A Comparison of Initial Vocational Education and Training Systems Between Finland and Hong Kong

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary

1. Introduction ........................................................................................................................... 4

2. Scope of Educational and Training Provision................................................................. 4

3. Progression .......................................................................................................................... 5
   3.1 Problems of Equality and Parity of Esteem ................................................................. 7

4. Curriculum Approaches ...................................................................................................... 9
   4.1 Pedagogy and Learning Strategies ............................................................................ 11
   4.2 Evaluation and Assessment .................................................................................... 11
   4.3 Role of Teachers ....................................................................................................... 13

5. Certification and Course Structure .................................................................................. 14

6. Student Guidance and Career Choices ........................................................................... 18

7. Partnership Between VET System and Working Life ..................................................... 19

8. Conclusions ....................................................................................................................... 20

References ............................................................................................................................... 23

J. Lasonen & L. Chan: A Comparison of Initial Vocational Education and Training Systems
Executive Summary

Hong Kong and Finland are both knowledge-based economies. Although Finland is a fairly big country while Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China, the population is about the same. The workforce in Hong Kong is much more diverse than in Finland in terms of educational attainment. In both societies, a high level of education and training is considered vital towards the development of human capital. The purpose of this paper is to compare the vocational education and training (VET) systems of Hong Kong and Finland.

VET has different foci in these two societies. Finland emphasises occupational competence and expertise and an orientation towards working life in the legislation. In Hong Kong the purpose of VET is to meet the manpower needs of the industry and commerce and to offer students an alternative route to university education.

We shall compare the following topics between Finland and Hong Kong: scope of educational provision, problems of equality and parity, progression, curricular approaches and pedagogy, certification and course structure, student guidance and career choices, partnership between VET systems and labour market, and future development. After summing up the major differences and similarities, the paper will suggest some issues involved in mutual understanding with the aim of developing future collaboration particularly on diversity at work.
1. Introduction

Hong Kong and Finland are both knowledge-based economies. Although Finland is a fairly big country while Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China, the population in both economies is about the same. In Hong Kong, over 95% of the people are ethnic Chinese and speak the same language. In Finland, about 99% of the people are ethnic Finnish of which 95% speaks the same language. The workforce in Hong Kong is much more diverse than in Finland in terms of educational attainment. In the former less than 30% of the 18-22 age group can go to tertiary institutions, a number that is much higher in the latter being about 70%. In both societies, a high level of education and training is considered vital towards the development of human capital.

In Finland, the aim of initial vocational education and training is to (a) raise the level of vocational competence among the population, (b) develop working life and meet its competence requirements, and (c) promote employment (Vocational Education and Training Act 21 August 1998/630, §2). The aim of studies leading to an AMK (polytechnic) degree is to provide students, on the basis of the requirements of working life and its development, with the knowledge and skills needed to perform occupational expert tasks (AMK Studies Act 3 March 1995/255, §2). In Hong Kong, vocational education and training (a) provides an alternative route alongside general education catering for students who wish to pursue a career in the vocational field, and (b) satisfies employers’ manpower needs at the craft, technician, and higher technician levels.

2. Scope of Educational and Training Provision

In Hong Kong, the percentage of young people who undertake degree programs is 18%, and for sub-degrees, i.e., diploma and higher diploma (D/HD) programs, it is 6%. The educational system in Hong Kong is similar to that in the UK. The degree and D/HD programs admit students upon completion of their A-Level and O-Level respectively. In line with the development in many western countries, the government is investing heavily in tertiary education and it plans to progressively increase the sub-degree places to about 40% of the relevant age
group (RAG) in 10 years. At the upper secondary education level, 85% of the RAG study at grammar schools and the remaining 10% pursue craft level education at vocational institutes. The latter figure will increase to 15% in 2003. In Mainland China, there are 11 million people who enrol in tertiary institutions, a figure that represents 11% of the RAG. And the government plans to increase the figure to 15% in 2005. At the national level, the ratio of upper secondary students who study in grammar schools and vocational institutions is about 1:1.

In Finland, upper secondary education, lasting on average three years, covers general upper secondary education and initial vocational qualifications. General upper secondary school prepares for students to take the Matriculation Examination. The main aim of initial vocational qualifications is occupational competence. The higher education system has two parallel sectors, universities and AMK or higher vocational education institutions. Universities and AMK institutions complement each other in their respective areas of strength, and each type of tertiary education establishment has its own functions. Universities focus on research and on research-based teaching. AMK institutions represent high-level expertise in working life and its development. Finland has 20 universities and 29 AMK institutions. Finnish higher education caters for a broad range of educational demand. In 1999 the higher education system as a whole had a student population that accounts for 66 per cent of the average 16-19 age cohort, of which the AMK institutions accounted for 37% and the universities for 29%. More than 1,000 educational establishments are delivering adult education. Only some of them are purely adult education providers; most of them offer instruction to the young people and adult population.
3. Progression

In Hong Kong, for higher diploma and diploma graduates who wish to pursue further studies, they may enter into Year2 and Year1 of a 3-year degree program respectively. In some exceptional cases, the former group of students may enrol in the first year of a master’s degree program at some UK universities. At the upper secondary school level, however, most graduates can only enrol in higher VET programs in the evenings, and it will take many years before they can obtain a higher diploma. The situation is similar in Mainland China whereby it is quite difficult for VET graduates in upper secondary schools to progress to universities.

In Finland, a qualification of at least three years taken in initial vocational education gives general eligibility for AMK institutions (OPM:n päätös [Decision by the Ministry of Education] 30 December 1998, 18/011/98) and universities (Yliopistoasetus [University Decree] 115/98, 12§). To qualify students for further and higher studies, initial vocational education programmes include obligatory common studies that promote also the development of occupational skills. Vocational education is intended to foster democracy, equality between men and women in all areas of society, and general equality in working life and society.

In Finland initial vocational qualifications give their holders extensive basic competencies for the different tasks of the given occupational field together with a more specialised competence and the occupational skills, as required by working life, needed for some subsection of the qualification. In addition, the three-year qualification gives general eligibility for further and higher education: the holder of an initial vocational qualification can apply for AMK institutions and universities.

AMK institutions offer occupationally oriented tertiary qualifications taking between 3.5 and 4 years to complete. Applicants must have completed general upper secondary school or taken an initial vocational qualification. At the moment, some 70% of the students are matriculated general upper secondary school leavers while some 30% have a vocational qualification. The degree programs offered by the AMK institutions are approved by the Ministry of Education. Instruction leading to an AMK degree is free.
Among young people under 25 in Finland, unemployment rates (37% in 1994 and 28% in 1998) have been double as compared to those among adults (21% in 1994 and 10% in 1998). During the recession in the early 1990s the unemployment rate approached 30 per cent, and even today it remains around 20 per cent for young people. In Hong Kong the youth unemployment rate in the 15 – 19 age group is also much higher than that of the overall population, i.e., 21% vs. 4.5% as reported by the government in the first quarter of this year (Census and Statistics Department, 2001).

In Finland, instead of hiring young people, employers prefer to engage older people with work experience. To remedy the situation there has been a reform of traditional work practice, involving an endeavour to emphasise learning at work (Lasonen, 2000). On completing their three-year initial vocational education a young person has accumulated at least six months of experience from work-based learning.

Youth unemployment is sometimes linked to difficulties in finding training opportunities for the youngsters. On the other hand, compared to the other age cohorts, young people are every year entering into the job market in substantially greater numbers due to the fact that they are better educated than their elders.

In Finland the greatest increase in the number of jobs has been in commerce and in technology- and business-related services. Young people find employment particularly in the service sector, where jobs tend to be short-term, irregular and part-time. The electronics and electric industry is the most rapidly growing industry in Finland, but it demands and needs highly educated workforce.

### 3.1 Problems of Equality and Parity

In Hong Kong, most young people consider university education as the preferred choice of study that can lead to better career prospect. The belief is also shared by their parents and teachers who have a heavy influence on their children’s value system. Hence, for students who first enter the vocational education stream at the post-secondary level, generally they have a low self-esteem. During the course of study, however, many VET students would begin to enjoy the
program because they find the curriculum very practical and tailored to the needs of the employers. Upon graduation, most of them can fit very well in the workplace. Moreover, the VET graduates have many opportunities to further their studies at local or overseas universities. Regarding the VET students at the upper secondary school level, their educational attainment is generally weak and the curriculum focuses on skills training and is mainly catered for employment. There is little prospect for the students to enter into university education. For VET students, there is a very strong correlation between their self-esteem and the opportunity for continuing their studies at the university level upon graduation.

The Finnish educational system is based on the principle of equality between women and men. Promotion of gender equality is an educational goal incorporated into school and children’s day care legislation (Luhtanen, 1999; Ranta, 1999) and into the Equality Between Women and Men Act (1995). Women’s levels of education have risen faster than men’s, and Finnish women under 50 are slightly better educated than men (Lehto & Sutela, 1999).

Finnish women participate in working life almost as much as men. International labour statistics show that since the 1960s, more women have been going out to work in Finland than in any other OECD country (Lehto & Sutela, 1999). In 1996 the proportion of women in the whole labour force was 48.6% and they constituted half of all employees. While both women and men work outside home full-time, women hold fixed-term jobs (19.7%) and work part-time (10%) more commonly than men (13.8% and 4% respectively). In the beginning of 1990s and during the recession, unemployment was higher among men than women. The difference in unemployment rate between women and men was at its height in 1992, when it was 15% as against 10%. The gap has narrowed since then (in 1994, 19.9% of men and 16.7% of women were without work). However, during the last few years the female unemployment rate has been higher than the male one. According to labour force statistics, in 1998 the rates of unemployment for women and men were 12.0% and 10.9% respectively (Lehto & Sutela, 1999). By comparison, in Hong Kong in late 2000, women account for 42.4% of the total labour force, and the unemployment rate for women and men is 3.2% and 5.3% respectively (Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistics, 2001).
In Finnish society, the greatest advances in gender equality have been made in education. The danger lies in educational equality being taken so much for granted that too little attention is paid to the differences in experiences, treatment and self-esteem between girls and boys. After education, the division of labour is still segregated into men’s and women’s fields, the powers of decision over the distribution of resources and over who will hold the leading positions are primarily in men’s hands, and overall women may find that they are receiving a smaller portion of the available resources than men.

Among the greatest obstacles to equality are the gender-based division of occupations and labour and the differential payment of women and men. Despite many educational campaigns, the division into women’s fields and men’s fields has remained nearly intact for 20 years. Almost half of all working women are in what are known as purely female-dominated fields (with 80% of the employees being women). One reason is the substantial female-dominated welfare services sector in the Finnish society. Pay differentials remain at around 20 per cent. The demand is now for equal pay for equally valued work. As regards, for example, women’s lower pay, the problem has lain in the fact that women’s work and women’s wishes regarding the kind of work that they want to do have been undervalued, might be considered less important than men’s work.

Computers and modern data transmission technology have rapidly invaded workplaces. In autumn 1997, two out of three Finnish employees reported that they worked on a computer, while in 1984 the figure had been only 17 per cent (Lehto & Sutela, 1999). At work female employees make more use information technology than their male counterparts, a feature that distinguishes Finland from the other European hi-tech countries. Finnish women are also diligent users of modern data transmission equipment such as the fax machine, e-mail and the Internet.

4. Curriculum Approaches

The Hong Kong VET programs generally include the following elements: lectures, tutorials, project work, laboratory exercises, and workshop practice. As the programs are primarily preparing the graduates for employment, equal emphasis is placed on theoretical lessons and practical work. Recently, at the upper secondary level, there is a considerable emphasis on
increasing the breadth of the VET. The curriculum covers more generic skills (including language, communication, numeracy and information technology skills as well as abilities to work with others) as well as positive attitude and values in order to lay a good foundation for their future life. At the tertiary level, the curriculum is based on the principle of “lenient entry, stringent exit”. It allows more students to fulfil their aspiration for tertiary education and, at the same time, maintains a rigorous quality assurance mechanism to ensure that the graduates meet the required standards (Education Commission 2000).

The purpose of Finnish initial vocational education is to raise the level of vocational competence among the population, develop working life, meet its competence requirements, and promote employment (L 630/98, 2§). Its aim is to provide students with knowledge and skills needed for the acquisition of occupational competence and with readiness for self-employment. An additional aim is to foster students’ development into good and balanced persons and members of society and provide them with knowledge and skills needed for further studies, hobbies and the all-round development of their personality, and to promote lifelong learning (L 630/98, 5§; Luhtanen, 1999; Ranta, 1999).

The Finnish vocational education curriculum system consists of the national core curricula and the educational institutions’ own curricula. The national core curricula are approved by the National Board of Education; they are specified individually for each sector of vocational education and for each qualification. The national core curricula are drawn up in collaboration with employers and employees representing various occupational fields, other representatives and experts from industry and commerce, and teachers and students. They specify the nationally uniform occupational skills and competency requirements and describe the educational sectors and their developmental prospects. They are intended to stimulate the development of the educational institutions and to encourage reforms of teaching methods and the learning culture.

The national core curricula provide a broad-ranging framework within which the individual educational establishments can design their specific curricula. The educational institutions deliver their instruction as they wish, taking into account any local or other relevant needs. The objective is that the educational institution, co-operating with other educational institutions in the

J. Lasonen & L. Chan: A Comparison of Initial Vocational Education and Training Systems
area, designs its teaching programme so that the student can incorporate into their study programme modules offered in other study fields and in general upper secondary school. Additionally, each student has a personal study program showing his/her specific vocational orientation. Students can also be credited for any previous studies and/or work experience.

4.1 Pedagogy and Learning Strategies

In Hong Kong flexible modes of delivery, such as web-based learning and e-learning, are being adopted. WebCT has been chosen as the standard platform for developing interactive learning packages. In addition, other forms of teaching and learning approaches, including activity teaching, problem-solving approach, contextual learning, work-based learning and assessment are being utilized.

Increasing cooperation between education and working life together with the introduction of work-based learning and self-directed studying and learning have been central themes in efforts to improve the quality of curricula in Finland in the second half of the 1990s. The workplace learning period incorporated into all study programmes does not stem from economic motives alone. Work-based learning has become important primarily because of technological development, questions involved in effective learning, and the need to bring work and school closer. Today's approaches to learning emphasise, being similar to Chinese emphases, contextual and experiential learning. The students are motivated to learn and persuaded to commit themselves to learning. The workplace learning periods included in vocational education programmes are implemented under the supervision of a vocational education establishment, which encourages the teachers to update their professional competences.

4.2 Evaluation and Assessment

The evaluation of vocational education involves three dimensions. First, the effectiveness of the educational system is assessed on the basis of how functional and flexible it is over a specific period of time. Second, the impact of instruction refers to individual growth, learning outcomes,
the needs of working life, and cultural development. Finally, economy of operations covers the development of educational resources, cost structure and alternative provision methods. At the national level, educational efficiency is being evaluated in all three sectors. Evaluation is used also in making decisions about the network of educational establishments.

In Hong Kong student assessment includes two major elements, i.e., continuous assessment and final examination. There is an External Examiner for each program, and he/she is typically appointed from a local university or the business/industry sector to be responsible for checking the quality and standard of the examination papers are up to an acceptable level.

Finland switched, at the turn of the 1980s, from centralised administration over to administration devolved to the local level meaning, among other things, that the educational establishments now designed their curricula on their own. When the central administration was no longer able to control the quality of education, it was partly in reaction that the educational authorities began to stress the assessment of educational quality. The aim is the dynamic and interactive development of evaluation activities and educational provision where all customer and stakeholder groups are taken into consideration.

Educational establishments engage also in self-evaluation, using models developed mainly on the basis of various approaches to management and evaluation studies. National final examinations are being introduced in vocational education with a view to assessing learning outcomes and creating standards. The educational establishments set their profit targets taking into account the national core curricula and the national foundations of qualifications. The objects of their self-evaluation are bound up with the chosen profit targets. In quality-oriented evaluation, the focus is on the quality of outcomes, processes and structures and on their continuous development. The service user, the customer, the learner, and the various stakeholder groups also play central roles in evaluation.

With a view to ensuring the quality of vocational education in Finland, all initial vocational qualifications will incorporate skills tests that make it possible to check that students have acquired the required occupational competence. The skills tests will be designed in collaboration with representatives of industry and commerce and of other sectors of working life. Their
incorporation into the qualifications will begin in 2001. In Hong Kong, the government has started limited skills assessment tests, particularly in the area of information technology, for initial vocational qualifications.

Similar to the Hong Kong, the Finnish student assessment supports learning and generates information on the student’s progress. The educational institution is provided with feedback on the effectiveness of its operations, employers with information on the skills level of students leaving education after finishing their studies. Student assessment emphasises developing students’ metacognitive skills through the use of self-evaluation, considered an essential method and a part of the assessment procedure as a whole. The aim is to make students also reflective professionals. Student attainment is assessed on a scale of excellent (mark 5), good (marks 4–3) or satisfactory (marks 2–1). In order to be awarded a qualification certificate the student must have completed the study modules of their training programme with an at least satisfactory average grade.

4.3 Role of Teachers

Because of the rapid technological changes in recent years, the knowledge acquired by students in classrooms may become obsolete in a few years’ time. Hence the role of the teachers has gradually changed to become a “learning facilitator”. In the context of vocational education, the number of lecture and tutorial hours has been gradually reduced, and students are expected to spend more time on independent learning in Hong Kong. Vocational teachers normally require a bachelor’s degree, a teacher’s training certificate, and three years of working experience in the relevant field.

In Finland the term vocational teacher denotes all teachers active at the various vocational education establishments, from those providing initial vocational training to those offering tertiary education (AMK institutions). Vocational teachers teach both theoretical and more practically oriented subjects or subjects integrating the two. Today, vocational teacher education provides those completing it with pedagogical qualifications for teaching posts at vocational education establishments, AMK institutions, adult education centres and liberal adult education establishments and for senior teacher posts at general upper secondary school and subject
teacher posts at comprehensive schools. Decree 968/98 on the qualifications required of staff in educational establishments defines the training and work experience that a teacher must have, thus defining also eligibility for teacher education. As a general admission requirement, applicants must have taken a Master’s degree or the highest vocational qualification in their field and accumulated a minimum of three years of relevant work experience.

5. Certification and Course Structure

All courses have to go through a validation process, which is a vigorous exercise conducted by an independent panel of experts to ascertain the validity of the program in Hong Kong. For some professional courses, such as engineering, accountancy, etc., they have to be accredited by the respective professional associations. There are basically 4 main types of VET courses at the post-secondary level:

- **Higher Diploma (HD)**
  It is a 3-year full-time program and requires between 1620 and 1980 contact hours.

- **Diploma (D)**
  It is a 2-year full-time program and requires between 1080 and 1320 contact hours.

- **Higher Certificate (HC)**
  It is a 2-year part-time program and requires between 450 and 540 contact hours.

- **Certificate (C)**
  It is a 2-year part-time program and requires between 450 and 540 contact hours.

Both the Higher Diploma, Diploma, and Certificate programs have the same entry requirements (i.e., completion of Secondary 5 with five passes in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination), whereas the entry requirements for Higher Certificate programs is completion of the Certificate. The main difference between D/HD and C/HC programs is that the latter programs are catered for students who work in a relevant industry/business sector during
daytime, hence the programs have much less practical elements. The programs generally include communication studies in Chinese and English, information technology, integrative project, and a core program.

In the Finnish initial vocational education, the 120-credit studies required for a completed qualification consist of 90-credit vocational studies, 20-credit common studies and 10-credit optional studies (one credit being nominally equivalent to one week’s full-time studies that refers to 40 contact hours). The common subjects include the mother tongue language, the second domestic language, a foreign language, mathematics, physics and chemistry, social, business and working-life studies, physical education and health and hygiene, and art education and cultural activities.

In Finland, study programmes consist of basic studies, specialisation studies, practical training and a final work as well as optional studies. Basic studies are studies common to all study fields that generate basic occupational skills. Specialisation studies include studies specific to the study field and qualification as well as other applicable elective studies, some of which may represent a study field other than the student's own. Some qualifications have predefined specialisation options. These include options that can be adjusted to a specialisation specific to the educational institution or student. The student can select their optional studies from among courses offered both by their own educational institution and by other institutions. Like the other studies making up a qualification, optional studies may also include components completed abroad. All qualifications include practical training in working life and a final work.

In Finland initial vocational qualifications are three-year qualifications based on the basic education syllabus. Matriculated upper secondary school leavers can also take the same vocational qualifications after studies of 2-2.5 years.

Initial vocational education has chiefly been school-based, but initial vocational qualifications now include workplace learning periods that on three-year programmes (120-credit equal to 4800 required study hours) must comprise at least 20 credits. Initial vocational qualifications are increasingly being taken also in apprenticeship training. School-based initial vocational qualifications are taken after studies in multidisciplinary or specialised vocational education.
institutions. A three-year initial vocational qualification gives eligibility for all tertiary education. Every year 45,000 students enter school-based initial vocational education while some 6,000 students take up apprenticeship training. An initial vocational qualification can be taken also through a skills assessment test (proficiency test), that is competence-based training including recognition of prior learning. The skills test system has been developed mainly to meet the needs of the adult working population.

At the beginning of 2000 there were 226 providers of training leading to an initial vocational qualification. There are a total of 51 initial vocational qualifications representing renewable natural resources, technology and transport, administration and commerce, the hotel, restaurant and catering business, health and social services, culture, and leisure and physical education.

The competence shared across all study fields consist of content foci, core competencies, and competence acquired through common studies. The importance of versatile competence and general occupation-oriented knowledge may increase in the future. The following common content foci must be taken into consideration in all study fields and programmes (Opetushallitus, 2000):

- internationalisation
- sustainable development
- development of technology in general and development of information and communications technology in particular
- entrepreneurship
- equality
- service- and consumer-related competence
- occupational health and safety

Core competence enables one to develop and succeed in one’s work. It is also of great importance for the individual’s quality of life and personality development, life style and emotional life. Core competence foregrounds the following skills:

J. Lasonen & L. Chan: A Comparison of Initial Vocational Education and Training Systems
1. **Learning to learn.** Skill in learning to learn involves being motivated and willing to develop oneself and one’s work throughout one’s life. This is about an ability to be aware of and assess one’s own learning, to acquire, structure and assess knowledge and to apply one’s previous learning in changing situations.

2. **Problem-solving skills.** Problem-solving skills make possible innovativeness and creativity and allow one to make reasonable choices. They entail ingenuity of a kind that helps one to cope with new situations and handle the problems that one comes up against.

3. **Communication and collaboration skills.** Communication skills cover versatile interaction and articulation skills, oral and written mother tongue and foreign-language skills and an ability to use information technology. These skills make it possible to cope in the communication situations of private and working life and to act in multicultural operational environments. People with language skills and able to use modern communications technology can find employment both home and abroad. Collaboration skills are more and more indispensable in all occupations and work communities. Both in private and working life, one is expected to be able to work together with different people, accept one’s own and other people’s emotions and diversity, show adaptability and flexibility in one’s human relations.

4. **Emotional intelligence and ethical skills.** Emotional and ethical skills equip students to commit themselves to their job, act responsibly and fairly as citizens and at work, and to handle and solve moral and ethical problems. In addition, these skills include the internalised ethics of one’s own occupational field. Furthermore, core competence covers also aesthetic values based on one’s own culture and personality and an ability to take them into consideration in one’s work and one’s private life. The function of vocational education is to enhance such competencies in all stages of a student’s education.

Finnish adults who have already been active in working life can take skills tests to acquire further and specialist vocational qualifications requiring the demonstration of more in-depth or specialised occupational skills. Training that prepares candidates for skill tests is given in educational establishments and in the form of apprenticeship training. In addition, educational

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**J. Lasonen & L. Chan: A Comparison of Initial Vocational Education and Training Systems**
establishments provide also other types of further training intended to supply the current needs of working life.

6. Student Guidance and Career Choice

There is a Student Affairs Office at each vocational institute, and the Office is responsible for providing career counseling and general education to the students in Hong Kong. Upon graduation, students may take up employment or pursue further studies at the local or overseas universities.

In Finland guidance and counselling is the responsibility of two distinct agents: pupil or student counselling is an offshoot of the educational administration, while career guidance for adults is provided by the labour administration. The aim of both guidance systems is supporting the individual in their studies, vocational orientation and general life management skills. Educational guidance is provided in comprehensive schools, general upper secondary schools and vocational education establishments. In vocational education, educational guidance aims particularly to supply the student with information about working life, entrepreneurship and the different occupations. In vocational education establishments educational guidance is given by study counsellors trained both as occupational teachers and in educational guidance. The methods used in educational guidance include group-oriented guidance, integration with other instruction, personal guidance, and study visits. Internationalisation has led to the extension of guidance also to students planning to study abroad and to students arriving from other countries. The labour and educational administrations are cooperating on the construction of a network for disseminating educational information and providing educational guidance, which will ensure that students are kept informed about domestic and international educational opportunities. Information dissemination and guidance activities are promoted also through computer systems shared between different sectors of the administration.

Guidance can be provided also in units subordinate to the labour administration. Here the strength is that guidance can reach also young people outside educational establishments. In addition, the counsellors have as a rule good knowledge of working life. The weakness of this
model is that the counsellors may be unfamiliar with education. The expectations of employers can make a counsellor pay too little attention to individual needs or inclinations.

7. Partnership Between VET System and Work

Co-operation and links between education and working life have everywhere become objects of development. Behind this are, among other things, the rapid changes in working life and the development of technology. Those involved in the design and provision of vocational education and training have emphasised knowledge-based competence but have at the same time considered that as a complement to instruction delivered at school, skills acquired in authentic occupational environments are immediately applicable and promote employment.

Graduates of vocational education in Hong Kong can fill the gap between unskilled workers and professionals in the labor market. Typically they can work as skilled workers, technicians, supervisors, and junior professionals. The job placement rate for VET graduates is consistently very high in comparison with university graduates. In the Finnish vocational education and training system combined provision, where instruction delivered by strong and up-to-date vocational education establishments is complemented by instruction given at workplaces, seems a suitable arrangement.

The Confederation of Finnish Industry and Employers representing the employers has had the most extensive resources for shaping vocational education policy. The Confederation has emphasised industrial competitiveness, considering, in its contributions, education mainly from the perspective of production tasks. At times the Confederation has taken a strong stand for educational reforms, such as the AMK institution reform and the upper secondary education experiments.

The Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, established when the earlier separate central organisations of the different types of local authority in Finland were merged, has developed into an influential contributor to decisions about educational policy. This is largely due to the more central powers to maintain schools devolved to the municipalities. The Association
has been particularly interested in monitoring the financial responsibilities that education has involved the municipalities in and, on the other hand, in the preservation and expansion of the municipalities’ influence over educational issues. In this context, it has given support to individual municipalities rather than to the federations of municipalities formed by them. It was essentially due to the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities that the administration and financing of the AMK institutions was made the responsibility of the municipalities.

In Finland the influence of the labour market is institutionalised mainly through the procedure of circulating proposals for comment and through expert consultation. The relevant organisations are allowed to state their views on all the most central reforms in preparation in their field. Representatives of labour market organisations are heard by parliamentary committees as experts.

8. Conclusions and the Future

In Hong Kong and Finland, vocational education and training is considered an important element towards the development of human resources necessary to sustain the economic prosperity. At the upper secondary level, VET is basically available to anyone who wishes to pursue a career in the vocational field. The purpose of initial vocational education is to provide the students with knowledge and skills needed for the acquisition of occupational competencies so that they are ready to join the workforce upon graduation. In curriculum development, the educational institutions have a high degree of freedom in design the course materials that are tailored to the needs of the students and the employers. Skills tests are widely used to Finland, whereas in Hong Kong, pilot skills assessment has started in the information technology trade. In the area of pedagogy and learning strategies, both educational systems emphasise the core competence in the following skills: learning to learn, problem-solving skills, communication and collaboration skills, and emotional intelligence and ethical skills. Despite the vast resources both governments have invested in initial vocational education, the youth unemployment situation remains unsatisfactorily high. This is mainly due to the fact that initial VET is not adequate to meet the manpower needs in a knowledge-based society.
There are also major differences in progression and students’ self-esteem. In Hong Kong, it is very difficult for students who finish initial vocational education to progress to universities. The reason is that students at this level are considered academically weak and they are unlikely to benefit from a university education. Consequently very few youngsters want to enter into VET at this stage and the students who are in VET have a low self-esteem. For the students who enter into VET at the tertiary level, they are mostly graduates of grammar schools and generally they possess a positive identity of their image. On the other hand, VET graduates from the upper secondary schools in Finland have the opportunity to progress into universities. And this makes the courses attractive to the youngsters.

In the area of further comparison, Hong Kong and Finland are very well developed in the area of information technology, and both are ranked among the highest in the world in terms of mobile phone penetration. Hence it would be worthwhile to study how the IT is taught at the tertiary VET level.

In Hong Kong, the education system will be undergoing a major reform in the next few years. A 6-year secondary education will be introduced, i.e., 3 years each for junior secondary and upper secondary. The general university education will also be changed to 4 years. A new type of tertiary institutions, known as community colleges, will be established to offer 2-year vocational education carrying the title of associate degree.

The developmental objectives in Finland for the next few years that are central from the perspective of educational policy have been set down in the development plan for education and university-based research for 1999-2004 approved by the Council of State on 29 December 1999 (Ministry of Education, 1999). The main policy line of the Government’s programme emphasises expertise, competence and knowledge that benefits all parts of the country equally.
References


