Implementing VET Start Programme in Estonian Vocational Schools – the Experience of Teachers and Support Specialists

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Abstract. VET start programme is introductory programme to facilitate transitions between school levels, support career choice and provide positive learning- and work experience. The programme is based on the principles of individuality, flexibility and practice-based studies. It was implemented in Estonia as a pilot programme since 2016. Today it is a permanent part of the vocational education system. In implementing VET start programme and adapting it to the students needs the key role is played by teachers and support network. The aim of the study was to describe the experiences of vocational teachers and support specialists in applying the VET start programme in two vocational schools. The results indicated that VET start was seen as a way of preventing social exclusion of vulnerable groups in society. Interviewees stressed the importance of learners self-aware career choices by developing their social, self-regulatory and coping skills and providing a positive learning experiences. The results of this study can be an input for development of VET start curricula as well as to support relevant competences of vocational teachers during pre-service and in-service training.

Keywords: VET start, transition programme, vocational education and training.
Introduction

In spite of its modern study environment and enhanced support measures, the Estonian vocational education system stands out for its high percentage of drop-outs: 21.7% of all vocational students in Estonia abandon their studies (Jaggo, 2019). Without an occupational qualification, young people face a higher risk of unemployment and social exclusion, which is why a goal has been set to reduce the number of young people who have a low level of education and are not currently studying. The NEET (young persons, aged between 15 and 24, not in employment, education or training) concept has been used in Europe as an indicator to inform youth-oriented policies and to broaden understanding of the vulnerable status of this group and to better monitor their problematic access to the labour market. The increasing NEET rate is a matter of concern in Estonia as well where the proportion of people not in employment, education or training was 7% in 2019 (Eurofound, 2020).

According to EU Council Recommendation (2020), VET programmes should pay more attention to vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities, low-qualified/skilled persons, minorities, people with migrant background and people with fewer opportunities because of their geographical location and/or their social-economically disadvantaged situation. Targeted measures for inclusive and accessible VET are flexible training formats, which prevent early leaving from education and training and support the school-to-work transition (EU Council Recommendation, 2020, 16).

Transitions from one school level to another or from schooling to working life are crucial for VET students learning pathways (Jäppinen & Maunonen-Eskelinen, 2012). Therefore, VET institutions are encouraged to develop policies and practices to support school transitions and prevent school dropout. In such orientation programme not only occupational content and requirements of a professional field are relevant, but also the social and personal competencies for the positive transition (Peinemann, 2018).

Between 2016 and 2019, the VET start programme was piloted in three Estonian vocational schools. It aimed to improve the preparedness of the young people in choosing a occupation in accordance with their abilities and to support them in entering or continuing vocational education or transition to working life. The participants in the programme received individual counselling and remedial education in basic subjects, with special emphasis on developing key competences and transversal skills and becoming acquainted with the occupation through practical work (Kinkar, Piiskop, & Nõmmiste 2019). Since 2019 VET start programme (The choice of profession curriculum) was officially introduced in Estonia with amendment of the Vocational Educational Institutions Act. The curriculum with duration of five or six months (30 credit points) is intended for all those who do not yet know what to study after the basic school, have interrupted their studies or need additional preparation for further studies. It is also possible to implement VET start programme with duration of 12 months (60 credit
points) for students with special educational needs. It aims to provide solutions for integrating working life and independent living. In this article we use the terms “long” and “short” to distinguish between the two programs.

Similar VET start or transition programmes have been launched in other countries, such as the Finland (Preparatory vocational education, 2019; Lakkala & Lakkala, 2019), United Kingdom, (Sharp et al., 2007), in Netherlands (Playing for Success, 2020), in German speaking countries (Peinemann, 2019), in Denmark and Sweden (Jørgensen, Järvinen & Lundahl, 2019). As such, vocational education systems in a number of countries have placed special emphasis on the educational and social inclusion of the vulnerable target group by creating ‘second chance’ study programmes in order to help students in transitioning from one level of study to the next. The main aim of such programmes is to help compensate for the young people’s shortcomings in terms of social and learning skills (Walther, 2006).

Paradoxically, study programmes specially created for the most vulnerable students with the aim of being inclusive can often end up creating or increasing segregation (González-Faraco, Luzón-Trujillo, & Corchuelo-Fernández, 2019), as the heterogeneity of young people fails to be taken into account (Kalalahti, Niemi, & Varjo, 2020). For example, the lack of transparency and low level of efficiency of the transition system used in vocational education in Germany have been criticised because of the high percentage of drop-outs in transition programmes (Beicht, 2009; Heisler, 2016). Three aspects are considered essential in the efficiency of transition programmes: developing and supporting the abilities of employees and learners; the context of the programme, meaning the way in which the organisational culture of the school supports the elements of the programme (e.g. the existence of cooperation culture); and the stability of the programme, meaning learners’ progress, strategic planning and resources (Jäppinen, 2012).

In Estonia, the need to maximise the cohesion and flexibility of all levels and types of education has become more apparent. According to the Estonian Education and Research Strategy 2021–2035 (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, 2019), country lacks a systematic approach to supporting people who belong to the risk group. As an aid measure, Estonian vocational schools have had the option of implementing the VET start programme and developing a curriculum that enables young people to familiarise themselves with different occupations and, based on that, to decide whether they want to continue their studies or enter the labour market. Even though VET start was piloted based on the analogous Finnish model, there is no knowledge of how schools have interpreted their previous experiences in implementing it or what the components of the programme aiding transition are. As the professionalism and cooperation of the teacher and support staff are key factors (Fix, Ritzen, Pieters, & Kuiper, 2019; Jäppinen, 2012; Van den Akker, 2007), in the following article we focus on the experiences of such teachers and support specialists in implementing VET start
in the framework of a powerful learning environment. In the article, the term ‘VET start’ is used to describe the Estonian context and ‘transition programme’ is used to describe the experiences of other countries.

**Theoretical background**

Learning content, authentic teaching and learning activities, guiding activities of teachers, evaluation and assessment of competencies are main characteristics of powerful learning environment in vocational education (Biemans, de Bruijn, den Boer, & Teurlings, 2013; Fix et al., 2019; de Bruijn & Leeman, 2011). According to this concept, formation of vocational identity is a starting point for learning (de Bruijn & Leeman, 2011, p. 696). To support vocational identity, domain-related theory, instrumental skills and social skills should be addressed and not in isolation but in relation to each other (ibid). An important role play VET teachers, acting as models with regard of acquisition of vocational competence and approach to learning (Biemans et al., 2013; de Bruijn & Leeman, 2011). Beside authenticity, reflective and constructive learning is crucial to allow students to optimally develop their own personal and professional competencies (Biemans et al., 2013).

This study is based on curriculum spider web of Van den Akker (2003; 2007) as theoretical framework. As Van den Akker highlighting, one of the major challenges for curriculum improvement is creating balance and consistency between the various components (Van den Akker, 2007, p. 39). His framework consists of ten components that address ten specific questions about the planning of student learning (see Fig. 1).

![Curricular spider web](image)

*Fig. 1. Curricular spider web (Van den Akker, 2003, p. 41)*
At the center of the model is the ‘rationale or vision’ – why they are learning? It serves as major orientation point for curricula and all other components are ideally linked to that rationale and preferably also consistent with each other (Van den Akker, 2003, p. 40).

The first three components are: aims and objectives (toward which goals are they learning), the learning content (what is learned) and the learning activities (how are they learning). Objectives of curricula must enable the students to make a positive connection with school, sense of belonging and involvement in planning the learning process (Fix et al., 2019). Curricular goals should include also learning social skills like classroom behaviour, showing respect towards others and ability to solve conflicts (Fix et al., 2019) because gaps in those skills are often the reason for applying to VET start programme.

One of the key components is this model, is the role of teacher - how she/he is facilitating the learning? Teachers have been identified as the most important school-related factor, who has the greatest role in creating a positive learning experience and a trust in teacher-student relationship (Fix et al., 2019; Hattie & Yates, 2018; Martin & Dowson, 2009). It has been found that the work of teachers in transition programs is most influenced by the motivational and behavioral problems of the students, as they also play an important role in the development of group processes (Peinemann, 2018). In the focus of the teacher’s work in transition programs is career orientation, with the aim of supporting each student's individual learning and career path (Katelaar et al., 2012). Teachers should also be adaptive, important activities include contextualization, integration and modelling (de Bruijn & Leeman, 2011). Depending on the principles of VET start, teachers and members of the support network can shape individual learning pathways by involving learners in goal setting, reflection and giving a feedback throughout the learning cycle and providing support services tailored to the needs of the individual learner (Kinkar et al., 2019).

Materials characterizes resources, with what are they learning? As Van den Akker (2003, p. 42) highlighting, we have to make learning more challenging and intrinsically motivating by moving from traditional, teacher- and textbook-dominated instruction towards more meaningful, activity-based and autonomous learning approaches.

Grouping is an organizational aspect of studies. It will answer to the questions: how are students allocated to various learning trajectories and are students learning individually, in small groups, or whole-class (Van den Akker, 2003, p. 40).

The components like location (class, library, out of school premises etc) and time (how much time is available for various subject matter domain or how much time can be spent on specific learning tasks) are also relevant in this model. In Estonia, it is recommended to involve organizations offering voluntary activities, which give the young person in the program the opportunity to discover their interests and develop work habits. Workshops, group counseling and company visits offered by the
Unemployment Insurance Fund can also be integrated into the study (Kinkar et al., 2019). As many entrants to the VET start program have a previous negative school experience, inclusive activities such as inspiring meetings with top athletes, inspiring artists, getting to know each other and experimenting with new activities are used in the early stage of the program.

The component of assessment deserves special attention in this model ‘since careful alignment between assessment and the rest of the curriculum appears to be critical for successful curriculum change’ (Van den Akker, 2003: 40). The learning path in VET start programme is based on the development needs and personality of the learner. It means noticing and taking into account various aspects that affect coping, eg communication and learning skills, self-regulation skills, individual needs and expectations, learning motivation (Kinkar et al., 2019). Along with assessment of development needs and continuous feedback, summative assessment is also important. In Estonia, the assessment system used in vocational training, bases for assessment of the acquisition of learning outcomes (Vocational Education Institutions Act, 2013, § 31).

The role of teachers and support network is the key in implementing VET start programme and making connections between curricular components and students needs (Fix et al., 2019; Jäppinen, 2012; Van den Akker, 2007). Therefore the aim of the study was to describe the experiences of vocational teachers and support specialists in applying the VET start programme in two vocational schools. Based on theoretical framework, the following research question was formulated: From teachers and support specialists perspective and experiences, what components of powerful learning environment characterize the implementation of VET start programme?

**Methodology**

**Sample and data**

In order to answer the research question a qualitative approach was adopted, as this allows the viewpoints of the study’s participants and their diversity to be highlighted (Flick, 2014). The sample (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016) consisted of 16 teachers and support specialists from two Estonian vocational schools with experience of running the VET start programme. In order to find interviewees, the selected vocational education institutions were contacted and then meetings with representatives of the schools took place in which preliminary agreements were made and information related to the study was shared. The schools provided the contact details of the teachers and specialists so that they could be contacted and asked whether they were willing to be interviewed. Individual interviews were conducted with various support specialists (a career counsellor, a special education teacher and a social pedagogue), teachers from various fields (general subject teachers and vocational teachers), the course instructors...
and the managers of the VET start programme. Participation in the study was voluntary. The interviews were conducted in the interviewee’s workspace.

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The interview questions covered 10 subject areas: the rationale of the VET start programme; aims and objectives; content; learning activities; teacher role; materials and resources; grouping; location; time; and assessment. The interview questions were based on Van den Akker’s (2003; 2007) framework of a powerful learning environment, but previous studies which were of relevance to the topic also served as examples (de Bruijn & Leeman, 2011; Fix et al., 2019; Virtanen et al., 2014). The interviews were conducted in the winter of 2019, with the length of the interviews varying from half an hour to two hours. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

**Data analysis**

The thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen for analysing the data, as it allows the most prominent themes in the data to be highlighted. In order to maximise the reliability of the study, re-encoding and investigator triangulation were used. First, three researchers read the full texts of the transcriptions and marked parts related to the subject areas, keeping in mind the elements of Van den Akker’s framework model of a powerful learning environment (2007). In the course of reading, initial codes or meaningful units were marked and categorised according to the previously defined main themes (rationale; aims and objectives; content; learning activities; teacher role; materials and resources; grouping; location; time; and assessment). Next, initial codes were discussed by the authors and, if necessary, the names of the codes were specified and the sub-themes of codes with similar meanings were formed under the previously defined main themes. Then, the data analysis process was repeated by four researchers and, in the subsequent discussion, initial descriptive results were interpreted, the level of abstraction was raised and the final thematic overview of the data was formed.

**Results**

The results are presented by curriculum components according to the powerful learning environment framework. Illustrative examples from the interviews are given. In order to ensure anonymity, only the interviewee’s number is mentioned alongside the examples.

**Rationale and aims of VET start**

According to the interviewees, the rationale of the VET start is a humanistic view and inclusive education. VET start is centred around the concept that every learner is valuable and that a learner exploring their potential through learning to learn and developing their intrinsic motivation is essential:
A VET start is a good idea from the human side of things. (...) humanity – a human-centric opportunity to provide education. (10)

VET start was seen as a way of preventing social exclusion in society:

The most important thing for me is that the person keeps on track – that they study, are included... that there are no failures, setbacks or instances of exclusion, that they can be a fully valuable member of society. (11)

The vocational teachers and support specialists interviewed stressed the importance of learners self-aware career choices, by developing their social, self-regulatory and coping skills and providing a positive learning experiences.

Supporting learners’ choice of occupation in the VET start programme consists of helping them get to know themselves better and introducing them to diverse career options. Completing the curriculum enables the learner to find out more about themselves in order to learn how to set personal goals and make safe career choices – it is considered important that the choice of occupation is well thought out by the learner themselves. According to the interviewees, VET start learners are able to make their choice themselves, having discovered their inner resources upon completing the curriculum. As those enrolling in the curriculum do not generally know which profession will suit them, it is very important for them to test a variety of professions and career options. Flexibility of learning is emphasised herein, the goal being to enable learners to familiarise themselves with various occupations without fear of dropping out.

However, according to the interviewees, it is even more important, that in supporting students in making a choice, the learners have in particular to know better themselves and to acquire social and coping skills:

The choice of profession is actually pretty minor compared to you having come far enough as a person to finally have the courage to do the things you didn't have the courage to do before. (1)

In the interviews, VET start providing a positive learning experience and sense of success were highlighted as important aims of the programme. Many learners carry a negative learning experience with them from earlier education, and the programme aims to help restore trust in learning and teachers.

Grouping

According to the interviewees, the grouping in VET start is characterised by great heterogeneity. In the same group, learners with special educational needs, intellectual disabilities and addiction problems may be studying together as well as learners who are returnees from other countries, or who have dropped out of vocational education. This sets a challenge for teachers and support staff:
A learners in this programme are quite different. So you can’t really have a sort of monolithic class and tell everyone, listen, here’s what’s going to happen. They can be quite different from one another. (15)

Because of the heterogeneity of the learners, the key question regarding VET start is assembling the group. In addition to the compatibility of the group members, the effect the group members have on one another must be taken into account. This can, in some cases, be negative:

We have actually started thinking more and more about the fact that some students are not suited to the programme. That including some students in such a high-risk group is kind of short-sighted in regard to some other students… well, I don’t want to say criminal, but it definitely doesn’t have a good effect on them. (1)

According to the interviewees, joining a study group can take place in different ways. For example, in some cases, those applying for places in mainstream education are directed to the VET start programme if it becomes evident that the student is still unsure of the choice of profession. VET students who are in danger of dropping out are also directed to VET start programme. Cooperation partners of schools, such as the Unemployment Insurance Fund and the local municipality, can also direct youngsters to VET start.

Depending on the reason for joining VET start, learners are characterised by varying levels of motivation: there are those who are goal-oriented and motivated; those who are hesitant and simply experimenting at first, but who become motivated during their studies; and those who have joined the programme against their will. The following quote describes the experience of discovering motivation during studies:

Many of those who are unsure and come to our school… Some students are quite reluctant when they first come here and then, by the end of the year, make discoveries and do a good job and are motivated and want to be here, but some truly don’t want to stay. (10)

The study groups of VET start tend to be small, according to the interviewees, starting from eight students up to 20 or more learners. The bigger study groups can be a challenge precisely because of the learners’ heterogeneity: each learner needs special support and attention and this in turn requires resources in order to meet each learner’s individual needs. Another challenge is launching group processes in a study group that is extremely heterogeneous:

As for creating a sense of unity in the group… for me, that is quite unimaginable at the moment, yeah. It just won’t develop. (3)

Managing learners’ group processes is a time-consuming process which requires conscious effort from teachers and support staff. In the long VET start programme, for example, time is consciously dedicated to this:

After half a year, the dynamics start to take shape – teamwork, taking others into consideration and knowing that we really are together in the group. (10)
The learning pathways of VET start learners are individual from the moment they enter the programme and the formation of their learning paths depends on the learners’ academic level in different subjects as well as their occupation-related interests and abilities. In both general and professional studies, the learning is organised according to levels, which means that work is performed in small groups or individually. General studies are typically taught in a VET start study group where teachers consider learners’ individual levels but practical subjects are taught to them alongside students from the mainstream vocational education programme.

Content of learning

In terms of content, the interviews described the VET start programme curriculum, which is characterised by both structure and flexibility. On the one hand, it was said that the curriculum and its operational programme should not be overly detailed and should enable the teachers to give consideration to learners’ individual needs and particularities flexibly. On the other hand, the structure of learning was emphasised – in terms of the curriculum framework at the national level and at the school level. The content of learning is aimed at developing learners’ self-regulatory, personal, social, civic and professional competences. The interviewees pointed out that learners familiarise themselves with occupations through practical skills and hands on activities. The need for integrating general and theoretical knowledge with practical subjects was emphasised:

*When I’m teaching a specific topic, I try to combine it with general subjects like math, Estonian, etc. – a sort of integrated approach.* (13)

In addition to practical activities, improving self-regulatory and social skills was also considered important. According to the interviewees, learners’ self-belief usually increases in the course of studies – they learn to handle fear of failure:

*It’s like, “I see that I’m improving, I see that I can do it.” That is what helps them feel more confident. And then all these problems like, “Oh, the maths teacher is mean and the natural science class is boring” do not get them down as much as they would have previously.* (1)

Various discussion groups enabling communication are organised, in which coping in group situations and communicating with team members and teachers are taught. These help the youngsters become more socially competent and improve their problem-solving skills. Acquiring social skills is also valued in a proactive manner, bearing in mind the subsequent transition to working life.

In addition to practical and social skills, teaching the learners skills for coping with everyday life was also considered important:
The content of our curriculum is all about improving learners’ coping skills and key competences as well as teaching vocational skills, but the most important thing is coping with everyday tasks and developing independence for the future. (14)

Teaching self-analysis skills was also seen as important, as they help youngsters cope with life in general and are useful in their studies as well as in choosing a speciality:

We try to encourage self-analysis – what to keep in mind when first looking for a professional path to go down, what questions to ask yourself and what information to look for. (8)

According to the interviewees, acquiring learning skills and forming intrinsic motivation also form part of learning content. The interviews show that forming primary study habits must be tackled first in some cases. Therefore, an effort is made to help develop learners’ study skills and motivation throughout the VET start period.

Learning activities

According to the interviewees, the activities are learner-centred. The curriculum’s interconnectedness with life was highlighted as well as its playfulness and creativity. Life skills are practised through different games. According to the interviewees, cooperative methods are implemented, discussions and pair work encouraged. In teaching, the main emphasis is on explanation, demonstration and instruction:

Demonstration is actually very important – step by step, and again and again. Explaining is great and visualising is highly important, depending on the subject. (10)

The interviews revealed that VET start learners should be given routine obligations related to coping in everyday life. It was also pointed out that learners should get acquainted with the realities of working life, whether that be getting up early, knowing occupational safety rules or possessing theoretical knowledge:

At the moment, the main emphasis is on lots of interesting practice, but in actual working life you need to possess theoretical knowledge as well...you end up having to do extra reading on electrical engineering from a textbook. (8)

It was pointed out in the interviews that one of the challenges is that learners in some fields only see the fun part of vocational education rather than “real life”, which is why a more realistic picture of the occupations should be considered.

Role of teachers and support specialists

The interviews show that the individual support of learners in VET start is, at its core, multi-professional cooperation in which members of the support system from outside of the school are also included, such as parents, the local municipality and other service providers. Cooperation between members of the support network is important for VET start teachers, especially in terms of the needs-based support of learners. Therefore, creating and maintaining effective cooperation also requires
teachers and support staff to carry out organisational activities, such as coordinating work with other members of the internal network, expanding the external network or communicating with key networks.

According to the teachers and support staff interviewed, the first step is building up a relationship of trust with learners – this is the prerequisite for supporting their development, as well as teaching professional studies and supervising traineeships, as the following interview excerpt demonstrates:

*The most difficult part is establishing first contact with the student, so that they can even begin to trust us. Actually teaching the subject is in itself very easy <…> But the most important thing is to make that contact, so that they can start to trust us.* (2)

In order to build up trust with learners, teachers and support specialists must possess empathy, openness, specific knowledge regarding the heterogeneous needs of VET start learners:

*That’s very important in this job: you need to be able to discern the nuances. Because otherwise … you won’t be able to understand the youngsters you’re dealing with. Otherwise, you might get the feeling that they can’t be bothered or don’t want to or… But in reality, there are other, deeper reasons for the way they’re behaving. And that you need a certain … competence in that case, so that you can work with these young people.* (5)

Establishing a relationship of trust precedes and is the basis for teachers and support staff being able to support learners in their choice of occupation, studying, discovering personal resources and improving their social skills. The interviewees see themselves as performing the roles of a supporter and supervisor who advises, motivates and recognises the learner’s adjustment within the group, leads group processes and directs the learner towards individual job orientation through practical activities. However, according to the interviews, the central role in supporting VET start learners plays the course instructor who creates and coordinates the social support network. In addition to coordinating the network, the course instructor is often the VET start learner’s main trusted person at the school – in the interviews, their role is even compared to that of a parent. The course instructor must get to know the learners so as to give each and every one of them the most suitable individual support and guidance.

**Time**

The timetable of VET start depends on the length of the programme. In both the long and short programmes, there are clear differences between daily and weekly schedules, just as there are differences in the VET start timetable as a whole. When describing the daily and weekly schedules of the short VET start programme, it was emphasised that learners must be active every day of the week, but that the activities should vary. Thus, the first couple of days of the week are full of theory lessons and joint activities, while Wednesday and Thursday are dedicated to the traineeship and Friday is a day
for volunteer work. The subjects pointed out that a school day usually consists of three 90-minute lessons in a row, but that for VET start learners this is too long:

*The 90 minutes tire them out, and there is only a 10-minute break in between. Because, like, university students get longer pauses, don't they? In vocational school, the lessons are usually the same length, but break times are much shorter.* (1)

Traineeships and voluntary work take place according to agreements with the traineeship supervisor or the corresponding placement institution, which is why flexibility in terms of time is essential. Those interviewed also said that the days during their traineeships should not be too long. The interviews show that all kinds of interruptions to a routine study rhythm, such as changes in traineeship schedules or in the general timetable, school holidays, etc. can be detrimental to VET start learners. Learners who have difficulty staying in the programme may be likely to quit as a result of this.

According to the interviewees, initial enthusiasm for studying may be replaced by fatigue and boredom as early as the second month, which means that teachers and support staff should apply different approaches in order to maintain a daily study routine:

*In the case of my current group, I've observed that in September they were fine, they were going to school. Since some point around the second week in October, there have been many absences, simply because they are tired.* (1)

The learners in the long VET start programme generally live in student dormitory, which enables the day to be structured differently. The study day in the extended programme is considerably longer, though there are numerous activities between lessons:

*Throughout the day, we have eight 45-minute lessons, though this time also includes preparing and cleaning the workplace, a walk in the forest, observing nature – all these physical activities <…> we also have an art module – art, handicrafts, music lessons.* (9)

Throughout the day, learners are provided with as many varied activities as possible. This enables them to concentrate on their interests, needs, abilities and individual learning style.

The timetable of VET start as a whole is flexible in both curricula. The short VET start programme is five months long. On the basis of their experience so far, the interviewees find the five-month study period optimal for arriving at a career decision. However, flexibility in terms of time is essential for joining the programme, especially for those who have abandoned their previous studies. The interviewees pointed out that as soon as a learner takes a break from studies, it is incredibly difficult to help them get back into a study routine later on:

*Trickling or continuous admissions to the programme are the only real option, there isn't any other… But we've been very strict with who we take on… We call them 'SOS cases'. If they don't get into VET start straight away, we'll lose them for good. But the stronger students with an existing network, we accept them at the start of February when the next group starts* (1).
The cases which have proven challenging for teachers and support specialists are those where the student “comes and goes as they choose” – this complicates both established group relations and the organisation of studies.

In the long VET start programme, the study period is one year. As most learners live in student accommodation, activities are organised so as to be carried out together on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. Time outside of class is also spent together (eating, leisure time and hobby group activities). This enables learners to integrate into their days different activities that support their choice of profession. The interviews showed that an effort is made to vary the rhythm of activities daily, weekly and monthly so that there is a balance between general and professional studies, the traineeship and developing self-regulatory and other skills.

**Learning environment**

The following aspects pertaining to the learning environment manifested themselves in the interviews: integrating formal and informal study environments and establishing a safe and learner-friendly school climate are valued.

The teachers and support staff who were interviewed described the physical learning environment as being modern and supportive of learners’ choices. Student accommodation is located next to the vocational school, which allows the learners to become independent and to practise coping skills important for VET start learners. Often, classes and traineeship activities take place in different learning bases, meaning that learners must plan their logistics, which forms part of consciously developing their time-planning skills and sense of responsibility. Also, integrating different learning environments is an important prerequisite in implementing the curriculum.

In addition to the formal learning environment, the interviewees value the environment outside of the school. They go on many excursions outdoors and take part in visits to companies and other establishments. In the regular VET start curriculum there is great emphasis on volunteer work, which also takes place outside of the school building:

*Friday is the day for volunteer work... The course instructor has made arrangements with the companies they can volunteer at. Stables and care for horses are very popular, so are elderly homes, maintenance work and gardening. (8)*

According to the interviewees, the workshops and practice labs are well-equipped and support the learners’ active participation. In terms of the traineeship, the importance of occupational safety and security requirements was emphasised. The spaces must be arranged in such a way that everything needed for practising work is there but also so that the materials and work environment are safe enough and adapted for learners with special educational needs. It is also necessary to create private learning conditions for certain learners and to provide them with the option of being separate from the others.
Based on the interviews, in forming a social-emotional learning environment, establishing a learner-friendly and supportive school climate is valued. The interviewees want learners to feel comfortable, and creating a relaxed and inclusive environment is seen as important:

*We should avoid creating a very strict classroom environment for them <…> They won't develop the sense of trust they should if we do. Many of them have come away from previous school damaged... Certain situations and conflicts with teachers... And they are more suited to a sort of open, busy space. (4)*

However, the interviewees said that an overly secure learning environment could prove hindering later on in coping with everyday life or in continuing education. According to those interviewed, learners could, for example, form the expectation that they will be granted the same level of individual support services and approaches in the workplace or further education.

**Materials and resources**

Two main issues were raised in regard to materials and resources: how to tailor existing study materials to the specific target group; and what resources there are for carrying out traineeships. The interviews show that VET start teachers flexibly choose, compile and customise teaching materials so that they meet learners’ individual needs and abilities. In choosing study materials, the teacher bases their choice on the student’s mental, social and emotional well-being, rather than their actual age. Regular textbooks are not used in VET start. Although there are both textbooks and methodological study materials, customised worksheets or worksheets created specifically for the target group are preferred.

Meaningful learning is achieved with the help of IT tools – videos, films and interactive boards are often used, with the content of study delivered to the learners through sound and images:

*Internet-based learning makes up about 40% of our theory lessons, because it sort of reaches everyone through sound and pictures. (12)*

According to the subjects, the resources available for practical learning are good and the existing traineeship classrooms and bases are well-equipped and support the learners’ active participation in learning activities. Lack of cooperation between vocational schools in terms of cross-usage of traineeship bases was seen as a challenge. For example, a VET start learner should be able to undertake part of their traineeship in their home area if they wish to do so, in order to diversify options for practical training.
Assessment

In terms of assessment, the importance of both continuous and final assessment was emphasised. Competence-based assessment is applied in vocational education, and providing support in achieving learning outcomes and in the final assessment of learning outcomes is also important in VET start.

The interviewed named formative assessment in the form of either written or oral feedback, numerical assessment is not used. Assessment methods such as presentations, projects, group work, practical work and, very occasionally, tests are used to assess theoretical knowledge or work performance. In the long VET start programme, the learners also receive daily feedback on coping skills such as solving problems and social skills. Practical skills are also assessed, and at the end of every work operation:

*Teachers assess how well the learner has done throughout the day.* <...> *We do not assess using numbers, but verbally: copes well – this means they have basically acquired a certain skill; copes with physical help/copes with verbal help/copes when following someone's lead.* (13)

The teachers and support specialists also highlighted learners’ self-assessment and peer assessment. The latter is applied as much as possible so that students also recognise one another’s work and learn from it.

The interviews show that assessment which is personalised and predominantly oral supports the students’ self-belief and motivation to study as well as the establishing of daily study routines.

Important input into planning and assessing the study process is provided by the admissions interview, during which pre-assessment takes place. During the interview, expectations are discussed and a learning pathway in line with the learner’s abilities and interests is mapped out. If possible, their parents are included in the process. According to the learner’s individual support needs, interventions supporting their learning and development are planned whose effectiveness is assessed on an ongoing basis. In addition to the interview, a career preferences test is used. This serves as input for creating an individual career and traineeship plan. This plan, mapped out at the beginning of studies, acts as the basis for the continuous feedback provided throughout the study process.

The final assessment in VET start is competence-based. The learning outcomes of the regular VET start programme are related to both initial vocation-related skills and key competences. In the long VET start programme (mainly for young people with intellectual disabilities), help and support are provided in order to achieve the learning outcomes. Here, the emphasis is on occupation-related knowledge and skills, a sense of responsibility and developing key competences. At the end of the programme, the graduate receives a certificate along with an assessment sheet:
At the end of the year we summarise these things, so that all of their knowledge and skills are described and there is a summary sheet. Everyday assessment doesn’t only involve learning, but behaviour as well. (13)

The final assessment of the VET start programme was described as a portfolio of competences in which the learner’s development plans, all of the parties’ assessments and the results certifying the acquisition of learning outcomes are compiled. Upon the completion of studies, a further career plan is created on the basis of this assessment, along with an evaluation as to whether individual support is needed.

Those conducting the long VET start programme described the idea of a competence portfolio that would be planned in a digital environment to which all team members had access. There is an increasing tendency towards including the student in the assessment of their activities. There is also a desire for an additional feature that would enable the student themselves (along with a support person, if needed) to log in to the environment and to follow and reflect their learning process:

We try to urge the students themselves to talk to us and give us feedback on how they’ve been doing – how they did one thing or another, whether they get to give themselves a smiley face or a sort of face with a straight mouth or a neutral face. (9)

The most important thing in the interviewees’ eyes is that the assessment should inspire and motivate the learner to stay in the programme until they can arrive at a choice of profession that is suited to their abilities and to map out their further learning pathway.

Discussion

The aim of the study was to describe the experiences of vocational teachers and support specialists in applying the VET start programme in the framework of a powerful learning environment in the example of two vocational schools. In the following, the results are discussed in terms of the components of Van den Akker’s (2003; 2007) model.

The central questions of the curriculum based on Van den Akker’s powerful learning environment framework are as follows: what aims are in mind, and what are the targeting and planning of learning based on? The results of the study show that the VET start programme is centred around a humanistic view and aims for educational and social inclusion, valuing every learner and their exploration of their own potential. The study highlights that supporting learners’ choice of occupation by offering flexible and diverse career options is seen as one of the main aims of VET start. Planning realistic career expectations (Jäppinen, 2012; Hirschi, 2010) and preparing the youngsters for entering the world of work (Niemi & Kurki, 2014; Pilz et al., 2014) is seen as a basis for effective learning in the framework of a powerful learning environment. The aims of the curriculum for the target group of the VET start programme are first and foremost related to developing social and learning skills (Jäppinen, 2012; Gallagher, 2011;
Hirschi, 2010; Pilz et al., 2014), which is also confirmed by the results of the current study. Learner-centred aims, developing social and self-regulatory skills and establishing a positive learning experience were emphasised. Often, it is precisely because of a lack of these experiences that young people’s choice of occupation or their transition between education levels do not work out (Jäppinen, 2012). Therefore, it could be said that similarly to the transition programmes initiated in other countries, the VET start programme in Estonia offers ‘second chances’ to young people from the vulnerable target group by turning previous negative learning experiences into positive ones and building a bridge for them to continue their studies or transition to work life by developing social and self-regulatory skills.

According to Van den Akker’s model, the components of the framework curriculum of a powerful learning environment should first and foremost be based on the rationale and the goals set for learning, which is why the content of the VET start programme is closely related to this goal. Since the need to develop students’ learning, self-regulatory and everyday coping skills was named as one of the aims of VET start, then similarly to previous studies (Jäppinen, 2012; Hirschi, 2010; Walther, 2006), this research also defines as important study content the development of social, self-regulatory and everyday coping skills by establishing flexible and diverse opportunities. An effort is made to link the teaching of general competences and learning skills with teaching practical skills in order to develop occupational competences. The same principle is kept in mind in terms of transferring theoretical knowledge, though to a lesser extent, due to the learners’ low level of general and learning skills, as other researchers have pointed out (Jäppinen, 2012; Kalalahti et al., 2020). The participants in this study cited a lack of theoretical knowledge as one of the challenges of the content of VET start. There are authors (for example Gallagher, 2011), according to whom a non-academic curriculum is essential in regards to the learners’ rehabilitation, though there are many authors (Bruin & Ohna, 2013; Cerda-Navarro, 2017) who feel that in the case of such alternative programmes, establishing an academic foundation is essential in order to prevent the recreation of social exclusion. Therefore, teaching theory and including routine obligations in studies should not be entirely avoided in the content of VET start, since learners might not otherwise be able to form a realistic understanding of their chosen speciality.

The learning environment is a meaningful factor in terms of the organisation of the VET start programme (Virtanen et al., 2014; Van den Akker, 2007). This study showed that integrating formal and non-formal learning environments and creating a safe and learner-friendly school climate are valued. Although integrating learning environments was considered important by those interviewed, the dilemma emerged of how to strike and maintain a balance between supporting a learner’s independence and self-regulatory skills and a safe learning pathway. On the one hand, the fact that the subjects, traineeship and volunteer work take place in different environments supports

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the learner’s social and coping skills. On the other hand, this requires a thought-out logistical plan from the school in order to ensure safety and not to interrupt the rhythm of daily studies. The teachers and support specialists who participated in the study rated very highly the activities supporting learning that enable the entire group to be together, such as excursions to companies and outings to nature. In the short VET start programme, volunteer work in organisations helps diversify the learning environment by offering opportunities to form working habits and experience new life situations.

The results show that the study group of VET start is a rather small but in any case heterogeneous group: there are learners with intellectual disabilities, emotional and behavioural difficulties, learning disabilities and psychological problems studying together, as well as learners who have returned to Estonia, are unsure about their choice of occupation or have dropped out of vocational education. Previous research on transition programmes also highlights the diversity of learners (Fix et al., 2019; Jäppinen, 2012; Kalalahti et al., 2020; Munns & McFadden, 2000). As such, it can be said that a transitional learner is often characterised by different combinations of background factors that affect learning, such as learning disabilities, special educational needs, low self-esteem, unrealistic ambitions, an unstable socio-economic situation or lack of support from their socio-cultural environment, which makes managing these risks challenging for vocational teachers and support specialists in VET start. However, according to numerous researchers (Botha ja Kourkotas, 2016; Jäppinen, 2012; Munns & McFadden, 2000), it is precisely because of the target group’s vulnerability that schools must develop a positive learning environment and culture that offers a ‘second chance’ to transitional learners. According to the results of this study, the VET start programme in Estonia has a similar responsibility before its learners.

According to the powerful learning environment framework of Van den Akker (2007), important characteristics of grouping are the formation of the group and the patterns of the individual learning pathways formed. In this study, assembling the group emerged as one of the key questions: it is necessary to consider the effect the group members have on one another as well as their compatibility. Peinemann (2018) has found that the heterogeneity of learners, personal difficulties, little or no maturity and (de)motivation play an important role in determining the formation of group processes in transition programmes. Even though the participants in the study sensed an expectation that anybody who wished to join the VET start programme would be able to do so, it is necessary to minimise the negative effect group members might have on one another. Thus, it can be said that according to this study, one of the prerequisites for the intended implementation of the VET start programme is the considered selection of learners. Additionally, it is important to take into consideration the need to shape group processes in a conscious and time-consuming manner.

Individual learning pathways begin forming when learners enter the programme and depend on their levels in various subjects as well as their speciality-related interests.
According to the research results, the solutions of the short and long VET start pro-
grammes differ in terms of which learning objectives are being met in a large group and
in which situations a large group is seen as more of an obstacle. In the short programme,
the learning pathways tend to be diverse – depending on the learners’ levels and choices,
they move between different specialities, study groups and working collectives along
their path. The learning pathways in the long VET start programme are individual as
well, though more centred around the VET start group. As such, based on the results,
it can be said that there is a multitude of opportunities for shaping an individual learn-
ing pathway, though in terms of the rationale and aim of the VET start programme,
gradually fostering learners’ independence from the secure VET start group can be
considered important. Schools should be autonomous in creating alternative models
designed to increase educational inclusion (Gonzáles-Faraco et al., 2019).

The timetable of VET start depends on the length of the programme. In both pro-
grammes there are clear differences between daily and weekly schedules, just as there
are differences in the VET start monthly schedules. At the same time, both programmes
aim to keep the students active every day of the week, making sure to vary their ac-
tivities. Those interviewed emphasised that interruptions to routine study rhythm are
detrimental, as the learners may leave the programme as a result. Therefore, changes
to the general timetable and traineeship schedules are generally avoided. The challenge
is to organise school holidays in such a way that learning habits and bonds with peers
are maintained. A similar conclusion was reached in a study conducted in Finland,
in which the implementation of the VET start programme in 16 vocational schools
was analysed. In the study, curricula customised for each learner without breaks was
highlighted as a positive experience, as it helped to maintain routine and keep them
on their learning pathway (Jäppinen, 2012). The critical time period for developing a
favourable study rhythm is at the beginning of the programme (Fix et al., 2019), which is
why inspiring extracurricular activities that encourage self-belief in learners and create
a sense of unity with fellow students are offered in the initial phase of the programme.

According to the research results, individual support of VET start learners is, in its
essence, multi-professional cooperation between members of the support system both
inside and outside of the school. Numerous authors (Jäppinen & Maunonen-Eskelinen,
2012; Riddle & Cleaver, 2015) emphasise the importance of cooperation culture in
relation to the effectiveness of transition programmes in dealing with learners’ heter-
ogeneity and social exclusion. Traineeship communities whose members are working
in the name of a shared goal – a positive school environment supporting learners’
development – in cooperative and constructive partnership (Botha & Kourkotas, 2016)
are seen as the working model of inclusive education. As such, cooperative school cul-
ture and the shared responsibility of network members are crucial in alleviating risks
related to VET start learners.
In addition to developing in-school cooperation, improving wider cooperation between schools and the school and the community is also important (Ainsow et al., 2012). One challenge that became evident in this study was the lack of cooperation between vocational schools in terms of cross-usage of traineeship bases. In order to diversify learners’ opportunities for practical training and, where necessary, offer VET start learners a traineeship close to their home, schools should consider using forms of cooperation that are much more efficient and flexible. Ainsow et al. (2012) has pointed out the need for schools that teach risk groups to implement inclusive partnership strategies instead of opposing and competing. Learners with special needs in particular could gain great support in learning and adapting from such networks. The importance of a resource-efficient network of educational institutions is also referred to in the Estonian Education Strategy 2021–2035, as it suggests creating regional education centres that aim to integrate vocational and general secondary education.

The teacher plays the most important role in providing a positive learning experience and establishing a trusting teacher-student relationship (Fix et al., 2019; Gallagher, 2011; Hattie & Yates, 2018). The results of this study confirm the importance of creating a trusting relationship in the VET start programme, as it is the prerequisite for supporting learners in their choice of speciality, learning, discovering their personal resources and developing social skills later on. In order to support VET start learners, teachers must possess empathy, openness, specific knowledge regarding the heterogeneous needs of VET start learners and perceptiveness when communicating with learners. Earlier research also shows that considering the needs of a heterogeneous learning group requires communicative and didactic/methodological competences kompetentse (Hellpoldt, 2016), flexibility and empathy from teachers (Peinemann, 2018). As such, it can be said that in order to support VET start learners, teachers must possess personality-related traits and certain values and stances that cannot necessarily be learned, as well as pedagogical and didactic competences that can be learned and improved.

The results show that teachers and support specialists act as supporters and supervisors of VET start learners. They advise, motivate and encourage, help the learner adapt to the group and guide group processes, introduce specialities and guide the learner towards a suitable speciality through practical activities. Therefore, the results of this study agree with previous research, according to which, on the one hand, a teacher in VET start assumes the role of a supervisor, encouraging and supporting the learner (de Bruijin & Leeman, 2011), but on the other hand, the teacher also focuses on guiding the career choice of each learner (Katelaar et al., 2012). Therefore, in a sense, the role of VET start teachers would seem to lie between social and vocational pedagogical practices, as Weiß (2018) has also observed.

According to this study, the central role in supporting VET start learners is that of the course instructor, who in addition to coordinating the cooperation support network, which supports each learner’s development, is often also the VET start learner’s primary
trusted person in the school. Gonzáles-Faraco et al. (2019) emphasises that the teacher being present for the learner helps close the potential gap between the learners and the school culture. Therefore, the role of the teacher is especially important in cases where the learner’s own socio-cultural community does not support their studies. Similarly to previous studies (Jäppinen, 2012), this study showed that supporting VET start learners in everyday coping proved to be most arduous for the course instructor who had the most close contact with the learners. As such, the elevated risk of burn-out for course instructors as well as other pedagogues and specialists involved in VET start must be given consideration, and in planning the programme, vocational schools must also grant the necessary support measures for their employees in addition to the support services provided for learners.

In terms of learning activities, learners’ individual needs and particularities must be flexibly considered. As VET start learners require a great deal of support and have more difficulty coping independently, there is more emphasis on explanation, demonstration and instruction by the teacher. A similar conclusion has been reached by the de Bruijn & Leeman (2011) and Gonzáles-Faraco et al. (2019), who highlight the importance of customised teaching and counselling in the vocational school context and emphasise the need to set an example through direct modelling. A learner’s individual needs dictate the learning methods customised for them and the implementation of adapted learning. Furthermore, learners’ different backgrounds and levels hinder the implementation of cooperative methods.

The materials used in VET start have also been specially customised for the target group based on learners’ mental, social and emotional well-being, rather than actual age. Meaningful learning is achieved with the help of IT tools, using videos, films and interactive activities in which the content is delivered to the learner through sound and images. The role of audio-visual support in transition curricula has been confirmed by previous research (Cerda-Navarro et al., 2017; Jäppinen, 2012; Van den Akker, 2007), according to which efficient and meaningful learning is more likely to take place in a technology-rich environment rather than a traditional textbook-based school lesson.

In his model, Van den Akker (2007) emphasises the importance of assessment that encourages learning, in which both the instrumental testing of knowledge and skills and output-based assessment are important (de Bruijn & Leeman, 2011). In the implementation of the VET start programme in Estonia, outcome-based assessment is applied and formative oral assessment was named as the main form of assessment. Feedback is provided on the progress of a learner’s vocational skills as well as general learning skills and coping in everyday situations. In order to fairly assess whether a student’s competences are in accordance with their learning outcomes, different methods such as tests, interviews and a portfolio are used. The varying nature of the assessment methods used in vocational education is referred to by Ingle & Duckworth (2013), who calls attention to the importance of the pre-assessment used in planning studies,
learners’ self-assessment and mutual assessment by fellow learners in supporting the learner. The same is emphasised by de Bruijn & Leeman (2011), who draw attention to assessing skills in situations that are as authentic as possible and applying as many different methods as possible. In addition to assessing previously set learning outcomes, it is recommended in the case of vulnerable target groups to note the changes in the learners’ development that were not originally planned but become evident during the implementation of the curriculum (Cerda-Navarro et al., 2017).

The results of this study provide further insight into the VET start programme through the experiences of vocational teachers and support specialists. The results can be seen as valuable input for greater implementation of VET start curricula as well as for developing the competences of vocational teachers in teacher-training curricula in universities. Further research could be conducted on the assessment of the effectiveness of the VET start programme based on the relationship between the aims of the programme, learners’ needs and the actual outcomes.

Reference

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Santrauka

Profesinio mokymo pradžios programa yra įvadinė programa, skirta perėjimui iš bendrojo ugdymo į profesinę mokyklą palengvinti, konsultuoti profesinės karjeros pasirinkimo klausimais ir suteikti teigiamos mokymosi bei darbo patirties. Programa yra grindžiama individualumo, lankstumo ir praktinio darbo principais. Ši programa Estijoje buvo vykdoma kaip bandomoji programa nuo 2016 m. Šiandien tai yra patvirtinta profesinio mokymo sistemos dalis. Įgyvendinant profesinio mokymo Pradžios programą ir pritaikant ją studentų poreikiams, pagrindinį vaidmenį tėvina mokytojai ir pagalbos tinklas. Tyrimo tikslas buvo aprašyti profesinios mokslo ir pagalbos specialistų patirtį, taikant profesinio mokymo Pradžios programą dviejose profesinėse mokyklose. Rezultatai parodė, kad profesinio mokymo Pradžios programa atliko labai svarbų pažeidžiamų visuomenės grupių socialinės atskirties prevencijos vaidmenį. Pašnekovai pabrėžė besimokančiųjų savarankiško karjeros pasirinkimo svarbą ugdant socialinius, savireguliacijos ir įveikos įgūdžius bei suteikiant teigiamą mokymosi patirtį. Šio tyrimo rezultatai gali prisidėti rengiant Profesinio mokymo pradžios programas, taip pat būti naudojami profesinios mokslo kompetencijos tobulinimo metu.

Esminiai žodžiai: Profesinio mokymo pradžios programa, Pereinamojo laikotarpio programa, profesinis mokymas.