

Social and communicational skills in upper secondary vocational education and training

Anu Räisänen¹, Mari Rökköläinen²

(1. Finnish Education Evaluation Council, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä 40014, Finland;

2. Finnish National Board of Education/Vocational Education, Helsinki 00531, Finland)

Abstract: This article presents the methodology used by the Finnish Education Evaluation Council in the national evaluation of social and communication skills in vocational education and training. The evaluation concentrates on key competences such as learning-to-learn skills, communication skills, social skills and entrepreneurship (Implementation of Education and Training 2010, 2004; Winterton, Delemare-Le Deist & Stringfellow, 2005; Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of December 18, 2006 on key competencies for lifelong learning, 2006). The evaluation focuses particularly on skills required in the labour market. These competences are included in all vocational study programmes as a part of accompanying with other key competences. The authors' approach follows the principles of developmental and participative evaluation, applying the Common Quality Assurance Framework (CQAF) model, which has been accepted by the European Commission for the quality management and quality assurance framework for vocational education and training in Europe. Additional methods such as interview and statistical data gathering were used to acquire comprehensive data and ensure extensive participation of each partner involved has key competences. The evaluation material was collected from vocational education and training providers by sector (n=8) and by qualification (n=53). Every sector and type of examination was included in the evaluation. The evaluation was based on a sample (n=130). The evaluation data were collected from multiple sources by using multiple methods. The material included written self-evaluation reports by vocational education and training providers (n=130 which equals 95% of VET providers), quantitative information, interviews organized by the National Board of Education and an evaluation seminar for providers as focus groups. Educational administrators, teachers, students, employers and workplace instructors participated in the self-evaluation of the vocational education and training establishments (multi-professional evaluation).

Key words: vocational education and training (VET); evaluation of education and training; evaluation; social skills; communication skills; key competences

1. Introduction

In recent years, the structure of vocational education and training in Finland has been reorganised, the amount of on-the-job learning has increased and skills demonstration has been introduced in all sectors and for all qualifications. The importance of general key competences as part of vocational competence has also been emphasized. These key competences will be further highlighted in the new national requirements for upper

Anu Räisänen, M.S., Finnish Education Evaluation Council, University of Jyväskylä; research field: evaluation of VET.
Mari Rökköläinen, M.S., Finnish National Board of Education/Vocational Education; research field: evaluation of VET.

secondary vocational qualifications now being prepared. Key competences in lifelong learning will be developed according to the recommendations given by the European Parliament and Council (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of December 18, 2006 on key competencies for lifelong learning, 2006).

This evaluation was a national evaluation project commissioned by the Ministry of Education. The purpose of the evaluation was to analyse the teaching of social and communication skills for working life as part of the three-year vocational education and training programmes. As specified by the Ministry, the evaluation was to concentrate on the following skill areas: (1) social skills (e.g., ability to work with others and to cope with work-related social situations); (2) communication skills (e.g., presentation skills, language skills and customer service skills required in the job); (3) learning-to-learn skills (e.g., learning capacity, self-improvement, self-evaluation of work performance); and (4) entrepreneurship skills and skills for functioning as an independent professional.

The evaluation focused both on the activities designed to develop these skills and on the actual results of this by the end of the education and training. The evaluation considered how education and training providers and educational institutions have taken the need of these skills into account in their curricula, teaching, on-the-job learning, student assessments, teacher training and their overall activities as education and training providers, and the results achieved were also evaluated. The skills acquired through education and training were assessed in the light of learning results data from vocational skills demonstration. The national core curriculum and teacher training were also evaluated.

2. Methodology of the evaluation

The evaluation followed the principles of developmental, participative and collaborative evaluation (e.g., Patton, 1997; O’Sullivan, 2004) and applied the Common Quality Assurance Framework (CQAF) model (i.e., Vocational Education and Training). The data for the evaluation was collected from multiple sources by using multiple methods. The materials included self-evaluation reports written by providers of vocational education and training, statistical information, and interviews with teachers, education administrators and teacher education units.

One of the greatest challenges was conceptually defining the key competences of lifelong learning. This involved referring to the literature on the subject, examining interpretations emerging in the drafting of curricula and qualification requirements, and practical experiences in working life. The concepts were pragmatically defined by a multi-professional team. The concept of entrepreneurship was divided into three sub-categories: “self-motivated entrepreneurship”, “internal entrepreneurship” and “external entrepreneurship”.

The material was collected separately for each qualification to facilitate exploration of special features in and differences between sectors and qualifications. The evaluation involved all sectors and qualifications except for the “circus” sector (n=52). Two education and training providers were chosen to represent each qualification. The evaluation also covered different types of training (training for young people, adult education, apprenticeship training, both Finnish and Swedish speaking education and training and special needs education). The responses covered 127 qualifications (response rate: 93.4%).

Qualification-specific working groups wrote descriptions and generated quantitative data, illustrating the state of the sector at the time of evaluation. After the collating of data and the writing of descriptions, the organizers held an evaluation session, with representatives of teachers, management, workplace instructors and

students participating.

Good practices were compiled from the qualification descriptions written by the education and training providers.

The external evaluation was performed by a multi-professional evaluation group (six members). At the first stage, the qualification-specific materials and best practices were analysed and subjected to criteria-based evaluation. The criteria were based on the CQAF model and target analysis. The main focus was on systematic operations (goals, operations, evaluation and monitoring, continuous improvement, plus results corresponding to goals). The interpretive analysis was carried out both numerically (on a scale from 0 to 5) and verbally. The highest possible point score was 140, and the score components were shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Evaluation targets and points

Needs of working life emphasized in education and training	0-20 points
Planning	0-25 points
Teaching and studying	0-30 points
Monitoring and assessment	0-10 points
Improvement and development	0-15 points
Results and effectiveness	0-20 points
Training policy and policy of the education or training provider	0-20 points

The evaluation also set a threshold value for high-quality operations. The evaluation group set the score of “3” as the threshold value: “some clear evidence that operations are consistent with the goals, both in planning and in practice, and some clear evidence that the results match the goals”. This was converted into an overall quality threshold: 57% of the maximum point score. On the basis of this, the education and training providers and qualifications were divided into two main groups: those exceeding the quality threshold and those falling short of the quality threshold. In addition to the scoring, each evaluator analyzed the quality of the results and the action, and wrote a report based on his or her own interpretive analysis. The national evaluation was compiled on these analyses, and the results were interpreted together during the evaluation sessions (n=9).

At the second stage, further evaluation information was sought. Learning results data compiled by the National Board of Education was used, representatives of authorities and teacher training institutions were interviewed, and the revised national requirements for upper secondary vocational qualifications were analysed (using the vocational qualification in construction as an example). A survey was also circulated to teacher training institutions, and an evaluation seminar (focus group discussions) was held to education and training providers to analyse the evaluation results together with teachers. The material supplied by the education and training providers was also used to create a new “in-depth analysis” focusing on the integration of social and communication skills into other areas of teaching and studying (see Figure 1). The extent of this integration was judged using the following criteria: (1) integrated pedagogy (e.g., profound awareness of the key competences of lifelong learning; implementation shared between various teachers and workplaces; inclusion of social skills in student assessment); (2) semi-integrated pedagogy (e.g., responsibility for these competences rests with one teacher); and (3) non-integrated pedagogy (e.g., no-one consciously takes responsibility for the key competences).

The external evaluation was organized in a multi-professional network by the Finnish Education Evaluation Council. It was carried out by an evaluation group, the members of which represented education and training providers, the employers’ national federation, experts of the Finnish National Board of Education and researchers

from various universities.

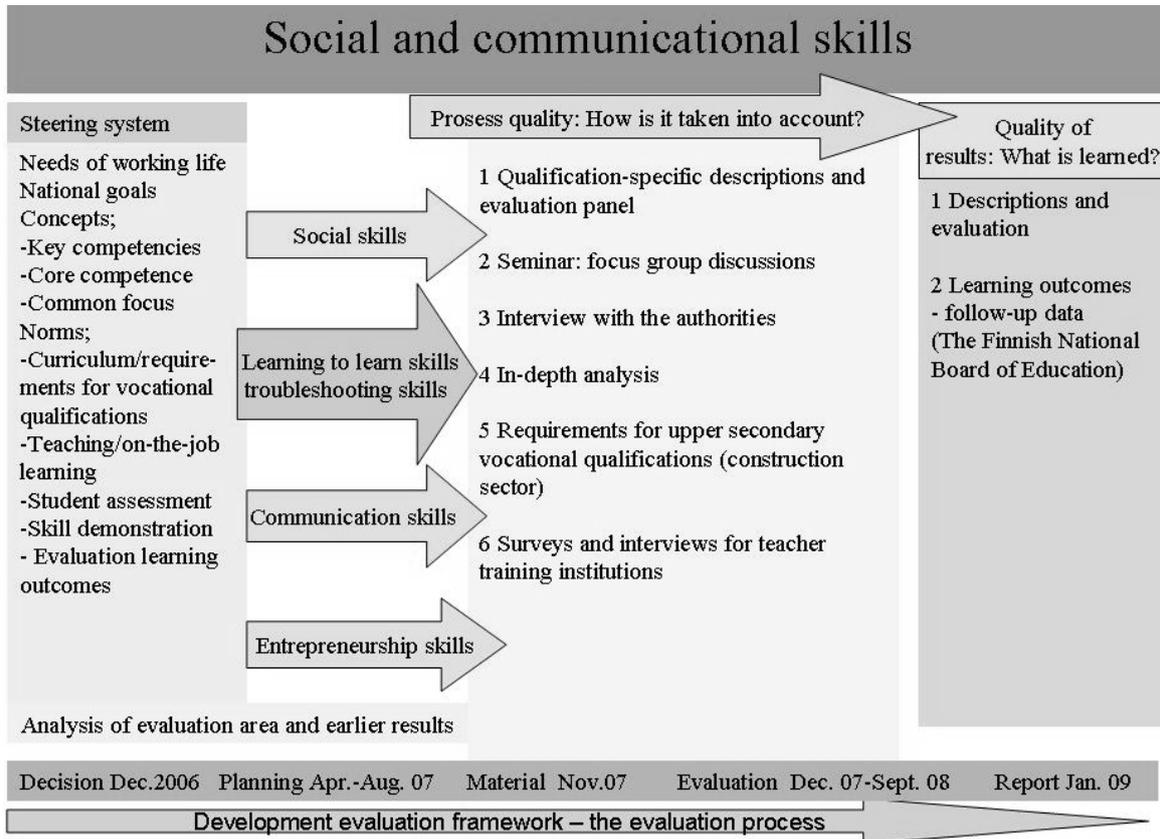


Figure 1 The evaluation framework and process

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Education and training are advancing in line with the goals

The evaluation results show that the general goals regarding social and communication skills have already been attained, and that vocational education and training is progressing according to these goals. However, development challenges still remain.

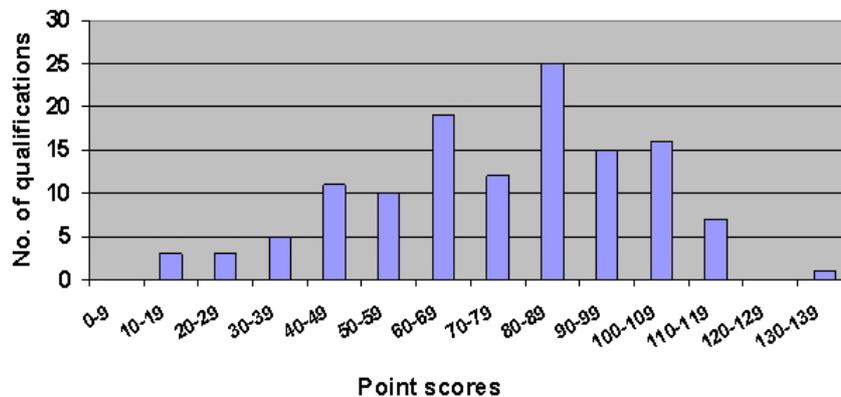


Figure 2 Distribution of scores for social and communication skills in upper secondary vocational qualifications

Figure 2 shows that the most qualifications are to be found at the average point score levels of 80 to 89 (n=25) and 60 to 69 (n=19). None of the qualifications reached the maximum point score (140), though on the other hand none of the qualifications received the minimum score either.

(1) About half of the qualifications in the evaluation (50.4%) attained the quality threshold, set at 57% of the maximum, or 79.8 points out of 140 (Table 1);

(2) 24% of the qualifications (n=30) passed the quality threshold in all sections and 45% (n=57) in some sections;

(3) 32% of the qualifications did not pass the quality threshold in any evaluated section.

Table 1 Quality level by evaluation area

Evaluation area	(a) Education or training provider falls short of quality threshold		(b) Education or training provider exceeds quality threshold	
	N	%	N	%
Needs of working life	59	46.5	68	53.5
Planning	76	59.8	51	40.2
Implementation of teaching and studying	66	52.0	61	48.0
Monitoring and assessment	64	50.4	63	49.6
Improvement and development	73	57.5	54	42.5
Results and effectiveness	61	48.0	66	52.0
Policy	75	59.1	52	40.9
Total score	63	49.6	64	50.4

3.2 Activities aimed at teaching social and communication skills are of fairly even quality, but generally they fail to reach the threshold level

Figure 3 shows that the quality of activities aimed at teaching social and communication skills is fairly even between the various areas evaluated, but they almost consistently fail to reach the threshold level of quality.

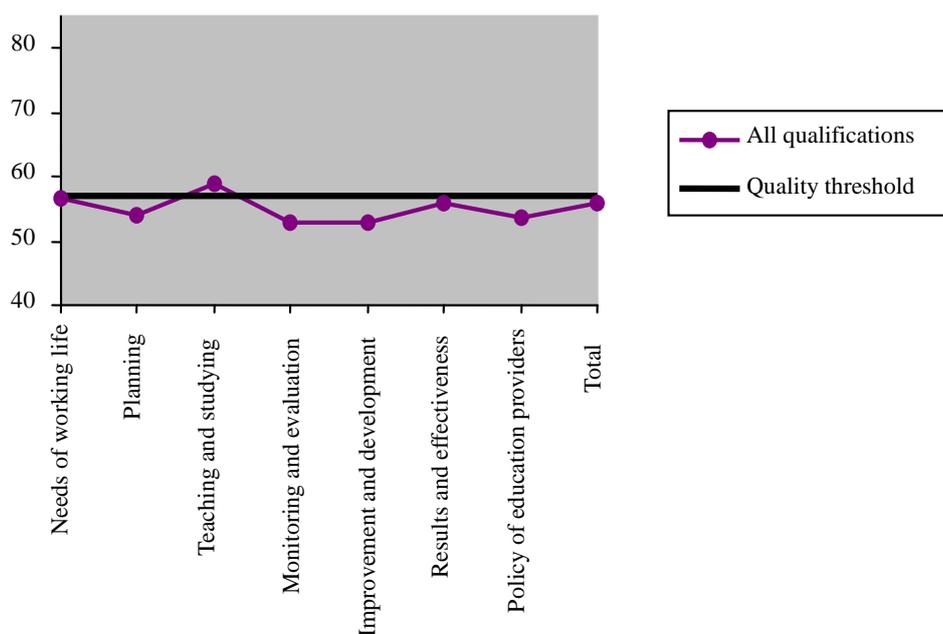


Figure 3 Level of quality for the areas evaluated

The best results were observed in anticipating and adapting to the needs of working life and in activities related to results and effectiveness. The lowest scores were observed in planning, education and training provider policy, improvement and development.

Sector- and qualification-specific differences were significant. In “technology and transport” and “natural resources and environment”, the point scores fell below the quality threshold in every area. Special educational institutions put a great deal of emphasis on social and communication skills, while apprenticeship training focuses least of all on these. The differences were distinct in different educational fields. It is a common idea that the social and communication skills in adult education and apprenticeship education are considered skills acquired and improved during the lifetime, and therefore they are not paid any attention to during the training. There were only negligible differences between Finnish-language and Swedish-language training.

3.3 Interpretive analysis revealed some factors and development needs related to the quality of the action

According to the interpretive analysis, many providers had set a goal for social and communicational skills and lined up activities connected to them. Many providers were lacking definitions of policy and orientation, in which case planning and implementation accumulated on individual teacher’s responsibility. The problem was, that providers’ policy did not always meet reality in educational institutions, and guidelines in an individual qualification did not come true. The distance between the educational or training institution and the education or training provider causes the problem of not seeing each other’s needs. It is a cultural question.

Education providers and educational institutions are aware of working life demands, although their anticipation methods are fairly undeveloped. The most critical point in the planning was related to the aims which for many were unclear, and partly totally missing. A major problem was also, that the social and communicational skills were not specified but taken as a whole. This highlighted, among other things, the need to define the concepts.

In pedagogical activity was emphasized both the significance of printed curricula and student assessment and vocational skills demonstrations. In educational institutions, very little attention was paid to the connection between printed and realized curriculum. The significance of the hidden curriculum turned out to be notable.

The cooperation between different teacher groups is unusual. Confusions occurred in responsibilities in teaching social and communicational skills. In some qualifications, the teachers of vocational studies had this responsibility, in some others, it was on the teachers of the core subjects (mother tongue and foreign languages among others), whereas in some studies the whole responsibility was shifted to the on-the-job-training. Relatively common opinion seems to be, that the social and communicational skills develop naturally along with teaching/training and other communal activity as well as learning on the job, without special investments.

The teachers orientated themselves to teach social and communicational skills through the teaching methods and the subject. Teaching supports group work and teamwork and emphasizes cooperational methods and customer service, on-the-job-learning and student assessment. A closer look at teacher’s work brought out a problem of a single teacher: Vocational studies teachers teach also core studies, such as mother tongue, foreign languages and mathematics.

Student assessment was a great pedagogical challenge. Social and communicational skills are evaluated at the workplace more often together with on-the-job-learning and vocational skills demonstrations than with other student assessment. Usually there are no common assessment criteria but the assessment is teacher-specific. Assessment of social and communicational skills was more formative than summative.

Many providers and educational institutions had rather organized evaluation and follow-up systems, but only a few included in them the follow-up and evaluation connected to the social and communicational skills. In some cases, the evaluation and follow-up procedures were totally lacking. The most essential matter was the feedback from workplaces. The most critical point was the evaluation of the learning outcomes. In great part of the qualifications, learning outcomes are not at all evaluated, yet in spite of that, the teachers were able to present results concerning students' knowledge (=insight). The problem in learning outcome evaluation was also, that the fields related to the social and communicational skills are not specified at all, but are understood as one unity. Besides the student assessment, different qualifications also needed improvement of the evaluation methods which would support teachers work (such as peer evaluation), and also deepening the culture of learning from others.

There was great variation between qualifications in quality improvement and developing. Some qualifications had separate development projects related to social and communicational skills, and some had connected social and communicational developing potentials to be a part of general improvement. Only little evidence of pedagogical innovations could be seen in the data. The problem here was, that development operations are not seen as a vision but as actions, such as development projects. The future development trends were quite narrow and technically oriented.

Although economical and other resources were estimated rather good, more resources are needed for the cooperation between different teacher groups and concerted teaching, for the training of teachers and workplace instructors, for integrating teaching in different special fields, and especially for developing student assessment. Pedagogical leadership (process management) was brought out to be a central development object.

Social skills were emphasized more than other special fields. Language teaching was especially seen a support in building up communicational skills. In practice, learning-to-learn skills were most often entrusted to individual teachers and students. Entrepreneurship was considered important, though students of vocational upper secondary education and training were regarded too young and inexperienced to study entrepreneurship. Some thought that education provides good basic skills for entrepreneurship.

Several critical comments were submitted to national steering and development interests were brought out. Accuracy in national guidelines and objectives, support in developing new methods and culture and teacher training were especially wanted.

3.4 Considerable differences in the extent of integration of social and communication skills into other areas of teaching that is of great importance for the development of these skills

Teaching of these skills was found to be integrated in less than 30% of the qualifications, semi-integrated in less than 40% and non-integrated in more than 30%. Integration was best achieved in the "humanities", "education" and "science" fields, and least well achieved in the "technology and transport", "natural resources and the environment", and "tourism, catering and domestic services" fields. The largest number of qualifications with no integration was found in the "natural resources and the environment" field. Integration was better achieved in special needs teaching than in other forms of education, and the lowest integration rate was found in apprenticeship training.

3.5 The need for social and communication skills in working life is greater than what the education and training system can cater for

Social and communication skills are highly important in working life, but in education and training they are not given as much weight as they deserve. Learning-to-learn and social skills receive the most focus, while the least focus is given to communication skills and entrepreneurship. The results, i.e. the level achieved through

education and training, are estimated to be some 20 percentage points lower than the needs of working life. The entrepreneurship results fall below the quality threshold.

The greatest gaps between the needs of working life, the focus in education and training, and the results achieved were found in qualifications where the pedagogy approach was non-integrated. By contrast, greater focus is placed on the needs of working life in qualification groups with an integrated pedagogy approach (see Figure 4).

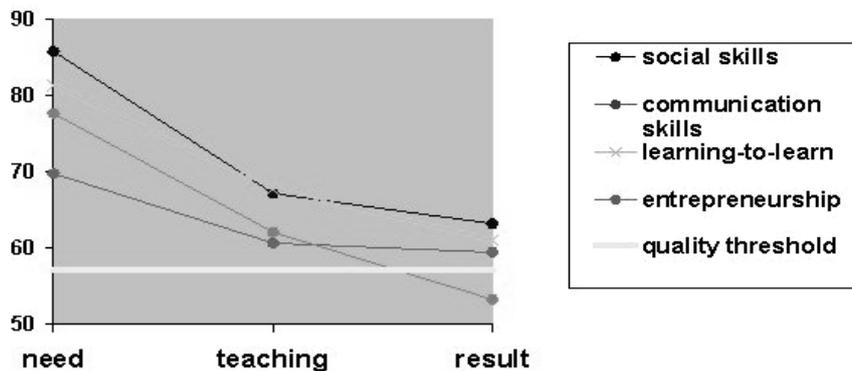


Figure 4 Need for social and communication skills in working life, the emphasis given to them in education and training, and how their point scores relate to the quality threshold

3.6 The learning results are good

In educational institutions, the social and communicational skills of the students are considered to be very good. Easily getting a job, small amount of dropouts and positive feedback from employers were also regarded good indicators of social and communicational skills.

The National Board of Education monitors and evaluates the learning results of vocational education and training (Räkköläinen, M., 2005). The evaluation data is generated directly from vocational competence tests, without national tests, and evaluation data is also generated on lifelong learning skills. The evaluation shows too good learning results: The most common point score in lifelong learning skills is 4 (out of a maximum of 5). There are great differences from one qualification to another in terms of the mastery of key competences. Women generally score better in these skills than men.

3.7 Teacher training is not very systematic in preparing teachers to take social and communication skills into account in vocational education and training

Teacher training institutions vary greatly in their awareness of the growing need for social and communicational skills teaching in vocational education and training. There are also widely differing views on the needs of working life. Procedures for anticipating those needs vary from one institution to another, and differences between sectors were considered great.

There is much variation in the extent to which the needs of working life and vocational education and training institutions are taken into account in teacher training curricula. There is also variance in the extent to which teachers are instructed in how to take social and communicational skills into account in their future jobs. In continuing education for teachers, the focus on social and communicational skills also differs greatly from one teacher training institution to another.

Educational institutions and education providers adopted a very critical attitude towards teacher training in their self-evaluation. The sharpest criticism was focused on the scientific training methods and abstracting the

training from the needs of daily work and life of young people.

3.8 The new national requirements for upper secondary vocational qualifications do not sufficiently clarify the inclusion of social and communicational skills in vocational education and training

In the new national requirements for upper secondary vocational qualifications, great changes have been made to the structure and content compared with the earlier national core curriculum and requirements for qualifications regarding social and communicational skills (Basic qualification in building trade, 2008). The harmonization of concepts achieved with this reform will clarify the vocational qualification system, for instance with regard to its relationship to the needs of working life.

However, key competences in lifelong learning have not been unambiguously defined in the new framework, and it may therefore turn out to be difficult to identify the essential features of each of those competences. The anticipated threats are that key competences in lifelong learning: (1) are understood as one package and not addressed separately; (2) will continue to be left for a single teacher to handle; and (3) are too complicated for people in working life to evaluate.

4. Conclusion

The evaluation demonstrated that vocational education and training is in fact progressing in line with the goals of lifelong learning and the needs of working life. Social and communication skills form part of vocational education and training, and greater importance is being attached to them in revisions to the framework for qualifications. Vocational education has become and will continue to become increasingly dependent on the needs of working life, through on-the-job learning and competence tests. Learning environments have become increasingly oriented towards working life.

The evaluation raises implications how the key competences affect learning methods and outcomes. It also shows a tension between espoused aims and plans to cover these competences and the reality of teaching and assessment practices. In this paper we argue that teachers need better integration of aims and practices as well as clearer pedagogical strategy in order to take responsibility for training in all different skills.

The major challenges concern the great differences observed between education and training providers, sectors and qualifications. There are differences related to operating practices and occupational traditions. The challenges are particularly apparent in the technology, transport, natural resources and environment sectors. The depth of integration in the pedagogical approach is an important challenge in changing operating practices. A further issue is that the special features of social and communication skills are not analysed and itemized; instead, these skills are often considered to be one package. Clarifying the concept of entrepreneurship is the greatest development challenge in this area.

The evaluation group also presented improvement proposals in its report. These refer to education and training providers, qualifications, teacher training, national policies and official supervision.

References:

- Basic qualification in building trade. (2008). *The basic elements for vocational upper secondary qualification*. Helsinki: National Board of Education.
- Implementation of Education and Training 2010. Working group B "Key Competencies". (2004). *Entrepreneurship Education and Learning*. European Commission Directorate-General for education and Culture, Education Lifelong Learning Policy Development.
- O'Sullivan, R. G. (2004). *Practicing evaluation: A collaborative approach recommendation*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

- Patton, M. Q. (1997). *Utilization-focused evaluation: The new century text (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage.
- Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of December 18, 2006 on key competencies for lifelong learning (2006/962/EC). *Official Journal of the European Union*.
- Räisänen, A. & Hietala, R. (Eds.). (2008). *SOVITELLEN—Social and communicational skills in vocational upper secondary education and training*. Jyväskylä: The Finnish Education Evaluation Council.
- Räikköläinen, M. (2005). *Developing the national competence-based learning outcomes evaluation programme in vocational upper secondary qualifications: From evaluation experimentation to practice*. Helsinki: National Board of Education
- Manfred Tessaring & Jennifer Wannan. (2004). *Cedefop synthesis of the Maastricht Study. Vocational education and training—Key to the future: Lisbon-Copenhagen-Maastricht: Mobilising for 2010*. Luxembourg: Office for Publications of the European Communities.
- Winterton, J. & Delamare-Le Deist, F. & Stringfellow, E. (2006). *Typology of knowledge, skills and competences. Clarification of the concept and prototype*. Cedefop reference series. Thessaloniki, Cedefop.

(Edited by Nicole and Lily)