Get a vocation: keeping on top of studies
Reducing the drop-out rate in vocational upper secondary education and training

Aini-Kristiina Jäppinen
PhD (in Education), Adjunct Professor, Senior Researcher
Institute for Educational Research
University of Jyväskylä, Finland

SUMMARY

The Finnish Ministry of Education commissioned a study in 2006–07 on reducing the number of drop-outs, *Get a vocation – keeping on top of studies.* The aim of the study was to establish the good practices and operating models underpinning reduction in drop-outs. The study indicates that an educational institution that fosters commitment of students to their studies acts systematically and persistently when facing challenges. It examines its operations critically. It creates a safe and caring learning environment in which certain basic principles prevail, but it is nevertheless flexible. In such educational institutions, pedagogically distributed leadership manifests itself in five key areas: management support groups, the general effectiveness of work on the curriculum, the practices of strategic plans and development work, on-the-job learning, and the multiprofessional nature of educational guidance.

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Foreword

European business life is in constant need of a trained and skilled labour force (OECD, 2004). However, there is starting to be a severe shortage of people with good vocational skills in some sectors, already seen in Finland, and society cannot afford to lose the input of any individual. In spite of measures aimed at reducing the number of people dropping out of vocational upper secondary education and training, getting students to commit to their studies continues to be a major challenge for all providers of vocational education and training and for the entire European education policy.

Students drop out for many reasons: as a result of wrong choices, poor study results, learning difficulties, motivation or mental health problems, a crisis in the student's personal life, or transferring too early to working life, another educational institution or another educational sector. Some of those who drop out change to a more suitable study programme and some return, in time, to the studies they dropped out of: some never do.

The study on reducing dropping out, Get a vocation – keeping on top of studies, initiated by the Finnish Ministry of Education, started in September 2006 and continued until the end of August 2007. For the study, the Ministry of Education chose 14 education providers whose educational institutions had a drop-out percentage of between 4 and 8 % in 2003–04, i.e. clearly less than the Finnish average (10–20 %). The study did not analyse the reasons for dropping out; instead, the aim was to establish the good practices and operating models that underpinned successful reduction in drop-out.

The education providers included in the study were divided into three groups: six large and multidisciplinary municipal education and training consortia; four medium-size or small education providers; and four single-sector education providers. They were located around Finland in both towns and rural areas with diverse forms of business. The educational sectors included were technology and transport, business and administration, social services, health and sports, construction, culture and tourism, catering and domestic services. The education providers represented over 30 vocational schools and around 10 000 15–20-year-old students, of which the majority came directly from comprehensive school.

Engendering a sense of commitment in students to their studies and establishing a vocational identity involves many factors. Table 1 includes the fields that were assessed in establishing the good practices

behind low drop-out. The fields were identified on the basis of mainly Finnish surveys and studies on vocational education and training and management, guidance and the general development of education (Kasurinen 2004; Numminen et al. 2002; Finnish Ministry of Education 2007; Ropo et al. 2005; Stenström and Laine 2006). From these, all concepts, subjects, ideas, etc. concerning the theme of drop-out were collected and organised into five main and 15 sub-areas together with their more precise contents according to the qualitative concept analysis (Patton, 2002) (Table 1). The first two sub-areas have only one content area. The consequences of the fact will be discussed later with the presentation of results.

Approach to good practice: pedagogically distributed leadership

For the reliability of the study, it was important that all the educational institutions were studied equally and from the same perspective. However, because the municipal education and training consortia or educational institutions were located in different types of areas and were of different sizes with their own priority areas, and because their students were also different, adopting a common approach was not a simple task.

Many studies on work and learning environments increasingly stress the importance of distributed leadership and responsibility as the distinctive features of a fruitful learning environment (Bereiter, 2002; Brown and Duguid, 2002; Engeström, 2004; Hargreaves and Fink, 2006; MacBeath, 2005; Møller and Eggen, 2005; Senge et al. 2000; Spillane, 2006; Tynjälä, 2006). Therefore, vocational upper secondary education and training was examined in terms of the implementation of pedagogically distributed leadership and not by comparing the education providers.

Pedagogically distributed leadership is the ability of all the members of a community to interact well. This can be seen in management and the practical implementation of curricula and study programmes. Distributed leadership means multiple voices, flexibility and commitment. It includes negotiation, space, creation of visions in a considerate way, control based on trust, sticking one's neck out and sharing power and responsibility. Pedagogically distributed leadership means the ability to create and develop a pedagogical and organisational system and also the ability of management to

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Table 1. **Result of the item analysis: study fields**

MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE	WORK ON THE CURRICULUM	STRATEGIC PLANS AND DEVELOPMENT WORK	STRUCTURE AND PROVISION OF EDUCATION	GUIDANCE ACTIVITIES
1. Management support groups and areas of responsibility	**4. General effectiveness** - taking responsibility and commitment for the entire staff - curriculum and links with working life - curriculum and guidance activities - curriculum as an open learning environment	**7. General factors** - action and development priorities and taking responsibility - effectiveness of plans and strategies - monitoring absences - group guidance - orientation practices	**10. Forms** - structures and teaching arrangements experienced positively - group sizes - on-the-job learning	**13. Availability, supply and organisation** - connection with basic education - guidance counsellors, school social workers and school psychologists - manifestation of multiprofessional nature - contribution of subject teachers - regional aspect of guidance
2. Participants in management support groups	**5. Structural factors** - positive teaching methods and other similar functions - provision of vocational and common studies and optional studies - curriculum and using IT	**8. Evaluation and quality work** - initial assessment of the students - support measures following initial assessments - self- and peer assessment by the students - assessment of teaching - quality criteria	**11. Contents** - plans and projects - cooperation between the home and school - cooperation at the institutional level - regional cooperation - cross-administrative cooperation - multi-vocational cooperation	**14. Role and contents** - giving feedback - integrating guidance into other activities - study guidance, guidance on growth and development, career guidance - guidance for first-year students - use of information and communications technology
3. Premises and auxiliary activities - premises for teaching, accommodation and leisure time - hobby and leisure-time activities - student activities	**6. Contextual factors** - individual study plan - monitoring studies - transition point of study path from basic education to vocational upper secondary education and training - IEP - support measures following on from the above - entrepreneurship - practical nature of studies	**9. Staff development** - methodical approach; constancy and competency - pedagogical cooperation - visits to educational institutions - periods of work experience for teachers - teacher mentoring - induction of new teachers - work guidance - individual study plan for teachers	**12. Social and student-related factors** - providing information about education and its marketing - profitability and image of educational sectors - effect of working life skills requirements on dropping out - heterogeneity of students	**15. Development and evaluation** - methodical nature of guidance - provision and development of special needs teaching - guidance quality work - guidance procedures - division of work and taking responsibility in guidance - guidance priorities and resources - post-guidance

intervene or, if necessary, to refrain from intervening in the details of employee work. The most important issue is to get the entire staff and students to do the right things together and separately at the right time.

Pedagogically distributed leadership involves a collective learning process that includes the ability to evaluate, develop and commit

to the job and the desire to be responsible for one's own learning process and, as far as possible, the learning process of the entire school community. Pedagogically distributed leadership as a collective learning process means managing expertise and transferring it from one to another. At its most effective, pedagogically distributed leadership as a way of sharing expertise manifests itself as the production of creative solutions and the committed introduction of new good practices.

On the basis of the above, examination of the vocational upper secondary education and training chosen by the Ministry of Education focused on pedagogically distributed leadership from five perspectives: how innovative, creative, fruitful and sensitive were the structures, forms and contents of the education and studies; development of a pedagogical and organisational leadership role, and the prevalence and distribution of responsibility and taking responsibility; the appropriateness, diversity and creativity of pedagogical and organisational practices and working methods; the coherence, sophistication and organisation of pedagogical and organisational practices and working methods; and the degree of networking, interactivity and commitment of the working culture of the entire staff. These criteria come straight from the theoretical frame of pedagogically distributed leadership, presented above.

Four quality levels were created on the basis of these five perspectives, based on the SOLO-Taxonomy by Biggs and Collis (1982). The levels were modified, however, for the specific purposes of this study. All areas and contents of Table 1 were estimated by each participant according to the five criteria and put onto the four levels of pedagogically distributed leadership. A peer-estimation was available for increasing the validity of the study.

However, some of the contents were such that it was not possible to specify their quality level; example were the group size, special financing or the heterogeneity of students. They were considered in another way and have therefore been omitted from this article. The levels and their criteria are as follows:

Level 4*:* the action or practice was diverse, innovative, creative, rich, regular, sustainable and extremely well organised. Almost all the staff were strongly committed to the action in question and participated in all development work. The educational institution's internal and external networking was very effective and included diverse forms of cooperation. Interaction was fruitful and diverse.

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Level 3*:* the action or practice was diverse, regular, fairly sustainable, enriching and well organised. The staff were generally committed to the action in question and many took part in continuous development work. The educational institution was internally well networked and cooperation was smooth. Interaction was good, effective, diverse and fairly frequent.

Level 2*:* the action or practice was becoming regular but was nonetheless still fairly new, experimental and only fairly well organised. The staff were either partly or reluctantly committed and only some of the staff regularly took part in development work. Internal networking and cooperation were quite good and smooth but did not cover an adequate number or all the members of staff. Interaction was reasonably good, but nonetheless partly inadequate.

Level 1*:* the action or practice was sporadic, new or short-term, and was weakly organised. The staff were weakly committed and only a few took part in regular development work. There were shortcomings in internal networking and cooperation and cooperation was not sufficiently comprehensive. Interaction was quite weak and inadequate.

Method

Compiling the material

To establish the common practices and actions exhibiting stronger pedagogically distributed leadership, representatives of education providers first completed a questionnaire and then were interviewed. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The questionnaire and interviews covered all sub-areas with contents (Table 1) being studied, specifically from the perspective of reducing the number of students dropping out and fostering commitment to their studies. The interviewees were individuals who had a comprehensive understanding of the activities of the municipal education and training consortium or educational institution, such as principals, education and quality managers, guidance counsellors, social workers or other individuals responsible for guidance. Many of the interviewees also worked in teaching positions. In addition, various types of document describing the activities were collected from the education providers.

Presenting the results

Although qualitative by nature, this study makes use of some quantitative features as means of levels of pedagogically distributed leadership. Therefore, the method used is of mixed-methods type (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003).

The results are presented using profiles evincing pedagogically distributed leadership, combined from the means of the levels. First, one main profile comprising all the sub-areas and quality levels was established for each education provider, followed by 13 separate sub-profiles of the contents of each sub-area in accordance with Table 1. (Although there were 15 sub-areas, it would not have been sensible to create a separate sub-profile of the first two because they both had only one content area.) The educational institution-level profiles were given for the education providers' own use.

The report only focused on the highest quality levels 3 and 4, which represented stronger pedagogically distributed leadership. To see which areas and contents were at these levels, and at which point there was coherence between the education providers, all the main profiles of each educational institution were first combined into one main profile. Then, the 13 separate sub-profiles were merged into one common sub-profile. The common profiles were achieved by calculating the average quality level for each sub-area and content. The average quality levels of the common profiles are expressed with an accuracy of 0.1.

Results

This article concerns the five sub-areas of stronger pedagogically distributed leadership that were distinguished from the common main profile. Their averages varied between 3.3 and 3.5. However, another finding will be presented before the profiles. In the qualitative analysis of the material, four features common to all the education providers clearly came to light. The stronger pedagogically distributed leadership revealed by the profiles is examined using these features. The features were a systematic approach and persistence, the critical examination of one's own actions, addressing particular issues one at a time, and ensuring a good atmosphere (MacBeath, 2005).

Four special features

No good practices develop of their own accord: they always have their own history. A sufficient amount of time, perseverance and

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belief in one's own actions are needed before results begin to show. The municipal education and training consortia and educational institutions studied had carried out systematic and persistent work for many years before a reduction in the number of students dropping out and a commitment to studying began to show and could be verified as concrete events or indicators.

Continuing critical self-examination and evaluation were seen in the further development of practices and actions that had proven fruitful and modification or rejection of the less desired ones. The aim was genuinely to understand what was good, what was worth developing and in what direction, what should be changed and what was worth giving up. The actions were never considered to be completely ready; there was always room for improvement.

Addressing particular themes is directly related to the two previous features. Although nearly everything was evaluated and developed to some extent, there was no attempt, to modify everything in one go. Some development areas were prioritised; others were managed with smaller inputs, or it was decided to leave them until later.

One manifestation of a good atmosphere was the emphasis on the individual consideration of students and the attempt to design tailored solutions, especially in problem cases. The idea that 'nobody is left behind' came across from the actions and practices. The attitude was not dependent on the size or resources of the education provider: everything that was possible was done. An inexplicable 'je ne sais quoi' could be sensed in the atmosphere of the institutions studied. The activities were not, of course, completely the same, as they were bound up with the characteristics of each educational institution or municipal education and training consortium (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006, p. 110). That certain 'je ne sais quoi' can be called generosity, caring, taking the time, taking responsibility, steadfastness, enthusiasm, and turning difficulties and challenges into one's own strengths and victory. It can further be added that the special 'je ne sais quoi' could often be seen as a genuine desire to be the best entity providing vocational upper secondary education and training in the region or the sector, and not just good or average in doing the task.

Profiles
As can be seen in Figure 1, five common sub-areas of stronger pedagogically distributed leadership can be distinguished from the main profile (Table 1). These form the support pillars that created the basis for designing vocational upper secondary education and
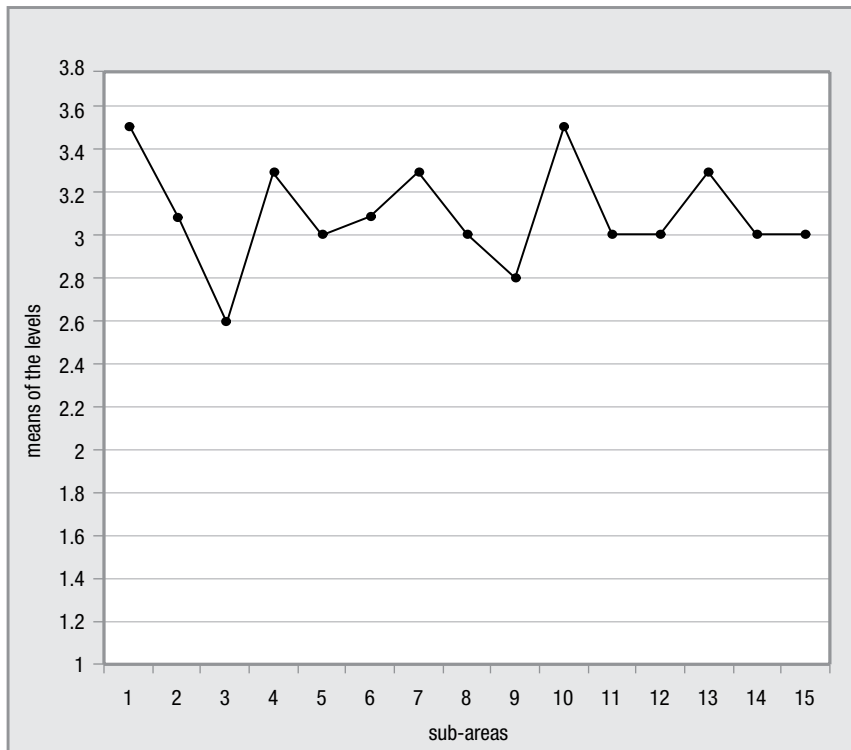
training that successfully reduced the number of drop-outs and engendered commitment in the studies. The five strong sub-areas with their averages were: management support groups and areas of responsibility (mean of the levels 3.5); general effectiveness of work on the curriculum (3.3); general practices relating to strategic plans and development work (3.3); on-the-job learning and other forms and structures of providing education (3.5); and availability, supply and organisation of guidance activities (3.3) (Jäppinen, 2007).

*1. Sub-area: management support groups and areas of
   responsibility*
The scope and sensible distribution of the areas of responsibility of the groups and teams supporting the management proved to be one of the most important areas of pedagogically distributed leadership, with an average of 3.5 (Figure 1). All the education providers received in this sub-area either quality level 3 or quality level 4. Both scores were recorded seven times each.

Figure 1. **Main profile**

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The management had a participative, developmental and evaluative grasp that emphasised effective interaction between the management and staff. There were two types of management groups or teams: decision-making bodies which were organisational tools for the management and 'doers' which were practical executors of the tasks. The groups and teams were both systematic and flexible; in addition to regular times, meetings were held, if necessary, at short notice. The groups and teams were organised down to the teacher level, and the staff carried out their tasks in accordance with mutually agreed values and principles.

A systematic approach and persistence manifested themselves as a management and organisational structure that extended from the management level to all parts of the educational institution(s) as efficient and comprehensively networked multiprofessional groups. The networks covered all the educational institutions in the municipal education and training consortium or the entire institution as comprehensively as possible. The groups and teams had clearly defined areas of responsibility and a purpose. The teachers had frequently had an involvement in setting up the groups and teams. The group members were also often members of other networks in their own educational sector as actors or experts.

Critical examination of the management and organisational structure could be seen especially in the interviews. The respondents were open and honest and avoided putting unnecessary gloss on matters. Addressing particular issues was demonstrated in the ability of the groups and teams supporting the management to handle, at a practical level, issues that were relevant to all the students and the entire staff, not just some of them. The focus was on the essential elements, without, however, forgetting the general view. The groups and teams covered all the support actions, such as student welfare services, special needs education, and student accommodation services. The management and organisational structures really worked in a good environment, and the groups and teams genuinely took matters forward. Sufficient information flowed via the teams and groups to all levels of the organisation.

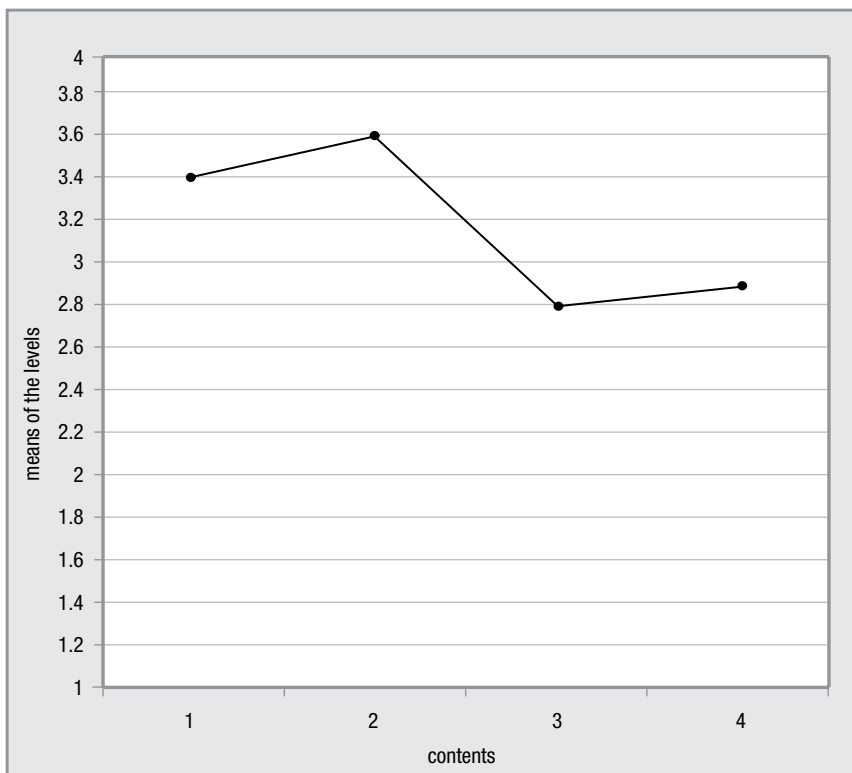*4. Sub-area: general effectiveness of work on the curriculum*

CONTENT 1
The general practices of work on the curriculum, i.e. carefully managed and divided work on the curriculum, proved another important

manifestation of stronger pedagogically distributed leadership. The general effectiveness of work on the curriculum received an average of 3.3 (Figure 1). Two education providers received quality level 4; six received level 3.5; five received level 3 and one received level 2.5. Figure 2 shows the averages of the stronger pedagogically distributed leadership for the contents relating to the general effectiveness of the curriculum: taking responsibility and commitment to work on the curriculum (3.4); working life and the curriculum (3.6); guidance concerning the curriculum (2.8); and open learning environments from the perspective of work on the curriculum (2.9).

A systematic approach and persistence manifested themselves as taking responsibility, both by management and the teaching staff for work on the curriculum, and as a commitment to it, with the curriculum being a tool for pedagogical management. The work was shared out among a large group of people in all parts of the institution(s).

Figure 2. **General effectiveness of work on the curriculum**

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Nevertheless, it was important that someone, such as the principal, had primary responsibility. Work on the curriculum was increasingly perceived as a continuous process and not as a one-off event.

Critical self-examination was seen in honest evaluations by those with the greatest responsibility for work on the curriculum as to how the process had progressed and how the work had been experienced and received by the staff also at difficult times.

Addressing particular issues was ensured so that every member of the community was expected to know their place in the work on the curriculum. The curriculum was a genuine tool for guiding the activities of the teaching staff. It was easily accessible for all and an essential tool that harmonised teaching and brought issues into sharp focus. In some educational institutions, it was even distributed for use by the students. The involvement of the students and consideration of their opinions was also put into practice in work on the curriculum in many educational institutions.

When working in a good atmosphere, the work on the curriculum was a factor that clarified and united actions and practices. A sense of community and common effort was emphasised in work on the curriculum.

CONTENT 2

The contents of the curriculum were generally determined according to the needs of working life. The aim was to forecast changes in working life and to react to them as quickly as possible. Representatives of working life were involved in many ways in the work on the curriculum, either directly or, for example, via the management or the teachers' networks in working life. The approval of the curriculum often required a statement from representatives of working life. The networks with working life were comprehensive and diverse, and joint projects and cooperation with companies were frequent and efficient. The connections to working life safeguarded professional growth; the orientation towards working life was a factor that strongly encouraged a commitment to studying.

CONTENT 3

Guidance was implemented at the curriculum level in diverse ways, for example as guidance study units relating to vocational studies and as other guidance inputs relating to studies, such as special guidance on on-the-job learning. Guidance was also increasingly understood to be an overarching entity relating to all activities.

CONTENT 4

An open learning environment meant many things. It included extensive IT solutions, such as e-teaching, all the surrounding school and learning networks, individual and multifaceted study choices, and the consideration of various types of learning methods and styles. An open learning environment was seen in practice, for example, in flexible, extensive teaching arrangements tailored for individual needs or as educational structures. An open learning environment was frequently created through working life or other stakeholders. An open learning environment also manifested itself as an atmosphere that was accepting and supportive of the students, as a sense of community.

7. Sub-area: general practices relating to strategic plans and development work
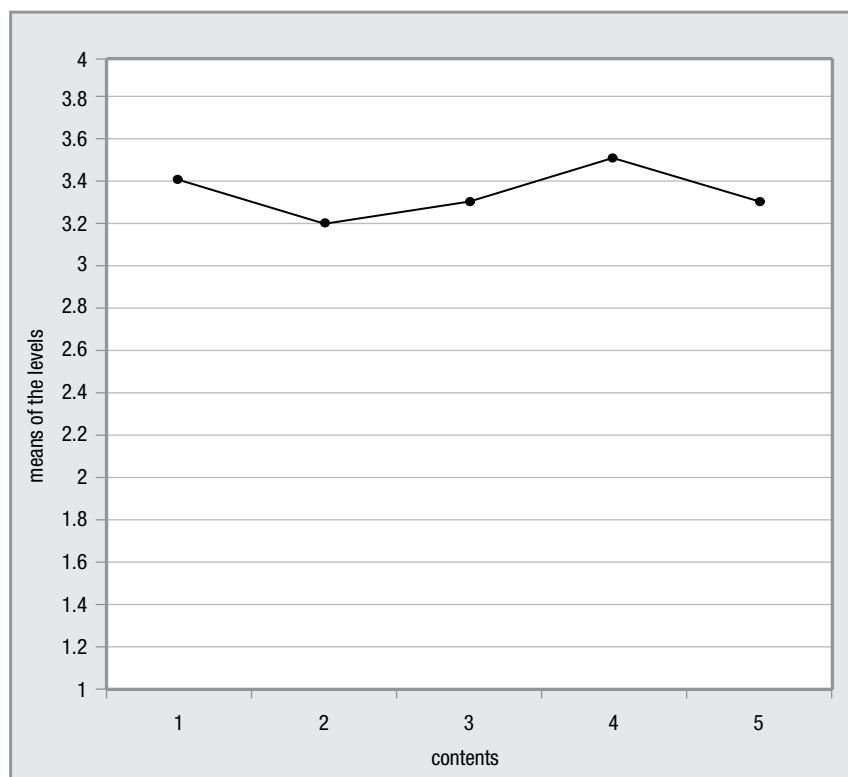
The third strong area of pedagogically distributed leadership was general practices relating to strategic plans and development work, with an average of 3.3 (Figure 1). The contents and averages of this sub-area were: priority areas of strategic plans and development work and taking responsibility for actions and development (3.4); effectiveness of the plans and strategies in practice (3.2); monitoring absences (3.3); group guidance (3.5); and orientation practices for new students (3.3) (Figure 3). One education provider had quality level 4, six had 3.5 and seven had 3.

It is, therefore, of great importance which principles are used to design and develop the activities within vocational upper secondary education and training and how the decisions made are brought to the practical level when taking a view on absences and their monitoring, group guidance and the orientation of new students in vocational upper secondary education and training. The results of this sub-area are first examined at a general level in the light of the four special features and finally some observations are made on the more detailed contents of the sub-area, although they are closely tied to the Finnish education context.

CONTENTS 1 AND 2

A systematic approach and persistence manifested themselves in several ways: as clearly expressed values which were acted on at a practical level; as common educational objectives suitable to the educational institutions in question; as the taking of responsibility by the staff for the smooth functioning of the activities; and as the practical efficiency of the plans and strategies.

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Figure 3. **General practices of strategic plans and development work**

In the critical examination of one's own actions, strategic plans that were considered both good and not so good were raised. The plans and strategies were closely linked to pedagogical development. Student barometers and questionnaires were becoming one of the development tools at many institutions, used to ascertain actual changes and their direction. Clearly divided and expressed areas of responsibility had a positive impact on taking responsibility and commitment.

The institutions focused on certain areas one at a time and used resources according to which seemed essential: themes or priorities were particularly highlighted at certain times. The development work had resulted in permanent good practices. In larger organisations, the practices that had proven to be good had been distributed between the units and educational sectors.

Ensuring a good atmosphere manifested itself as the responsibility of the entire staff for education and as taking special care of the students. A sense of community and cooperation were emphasised in disseminating the plans, strategies and actions and in fostering commitment to them. The plans and strategies worked if the teaching staff and other personnel were given the opportunity to influence them: they were also suited to daily life. They were, on the one hand, based on certain permanent daily values, rules and practices, but, on the other hand, there was a willingness to adapt and change the activities flexibly according to the needs of the students.

CONTENTS 3-5
The monitoring of absences was generally assertive. Absences were quickly notified to the guardians of under-age students, many educational institutions were in the process of transferring the data to a database, and vocational and subject teachers were required to intervene in systematic absences. New and creative practices had been developed for group guidance. New student orientation practices were motivating and considered, for example, the studies of new students started a couple of days before the rest.

10. Sub-area: on-the-job learning and other forms and structures of providing education
The practices relating to the forms of the structure and provision of education were examined through certain teaching arrangements and on-the-job learning. The strength of the sub-area, which had an average of 3.5 (Figure 1), was mainly based on the extremely high 3.9 average for on-the-job learning (2) (Figure 4); for this reason the title of this section of the results was reformulated to emphasise on-the-job learning. In terms of reducing the level of drop-out and fostering a commitment to studying, the other structures and teaching arrangements considered positive also received a high average of 3.1 (1). Three providers received quality level 4, eight received 3.5 and three received 3.

CONTENT 2
On-the-job learning proved to be the most unifying factor among the various education providers and the factor that represented the strongest pedagogically distributed leadership. If the result for the work on the curriculum relating to working life, with its average of 3.5 (Figure 2), is integrated into this result, this indicates that

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focusing particularly on the connections to working life may achieve a reduction in the drop-out level and successfully foster commitment to studying.

Periods in working life had been arranged systematically. New, innovative and permanent on-the-job learning practices were created in longer-term projects and through the systematic and persistent nature of the actions. The teachers were proactive in their attitude to working life. They also tried to place students in appropriate on-the-job learning places.

Critical self-examination was not restricted to implementation of on-the-job learning, but was closely linked to strategic plans and development work on the curriculum. Efforts were made to give students as concrete and true a picture as possible of working life and of the tasks of the profession for which they were being trained.

Figure 4. **Forms of education provision**
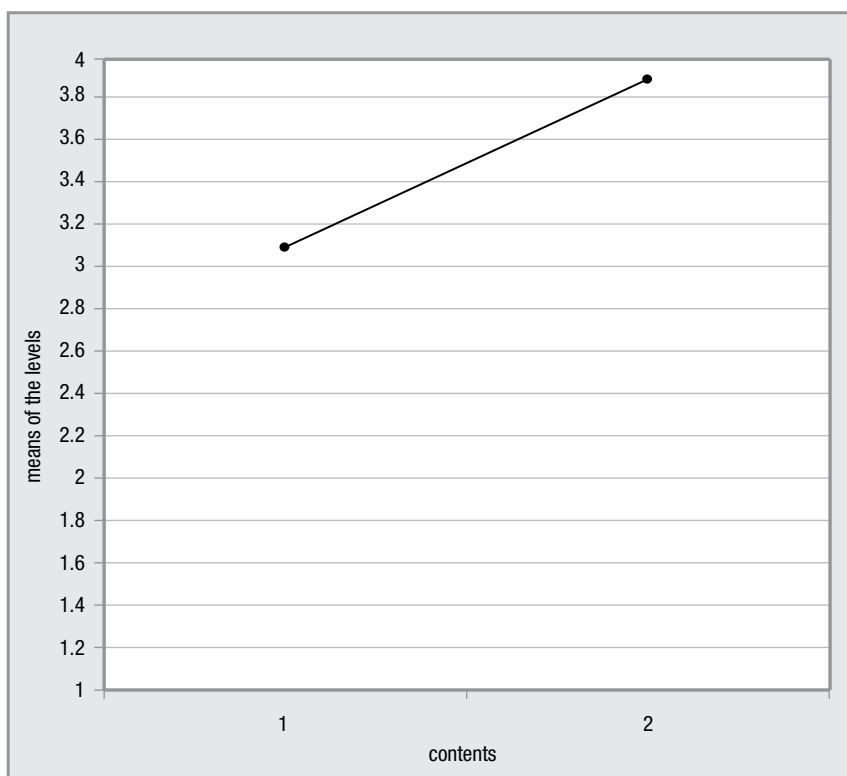
Addressing particular issues was seen in directing on-the-job learning projects at particular groups of students, such as those needing special support. It was also seen in personalisation of teaching, training of workplace counsellors and the development of cooperation with businesses. There was also emphasis on working-life-oriented working practices.

Ensuring a good atmosphere was mostly concerned with student motivation and taking into account the opinions of students. The teachers were in close contact with the students during the period of on-the-job learning, for example through visits and phone calls or by e-mail, and so demonstrated particular concern. Depending on the student's personal needs, the periods of on-the-job learning could sometimes be longer than normal, the practices allowing individual and tailored curricula. Spending time in working life was an important part of the student's own period of learning.

13. Sub-area: availability, supply and organisation of guidance activities
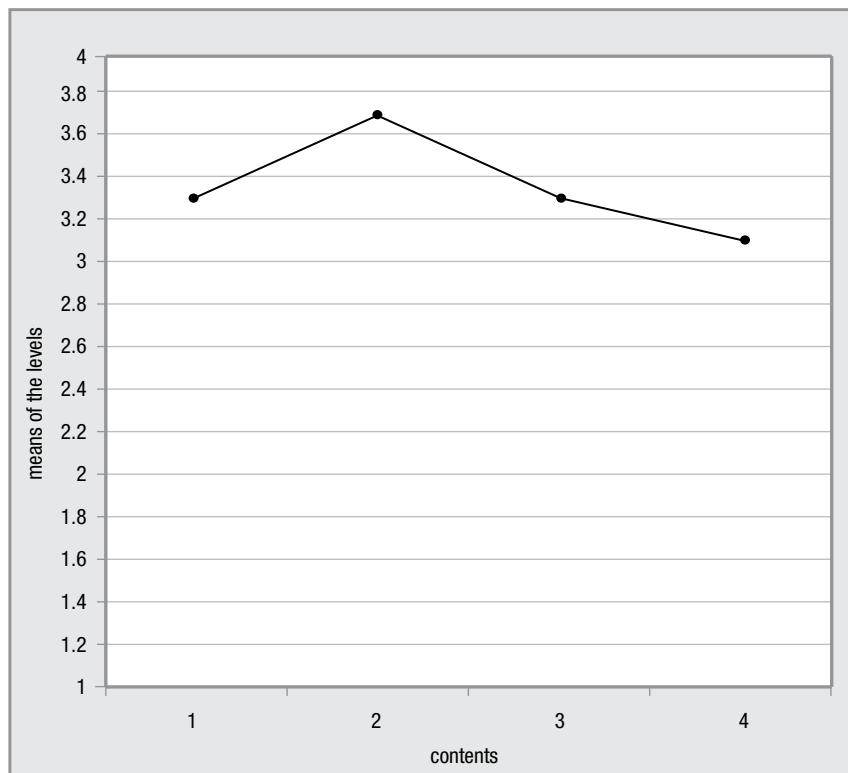
The availability and supply of guidance and the organisation of guidance activities received an average of 3.3 (Figure 1). This sub-area proved to be the fifth important factor for reducing the number of drop-outs and fostering a commitment to studying. The sub-area was studied through four contents: connections of guidance to basic education (3.1); multiprofessional nature of guidance (3.5); input into guidance by subject and vocational teachers; and regional guidance activities (2.9) (Figure 5). One of the education providers received quality level 4, nine received 3.5, two received 3.0, one received 2.5 and one received 2.

CONTENTS 1-2

Of the results, the multiprofessional nature of guidance should be highlighted. The smooth cooperation and networking of guidance professionals, who had many different job descriptions, proved to be the most important factor for the availability, supply and organisation of guidance. Actual guidance professionals are not the only available resource: for guidance to be sufficient and correctly targeted, input by everyone is required. The responsibility for guidance of subject and vocational teachers, and their important contribution, received increasing attention in many educational institutions.

Systematic approach and persistence related to the long-term organisation of guidance and the quality achieved even with smaller

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Figure 5. **Availability and supply of guidance and organisation of guidance activities**

resources. The basis of multiprofessional nature of guidance was the well-functioning, networked and comprehensive student welfare group. All the members of the multiprofessional groups took responsibility for guidance within the sphere of their own expertise, meaning that the resources sufficed.

Critical self-examination featured as the continuous evaluation of the successes and challenges of guidance practices. A particular effort was focused on receiving information on the vocational training of comprehensive school guidance counsellors, which was considered problematic because much more information was provided on upper secondary level studies.

Addressing particular issues one at a time manifested itself, for example, as personal meetings, phone calls and contacts by e-mail. It also manifested itself as tailored guidance for specific students

or as solutions based on the division of tasks of those responsible for guidance. Staff responsible for guidance also systematically visited schools to inform comprehensive school children about the educational possibilities of vocational institutions.

Ensuring a good atmosphere was particularly apparent. The multiprofessional nature of guidance came across as the strong communal spirit, a safety net for students and a particular strength of the institutions. Close cooperation on guidance included scheduled transition meetings and informal discussions and contacts in connection with joint educational events.

Discussion

On the basis of the results of the Finnish study Get a vocation – keeping on top of studies, a vocational institution that fosters commitment in its students operates systematically and persistently, learning from difficult issues and responding to challenges. It examines its activities critically and adapts them, if necessary. It focuses on certain issues one at a time. It creates a safe and caring learning environment in which certain basic principles prevail, but, if required, is flexible and takes individual factors into consideration. This kind of educational institution is by no means perfect, but it has a solid aspiration continually to go forward.

The purpose of the Finnish Ministry, the task provider, was to find and disseminate the best practices which were common among vocational institutions that had succeeded in reducing their drop-out rate. This starting point limited the study, resulting in concentration on the common strengths of the institutions, not on their weaknesses, and lay aside strengths of an individual organisation. We might suppose that the issues which are not discussed in this paper (Table 1) are by no means without values: they can be strengths in some cases. However, we might draw the conclusion that the common strengths could be excellent starting points in the work to reduce the drop-out rate elsewhere.

Educational institutions that reduced the numbers dropping out and fostered commitment to studies in the students were diverse. They differed from each other in size, students, surroundings, economics, study fields, etc. They also organised their operations in very different ways, according to their teaching culture, staff expertise, etc. The institutions seemed to have, however, certain common basic features for successful activities and good practices, i.e. they exhibited stronger pedagogically distributed leadership: this means distribution

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of responsibility, expertise, power and commitment. First, these types of educational institution are managed with the aid of responsible support groups that extend to the various parts and levels of the organisation. Their members either represent all staff groups or they have close and effective connections to everyone.

Second, these educational institutions use the curriculum as a means of developing their activities. People are committed to working on the curriculum and take responsibility for it. The curriculum is genuinely a tool that assists in the development of connections to working life and guidance and broadens the learning environment.

Third, these types of educational institution invest in their strategic plans and development work: they have a clear view of where they are going. They have set values and priority areas that are implemented in practice and that the staff are willing to put themselves out for. Collective responsibility is taken for development work and activities, so plans and strategies work in practice. Absences are monitored closely and systematically and intervention is taken in real time. Emphasis is placed on group guidance and orientation practices for new students.

Fourth, these kinds of educational institution pay particular attention to on-the-job learning and its development. They ensure training for workplace instructors and provide information for the workplace, create a network of on-the-job learning places and guarantee the contents, quality and evaluation of on-the-job learning and on-the-job learning for students who need special support.

Fifth, they invest in the availability and organisation of guidance. They create active connections in guidance with the previous stage of education. These types of educational institutions use their guidance resources to the full and, if there is a shortfall, create compensating guidance practices. The guidance is multiprofessional so that everyone takes responsibility for guidance alongside actual guidance professionals. Guidance connections are also created outside the educational institution.

Society in Europe is constantly becoming more complex and unpredictable and, with these changes, teaching and learning an ever more demanding process. No long-lasting results will be achieved through quick fixes and an accelerated timetable, and it is self-evident that fostering commitment to studying and reducing the level of drop-out will require a considerable amount of time, effort and work. But it is possible for everybody, with small steps, persistently and systematically, by critically addressing particular issues one at a time, and through the support and generosity of every member of staff.

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