

Developing relevance for working life at universities of applied sciences

The goal in creating the university of applied sciences system has been to develop degrees that are more practically and professionally oriented alongside traditional university degrees so as to improve the quality of education and meet the rapidly changing needs of society and working life better. A special objective of the university of applied sciences reform is to strengthen regional development and increase universities' cooperation with small and medium-sized enterprises and producers of welfare services.

The task of universities of applied sciences (previously called polytechnics) is to turn out people with occupational skills who have received quality education to meet the rapidly changing needs of practical working life and in this way help ensure Finland's competitiveness by providing the skills needed in different fields. The match between the quality and content of the education provided by universities of applied sciences and the need for skills has a large significance for public finances, since the quality and availability of educated personnel influences the development of the entire economy.

The Ministry of Education grants basic funds, project funds and research funds to universities of applied sciences. The 2009 budget includes over 395 million euros in government grants to universities of applied sciences.

The purpose of the audit was to determine how relevance for working life is achieved at universities of applied sciences. At the institution level the audit examined how relevance for working life has been taken into consideration in planning and implementing education and what practical forms of cooperation exist between institutions and working life and business. The audit focused on two key education programmes, building technology and nursing.

The audit found that concrete operational plans to deepen cooperation with working life are needed to achieve the general goals

described in the strategies adopted by the universities of applied sciences. The universities of applied sciences should take an active approach and clearly state what kinds of services and forms of cooperation they have for working life and business and who is responsible for cooperation.

Increasing cooperation particularly with small and medium-sized enterprises is indispensable for the universities of applied sciences to achieve the objectives that have been set for them as strategic regional developers. Forms of cooperation should be defined in a way that serves institutions and working life. The universities of applied sciences should have functioning structures for cooperation.

The audit revealed that the content of syllabuses varies considerably not only between universities of applied sciences but also between different units at the same university of applied sciences. Syllabuses need to be harmonized particularly in the nursing field. Practical training should be linked more closely to education in syllabuses in order to improve the connection between teaching and practical training and increase institutions' responsibility for arranging and supervising practical training.

The audit also indicated that teachers' familiarity with working life depends in many places almost entirely on a teacher's own activity. Teachers' long teaching experience without a permanent connection to outside working life easily leads to an overly theoretical approach and isolation from practical working life. The universities of applied sciences should make sure that teachers regularly take time off to participate in working life.

The universities of applied sciences should develop their feedback and survey systems so that feedback is collected and analysed systematically. Good practices should also be documented so that they support the development of the quality assurance system. By developing the feedback system, working life partners can be encouraged to make a long-term commitment to cooperation.

There is a need for comprehensive and objective information on relevance for working life and its development that can be used in steering education. The system for evaluating education at universities of applied sciences should be developed towards the systematic monitoring of relevance for working life. The systematic monitoring of relevance for working life requires the definition of the concept of relevance for working life and criteria.

