

**ACADEMIA Exchange for European Guidance Counsellors
Regional and cross-sectoral cooperation in guidance from
comprehensive education to vocational education/upper secondary
education and to higher education (polytechnics and universities)**

Vaasa, Finland

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General impressions

Vaasa is a very pleasant city with wide, open spaces and quiet traffic. There is a great sense of light and space. Many buildings are constructed in traditional style with wooden cladding. The weather was cool but very bright and it didn't get dark until late at night. We were told that the sea ice had only melted a couple of weeks prior to our visit and that, in the winter, it is possible to drive across the bay to some of the islands over the ice itself. Our hosts laid on a walking tour of the town, invited us for a traditional sauna evening, arranged a civic reception in the town hall, entertained us with a meal in a restaurant on board a sailing ship and took us to a dance hall to join the locals in a tango.



The visit was exceptionally well organised and the group, from many different countries, gelled together very well. We were all very sad to break up at the end of the week and will continue to benefit from the relationships we made during our visit to Vaasa.



Monday 15th May

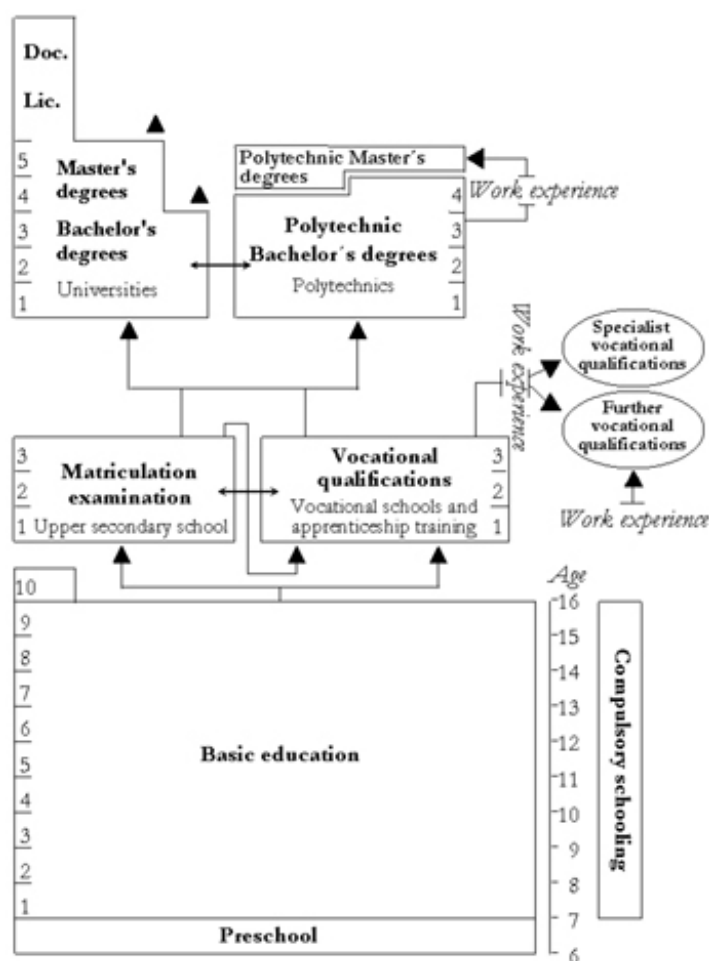
Vaasa Polytechnic

The programme started with an introduction to our hosts in the polytechnic and to the organisation of CIMO, the Centre for International Mobility based in Helsinki. We also met Heli Piikila, President of the Finnish Association for Guidance Counsellors.

Miika Kekki explained the planned structure of the visit and asked us to use the CEDEFOP common reference tools on the principles of guidance provision to consider our feedback for each day and for the final evaluation. This proved to be very useful in focussing our minds on the usefulness of each session and on the aspects which we could apply to our own situations.

We were given a general overview of the Finnish education system and shown a diagrammatic representation of its structure which we quickly came to recognise as it was frequently used as an introduction to a session.

Education System Chart



We were able to identify certain similarities with the UK systems but with

some significant differences such as the later age at which children in Finland join the formal educational system and the expectation that the majority will stay in the structure until the age of 20 with many of these continuing to Bachelor and Master's degrees before finally leaving at the age of 25-27.

As in the UK, basic education goes to age 16 but the structure of general and vocational upper secondary schools then takes students for a further three years before they would be expected to either progress to higher education or look for a job. Some students are not ready or able to progress to upper secondary and they will be offered an additional year in basic education if they wish. This is the so-called '10th Grade' and it offers a completely flexible curriculum allowing individuals to follow areas of interest, improve on grades and gain structured work experience. There is an emphasis on personal development, study skills and individual guidance. In theory upper secondary is optional but there are very few benefits available for under 18's not engaged in full time education.



Vaasa Polytechnic has around 3,500 students and provides education in Finnish, Swedish and English. Three of the degree programmes have English as the language of instruction. Students attend the polytechnic from many countries and there are up to 200 foreign students on degree programmes each year with a further 80 taking part in exchange programmes. We were given a brief introduction to the polytechnic system and told that we would

visit in more depth later in the week.

Vaasa Employment Office

The next location on our visit was the local employment office – one of 147 in Finland. The local office is divided into 11 working teams which cover a variety of activities including employer liaison, labour market information and vocational guidance for job-seekers. The local unemployment rate is around 7.8% (the national rate is 10%).

The services at the unemployment office are open to everyone, including those in employment and seeking a career change. Services include:

- Vocational guidance and career planning
- Educational and vocational information service
- Labour market training
- Advice on entrepreneurship
- Additional services for people who have difficulty in accessing employment (eg because of a disability)
 - Start up subsidy
 - Employment subsidy
 - Mobility assistance

Services can be accessed via drop-in, phone or email. There is also a national website access at www.mol.fi where vacancies are posted and applicants can also post their own CV.

As visitors we were immediately struck by the friendly atmosphere and the spaciousness and quality of the surroundings. The set-up was very welcoming and staff clearly did not feel they would be threatened by irate clients. The employment service had more in common with some of the multi-service Opportunity Centres in Scotland than with the Job Centre system.

Tuesday 16th May

Vaasa Vocational Institute (VVI)

This is a vocational upper secondary offering a range of courses in five educational fields:

- Technical and Communication (transport)
- Business and Administration
- Tourism and Catering (including a course in hotel and restaurant services taught in English)
- Health and Social Services
- Culture

The Institute also runs the Best Western Hotel Silveria as a commercial operation and training facility for students. There are around 4,000 students

and 450 teachers. VVI also has special Further Education programmes and specialist qualifications for adults who are changing career or returning to education. The institute is bilingual (Finnish and Swedish) and offers a three year programme. Around 80% of the programme will be in the student's chosen vocational area with 5% optional units and 15% compulsory maths, sciences and languages. School leavers are offered a taster programme before the start of the course. The emphasis is on creating real working situations within the college environment so that, for example, the construction students will build a complete house and it will be offered for sale to the general public. A number of the college staff have had their houses built by students.

Vocational Upper secondaries are just starting to introduce a national competence-based qualification system. One example is in the hairdressing examination which some students were undertaking during our visit. The student plans a task, carries it out, evaluates their own performance and is evaluated by a lecturer and by a professional from the workplace.

Study counsellors (known as Opo) work with students on their motivation and offer help with personal issues and learning difficulties.

After the three year programme, around 30% of students will go on to further study. The 70% of students who leave education at this point have good employment prospects.

We were introduced to the Techno Tet project in the college which offers structured work experience, occupational tasters and a chance to experience college life to school leavers who are unsure of their next step. The pupils are selected by school guidance counsellors and they spend the first week of the programme on a variety of vocational tasters at VVI and the second week in a polytechnic or university and in visiting a range of companies. The number of school pupils choosing the vocational upper secondary option has increased since this programme was started.

We were also introduced to the work undertaken by Raija Laaksonen and others who are working with immigrant communities in the local schools. The biggest immigrant group is from the former Soviet Union, followed by Estonia but there are also a number of refugees in the area from countries such as Somalia. School pupils are given intensive support in groups of no more than 10. It was clear from the presentation that the teachers and counsellors working with these pupils were very committed to helping the students to integrate into Finnish society and to feel part of the community.

Wednesday 17th May

Vaasa Polytechnic

Polytechnics have only existed in Finland for around 10 years and they are the main route to Higher Education from the Vocational Upper Secondary system. There is currently some debate about whether they should be called

Universities of Applied Sciences. It is possible to transfer between the vocational and academic routes at a number of different points. After upper secondary education roughly 35% go into the workplace, 35% go to Polytechnic and 30% go to University.

Vaasa Polytechnic has around 3,500 students (some of whom are part time or distance learners) and qualifications are offered in the sectors of:

- Technology and Communication
- Business, Economics and Tourism
- Health Care and Social Services

The Polytechnic is partly managed by the city authority and partly by local companies and offers courses taught in Finnish, Swedish and English. Polytechnics award their own degrees but are nationally monitored and controlled. There is a joint application system for 29 polytechnics and this is available on the internet. Entrance exams take place in June and the institutions arrange exams so that, for example, all engineering exams take place on the same day and students can take them at the nearest institution.

Finnish HE institutions work to the arrangements of the Bologna Declaration (1999) and use the European Credit transfer System. A degree in Business Economics would be 210 credits and would take between 3.5 and 4.5 years. It is possible to opt out for up to two years and return to your studies. There are no tuition fees for home or foreign students.

Thursday 18th May

University of Vaasa

The university was founded in 1968 and achieved university status in 1980. It has around 5000 students, 4590 of whom are undergraduates. Approximately 700 students are in first year. Half the students are on Business courses. The study co-ordinator from the Business faculty described the courses to us and explained that the Bachelor degree contains a career planning module which is delivered by HR professors in the faculty. There is also a high technology unit in the university which is known as Technobothnia.

The university is running a Guidance, Counselling and Supervision project which aims to create an overall view of guidance, counselling and supervision processes currently in operation at the university. They are examining questions such as: What kinds of processes are there? Who is involved? When do they do it? (i.e. at what stage in the student's course of study)

A system is being developed for study counselling and academic study skills. There is a tutoring system for recruitment and the early stages of study. Each student has an individual study plan and can discuss their options and progress with their study counsellor.

We were taken around the main university buildings and shown a range of

facilities. It was very clear that a great deal of thought and investment had gone into making the facilities very student friendly and had made an excellent study environment . The Tritonia library, which is a shared facility with other Higher Education institutes in the area, is a particularly impressive building with fabulous views over the old harbour area. The Technobothnia unit incorporates old industrial buildings on the same site.



Abo Akademi University

This is a Swedish language, multi-faculty university which was founded in 1981. The campus in Vaasa covers Education and Social and caring Sciences and the campus in Turku covers Arts, Maths and Natural Science, Economics and Social Science, Technology and Theology.

In 2003 the Akademi moved into its new campus which is a converted flour mill. In the conversion the architects have preserved a lot of the original character while creating excellent modern study facilities.



Education Faculty – This covers general, special, technical and adult education. You require a masters degree to teach in Finland and all Swedish speaking teachers in Finland are trained here. It is possible, once qualified, to switch between Swedish and Finnish speaking schools subject to a language test.

Social and Caring Science Faculty - This contains the Institute for Finnish-Swedish Sociological Research. The study guidance system was described and it includes: student orientation, study advisers and student counsellors and a mentoring system including teacher mentors and student mentors.

Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration (Hanken)

This is an Equis accredited business school with campuses in Helsinki and Vaasa. It covers Accounting, Entrepreneurship and Management, Finance, Commercial Law and Marketing. Students must study two additional languages besides Swedish and Finnish.

The Careers Service on campus offers a range of services to students including:

- Career planning and job search
- Job adverts
- Database of student CV's
- Courses and literature about job search
- Visits to companies and employers

The study counselling service is open to all students on a drop-in basis. Counselling is offered regarding the degree structure and course choices. One adviser works specifically with the Masters programme and another with Phd students. Students make their individual study plans in consultation with a study co-ordinator.

Friday 19th May

Abo Akademi University

The education system for Guidance Counsellors was explained to us. Counsellors working in education require a Masters degree which could incorporate a teaching qualification and a further qualification in Guidance Counselling. The guidance part would be 60 ECTS credits covering:

- Learning and the development of the individual
- Guidance
 - Students with special needs
 - Empathy
 - It and guidance
 - The curriculum and guidance
 - Guidance didactics
- Education, profession and work
- Teaching practice
- Optional studies

Evaluation

Our final session was an evaluation of the visit where we discussed the impact the visit had had on us and how useful we felt the sessions had been.

We looked again at the CEDEFOP common reference tools on the principles of guidance provision and drew a few conclusions based on our experiences.

- Centrality of the citizen – all the services we saw were client-centred and flexible. The student is always at the centre of the process and

does not have to adjust to the organisation.

- Enabling – the personal study plan system offers students the opportunity to learn skills in making appropriate choices. There is a good range of information available for students at all levels.
- Improving access – the facilities of the employment service were particularly impressive and were open to unemployed, people in work, refugees and recent immigrants and people with disabilities.
- Assuring quality – we would have liked to learn more about how quality of provision in guidance is evaluated.

In more general terms, we gained a great deal of knowledge of Finnish educational systems and were shown a wide range of facilities. Our hosts were extremely helpful, warm and welcoming and were generous with their time. We were all stuck by the hospitality of the Finnish people.

