

## **Sustainability education in Finnish vocational education**

### **Fifth Exchange of Practices in the Education for Climate Targets (EXPECT) project.**

Our fifth peer learning activity for this Erasmus+ funded project took place in Helsinki, Finland on 13-14<sup>th</sup> June 2022 where we were the guests of StadinAO, the largest vocational college in Finland, with 22,000 students.

The 'sustainable Helsinki' strategy of the City of Helsinki was outlined for us by Anssi Almgren. In education, this means a 'hope based' curriculum designed to create opportunities for transformative and eco-social learning. The strategy has 23 education actions and includes a strong commitment to developing students' sustainability mindset and being able to take action themselves. The pedagogy is influenced by Paulo Freire's dialogic approach and there is a recognition that the sustainable development goals are political objectives and require wholesale social transformation.

Marjaana Suorsa from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry set Finland's Zero-Carbon targets in the practical context of its very significant Forestry sector where much of the country's forest is owned and managed by ordinary citizens, with over 600,000 owners, many of whom live in cities but feel a strong attachment to the forest economy. Sustainable land use and forest management are questions of wide popular concern and discussion, and climate change is creating new threats and vulnerabilities. Students looking to work in agriculture and forestry need a range of interdisciplinary knowledge and skills and scientific research and citizen science need to be integrated with farming and land management.

Sirpa Lindroos, Niina Srbinoska and Riika Kastu from StadinAO outlined the Finnish education system and the work of the college. The core principle is that the education system must be universal, accessible and inclusive with 'no dead-ends'. Vocational education is a key element in lifelong learning, enrolment is open and continuous, and accreditation is flexible and modular. The common upper secondary diploma is made up of 180 units, taught over 3 years for full-time students, with recognition of prior achievement, credit transfer and considerable choice of content, and including a common core of 35 credits.

Our tour of StadinAO confirmed that the college is superbly equipped with industry standard kit and generously staffed with expert teachers. Skills need to be demonstrated in practical contexts but assessment is appropriate to the setting rather than being highly standardised. Student who are not yet ready to

benefit from the diploma can follow pre-vocational preparatory programme until they are. There is no rationing of access, and students can generally progress at their own pace.

There is no high-stakes inspection of the type we have in England, and staff teams have substantial delegated power and share tasks in a very co-operative and democratic way. I was most struck by the basic assumption of trust and commitment; staff-to-staff and staff-to-student throughout the system. The core belief is that everyone has the best intentions and wants to achieve their personal best, not that they are trying to play the system or compete with others for the best grades.

Educational practices are never entirely transferable from one country to another, but I couldn't help thinking how much the English system would benefit from an injection of Finland's more inclusive, generous and trusting ethos. We seem to have created so many structures and processes to monitor, evaluate, segregate, rank and ration our provision and too often this perpetuates a sense of failure rather than supporting success.

We heard about the green transition from Helen Ltd, an energy provider fully owned by the City of Helsinki and providing for a third of all Finnish households. The company is developing district heating projects, geothermal, wind and biomass generation and many innovative pilots. There is still a shortage of electricians who can install heat pumps, and this is a challenge which colleges are helping to address. We heard how wind power is now meeting 25% of Helsinki's energy needs. We also heard about the new LUMI supercomputer data storage and processing facility which is entirely carbon neutral, being hydro-powered and water cooled and feeds into a local heating system.

We are very grateful to our hosts and all the presenters put together such an interesting programme to introduce the Finnish approach to integrating sustainability into technical and vocational education. This visit provided us with another fascinating piece of the Europe-wide jigsaw of sustainable vocational education.

**Eddie Playfair, Senior Policy Manager, Association of Colleges (AoC), April 2022.**

