

AUDIT OF VAASA UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

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4.1 Cooperation with working life

- HEI's self-assessment

Reasons for the Choice of Evaluation Area

The evaluation area chosen by VAMK is cooperation with working life in bachelor's degree education. Education is, besides being one of the tasks decreed in the Universities of Applied Sciences Act, the core of our mission and enhancement area in our strategy. Our strategy conveys our aim to create a new partnership with societal impact together with actors of working life, where the emphases of our education and regional profile meet. In the audit, we wish to receive more insight and methods to integrate the working life cooperation even better into the tuition and learning processes of our education.

The significant export energy industry in our operating environment is based on enterprises that represent the fastest growing state-of-the art technology and competence in their respective fields. It is self-evident that to be able to know the needs and expectations of these enterprises, the cooperation needs to be wide-scale, close and deep enough. These enterprises create more business around them, for example in subcontractor businesses and services, and cooperation with them is important, as it is to meet the competence needs of the entire area. Our aim is that our students obtain skills to find employment in their dream occupation. When they graduate, they must have the competences of the future working life.

Partnership Agreements in Addition to Advisory Committees

To act as a coach for the students in an interface where the changing and reforming working life and the student still building up his or her competencies meet, we have to take care of improving the curricula and competencies of our staff and their acquiring new information. The field-specific

advisory committees that convene a couple of times a year have served as cooperation bodies with working life for years. Members in the committees are representatives of significant working life actors and members of the VAMK staff.

Fast changes in working life can be seen in advisory committees, as well. If the working life representatives do not regard this activity as significant or topical, it is difficult to make them commit to and participate in the committee work. Therefore, we are starting a new model in addition to the advisory committees, which is based on an agreement between VAMK and the working life partner. Together with the partner, we will consider various forms of cooperation, agree on the targets and appoint the responsible persons. The cooperation can be, for example, guest lectures, teachers' working life periods, promoting student recruitment for both parties, cooperation in projects and assignments for courses.

Implementing Cooperation with Working Life

In practice, cooperation with working life often is implemented through teachers and their contacts. The problem is that information of this cooperation does not reach others, wider opportunities to cooperate with VAMK are not raised and good cooperation practices are not disseminated in the entire organisation. To increase multi-field cooperation and flow of information, we arrange cooperation meetings with our cooperation partners, and the teaching staff are invited to participate. In these meetings, cooperation results are reviewed, and future cooperation is planned. The phases of working life cooperation are compiled in the annual planning cycle.

ANNUAL PLANNING CYCLE FOR COOPERATION WITH WORKING LIFE AT VAMK

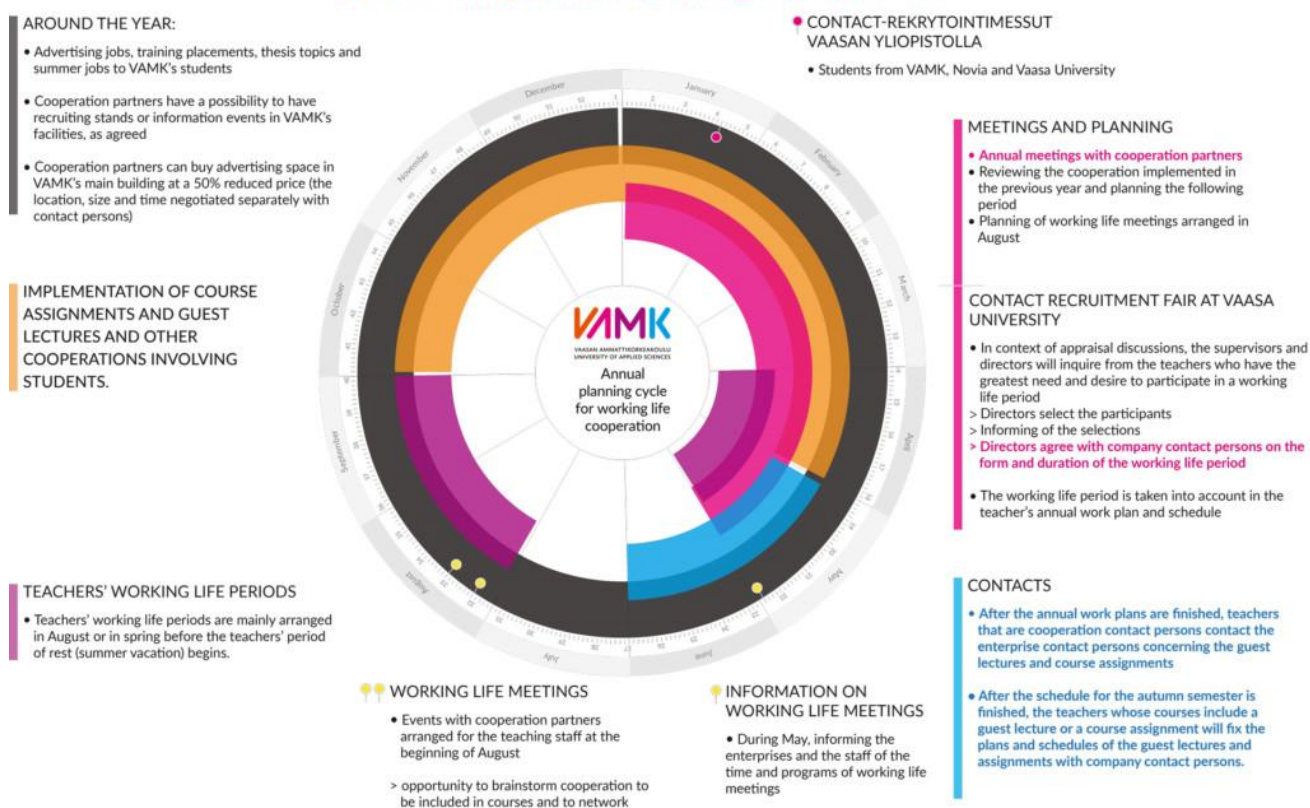


Figure 7. Annual planning cycle for working life cooperation

Assessment of the Implementation of the Cooperation with Working Life

The implementation and results of the cooperation is followed up in annual meetings, in which the partners and the staff participate. In appraisal discussions, the supervisor of each person will be informed about the implemented projects with working life, and through that, gets an overview of the working life cooperation in the field of the respective educational programme. The aim is to inspire and encourage everyone to follow up one's own field and to consider how to keep up with the progress. Gathering information and receiving the overall view of all cooperation with working life by VAMK actors is, however, laborious due to its scope and multifaceted nature. We are planning a questionnaire to measure the partners' satisfaction.

Aims

The aim of the agreement partnership is to gain mutual advantage of the cooperation. The current partners have been chosen considering our emphases, and when negotiating of the forms of cooperation, the needs of both parties have been considered. The set aim of the cooperation with working life is to have thirty agreement partners by the year 2024. We seek to increase the volume of RDI activities and networking with working life, vocational secondary education and partner HEIs. The research platforms under construction support the implementation of these aims. A challenge is to get the entire staff to participate even more in this cooperation. This

requires expanding the cooperation opportunities, informing of them and making them a visible part of our activities.

Examples of Cooperation with Working Life

- [Wapice Ltd](#) has been chosen as a Cooperation Partner of the Year. The long-standing cooperation has included joint projects, cooperation in tuition, developing curricula and staff exchange.
- Heidi Skjäl, Senior Lecturer at VAMK, have a lot of experience how to implement working life cooperation. This is her [article](#) of working-life cooperation projects executed during the study modules.
- [The Mirka Innovation Challenge](#) was an open innovation event dedicated to creating new solutions and curve-jumping, paradigm shifting ideas for sustainable future and growth. The aim was to build cross-disciplinary and multi-talented teams for diverse and innovative outcomes.
- [Quality improvement effort in Vaasa Central Hospital](#), in collaboration between a nursing teacher and two nursing students from VAMK and two nursing leaders from the hospital.
- [Robot Academy](#) and [the master's degree in industrial robotics \(In Finnish\)](#) The new degree is a sign of close cooperation with working life.

Strengths

Partnership model for cooperation with working life

Regular dialogue with strategic partners

Versatile cooperation with working life

Enhancement areas

A more wide-scale inclusion of students in working life cooperation

Inclusion of opportunities for working life cooperation as part of all teachers' work

Increasing awareness of our cooperation opportunities among working life actors

4.1 Cooperation with working life

- Assessment of the audit team

Cooperation with working life serves as source for future-oriented education

Cooperation with working life is strongly anchored in VAMK's institutional strategy and mirrors the institution's mission to be a competent partner for both regionally and internationally operating companies; furthermore, it caters to the needs of the labour market through competence- and skills-oriented education. Thus, VAMK constantly seeks to strengthen the cooperation with working life and integrate the working life cooperation more deeply into the institution's teaching and learning.

Input from working life to curriculum development and competence enhancement comes through various channels, such as field-specific advisory boards, strategic partners and regional companies and authorities. In meetings, both formal and informal and spread over a year, current trends and needs are discussed and thus input is fed into curriculum development and teaching. All cooperation forms are based on dialogue and commitment to mutual learning. Institutional indicators relating to working life cooperation provide good orientation for the development of this area.

Learning from and with working life is key to developing the competences of qualified workforce. Thus, student projects and student learning phases with working life should already be systemically integrated into curriculum development to assure an equal learning experience with working life for all students and foster a broader participation of teaching staff members working life cooperation. VAMK could also consider implementing regular student competitions or start-up pitches as integral parts of their teaching with representatives from working life acting as jury members.

In the interviews, stakeholders appreciatively referred to the added value that cooperation with VAMK teachers and VAMK graduates brings to the entire region. Regional institutions as well as regional companies and industries can draw considerable benefit from the various forms of cooperation, be it through knowledge transfer, competence development or common projects.

Partnerships provide impetus for cooperation and add value to VAMK

VAMK's new partnership model will foster new forms to tighten working life – teaching nexus and increase societal impact through guest lectures, cooperation in course assignments, thesis supervision, promotion of student recruitment, and working-life periods for staff members, just to name some examples. To boost the interaction with working life, VAMK aims to set up 30 partnership agreements of this new model until 2024 and make them visible through research platforms and networking activities. Furthermore, these agreements will provide impetus to enhance working life cooperation in degree programmes and RDI.

VAMK's annual planning cycle for working life cooperation as well as the annual follow-up will support the institution's strategic aim to be the main partner in expertise. Annual meetings and events with partners foster this aim and provide a good basis and valuable opportunity for staff-to-company as well as company-to-company connections. As was mentioned in the interviews, these annual events as well as informal meetings make the cooperation between teachers and working life "tangible". The implementation of key account managers for strategic partnerships facilitate communication for both sides.

Competence development takes place through mutual learning

The opportunity for staff members to go on a working-life period is an example of good practice as these periods contribute to a more stringent competence-orientation of teaching and updating staff's field knowledge; thus, staff members should be encouraged to opt for this possibility while

foreseeing necessary back-up through the institution.

Working-life cooperation means mutual learning, thus VAMK should strengthen its partnerships through continuous learning offers for its partners and their employees. The new interdisciplinary platforms provide an excellent opportunity to disseminate both results and plans. VAMK should use these platforms to proactively disseminate continuous learning offers and new initiatives. Furthermore, predictive analyses regarding labour market trends could provide valuable input for future-oriented education and up-skilling through continuous learning.

The newly founded alumni network is a valuable source of competence enhancement and should be used to mentor and foster the link of students' experience with working life in the sense of peer-learning.

Further potential can be drawn from cooperation with working life

The new partnership model foresees various forms of possible cooperation: these forms could be streamlined and channelled according to the strategic goals of VAMK to steer output and impact stemming from the partnership. Furthermore, the partnership model would also benefit from support material that describes how partnerships are managed, how VAMK's strategic goals can be included in partnership agreements and open possibilities to expand partnerships beyond the obvious methods of collaboration. Information based on written material or even a toolbox could clarify the range of cooperation of the new model of strategic partnerships. This could serve to widen collaboration from education to RDI or vice versa.

So far, VAMK's working-life cooperation is mainly oriented towards big regional and internationally active companies of the region. With a view to the importance of SMEs within the global economic context, and the job opportunities SMEs provide for students and graduates, VAMK should also explore ways to foster SME cooperation in the region for strategic partnerships.

Examples of VAMK's good practices in working life cooperation

- The well-monitored meeting and interaction events with partners, such as annual meet-up events are commendable as they make partnerships more systematic and add value to working life through staff interaction.
- The opportunity for staff to go for a period of working life experience to learn in the field and from the field experience is a true example of good practice.
- The cooperation with the energy sector of the region to provide students with future-oriented competences and know-how is a model for how to foster state-of-the-art knowledge and competences.
- After-placement review of students' experiences particularly in education for the health sector capture expectations and experiences to be used by peers.
- The implementation of key account managers for strategic partners help to streamline communication between VAMK and its working-life partners.