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Enhancing the standing of Vocational Education and the Occupations it Serves: A Symposium

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Abstract

The standing of vocational education is often perceived to be low, compared with other education sectors, albeit more so in some countries than others. The consequences of this standing can be profound. They include how governments, industry, enterprises and communities sponsor vocational education, and what constitutes its purposes, form and its administration. These perceptions also shape how individuals engage with it, parents advise about it and employers' willingness to engage with its provisions. Over time, also it has been the voices and sentiments of powerful others (e.g. aristocrats, theocrats, bureaucrats and academics) that have shaped the discourses about the standing of occupations and their preparation (Billett, 2014). In many instances, this privileging has and continues to come at a cost to the standing, processes of and goals for this important educational sector. The symposium will comprise four country perspectives and a brief discussion, from Denmark (Vibe Aakrog), Finland (Petri Nokelainen), Norway (Hilde Hiim) and Switzerland (Barbara Stalder), each of which will outline factors associated with the standing of vocational education and ways in which it has or might be enhanced.

Keywords

standing of vocational education, status of occupation, societal sentiments

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1 Introduction

The societal standing of vocational education is often perceived to be low, compared with other education sectors, albeit more so in some countries than others. The consequences of this standing can be profound. They include how governments, industry, enterprises and communities view and sponsor vocational education, and what constitutes its purposes, form and its administration. These perceptions also shape decision about whether or not both young and older people elect to participate with it (i.e. preferred, non-preferred choice) and then how they engage with its provisions. In addition, its standing shapes how parents advise about it and employers' willingness to engage with its provisions. This factor has never been more salient in an era of high aspiration about work and working life by young people and their parents, whom desire high status, clean and well-paid occupations. It has been suggested that traditions, familial expectations and material considerations as well as strong desire for self-realisation underpin contemporary decision-making about post-school options (Clement, 2014). The relationship between occupations and the standing of VET is profound and enduring. Over time, it has been the voices and sentiments of powerful others (e.g. aristocrats, theocrats, bureaucrats and academics) that have shaped the discourses about the standing of occupations and their preparation (Billett, 2014). Almost all of these sentiments have been developed through perspectives that fail to acknowledge the complexity of much of these occupational activities, nor an understanding of the requirements to perform those tasks and the development of those capacities. In many instances, this privileging has and continues to come at a cost to the standing, processes of and goals for this important educational sector. Perhaps this has never more been the case than in an era of high aspirations and expectations by young people and their parents, when decisions about preferred occupations are made in the absence of knowledge about them and their enactment. This circumstance is seemingly leading a growing percentage of young people to move away from considering VET as a viable post-school option,

Indeed, governmental concerns in countries with advanced industrial economies about the development of technical skills and young people's preference for higher education (i.e. university) over VET are pertinent here. The UK is experiencing declining levels of participation in courses for advanced technical skills required for contemporary and emerging economic needs (Wolf, 2016), and Germany is also claimed to be having difficulty securing adequate numbers of quality apprentices. This has led to competition amongst companies to secure such apprentices. South Korea has long struggled to attract young people to manufacturing work that sustains its economy (Cho & Apple, 1998). This issue is not restricted to schooling and entry-level occupational preparation. There are also growing concerns about low levels of adult competence in technologically-driven work, and engagement with continuing education and training, in many countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013). CEDEFOP and BiBB recently held a joint international symposium to address the issue of the low standing of vocational education and its economic consequences. One idea being proposed widely is to have provide higher educational courses through VET institutions and have apprentice degrees to enhance their status is but one response being mooted. It would seem that the degree and extent of connectedness amongst education systems, social partners and local communities is an indicator of the relative esteem in which VET is held (Clement, 2014).

This suggestion highlights the issue of parity of esteem that plays out in at least two circumstances. Where VET is taken to be an element of upper secondary schooling, comparisons with general or academic education within schooling is inevitable. In such comparisons, and in the contemporary press for schools to pair people for university education, there is a risk that VET will be seen primarily for those who perform poorly in schooling. Then, where VET comprises a post-schooling activity, it is compared with the processes and outcomes of higher education. This factor alone (i.e. the different forms and locations of VET) emphasises the need to understand provisions of VET from a range of perspectives including how it is manifested in

particular countries, its relationship to other education sectors in those countries and how occupations are perceived in those countries (Cedefop, 2014).

This symposium aims to elaborate the sources of the low standing of vocational education and training (VET) and the occupations it serves (Billett, 2014), their manifestation in the countries represented at the symposium and, importantly, how this can be redressed. Recent Australian research identifies VET students' preferences associated with gender, age and educational achievement) (Gore et al., in press). The symposium seeks to offer perspectives about the standing of vocational education from four countries (i.e. Denmark, Switzerland, Norway and Finland) with distinct systems to identify and inform policy interventions about promoting the standing and status of VET across these and other countries. The emphasis here is on identifying through what means might the standing of this form of education, and conjointly, the occupation serves be enhanced.

The symposium is informed by the following questions.

- How can vocational education's standing be enhanced to secure greater participation and better educational outcomes for its graduates?
- Informing sub-questions:
- What shapes community members' perceptions of vocational education and the occupations it serves?
- What has to change to realise enhanced engagement by students and support from parents and employers?

The symposium comprises four country perspectives from Denmark (Vibe Aakrog), Norway (Hilde Hiim), Switzerland (Barbara Stalder), and Finland (Petri Nokelainen), and a brief discussion in summary. Each of these four papers will outline factors associated with the standing of vocational education and how it has or might be enhanced from the particular country perspective.

2 Enhancing the standing of vocational education and the occupation it serves: Denmark (Vibe Aarkrog, Aarhus University)

Enhancing the standing of vocational education and training (VET) is one of two main targets in the current legislation of Danish VET, the other target being reducing drop out of around 50%. The focus on enhancing VET should curb a development throughout the past 15 years in which the enrolment in VET has descended from one third to one fifth of a youth cohort (in 2017 only 18,5% of a cohort), alongside an increasing intake in general upper secondary program (in 2017: 74% of a cohort)¹.

A number of - to some degree research-based - assumptions about the low intake have guided the latest reform of VET which was inaugurated in August 2015: 1. 15-year-old students in lower secondary are too young to choose occupation and education. 2. The guidance counsellors in lower secondary and the parents are uninformed about VET and perceive general upper secondary as the safe choice. 3. The admission requirements are too loose (before the reform anybody had a right to enrol in a VET-program) 4. The VET colleges need a learning environment that appeals to the young people, the argument being that VET mostly attracts

¹ <https://www.uvm.dk/aktuelt/nyheder/uvm/udd/gym/2017/marts/170320-fortsat-stor-soegning-mod-gymnasiet> [23.07.2018]. English translation: Continuing great influx to general upper secondary education.

young adults and adults. 5. The VET-programs should qualify for not only jobs but also give access to higher education and 6. The quality of the teaching in VET needs to be improved, particularly in relation to developing for differentiated teaching and learning and for strengthening the coherence of the practical and theoretical parts of the dual VET programs. At the symposium, the perspectives for enhancing the standing of VET will be based on current research (Søndergaard et al., 2017; EVA, 2017) into the focus areas, which, based on the assumptions above, were included in the reform.

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3 Enhancing the standing of vocational education and the occupations it serves: Norway (Hilde Hiim, Oslo and Akershus University College)

In Norway, vocational education and training (VET) at upper secondary school level is organized in a two plus two – model with two years at school followed by two years of apprenticeship. Even if about fifty percent of a youth cohort choose vocational education, low standing is a problem. Almost half of the students drop out or choose a transfer to academic studies. In this symposium, I will present some research concerning the standing and quality of Norwegian VET (Hiim, 2013, 2017; Nyen & Tønder, 2012; Olsen & Reegård, 2013).

First, there is a need to strengthen the knowledge about vocational education among teachers and guidance counsellors at the lower secondary level. Vocational teachers' opportunities to teach at this level should be increased along with an increase in practical subjects. Second, closer cooperation between school and work life throughout all four years of VET is essential to enhance both quality and standing. It can contribute to a more vocationally relevant, meaningful education from the start, and the students will be better prepared for and more easily get an apprenticeship. More flexible systems for reciprocal transfer between vocational and academic programs, and access to higher education from vocational programs are important. There are political discussions about establishing further education at university level for skilled workers.

In Norway, there has been vocational teacher education at bachelor level for skilled workers since 2003, and opportunities to take a master's degree in vocational pedagogy and eventually a PhD. This is important to strengthen the role of vocational professionals in the educational system and to develop relevant research. The most important measure to enhance standing and quality in Norwegian VET seems to be an intimate contact between work life and school from secondary school all the way to university level, related to ideas of integrating vocational practice and theory, and lifelong learning.

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4 Enhancing the standing of vocational education and the occupations it serves: Switzerland (Barbara E. Stalder, University of Teacher Education Bern)

In Switzerland, VET attracts high achieving and lower skilled learners, which is the result of and contributes to its high standing (Renold & Rageth, 2016). Two-thirds of all young people enter an initial VET programme. Most Swiss citizens see VET as the ideal form of education at the upper secondary level, although they consider the status of VET as being lower than the status of academic education (Cattaneo & Wolter, 2016).

Initial VET is mainly provided in the form of apprenticeships, serving around 230 occupations in all sectors (e.g., industry, health, crafts) (SERI, 2017). VET is attractive to learners because it is contextualized and embedded in real tasks at the workplace. Learners become integrated in a team of adults, which gives sense to what they learn and work (Stalder & Nägele, 2011). Permeability between educational programs offers attractive career paths, e.g. by changing from initial VET to higher professional training or to university. VET is attractive to employers because apprentices are trained according to the needs and standards of the economy (SERI, 2015). Employer organizations develop the curricula and define the skills to be attained; qualifications are standardized and nationally recognised.

The standing of VET is particularly high in the German, but lower in the French and Italian parts of Switzerland. How people perceive VET is rooted in historical developments, local cultures, and individual educational experiences (Bolli & Rageth, 2016; Bonoli, 2012). For a growing number of high achieving learners, VET becomes a second, rather than the first choice. Employers struggle to fill apprenticeship places in demanding occupations. I will argue that a high standing of VET can only be reached and maintained, if VET attracts high achieving youth and if it can convince them that enrolment in VET leads to successful and meaningful careers.

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5 Enhancing the standing of vocational education and the occupations it serves: Finland (Petri Nokelainen, Tampere University of Technology, Finland)

In Finland, the upper secondary level consists of general education and vocational education, which can also be combined to pass a matriculation examination and obtain a vocational qualification. Quite different from other Nordic and European countries, the participation rate for vocational education has increased over the past two decades and is now quite close to upper secondary education. Statistics show that 42.5 per cent ($n=24459$) of completers of the 9th grade of comprehensive school continued their studies in vocational education (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016a). Majority of the VET students (84.5%, $n=276\ 946$) participate in institution-based education (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016b). According to Virtanen and Tynjälä (2008), one reason for this is the successful incorporation of on-the-job learning into school-based VET.

Standing of VET is quite strong in Finland, as the system has been acknowledged for its overall quality (Räisänen & Rökköläinen, 2014) and the possibilities it offers for further studies (Virolainen & Stenström, 2014). Attractiveness is partly due to the reforms carried out during 1970-1990 that opened up routes to further and higher education providing general eligibility for universities and polytechnic institutions of higher education (Pylväs, Rintala, & Nokelainen, in press). According to Virolainen and Stenström (2014), other reasons behind the development are the system characteristics (on-the-job learning periods, competence tests), policy characteristics (youth qualifying for unemployment benefits) and improved image of vocational education (skills competitions, visibility in media).

In the light of this, it is interesting to see the effects of the new legislation (“Finnish VET reform”, active 1.1.2018) that aims to improve the effectiveness and quality of VET by creating a competence-based customer-oriented system and increasing learning in the workplace. The effects of the forthcoming law (and the new funding model) are already visible in the form of merging of VET institutions and public discussion about the quality of teaching and learning in the workplaces especially for the younger VET students (Nokelainen & Rintala, 2017).

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6 Conclusion

What is evident across these four presentations is that how VET is manifested and is standing is, by degree, quite country specific. Because of this, what constitutes its standing and efforts to enhance the standing require a consideration of the specific national historical, institutional and contemporary context. All of this reinforces a conclusion from a Cedefop study (2014) that sought to identify means to enhance the attractiveness of VET for young people. It concluded that no single approach or single factor could assist to address this problem because of the complex of factors and their particular varied across countries in their study. Nevertheless, it is possible to propose that factors such as decent and well-regarded occupations, prospects of employment and desirability for young people are likely to be elements that will attract and retain interest. Such a complex of factors suggests that the actions of a number of agencies and institutions are likely to be required. This can extend to governments acting to provide more transparent pathways, promoting higher forms of vocational education, engaging with industry and professional groups to promote the standing of programs and outcomes, and also schools and school teachers playing an important role in redressing a parity of esteem issues within schooling, and proposing VET as a viable educational option, premised upon employability outcomes. Hence, social partners in the form of schools, but also those in local communities working to make accessible and attractive what constitutes the employment destinations for VET graduates. The local aspect seems to be important, as it is within local communities that parents and young people make choices about their pathways to working life. Hence, advice, options and opportunities at the local level may become necessary prerequisites for advancing practice of vocational education and training. In this way, the connectedness of vocational education and training institutions, the communities they serve, and broader educational provisions are likely to be key foundations for enhancing the status and attractiveness of VET to young people.

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Biographical notes

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