Danish University Colleges

The Danish VET system and the quality issue

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Assuring Quality in Denmark – a historic perspective
Hans Joergen Knudsen, Metropolitan University College

The Danish VET system and the quality issue
The Danish VET-system is based on three columns:

VET-schools
Danish VET-schools were made self-governing institutions in 1991, meaning that they have a board of governors, responsible for economy, staff, buildings and machinery and for working in accordance with the Danish legislation. The school-board is accountable to the Ministry of Education. The school-board hires (and can also fire) the school-director. The main part of the representatives of the school-board are from the social partners (50% from trade unions and 50% from employers’ organisations. The chairman of the board is from one of those parties, alternating each four years. There will normally be representatives from the local political system, and also teachers and students are represented (only 50% vote), and the school-director participates in the meetings without the right to vote.

The schools are financed by the Ministry of Education (MoE), based mainly on the number of students. They get a total sum of money per year, and can decide how to spend the money, as they like – as long as they stick to the legislation. If a school spends too much money it must try to get a loan from a bank.

They can earn more money by running courses for private companies.
Social Partnership
There is a long tradition for Social Partnership in the Danish VET-system. In the different trades, Trade Committees are set up by the Social Partners (50% from each side). The Trade Committees know what competence for instance a carpenter should posses in order to be of value as a carpenter. Based on that knowledge, they set up the competence goals for each educational programme in the VET-sector (in accordance with the Danish Qualifications Framework and very close to the European Qualifications Framework). The competence goals are rather broad, and it is for the schools to make them more precise, and for the teachers to make the competence goals understandable for the students (by setting so-called learning-objectives).

Alternating programmes
The Danish VET system has a long tradition for using alternating training programmes. The present system has a basic-programme (one year, school-based) and a main programme (lasting 3-4 years and alternating) – with a few weeks school-training and most of the time spent in the company. In order to complete the main programme the student must have an agreement with an approved company, providing the training, and paying the salary to the apprentice.

Students can choose subjects at a level that makes it possible for them to get access to not only the labour market but also to higher education.

VET-schools autonomy
The 1991 legislation gave VET-schools a lot of autonomy compared to the situation before 1991. In the beginning they could decide almost everything, as long as the economy was good enough. A few years later the MoE started to take back some of the autonomy from the schools. The first thing was that they could not any longer decide for themselves what educational programmes they would like to offer – the Ministry should accept it first.

The next thing was probably influenced by the New Public Management wave. Many private companies had started to work with quality assurance – inspired, among others, by Toyota. The Ministry started to discuss it, went to other countries to look at their systems, and decided to establish a Danish Quality system, based on self-evaluation - not external inspection.

The quality concept was discussed very much but a clear definition was not found. After many discussions the MoE decided (in 1996) to offer 90 million Dkr to the schools (the so-called Q-90 project) for getting started on something – a system of some kind.

The schools (most of them) worked on this for about a year, and after that results were gathered, and it was rather clear that most of the schools had decided to use the so-called EFQM model (later called the Excellence-model).

The next step (for the schools) was to find out how to use the model, and for the Ministry how to get results without too much trouble.
Quality work in the first phase
Some of the major VET-schools wanted to cooperate, and together with DEL (now part of Metropolitan University College) they established a network called the Quality Network and had meetings where all practical issues were discussed. At that time (1998-99) most schools were either commercial schools or technical schools, and those two had slightly different views as to what to do and how to do it – but still they wanted to meet, and to some extent also to cooperate.

The Excellence model looks like this:

![Excellence model diagram]

It has been changed a little bit over time but from the very beginning there has been two sides: An input side and an output side. The Danish VET schools found out that they knew a lot about the input side but almost nothing about the output side. That was an eye opener itself.

The first challenge was to find out what good quality was. Was it high marks, many students passing their exams, many students got a job after completion – or what was it?\(^1\)

A special challenge was, that what actually happened in the classroom was not really part of the quality-assurance work. It was the teachers’ kingdom and control from the outside (the Ministry as well as the school-management) never really happened. Teachers were supposed to be professionals with the right theoretical and practical background and working for the benefit of students, rather than for the school.

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\(^1\) In the private sector many companies found that good quality was when the customers got at least as much as they expected.
The quality work was first and foremost done by professionals (quality experts), involving leaders but never really reached to the teachers’ level.

The work in the Quality Network ended up with a lot of focus on satisfaction (what seemed to be good enough seen from stakeholders point of view). That was something schools could work with, and most people believed that satisfaction would lead to better results and better and higher quality.

The core activities (the red part of the drawing below) were never really involved in the first phase of the quality assurance era. It was much easier to work with satisfaction. It was possible to measure.

Q90
Excellence model

It resulted in a lot of paperwork, and results were published on the schools' websites – everybody including the MoE could follow what happened.

It also resulted in a situation where we got two “schools of quality assurance”, one working with the commercial schools and one with the technical schools. They met in their own circles, and since the discussions in the Quality Network was almost the same as in the two circles, the Quality Network was stopped, and the two circles worked alone. Now and then they met and discussed but it ended up with two different networks: The ESB network (technical schools) and the “Uddannelsesnetwork” (commercial schools). They involved professional companies to do the work on what questions should be asked, and to also produce results in such a way that schools in the same network could compare with each other.

Quality work in the second phase
The two networks started to work rather independently but both with focus on satisfaction. The ESB-network had a major benchlearning project (2006-07) where they tried to use the
results and to learn from each other. They learned a lot - but also that knowledge sharing is not that easy.

The networks also had to face that many commercial schools and technical schools merged and we got many combination schools. That put pressure on the two providers to do almost the same.

Another problem was that what teachers and students did was not yet made part of the system, and finally that the work was about satisfaction rather than quality.

In 2000 the EU set up the so-called Lisbon Strategy in which education was a high priority issue. The Education and Training 2010 Programme followed and from 2002 the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) was established. The Ministers now decided about what goals should be set up as common European goals. Part of that discussion was the drop-out rates in Europe. The Danish MoE decided (based on inspiration from Europe) that at least 95% of a cohort should end up with a formal youth education (upper secondary). In order to make that happen, the MoE decided to involve more directly in the quality work. They told the VET-schools to make plans for how to realize that goal (“Action plans for increased completion of education”). Over the years the MoE has told the schools to report on different issues, connected (seen from the Ministry’s point of view) to quality itself. It was things like: Use of ICT, better link between theory and practice, differentiated instruction, lower drop-out rates, and now also more focus on talents, more satisfied students etc.

Since 2013 (a new VET-reform) the MoE has set up the goal that “all students should learn as much as they can”, and they have been very much influenced by John Hattie’s concept of visible learning, formative evaluation etc. All those things are directly related to teachers’ work, and many teachers, therefore, find that their autonomy as professionals has been reduced. Part of the legislation related to a new VET-reform is also that leaders are supposed to get closer to what happens in the classroom.

Quality is not as much about satisfaction but ever more close to the core – teaching and learning, and the leaders involvement. The MoE has set a new agenda, and quality, therefore is very close to the classroom, and criteria for what is good or bad is ever more set by the MoE.

The headline seems to be “that all students should learn as much as they can”. Neither leaders nor teachers are against, and quality over the next years will be heavily influenced by that sentence (and goal).

Both leaders and teachers must work on the quality issue, and that is the present challenge. They must work with things different from what they used to do in the past. Leaders must now be much closer to teaching and learning processes, and teachers are supposed to teach, to work with development of new methods and materials, and to also work with administrative tasks, quality assurance and networking with local companies.

Not only the leaders are getting closer to the teachers’ kingdom (the classroom or workshop) but also the Ministry are very close now. Teachers and schools feel that they are not really autonomous anymore – they must find new solutions to that challenge as well.