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VET-Teachers Dilemma

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In this paper I discuss the relations between political demands to the Vocational Education and Training system (VET) in Denmark and the problems they cause for teachers working at the VET-colleges. The empirical material is gathered as part of a four year research project on Drop-out and Retention of Students in Danish VET (http://psy.au.dk/frafald/).

1. The former- and the newly elected government in Denmark wants to promote that in the year 2015 95% of a youth cohort must complete an upper secondary education (‘The 95%-goal’) following either an academic path or VET which in a Danish context include programs providing practical vocational qualifications for certain trades and crafts. The duration is typically between 3 and 4 years. VET in Denmark is organized according to the principle of dual education. This implies that the VET students typically begin his or her training program with a 20 to 60 weeks basic course at a VET-college followed by apprenticeship at an enterprise. Availability of a sufficient number of training places is a necessary precondition if all students who take up a VET-program shall have the possibility to finalize it. Both parts of the youth education system are aimed at young people (16 years) who have just left elementary school (grade nine).

2. The VET system must provide the labor market with the highly qualified work force demanded by companies and enterprises. A highly qualified work force is considered to be a pivotal point securing the Danish economy in a global competition.

The paper argues that these two demands are not necessary compatible. In some cases they are even mutually contradictory which creates dilemmas and conflicts for the teachers at the VET-colleges: The economic crises have caused a shortage of training places. The teachers therefore know that not all students who begin will be able to finalize the VET program. But at the same time the teachers must secure that the politically formulated ‘95%-goal’ is achieved. How do they solve this dilemma?
Introduction

In 2005 the Danish government established set up two committees with the task to lay down the principles for the future development paths of the Danish Vocation and Educational System (VET) and to present recommendations for the future policy for education at upper secondary level. The committees worked simultaneously and their work was supposed to be mutually coordinated. In the terms of references for the committee known as ‘The Committee to Secure VET for the Future’ it is stated that:

‘The committee must suggest and substantiate concrete initiatives that will secure Danish VET for the future in order to make sure that these programs continuously will guarantee both the development of the basic skills of the labor force and an adequate educational option for young people who has just left elementary school’ (Ministry of Education 2006a).

In other words the task for this committee was primarily to investigate VET’s future contribution to the education and training of the work force, aiming at the needs of the labor market and organizing this part of the educational system in order to attract young people directly from elementary school. A very popular political formulation of this ambition which has often been used by the government in the political debate is that in Denmark we will have ‘Worlds’ best Vocational Education and Training’.

The terms of references for the other committee known as ‘The Committee to Secure that all Young People Complete an Upper Secondary Education’ states that:

‘The committee must present a suggestion for a plan of action in order to ensure that by the year 2015 95% of a youth cohort will complete upper secondary education and that the VET-system will provide a substantial contribution to realize this objective’ (Ministry of Education 2006b).

In other words the committee must focus on young people and their possibilities to complete an upper secondary education. In other words: ‘Education for all’ as the political slogan is.

One could argue that the two committees had their focus on the same part of the educational system but with quite different agendas and purposes. The situation in Denmark is that approximately 20 – 25% of a youth cohort does not complete upper secondary education and this level has been quite steady during the last 20 years. Research shows that a large proportion of those young people who presently does not complete education on a secondary level carries a number of problems which are not normally associated with education: Social and psychological problems, problems with family and housing, crime, abuse of drugs and alcohol etc. In addition the parliament in spring 2010 passed legislation known as ‘Youth packet 2’ which among others demand young that people at the age of 15 to 17 must attend educational activities. If not their
parents can get economical punished. This situation where the government demands ‘Worlds’ best VET’ and ‘Education for all’ and demand young people to attend education different problems and dilemmas are generated in VET and especially for the teachers at the VET-colleges; they are the ones facing the students with the task to handle all students no matter which conditions they might be in (Koudahl 2008).

This paper argues that these two demands are not necessary compatible. In some cases they can even be characterized as mutually contradictory and this creates dilemmas and conflicts for the teachers at the vocational colleges

**The Danish VET-system**

To understand why the teachers are in a unique position some remarks on Danish VET are necessary.

Danish VET is organized around the principle of dual education. VET-students usually take up their program with an introductory course of with the duration between 20 to 60 weeks at a VET-college. This is followed by the main course where the students alternate between the VET-college and apprenticeship at an enterprise. This way of organizing VET has as its precondition that a sufficient number of training places are available because the students can only complete their program if they are able to find a training place. During the main course the students are paid a salary by the enterprise in which they have their training place. The level of this salary is negotiated between representatives of the labor market parties. Due to this organization the students are in a rather special situation during the main course as they are both considered to be employees and students in training. One consequence of this situation is that enterprises looking for apprentices are liable to pick those students from the introductory course which are considered to be most suited to adapt to the norms and expectations which exist at the labor market. In other words the enterprises will pick students with the right attitude and appearance and will avoid students with problems and students which are not immediately able to become part of the work force at the enterprise. Therefore a tendency in the system to prioritize among the students leaving the most vulnerable behind without possibility to complete a VET program is found. Present there is a shortage of training places. 10.000 students who have finalized the basic course and who are therefore prepared to enter the main course are waiting for a training place. This is the official figure but the number of training places needed is surely much higher. Our research shows that the prospect for students of not being able to have a training place after completing basic course make a lot of them drop out before completing the basic course and therefore they are not recorded in the official statistics. This figure is to be measured against the fact that around 60.000 takes enters basic courses each year. The prospects for having a training place are very poor and especially the economic crises have made it even more unlikely that they will succeed in completing their program (Koudahl 2010).

Because the economic crises have caused a shortage of training places at the enterprises the teachers know that not all students who begin- will be able to finalize the VET program. But at the same time they are the
ones who must ensure that the politically formulated ‘95%- goal’ is achieved. So how do they solve this dilemma?

**Research method**

The empirical basis of this paper derives mainly from a qualitative part of a mixed method study on dropout and retention of students in Danish VET. The project was launched in 2009 and is planned to be completed in December 2012. In the initial quantitative part of the study a comparison was made of the actual dropout rate and the predicted dropout rate from 45 technical- and 37 business- VET-colleges in Denmark, taking into consideration different educational programs at the colleges, differences in the students social- and cultural background and a number of variables concerning examination results from elementary school, parents educational background current occupational career etc. (Larsen & Jensen 2010). On the basis of this benchmark analysis eight colleges were selected for qualitative studies; two business- and six technical colleges. According to the benchmark analysis four of the colleges did well and four colleges did not do well in retaining the students. The qualitative studies combined interviews with 168 students of whom 80 were re-interviewed six month to one year later, observations of the teaching practices and interviews with approximately 50 teachers and managers at different levels of the organization of the colleges. All interviews were coded using the program Nvivo.

As the data available for the quantitative study dates back from 2007 and the qualitative studies were conducted in 2009 – 2011 changes regarding dropout and retention might have changed due to local labor market changes and not at least the economic crises which undoubtedly have caused an extended shortage of training places. This is taken into consideration in the interpretation of the results.

The overall aim of the qualitative study is to investigate processes of engagement and how the vocational colleges contribute to those processes. The overall thesis’ are that educational engagement increases the rates of retention of students and that engagement must be investigated at different levels:

- Engagement in the social community with other students.
- Engagement in the teachers and other adults.
- Engagement in the college as an institution.
- Engagement in the craft or trade in itself and the idea of achieving a specific adult identity.
- Engagement in the development of one’s own competences and qualifications through the ability to master tools, materials, work processes, language associated with specific crafts and trades etc.
- Engagement In the creativity of the craft or trade, to work with concrete materials and to experience that what you created yesterday also exist in a very concrete form the day after.
Another thesis is that the teachers’ engagement in their work and in the students both as young people who are to complete an education and training program, and as human beings as such, will enhance the overall engagement of the students and thereby increase the rate of retention. In other words when the teachers are able to have a focus on both the content of the craft or trade and a focus on the personal aspects of the students the possibility for retention is increased.

The following part of the paper will present examples of findings primarily from interviews with teachers and observations of the educational practices at technical VET-colleges.

Findings and discussion

Some students do not fit in …

As previously mentioned the training place is the pivotal point of the Danish VET-system. The students are completely dependable on finding a training place if they are to have a chance to complete their VET-program. But also the VET-colleges are dependent keeping up good relations with the local labor market in order to ensure that the enterprises will continuously offer training places to their students. This creates a dilemma for the teachers because they on the one hand are to ensure that all students who take up VET in principle must complete it but on the other hand they cannot send all students to the masters of the local enterprises simply because they are not fit for the task. During an interview with a teacher I ask him if he think that it makes sense at all to speak about the students as if they represent a homogenous group or if he thinks that the differences between the students makes it impossible to see them as one group. He answers:

Teacher: Well it’s probably not fair to speak about the students as one group. That’s because... Well we have the goal-oriented students; those who have a clear purpose entering VET and believe that they can manage it. Then we have the students who think they might manage and then we have the students who have no idea of how their future life is going to be. But they are enforced into schools and the youth guidance offices... telling them that ‘you must do something...’ [Referring to Youth Package 2, PK]. We have some of those students too. And then you can say after having categorized the students, then there are the social aspects too. Then there are these underlying issues which are necessary to make it work... If they for instance want to be a carpenter – but their parents have actually been unemployed all their lives. And then they have no stability either and then... Well it’s sad to explain to them that they would never make it. That no matter what... It wouldn’t work. If a master asks us if we have a potential apprentice, and we have... We have a couple of really fine ones who can start in a period of probation for a week or two and then the master can try them out. Well, in these cases those students are ignored.
PK: Do you do it deliberately, I mean... Is it something you think or is it something you teachers actually talk about and say to one another... ‘Well, we only send out the best students to the masters and then those others... We cannot send them out because it wouldn’t be fair to the masters...’ Is it like that?

Teacher: Well, you can say that we would fell unwell sending out students who wants to become carpenters when we know beforehand that they would only show up two out of five days in a week because the master would come directly at us asking. ‘What the hell is this you have sent me? Then it is not worthwhile. Then it’s more trouble and no use.’ And - yes. We can understand that. You must acknowledge such an argument... So, no... You must say that it is those students who have proven that they are able... Those that we have a guarantee that... or we believe in, or... Who we believe that they will make it...

During the same interview this teacher estimates that only half of the students who begin their introductory course are able to continue into the main course because of the shortage of training places. This puts the teacher in a very concrete dilemma because he must consider how he is going to prioritize among all the students right from the beginning of the introductory course. What can the teacher do when he knows that half of the students who begins introductory course cannot complete VET and when he knows that the masters do not want to hire apprentices who are not able to comply with the demands on the labor market. Well, the answer is as obvious as it is brutal: He have to contribute to the selection between students in order to ensure that the most competent students will have a training place while the least capable are forced to drop out. If the teacher did not do this he would compromise the labor market demands for highly skilled labor, he would create serious problems between the VET-college and the local enterprises and he would prevent the most competent students to complete their VET. Therefor in a situation where there are fewer training places than students trying to find a training place the VET-colleges are in practice active in the prioritizing of students. By doing this they in practice obstruct the ‘95%-ambition’. But what else can they do?

Expelled

During a visit to a VET-College I witness how a student is expelled. The student is asked to enter the teachers’ office. There he is told that because of too much absenteeism the teachers no longer believe that he is able to continue his education and qualify for the exams. He is then asked to leave the college. He packs up his tools and leaves the college immediately. After this incident I do an interview with one of the teachers who made the decision to expel this student. He explain that after the government decided on the ‘95%-goal’ many young people who used to have unskilled jobs or who maybe lived on welfare payments, young people with different personal and social problems etc. are now at the VET-college and the teachers tasks have
changed substantially. They have to take much more care of the students’ different personal problems. But there have not been allocated more resources even though the teachers in addition to teaching the craft to the students also must take up tasks which normally would be a job for social workers. He is quite frustrated because of this situation because on the one hand he believes that the teachers are not able to do what is expected from them and therefore they are forced to expel students who do not comply with norms and rules at the college. On the other hand he recognizes that the students who are expelled are the ones with the biggest needs for support if they are to complete an educational program. He says:

Teacher: But instead of expelling [the name of the student] we should create a decent educational offer with more resources allocated. We should tell the other students ‘Well friends... These guys have some troubles. They need more time than you do...’. I think that instead of expelling them we could keep them out of idleness, abuse of alcohol and drugs, crime and all those things. No other social institutions can do the same at such a low price as we can...

What the teacher expresses is; on the one hand the college must be able to hold a group of students with different non-educational problems but no more resources are allocated to fulfill the task. On the other hand they still have to do the job of teaching the craft to the students. Furthermore it is interesting that this teacher speaks of the college as a social institution with a specific task. In that sense he expresses the dilemma which is created from the governments two sided ambition for the VET-colleges that they must make education for all and at the same time produce the most qualified skilled labor in the world.

The teacher as a social worker

At another college some of the teachers have developed a quite different approach in order to comply with the fact that many more students with non-educational problems are now admitted. The teachers’ attitude is that in order to deal with these students they must focus on the socio-educational aspects of the work and this to such an extent that the vocational aspects by and large have vanished. Some of the teachers even refer to themselves as a ‘social security office’. During an interview with a teacher I ask her:

PK. Which qualifications do you think are the most important in order to be a teacher at this college?

Teacher: A lot of empathy and the ability to listen and then to be very specific in your demands to the students, to be able to put very few and simple goals for the students to achieve. And in general the attitude that young people always have the best intentions and it is just a question of how I become able to understand these intentions. You have to see it that way.
PK: So that is the most important, you think. What about the craft in which you teach? Is it not important?

Teacher: No, I don’t think so. No, I think that the craft is pedagogy, especially during the basic course, because the students are often weak and fragile and socially exposed. It is more important to make them stay here at the college than it is to teach them how to perform a craft.

The teachers at this basic course agrees that the primary task is to help the students to handle everyday life, to make them avoid abuse of drugs and alcohol, avoid crime and to make the students able to decide what they want to do in their future life. The fact that a VET-college formally is an educational institution with the task to prepare the students to take up apprenticeship after basic course is hardly mentioned. The teachers consider the personal development of the students to be their primary effort. Later in the interview the same teacher explain her thoughts on how to organize the instruction:

Teacher: My consideration is that I want the students to be in a happy mood when they leave the college in the afternoon. I want them to fell that they have had a success during the day. I almost don’t care on which level they have experienced a success. And then I want my self to be happy too. I don’t want to feel ‘used’ just because I have been at work. So these are my considerations; that everybody are in a good mood. I think it is very sad if one of my students leave the college unhappy even though it might be because of something which is out of my hands. Maybe the boy- og girlfriend have broken up and have sent a text about it while I have been teaching and I can’t control that. But I think it is sad...

The characteristics of the students imply that the vocational elements have by and large no room. Instead the socio-educational aspects of the work become the pivotal point for the teachers’ work. In other words; these teachers ‘make a virtue of necessity’. They have acknowledged that most of these young people are not able to complete an education. First and foremost because of their personal problems but even if they would complete the basic course they would probably not be able to enter into the main course because of the shortage of training places and the way enterprises prioritize among the students.

I only teach the students who really wants to...

Many VET-teachers at technical colleges are former craftsmen themselves and often they have worked in the same community in which the college they teach in is located. Therefor they have first-hand knowledge of the local labor market and have personal contacts among the local enterprises. This might be helpful when trying to find training places for the students. But often they bring rules, habits and accepted principles from the labor market into the college and into their relations with the students. Some of these teachers find the
situation in which they are told to be a kind of social worker for the students absolutely unfair. They identify themselves with their craft and the job as teacher is to pass on their vocational skills to the students. Some teachers have developed strategies to overcome the already mentioned two-sided demand. It might be, as in this case, a teacher who finds that there are fundamental discrepancies between the works he has to do which is teaching the students a craft and the conditions under which he have to teach a very mixed group of students. During an interview he repeatedly returns to that what he believes is his main task; to prepare the students for what they can expect to be demanded at the labor market like being on time, to be energetic, effective and productive. He says:

Teacher: Well, my old teacher in elementary school often said to my: ‘You can drag the horse to the pond but you cannot make it drink’. I can drag the students into the classroom and place them on a chair but I cannot force them to learn something. They have to want to learn something themselves and if they want to I’ll help them as much as I possibly can. But if they don’t want to learn anything then I’d rather use my time on someone else.

This teacher has taken the consequence of what he believes are the unfair conditions under which he has to teach and he has given up the students who do not signal by themselves that they are interested in participating. In that sense he reproduces the logics which exist at the labor market. And he believes that it is first and foremost his job to prepare the students for the labor market, not to be a social worker. In his interpretation the students must be at the college with a specific purpose – vocational qualifications. Taking this stance it is likely that only the students who comply with the teachers’ ideas of what the labor market demands from them will receive teaching and instruction. Whish of course places the other students at risk of dropping out.

**Summing up**

In this paper I have presented a number of examples of how teachers a VET-colleges tries to handle demands form the government. On the one hand they must produce ‘Education for everyone’. On the other hand they are demanded to create ‘Worlds’ best VET’. Many teachers find it impossible to fulfill both tasks at the same time. ‘Youth package 2’ has further contributed to this situation and the shortage of training places makes the task even more difficult. Regarding the government demands it might be appropriate to discuss the actual purposes of the educational system. Every educational system has a double purpose (at least) (Archer 1982): One task is to teach the students in order to pass on qualifications and competences which will make them able to continue into further studies or to get a job. But educational systems also have to ensure that only students who actually acquire the qualifications and competences needed to take up further education or a job are passed on. The latter task is formalized in tests and examinations and through the demand to educational institutions to assess the students. And in reality no one wants to have an surgery by a doctor
who might have solved some of his personal problems while studying at university but he never acquired the qualifications to perform surgery. Likewise no one wants to have a house build by a craftsman who does not know how to do it even though he might have tidied up personal problems during his VET-program. Therefor the dilemma created by what in the real world are opposing government ambitions on behalf of the Danish VET ends up on the teachers’ desk. The teachers then employ a number of strategies to find their way out of what seems to be an impossible situation. But no matter which strategy the teachers employ the system of dual education relying totally on the availability of training places creates a mismatch between the number of students and the number of training places. In a situation where the government demands that every young girl or boy must be engaged in education, that they all in principle can be admitted to a basic course at a VET-college and that he or she must complete a full VET-program. The dilemmas of the VET teachers are even bigger.

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