



## Education for All?

### Lessons from the Reform of the Danish VET-Programmes

► The reform of the foundational courses of Danish VET-programmes which took place in 2000 aimed at increasing inclusion and retention of disadvantaged students as well as raising the general prestige of VET by introducing greater flexibility in course structure and organisation, among others, by means of modularisation, the creation of occupational families, and flexible student intake. Focusing particularly on the reform of the technical programmes, this article describes important elements of the reform and its outcomes on the basis of current research and concludes by discussing policy-making lessons to be learnt from the Danish efforts.

### From Policy-Learning to Policy-Making

We cannot afford the unthinking copying from elsewhere of education policies dimly understood. Nor can we afford a situation in which many jurisdictions are doing similar things while failing to learn from each other (LEVIN 1998, p. 139).

“Policy-learning” is an essential component of contemporary policy-making. In order to remedy problems at home, policy-makers travel across the world in search for “good practice” and borrow policies which show good results and – hopefully unintentionally – also policies which show bad results (CORT 2010; LEVIN 1998). In the EU’s Open Method of Coordination, policy-learning has become institutionalised and through technical working groups cases of good practice are drawn up and forwarded as a source of inspiration in national reforms. This is also the case for vocational education and training (VET), where especially Anglo-Saxon concepts of qualifications frameworks, learning outcomes, accreditation and accountability have influenced national policies. The EU VET-policy is also highly influenced by these concepts and currently the introduction of national qualifications frameworks is on-going in many European countries. The qualifications framework policy entails an introduction of flexible and modularised approaches, which in some systems are long-established practices and in others quite new and contested ideas.

Despite their similarities in structure and organising principles, the Danish and the German VET-systems are in this respect interesting contrasting examples. Thus, since 2000 many of these new principles – in particular modularisation, the merging of foundational courses into related occupational profiles, implementation of a national qualifications framework and of learning outcomes – have been introduced into Danish VET-policies without greater political disputes or conflicts among the stakeholders. In Germany, on the other hand, many of these issues have re-accentuated existing fissures and conflicts and are contested approaches in the context of the “Dual System” (DREXEL 2003; RAUNER 2004; THELEN/BUSEMEYER 2008;



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TRAMPUSCH 2009). Although, it would be valuable to analyse the “why” of these differences, this article offers a policy-learning perspective: what are the lessons to be learnt from the Danish case, if any?

## The Danish VET-System

The Danish system can be clustered with the Austrian, German and Swiss systems, all of which exhibit the following main characteristics:

- Involvement of the social partners in the administration and financing of VET;
- The provision of portable certified occupational skills recognised nationwide through “dual” programmes (TRAMPUSCH 2010, p. 187).

From an educational perspective, a third trait should be added: namely, the inclusion of VET in the youth education system with an emphasis on general education for personal development, citizenship and further education. In the Danish system, these institutional traits can be traced back to reforms in 1937 (social partners involvement), 1956 (dual training) and 1976 (general youth education) (CORT/WIBORG 2009; JUUL 2005).

The Danish VET-system is often described as bridging the German dual system and the Scandinavian non-streamed, school-based system, where “streaming” refers to a differentiation of students according to skill-level. However, this classification may be misleading as the ratio between school and work is equivalent in the Danish and the German systems, i. e. approx. two thirds of a programme consist in apprenticeship training in a company and one third takes place at a vocational college.

In contrast to the German system, all Danish VET-programmes are divided into two parts: a foundational course, which is school-based, and a main course, which is conditional on the VET-student entering a contract with a company. The foundational course could be classified as “pre-vocational” as it provides the students with the competences required to continue in a main course, which lasts between two and a half and three and a half years. While it is possible to shortcut the foundational course and start directly in an apprenticeship by entering a contract with a company, the majority of students start in a foundational course. In the main course, the students alternate between working in a company, and attending VET-courses at a vocational college. In the Danish system, the dual principle differs from the German in so far as the school-based periods are organised in longer courses equivalent to a total of 40 weeks.

## The Reform of the Danish VET-System since the 1990s

### RECONCILING “EDUCATION FOR ALL” AND A “HIGH SKILLS”-STRATEGY

Since 1989, reform has been the trademark of the Danish VET-system and the reform pace has increased since 2000. The reforms reflect societal changes and the political strategic importance of VET in national policy-making. In the 1990s, Danish VET-policies were to a high degree influenced by global ideas of decentralisation and marketisation of education. An important aim was – and still is – to establish a VET-policy able, on the one hand, to contribute to a “high skills” strategy in a global market economy (BROWN/GREEN/LAUDER 2001), and to include disadvantaged groups into the upper secondary education system on the other.

Accordingly, “Education for All” was an ambitious policy formulated by the mid-1990s, aimed at enabling 95 per cent of a youth cohort to complete a youth education programme. Two major problems were identified in connection with the “Education for All” programme: Firstly, the decreasing prestige of VET among students and parents. Thus, since the 1960s, the general education programmes (Gymnasium) had attracted more and more young people and VET increasingly became the option for those students who were declared “not fit” for the Gymnasium. This led to a decreasing parity of esteem between VET and general education programmes.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, a major problem was a high drop-out rate in the VET-programmes.

In 1997, a report by the Ministry of Education pointed to these problems and raised a question which had already been discussed in the 1960s, namely whether a unitary system including both VET and the general education programmes should be developed or whether VET should continue as an independent track. In case of the latter, the report proposed a further simplification of the system in order to meet the needs of the lower-achieving students: the foundational courses should be reduced from 89 to fewer (but broader) courses in order to make the VET-system more transparent and to provide students with the opportunity to postpone their choice of an occupational profile (CORT/WIBORG 2009).

### REFORM 2000

It was this latter model that became the core of Reform 2000. The then social-democratic social-liberal government chose to maintain a two-track system and made an attempt to simplify the system, with a flexible modularised system that was supposed to attract both weak and strong students.

<sup>1</sup> In Denmark, 30 per cent of a youth cohort enter the VET track, whereas approx. 55 per cent enter the Gymnasium track.

The reformed system continued to consist of a school-based foundational course and a main course based on the dual principle. The main course remained more or less untouched by the reform, which reflects two facts:

1. the main course is regarded as the competence of the social partners and
2. a fear of making demands on the companies exists as this could lead to a loss of apprenticeships, a situation fatal to a system based on the interest and willingness of companies to take in apprentices.

In contrast, the foundational course was changed drastically, with the existing 89 courses being merged into seven broad courses organised around related occupational profiles:

1. service industries;
2. building and construction;
3. technology and communication;
4. mechanical engineering, transport and logistics;
5. food production and catering;
6. crafts and engineering trades;
7. commerce, clerical education and finance (SIGURJONSSON 2002).<sup>2</sup>

The occupational profiles were the result of negotiations among the social partners and the Ministry of Education. Thus, the foundational course for "Building and construction" came to include, for example, brick-layers, carpenters, plumbers, heating and sanitary engineers, chimney sweeps, stonemasons, construction painters, etc. The driving rationale was to offer the students the opportunity to acquire knowledge of several occupations before making a final decision as this was considered to be an important factor in reducing the high drop-out rate.

#### **INCREASED FLEXIBILITY IN COURSE LENGTH, STRUCTURE, AND STUDENT INTAKE**

In the reform, the length of the foundational course became flexible and was to be based on the learning needs of the individual student. The idea was to make it possible for the students to acquire the defined competences at their own pace; consequently it was possible to extend the foundational course up to 60 weeks in the technical training programmes (on average most students complete the foundational course within the stipulated time of 20 weeks). The foundational course was modularised and intake to it became flexible. Two important aspects of these changes were the abandonment of fixed classes and fixed routes to the main course.

<sup>2</sup> *The first six courses constitute the technical training programmes, while the commercial programmes are included in the course "commerce, clerical education and finance".*

In the reform, it was up to the individual college to implement the new concepts and turn them into practical reality. At many colleges modularisation took the form of "learning activities" meeting curricular objectives regarding the development of specific competences (based on a broad competence concept encompassing personal, social, vocational, and general competences). A learning activity could be a thematic course, a project, or a subject and would last five weeks. Progression was ensured by offering the students broader modules at the start and making them more specialised as the student became more clarified about an occupational profile (see information box). The choice-based modules were believed to facilitate meeting the needs of the individual, but it was also argued that the modular approach would be better suited to the needs of the labour market, which increasingly emphasised flexibility and innovation.

#### **Exemplary structure of foundational courses in the technical programmes**

A modularised foundational course would ideally be structured as follows in one of the technical courses: Upon entrance, the student's prior learning is assessed and an individual educational plan drawn up stipulating the learning objectives for the student and how to achieve these. Over the 20 weeks of the foundational course, the student chooses among different modules in five-week blocks:

- *Weeks 1-5:* choice among three modules comprising basic subjects (Danish, foreign languages, math)
- *Weeks 6-10:* choice among three modules comprising "area subjects", i. e. subjects which introduce elements common to two or more occupational profiles
- *Weeks 11-15:* choice among four modules comprising subjects specific for a single occupational profile
- *Weeks 16-20:* choice among three modules comprising subjects specific for a single occupational profile. In these modules, optional subjects and higher level additional subjects could also be included.

To enable both students and teachers to monitor progress, after completion of each module the progress of the student is assessed and a score-card is drawn up on the basis of the student's individual educational plan. In case of a lack of achievement by the student, the foundational course can be prolonged.

## **Evaluating the Outcomes of Reform 2000**

### **INCREASED DROP-OUT AND DECREASED PRESTIGE**

Reform 2000 was evaluated for two years during its implementation. The evaluation focused primarily on problems of implementation and on how to improve the implementation processes (SHAPIRO/ABRAHAMSEN/PANTON 2001), whereas the conceptualisation and premises on which the reform built were not evaluated. However, a number of PhD theses were conducted focusing on the reform and especially on its conceptualisation of "young people" and the underlying rationality that a higher degree of flexibility and individualisation was the answer to problems of prestige, transparency, inclusion and drop-out.

Thus, the conceptualisation of “young people” in Reform 2000 was emulated on a Danish interpretation of ZIEHE’s analysis of liberated youth and painted a picture of a generation of “zappers” searching for individual meaning and identity in a shimmering world (ZIEHE 1989). According to Koudahl, this generalisation of “young people” was highly problematic as it led policy-makers to the conclusion that students in VET should be given more choice and more responsibility for their learning (Koudahl 2006). However, the individualised and modularised approaches intended to appeal especially to weaker students through the possibility of extension and differentiation were shown to miss the target group: JUUL and KOUDAHL show how especially the weaker students were not able to deal with the modular approaches which demanded from the students to “take responsibility for their own learning”.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, although increased flexibility and individualisation were meant to help curb the high drop-out rate, the rate increased from 30 to 35 per cent from 2000 to 2005 (KOU DAHL 2005). According to Koudahl, some of the elements of the reform contributed to the increase in the drop-out rate, i. e. the introduction of continuous intake of students and the lack of fixed classes. Many of the lower-achieving students dropped out because of the lack of stable frames and the integration into a social community of school mates.

It should be noted that drop-out is a complex problem which includes factors which are beyond the reach of the VET-system. Thus, especially personal and social problems lead to drop-out, and many young people in the recruitment base of the VET-programmes come from socially challenged families. Forced to deal with this reality, the Ministry of Education and the vocational colleges resorted to a host of socio-pedagogical measures: the introduction of mentoring schemes, the strengthening of guidance, and the employment of social workers and psychologists at the vocational colleges. In a recent study on VET teachers’ perception of change in the Danish system it was stated that with Reform 2000 the educational focus moved from teaching to “nursing” in the foundational course (CORT/ROLLS 2009). Thus, VET teachers assessed the reform critically and perceived their teacher role in the foundational course as changing into a role of a social pedagogue.

The theses by KOUDAHL and LARSEN furthermore point to the fact that the introduction of occupational families also missed its target to some extent: a great majority of the young people were often quite determined and clarified in their choice of an occupation.

## AMENDING REFORM 2000

To summarise, research pointed to the fact that especially the lower achieving students had problems to deal with the flexibility and individualisation of the reform. It also pointed to the fact that the reform had led to a decrease in the prestige of the VET-programmes by focusing more on the inclusion of lower-achieving students in order to attain the 95 per cent policy objective and less on the “high skills” strategy. Based on the research results and the fact that the reform did not deliver the expected outcome, the Act on VET was amended in June 2007 to remedy the situation:

- the number of foundational courses was extended from seven to twelve in order to make the functional relations between the occupational profiles more transparent to the students (CLEMATIDE/BRUHN 2007);
- “foundational course packages” were introduced in order to provide “specially designed courses aimed at either higher- or lower-achieving students”, hereby introducing an element of streaming within the VET-programmes (CORT 2008, p. 46);
- vocational colleges were required to set up further strategies for reducing the drop-out rate.

According to the latest figures, completion rates have improved minimally, from 80.6 per cent in 2007 to 80.7 per cent in 2008. Thus the drop-out rate seems finally to have been curbed within the foundational course. However, due to the economic recession the number of students who lack an apprenticeship has increased drastically to 8,176, or by 63 per cent compared to 2009.

In that, as stated above, the main programme did not undergo many changes with the reform, it stayed based on the dual training principle, and for many students the apprenticeship contract continues to be a main stumbling block. The transition phase from the foundational to the main programme remains a critical turning point, which was not dealt with in the reform, although a phase for considerable risk of drop-out.

In other words, the Danish VET-system is facing serious challenges which cannot be solved through changes in the foundational course, but only through the active commitment of the companies to the dual training principle, or the extension of the school-based training scheme (which was downscaled as an option in 2003), or a complete make-over of the system. At the moment, the Danish VET-system is developing through budding and has turned into a plural system which may be flexible but is far from transparent and attractive.

<sup>3</sup> A concept borrowed from the Norwegian researcher Ivar Bjørgen (Juul 2005).



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## And as for Policy-Learning?

What is the policy-learning lesson of the Danish Reform 2000? An overall lesson is that there certainly is no “easy fix”. VET is not a panacea to all kinds of societal problems, and too many contradictory political aims will cause dysfunctions within the system. In the reform, the main target became the attainment of the 95 per cent policy objective and hence the focus shifted away from the “high skills” strategy to the retention of the lower-achieving students. To some extent, this shifted the focus from the core of VET, i. e. the education and training of qualified workers, to socio-pedagogical measures. While these two aspects need not be mutually exclusive, the reform’s failure to combine them successfully contributed to a further deterioration of the prestige of Danish VET-programmes.

Another important lesson to be learned from the outcomes of Reform 2000 is the need to base such reforms on thorough analyses of the relationship between policy objectives, initiatives, contextual factors and implementation.

Especially if the experiences of other countries are drawn into a reform, it is crucial to take into account the differences in systems and contextual factors. However, this presumes that policy-making is a rational and scientific process, which it is not (BALL 1990). Policies reflect interests and power struggles, and hence the foregoing suggestions may after all just be an ideal impossible to achieve. ■

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