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Inclusion and equal access at the same time – comparing VET in Sweden and Denmark

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1. Introduction

The parity of esteem between vocational education and general education constitutes a significant challenge in many countries (Young & Raffe, 1998; Deissinger et al, 2013). Recurrent policy-attempts to combat the vocational/academic divide can in part be contextualized by dominant historical discourses of VET as less prestigious than academic education oriented to higher positions in the social hierarchy of society (Billett, 2014). Societal class and gender distinctions contributes to lower esteem of VET in the dominant perception of status since young people from non-academic traditions commonly prefer a faster route to working life than through the academic route (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1997).

However, research on VET has challenged dominant and one-dimensional conceptions of esteem/prestige, demonstrating how the respect and value of VET vary among different groups of young people who are in the midst of developing their occupational identities (e.g. Broockmann, 2014), vocational teachers (Berner, 2010) and labour market partners. Hence, the esteem of VET is depending upon its capacity to meet salient social, economic and personal purposes (Billett, 2014). VET-policy also matters for affecting the esteem of VET. Previous research on VET-systems in different European countries has contributed with novel knowledge about different policy-strategies used to improve the esteem of initial VET (Young & Raffe, 1998; Lasonen & Young, 1998). Some strategies (ideal types) have been characterized by attempts to modernize and enhance the quality and efficiency of VET-systems while protecting the specific nature of vocational education and training; other strategies are distinguished by attempts to bridge or integrate vocational education and general education. Expanding on these strands of work, this paper focuses on how and why different policy strategies to improve parity of esteem have emerged in Denmark and Sweden.

A common challenge for all Nordic countries, associated with non-elitist and comprehensive education systems, is to be inclusive, and at the same to give access to both employment and higher education, irrespective of young people's social backgrounds. Denmark and Sweden represent two different solutions to achieve these two policy-objectives. The aim of this paper is to compare how this dilemma has been handled in Denmark and Sweden during the last 40 years, with a particular focus on education reforms where issues of parity of esteem and equal access have been brought to the core.

Point of departure

The starting point for the paper is the late 1960-ies and early 1970-ies when esteem and equal access emerged as central issues in education policy in both countries. This period is identified as a critical phase for the esteem of vocational education and training as a separate track from general education due to several political and cultural drivers for a unification of

general education and vocational training. The subsequent section focuses on recent policy-attempts (1990 – until present) to achieve equal access to higher education in connection to international trends in education policy to increasing and widening access to higher education in many countries (Deissinger et al, 2013).

The paper is based on ongoing comparative research on initial VET in the Nordic countries (Norway and Finland is also included) within a larger research project (<www.Nord-VET.dk>). Using a dynamic and problem based approach, national case-studies have identified critical turning points in the history of VET (from mid-19th century to present) and explored how a number of different key challenges have been managed by each country. Where no other references are made, this paper draws on the reports from Denmark (Bøndergaard 2014; Jørgensen, 2014, 2015) and Sweden (Olofsson & P. Thunqvist 2014; P. Thunqvist & Hallqvist, 2014; P. Thunqvist, 2015).

A sum up of main characteristics of the VET-systems in Denmark and Sweden is relevant for the further course of analysis: Sweden provides an illustration of a school-based VET-system characterized by distinct features such as an extensive space given to general subjects, the pre-vocational character and low priority given to the creation of “ready-trained” workers, and the governments steering role. However, a long-term perspective reveals that the Swedish VET-system, voluntary and unregulated until the post-war era, has gravitated to a Danish-style dual system more than once (Olofsson & Persson Thunqvist, 2014). For example, during and after Second World War (1940-1950-ies) the main labor market partners (LO and SAF) negotiated a system for apprenticeship regulated by collective agreement as a complement to compulsory school-based VET. While this corporatist tradition (collective bargaining between the state, employers and unions) largely remains in the labour market, since late 1960-ies initial VET has gradually become a part of a state-governed gymnasium, with a strong involvement of municipal organizers and, since early 1990s, private school companies. By contrast, the Danish VET-system has remained a dual system governed jointly by social partners in order to provide qualifications that are nationally recognized in the labour market and to give access to skilled employment. In Sweden (since 1991), school-based VET is complemented with 15 weeks of workplace training, whereas in Denmark, work based learning in a private company or a public institution make up around two-thirds of the duration of the vocational programmes. While the educational value/esteem of school-based vocational education and training is paramount in Sweden, in Denmark the workplace is by most apprentices and by the labour market organisations considered to be the most important learning venue.

In the further course of analysis we argue that these differences in the institutional design of initial VET, shaping the menu for available policy options in each country, plays a crucial role for recent policy attempts to manage the challenge of being inclusive and provide equal access to higher education. In addition, the analysis focuses on dynamic tensions in the VET-systems, highlighting different policy attempts to counteract unintended consequences of prior policy making. As ‘the academic drift’ comprises a common challenge for initial VET in both countries, the analysis will particularly address two dimensions of academic drift: 1) policies to increase the portion of an age cohort taking academic qualification, and 2) policy changes in the vocational track (e.g. increasing academic content) or in the composition and mix of vocational and general education.

2. Managing inclusion and equal access in Sweden and Denmark: Analysis

2.1 Reforms for unification and equal access (1970-1980)

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there were parallel political and social movements in Sweden and Denmark that gravitated to a centralized unification strategy aiming at bringing together two historically separate strands of education: academic secondary education and non-compulsory VET. The call for equal access was also largely driven by the rapid expansion of compulsory and upper secondary education in both countries. Why did this strategy become a “game-changer” affecting subsequent VET-policy for equal access in Sweden, while it failed in Denmark?

Sweden:

The unification strategy emerged in the 1968 upper secondary education reform which represents the first centralized structural education reform in Sweden since 1918 and which was followed by a series of subsequent reforms during the 1970-ies. At the core of the reforms was to improve parity of esteem by gathering general education and vocational training under the same organizational umbrella with a common curriculum aimed for practically all 15-19 years old. In the new gymnasium, finalized by the 1971-reform, alongside general education lines, vocational education was provided in 13 broad lines of two years duration. All lines were organized in blocks targeting broad sectors of working life and allowed for gradual specialization.

Although the unification strategy in theory improved equal access, it was still difficult for VET-students to advance to higher education. Despite the administrative integration of VET in the gymnasium, deep rooted social and cultural boundaries between vocational tracks and academic tracks prevailed and were not least manifested by separate school cultures (Berner, 1989). The vocational lines were predominantly oriented toward specific vocational skills. They included general education, but typically no core-subjects courses (e.g., mathematics) as in the academic track. Teachers in the academic tracks held university degrees, vocational teachers often had a shorter, practical teacher training. For many vocational students with a working class background, higher education was foreign territory. While the exclusivity of academic education in part was protected by such latent functions, the attractiveness of vocational education indicated by young people’s choices increased with the subsequent expansion of school-based VET. For example, in the mid-1980s, over 75 per cent of the new students opted for vocational programs (Olofsson & P. Thunqvist, 2014). These trends also worked against academic drift partly because vocational students had less to lose: in a time of steady economic optimism in the 1980ies (Lundahl et al, 2010), it was rather easy to get an employment and the educational system as a whole promoted opportunities to transfer back to continuing education later on.

The 1971 upper secondary reform was clearly a sign of the political hegemony of the Swedish Social Democracy supported by the trade union movement. However, the large industries dominating the Swedish economy also have been a driving force behind the integration of VET in the gymnasium (Lundahl, et al, 2010). The pre-vocational character of VET was an obstacle to many smaller firms with lesser resources than big companies to provide their workforce with specialized vocational training. Larger companies required that the gymnasium should provide working life with generalist education and broad vocational training to serve their needs of international competitiveness and flexibility. Hence, the labour

market value of pre-vocational VET varies between big companies and small firms in Sweden. Since the launch of the early 1970-reforms, taking an advisory role school committee representatives for the employer organizations recurrently required quality improvements of vocational training and more workplace-based training in initial VET. But the labour market partners did not seriously question the public responsibility of initial VET. The organization and planning of VET in the gymnasium became an affair within the education sector, while labour market partners took on an outsider-position (Olofsson & Panican, 2008).

Denmark:

In the early 1970, similar to the situation in Sweden, Danish Social Democratic Party put forward reform proposals of a unified system of upper secondary education (Jørgensen, 2011). The unification strategy was supported by several arguments. One central goal was to improve social equality in the participation in higher education. By introducing a new school-based entry year in all upper secondary programs, young people would be given opportunities for a gradual and qualified choice of educational pathway. In addition, increasing the general curriculum and postponing early specialization was a way to combat early tracking and enhance flexibility and life-long learning (Jørgensen, 2011).

The Social Democratic driven proposals for unification can also be seen in connection to a profound conflict between proponents for apprenticeship and their critics (for an extended analysis of these political discussions, see Bøndergaard, 2014, pp. 49-56). A radical left-wing political climate fueled notions about apprenticeship as preserving old-fashioned power relationships between apprentices, masters and employers and legitimizing the capitalist society. Apprentices' organizations also voiced criticism against the apprenticeship system. On the other side, many skilled workers and masters defended the esteem and respect for apprenticeship, arguing for the importance to maintain the professional quality of vocational training but also occupational identities and professional pride, difficult to achieve through a school-based system only. In the national education debate proponents for equal access through a school-based system, argued that apprenticeship represented not only a tracked system and a blind alley to further education but also hinders personal development. The criticism of apprenticeship was congruent with falling esteem for this track among young people, indicated by decreasing enrolment patterns. In the late 1960s, apprenticeship is still by far the most dominating education among young people; in 1975 the distribution of students in general education respective apprenticeship is approximately on the same level, implicating that apprenticeship where no longer the dominant education in Denmark (Bøndergaard, 2014: p. 67). The reform plans for a unification of vocational education and general education can thus also be seen as a response to political criticism and falling popularity among young people.

Why did the unification strategy succeed in Sweden but not in Denmark?

By contrast to Sweden, for various reasons, the unification strategy was not implemented in Denmark. One reason is related to the different balance of political power: If the Danish Social Democratic Party had been as strong as in Sweden, it might potentially have led to a different outcome for the unification strategy. As illustrated above, social democrats in both countries shared similar preferences for a unification strategy in tone with contemporary left-wing political movements, but the social democratic party in Denmark was forced to make compromises with other political parties protecting the dual apprenticeship system (Jørgensen, 2011; Dobbins & Busemeyer, 2014). The comprehensive reform met strong opposition by the Right wing in parliament in a political alliance with the employer organizations and the skilled worker unions (Jørgensen, 2011, p. 7-8). For the Right wing, the reform represented a

treat to the exclusive standard of the gymnasium. The labour market partners feared that the unification strategy would give the government extensive control over the VET-system thereby undermining the system of occupational self-governance. While the influence of Social Democratic education policy remained strong in Sweden, Denmark saw a political turn to the right. In effect, subsequent reforms in 1976 were less radical than the Swedish education reforms. However, an important part of the explanation is also a strong institutional and cultural tradition of occupational self-governance in the Danish VET system which worked against a centralized solution where initial VET became embedded in a comprehensive education system. The different outcomes of the unification strategy comprise a relevant background for recent policy-strategies to handle the dilemma of inclusion and equal access.

2.2. *Recent attempts to manage inclusion and equal access (1990-2015)*

Sweden:

Since early 1990 until present, policy-strategies to improve the esteem of VET have shifted twice since the latest reforms (1991 and 2011) of the gymnasium, affecting the overall structure and mix between vocational education and general education. The 1991-reform extended all vocational programmes with a third mainly theoretical year, which made the students formally eligible for higher education. As the elements of general education increased at the expense of vocational training, it weakened the direct links between vocational education and the labour market. During the 2011-reform (driven by a centre-wing political alliance) the programme structure was modified again: the amount of vocational content increased at the expense of higher education preparatory courses (Persson Thunqvist & Hallqvist, 2014). The ways in which these reforms have switched back and forth between alternatively making the VET-programmes broad respective specific indicates a policy dilemma.

After the launch of the 1991 reform, subsequent policy strategies have largely been attempts to counteract unintended consequences with the academically oriented VET-system. Recognizing that many vocational students experienced difficulties to cope with the extended academic curriculum and did not reach the final exam after four years, the government upgraded the priority of social inclusive policies in initial VET. Individual programmes and experiments with small-scale apprenticeship for “school-tired students” became common solutions to keep young people in school when youth unemployment radically rose during the early 1990ies. The rationale behind these policy strategies was more guided by individualized solutions and philosophy of diversity rather than philosophy of unification and equality as in the 1971-reform (Olofsson & P. Thunqvist, 2014).

The far most contested aspect of the latest 2011-reform in a policy-perspective was the implementation of a stronger division between higher education preparatory programs respective vocational programmes. The quality of higher education preparatory programmes was expected to increase as they became more exclusively associated with higher education. By building new formal frameworks for cooperation between initial VET and the labour market at central and local levels, the quality and efficiency of the vocational tracks were expected to increase as well. This was also a way to counterbalance the academic drift and falling numbers of young people opting for a VET-programme. In addition, a new regular apprenticeship track along ordinary VET programmes was introduced by the reform and is still under progress in small scale.

The political movement during the last decade to strengthen the school - work life ties in initial VET has to some extent gravitated to a partial implementation of a Danish dual system with a stronger apprenticeship component (Persson Thunqvist, 2015). However, since the launch of the 2011-reform, the former government has been forced to make several adjustments and compromises in favor of the school-based model of VET. Particularly the weakened links between VET and higher education have been met with strong reactions within the world of education and among the left wing parties and the unions. Since 2013, all upper secondary programs formally qualify for basic eligibility for higher education and, again, the state takes a stronger hold on school-organized VET, inclusive apprenticeship.

Denmark:

By contrast to Sweden, after the defeat of the unifying strategy in the early 1970s in Denmark, subsequent education reforms in 1991 and 2000 have been characterized by a broad consensus amongst most political parties and the dominant labour market partners to update and prioritize vocational education and apprenticeship as a separate track from the gymnasium. Hence, in a policy-perspective, the unification strategy has largely been replaced by *vocational enhancement* as a strategy to retain a strong labour market value of the dual VET system (Lasonen & Young, 1998). Precisely here lies the main difference to Swedish education reforms from 1990s toward a more academic oriented VET-system. The Danish reforms have largely aimed to funneling students to skilled employment. However, likewise Sweden, the strong academic drift among young people to the gymnasium and higher education has recurrently called for policy objectives to *build bridges* from apprenticeship to higher education (Jørgensen, 2014).

These policy attempts can be seen as ways of addressing and handling inbuilt challenges in the dual VET system (e.g. weak connections to higher education). They include the establishment of a Swedish-style full time school-based vocational gymnasium (introduced in the 1980s) which provides both vocational education and support progression to higher education. By contrast to apprenticeship, it does not qualify for skilled employment. Another recurrent strategy has been to add academic content and supplementary general courses into regular vocational programmes to improve flexibility and permeability to higher education. A recent case in point is the development of hybrid VET-programmes, *eux* (launched 2010), that builds on a combination of the apprenticeship tradition and general education in the gymnasium (Jørgensen, 2015). By the latest 2015-reform, *eux* have expanded to cover 24 occupations. The new hybrid programmes are of principle interest for the future development of the dual VET system in comparison to the Swedish school-based model given its scope to provide double qualifications for both skilled employment and higher education. A basis for such comparison, however, must be grounded in an examination of the success and pitfalls of prior policy strategies to link apprenticeship to higher education.

Previous research (Jørgensen, 2014; 2015) reveals several challenges and unintended consequences associated with such policy attempts during the last decades. Some barriers to bridge apprenticeship and higher education are related to the strong connections between the dual VET-system and the labour market. The active involvement of the labour market partners in the dual VET system strongly contributes to maintain a strong standing of apprenticeship from a labour market perspective. In general, apprenticeship has also remained a respected alternative besides (not just under) general education because it offers a rather safe road for young people to skilled employment and in many cases high introduction wages (Jørgensen, 2014). Long periods of workplace learning make it difficult for students to qualify for higher education. Early establishment in the labour market and economic independency are not in themselves incitements for investments in further education. Moreover, as in

Sweden, the social background of the majority of vocational students often makes the vocational route more attractive than the academic route.

Another challenge to link apprenticeship to higher education can be seen as an unintended consequence of different policy-goals drawing in different directions. Similar as the situation in Sweden, social inclusive policy goals have tended to counteract policy goals for permeability to higher education. In both countries, ambitious goals to integrate practically all young people in post-compulsory education have contributed to increasing the numbers of young people in higher education. A trade-off is that many young people have started a vocational programme with little motivation for education. Political measures to include low performing students at risk of dropping out are partly in conflict with the policy objective of bringing VET closer to higher education. Moreover, a challenge for creating demanding vocational tracks with extended higher educational preparatory courses is that they reduce the esteem of regular apprenticeship as they draw away academic motivated students out of the ordinary programmes (Jørgensen, 2015). This could be described as a vicious circle where the image of VET as a “blind alley” to higher education and as an alternative for school tired students cash out in decreased esteem of VET for the majority of young people.

These inbuilt challenges in the dual VET-system and unintended consequences with prior policy attempts to improve social inclusion illuminate the difficulties to make apprenticeship to a natural pathway to higher education in Denmark. The current development of hybrid vocational programmes (eux) is of particular interest for future research in terms of new innovative ways that create institutional links between vocational and general education that provides “double access” (see Jørgensson, 2015) and, at best, integrate different qualifications into a coherent learning process.

3. Conclusions: Two different solutions to the dilemma and their implications

As discussed above, Denmark and Sweden have made several efforts to manage the dilemma of being inclusive and providing equal access to higher education by creating new relationships between general and vocational education. A challenge in policymaking during the last decades has been manifested in various attempts to link, bridge or unify educational traditions with different historical, social and cultural origins, while at the same time remaining or enhancing the distinct nature and quality of vocational education and training.

The reforms in early 1970-ies are of particular interest for comparative research about the notion of parity of esteem because it represents a critical juncture for VET in the Scandinavian countries. At stake was in which form vocational education could maintain its status as a legitimate and viable alternative to general education given societal demands for equal opportunities to upper- and post-secondary education. The analysis reaches the conclusion that Sweden and Denmark largely have maintained two different main solutions to manage inclusion and equal access to higher education during the last four decades. In terms of theory, the different outcomes of the unification strategy in the two neighboring countries reveal a path dependency (Dobbins & Bussemeyer, 2014) in the sense that most political parties and the labour market partners in each country have adjusted their strategies and preferences to the school-based model (Sweden) respective the dual system (Denmark). At the same time, different policy-strategies for achieving these two policy objectives can be characterized as attempts to counteract inbuilt tensions in the VET-systems including

unintended consequences with prior reforms, reflecting the intrinsic dynamic and conflicting nature of policy-making in the field of initial VET.

The Swedish social democratic driven strategy to unify VET in a comprehensive education system, pushing apprenticeship aside, was not only implemented in Sweden but also became a model for building a comprehensive education system in Finland. The main solution to the dilemma has largely been to maintain initial VET in the gymnasium. By requiring that all youngsters (16-19 years old) study general subjects, including several basic higher education preparatory courses at the same level, it is believed that the system best promotes opportunities for individuals in the society in a long term perspective. Keeping initial VET integrated in the gymnasium also makes an arsenal of pedagogical resources available to handle social inclusive goals (e.g. supporting students with low school performances). However, a trade-off is that those who did not intend to continue to follow a higher education lost their possibility to follow a less-scientific vocational education. Moreover, it is quite evident that the boundaries between different social groups in the academic and vocational tracks have not disappeared as a result of previous reforms (Persson Thunqvist & Hallqvist, 2014: 16-17). A major challenge for the Swedish style unification strategy over time has been that the strong educational rational in initial VET has weakened the direct links to the labour market. A central concern for VET-policy during the last decades has therefore been oriented to bridging the gaps between the gymnasium and the world of work.

Although the legitimacy of the apprenticeship tradition in Denmark initially was contested, the social democratic unification strategy was largely replaced by policy strategies to modernize the dual system of VET in connection to various social and labor market demands. Despite previous criticism of the dual system, trade unions and social democrats have become to recognize the benefits with a dual system and support apprenticeship. The strong ties between the dual VET-system and the labour market are a major strength, but the failure of persistent policy attempts to improve the weak connections to higher education have remained a policy-dilemma. Compared to Sweden, the early tracking of students in different education pathways in the dual system makes it difficult for young people to progress to higher education. On the other hand, the Danish VET-system has proved more successful than Sweden over time to include non-academic students in skilled employment and supported carrier developments in the labour market (Olofsson & Panican, 2010). This success, somewhat paradoxically, also comprises a barrier to higher education.

Future challenges

At present, the issue of parity of esteem is high on the political agenda in both Denmark and Sweden. Likewise other Nordic countries, initial VET in Denmark and Sweden has for several decades attracted approximately half of an age cohort (Virolainen & Stenström, 2014), but in recent years enrolment is falling rather drastically in Denmark and Sweden (but not in Finland). Simultaneously strengthen the conditions for retention and completion among all groups of students and the prestige of VET among students with strong school performance comprise a main challenge in Denmark (Jørgensson, 2014). Also in the Swedish school-based VET, there has been a shift from social inclusive politics emphasizing equality and citizenship (such as in the 1971-reform) to more individualized notions of inclusion in terms of more diversified special pedagogical solutions for individual students with difficulties to get along with schooling (Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014). This governmental policy has contributed to include practically all youngsters in post-secondary education, but also an image of VET as a “second choice”. Again, both countries try new ways to link vocational and general education to improve the esteem and to attract more ambitious students. The new hybrid programmes in

Denmark (eux) as well as recent attempts in Sweden to innovate and enhance the ties between the new apprenticeship track, regular school-based VET-programmes, and higher education, are current innovations in this direction.

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