

Harmonization of Vocational Teacher Education in EU?

The issue of recruitment criteria

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What criterion in *entrance requirement* are to be considered if or when Vocational Education and Training –Teacher Training (VET-TT) is going to be harmonized in EU? This paper addresses two issues concerning (VET-TT). The first part relates to recruitment to Swedish VET-TT. The second part is an analytical tool which can be used in comparisons of different VET-TT models. In the Copenhagen declaration it is stated that there is a desire to harmonize and later recognize VET within the union¹. We argue that one of the most crucial criteria to consider if VET-TT- is going to be harmonized are the entrance requirements to vocational teacher education. As a case study of entrance requirement the first part discusses dilemmas arising when recruiting students to vocational teacher education in Sweden. In this procedure, including governmental rules and regulations, a hidden contradiction exists between demands of formal merits and experience from working life.

To describe and compare VET-TT-models

All societies have developed systems where specific competences and skills for their work force are transferred to its youth. Those systems can take many different forms. It can be more or less regulated by the government and it can be conducted in different ways. Depending on historical circumstances and cultural traditions VET might be carried out as apprenticeship under auspices of a Master Craftsman or with the entire training located to school workshops. Furthermore there are huge variations of the content of the curriculum as well as the influences of the adjacent branches. Like a Gordian knot VET-TT are embedded into such issues and thereby comprises some dimensions that other teacher education doesn't have to consider so much. One of them is the entrance requirement. Who is considered worthy to pass the gate and enter the teacher education?

The experienced researcher knows that VET-TT models are difficult to describe, compare and analyse. Apart from structural, organisational, economical and pedagogical issues such a description has to include the inevitably difficult question regarding work-cultures and ethical conduction. Many studies emphasises that in vocational training not only skills and subject knowledge in a vocation is trained. Equally important is the invisible transfer of the prevailing work- culture with its embedded values. Between strict discipline and a high degree of freedom there is an intricate balance because too strict discipline might end up into a “learned helplessness” among the students and thereby a reduction of power to act – a competence much valued in working life. Too much freedom might end up into a *laissez-fair* mentality also causing helplessness.² This invisible cultural transfer and the balance between demand

¹ http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/copenhagen/index_en.html

² Ellström, P-E (1996]

and freedom affects all training to a high degree and in its prolongations the behaviour at work.³

Comparisons can take many forms. One important aspect, focused here, is *recruitment requirements*. What is considered to be important when someone is accepted as a future vocational teacher? Is it practical knowledge and skill or is it theoretical knowledge in a knowledge area mostly visible in the amount of academic credits? The second is the *curriculum*: How detailed is it made and who construct it? Can teacher educators apply a problem based or oriented form with high student autonomy or will they be forced into a “Chalk – and – talk” methodology? The third criterion is the *grade setting*. Who decide the criteria and how detailed it is? Does it relate to demonstrated competence close to reality or on written tests at the university? The final criteria are the amount of *practice*: How is the relation between the vocational teacher education and the initial vocational training? Is training considered to be best performed close to the environment where the trainee will be working or is it at the universities focused on theories about training?

Characteristics of the Swedish VET-TT.

Normally the Swedish vocational teacher students have between ten and fifteen year of work experience and their average age is between 35 - 40 years when entering the one and a half years long education. There is a demand for higher education equivalent to 60 Credits. This demand increases the recruitment problems because many skilled craftsmen and women lack those credits. Today there are attempts to transfer real competence into credits by use of validation.⁴

Except from a few guidelines from the state authority there is no national curriculum for teacher education in Sweden. The teachers at the universities construct the curricula and decide how time should be allocated. As mentioned, the length is one and a half year focused on pedagogical and didactic issues. There is no education or training in the specific vocations in the Swedish model since the students are supposed to already master this. During half of the courses they study more general pedagogical subjects related to teacher work together with all other categories of teachers to be while the remaining time is focused on vocational teacher work. The time allocated for education at the university and at practice schools are almost equal in lengths. During their time at the university the students are scheduled about 10 – 15 hours per week. The remaining time they work individually or in groups with tasks given by their teachers. In each course the mark setting is made in three steps. During their practise time assessment are made with support of their mentoring teacher. Mark settings are made in three levels; failed, passed and passed with distinction⁵.

Attempts to increase recruitment to VET-TT

Since a few year there are large problem to recruit students to the one and a half year long education. The Upper Secondary School where the major part of vocational education is carried out need about one thousand examined teachers every year. Today, only three hundred are examined per year in the entire country. As a result, Sweden has a growing number of vocational teachers working at the schools with no formal teacher education. Studies also

³ Ellström, P-E (1996), Johansson (1999) and Sällstrom (2002). See also Turbin, J. 2001 and Wagner, H-G. 2003 where they elaborate on transfer of VET- models between countries.

⁴ Johansson, S (2004) Forum för rekrytering av yrkeslärare. I *Vision och verksamhet*. Rekryteringsdelegationen. Stockholm. [Forum for Recruitment of VET-Teachers. In Vision and Reality. Final report from the Recruitment Authority. Stockholm. Sweden. In Swedish]

⁵ Andersson, H. (1991)

indicate that development work and status at the schools decreases in accordance with the number of non-qualified teachers. In order to facilitate recruitment a large project has been carried out where validation was used to compare competences acquired at work with the governmental demand of formal academic credits. As concluded when elaborating the dimension of education and the society's need of a skilled workforce:

*The dream of the perfect matching often fails when the reality has changed compared to the point of departure when education once was planned.*⁶

As mentioned, there is a lack of formally educated vocational teachers at Upper Secondary School. About fifty percentage or 60000 students enter one of the countries vocational programs every year. Alarmed by the figures the government launched a specific project to increase the recruitment to VET-TT. Studies showed two major problems for recruitment. One was economical reasons and the other was the demand for academic credits. As mentioned the average age of the student are between 35 – 40 years which mostly brings responsibility for family. The other obstacle was the demand for 90 credits in what by the state authority was called “relevant knowledge area” (corresponding to one and a half years of study).⁷

The recruitment procedure to VET-TT is formally carried out by the universities acceptance committees. One great problem was to judge the applicants competence in the various branches. The aim of the project was to try out models for judging the students vocational competence and transfer it to formal academic credits.⁸

Six universities participated in the project. A large part of the work was efforts to create network between the universities and the national – regional and local branches to get their acceptance and willingness to contribute to the validation. It was obvious that only the branches had the knowledge to define and judge the competences within their specific vocations. A dilemma was that in the major part of the branches no formal academic education or courses existed that could be used in the process of validation. Instead they had to construct an ideal competence profile. During the work to conduct the validation an unsuspected large guidance work was necessary to collect, systemize and verify the student's applications. It was found that the validation process comprised of three phases. The first was to gather and systematize information from the applicant. The second was the branches work to judge the vocational competence while the third phase was to transfer this judgement into academic credits, a work conducted by the universities entrance committees.

Any consensus about the transfer to academic credits could not be reached between the universities. This matter never became any problem because every university could decide the amount of credits according to the outcome from the branches itself. Furthermore there was no agreement between the branches how the validation should best be carried out. Some branches preferred models with practical tests while other recommended expert judgements. One of the outcomes of the project was that the applied validation procedure increased the number of students but was time consuming, demanded skilled staff and therefore expensive.

⁶ A thorough discussion concerning the supply and demand of the work-force is presented in Abrahamsson, K. Abrahamsson, L, Björkman, T. Ellström, P-E and Johansson, J. (2002) Utbildning, Kompetens och arbete. Studentlitteratur. Lund. [Education, Competence and Work. In Swedish]

⁷ Johansson, S (2002) Rapport angående rekrytering av karaktärsämneslärare inom Industri-och hantverkssektorn. I Rekrytering. En utmaning för en öppen högskola. Göteborg universitet.

⁸ Linblå, M. (2005) discusses in her research of the project validation from a power perspective. She claims that this project was not any attempt to change the existing system but more an adaptation.

Another finding was that socio-economical problems for the students were of crucial importance and had to be solved before they considerate entering VET-TT.

Possible analytical tool

One way to compare VET-TT models is to use concepts steaming from what is sometimes called the Code-Theory.⁹ In that theory, under the umbrella of social reconstructivism, society is viewed as comprising of a number of groups with unequal status and privileges and there is a constant struggle between them to either gain access to other group's status and privileges or to keep one's own. It is the boundaries between groups, their strengths, and their underpinning directing principles that form and maintain those boundaries that are studied. In order to describe this boundary maintenance the concepts *Classification* and *Framing* are used. Classification relate to power and Framing to control. Depending on how strong or weak the classification and framing are, different *Code modalities* develop.

A collection code exists when the boundaries are strong, upheld by some type of power and strictly controlled. For example, in Sweden only an accredit electrician has permission to work with electrical installations. The power emanates from a government authority and is controlled by the branch organisation. This situation gives this group a strong position during negotiations resulting in comparatively high status and salary. The principle that public safety is important directs this strong collection code.

An integrated code exists when groups are mixed and the actors have a high degree of freedom. For example, in a situation where different categories of students are mixed and given a common task with a high degree of freedom to self decide how and when this task should be solved. As yet an example: Viewing the present movement at work – including teacher work – with its increasing team-work organisation with a high degree of freedom, it is an increasingly integrated code modality. The underpinning principle is that a human being is most effective if they work as a team who can decide how to organize daily work. It has to be noted that the code-modality in a comparison says nothing about what is better or worse, neither is any point of equilibrium or point of zero. It has to be viewed as concepts used in comparisons either between different models or comparisons made at the same place over a time span.

Analysis guided by the Code Theory.

First it can be noted that the recruitment criteria to vocational teacher education differs from country to country. In Sweden the practical knowledge and skill is considered to be of outmost importance. Although the above described demand for formal academic merits this is partly bypassed by the validation system. If the different recruitment criteria are viewed as a classification procedure then the Swedish system can be judged to be governed by an integrated code modality. The classification or selection principle of the student relies on *both* the different branches and the university. It can be concluded that the stronger the beliefs in academic education the more collection code modality will develop because the academic system will bar others from entering the education. The Swedish model allows the teacher educators to construct the curriculum themselves, not to mention to decide the training process. Furthermore, there is a deliberate constructed mixture made between practise and theory in the training process. As a summary, when taking the recruitment, curriculum, mark

⁹ For a thorough description of the analytical concepts see Bernstein, Basil (1990 and 1987) *Class , Codes and Control*.

setting and practice as a whole, a picture emerges where the Swedish model can be said to be governed by an integrated code modality.

Concluding remarks and emerging questions

It is obvious that when VET-TT needs to recruit students the tension between two cultures emerges. To use Bernstein's concept: There is a strong collection code modality between the university and working life where the boundaries between them are upheld by the bar put up by the entrance requirement. By that bar there develops a contradiction between the need for recruiting new students to VET-TT and the traditional regulations and rules that govern the academic world. Universities are a meritocracy culture where formal education in specific knowledge areas has a high value. In the world of work the value relies on real competencies proven in the various vocations specific activity areas. Those different systems create the dilemmas that arise specifically when students to VET-TT are recruited.

How different are the boundaries between the universities and working life in the different countries in EU? What happens if some countries have an authorised VET-TT giving the teachers high autonomy and other not? Will a country or a branch where the training is carried out by teachers with an academic education consider other models where the teachers have no teacher education as equivalent? We believe that such questions have to be discussed and that the entrance requirement to VET-TT is a good starting point.

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