

**Håkon HØST & Svein MICHELSEN**

(NIFU Nordic Institute for Studies on Innovation, Research and Education & University of Bergen, Norway)

**The Norwegian vocational college: heterogenous aggregate of intermediate educations, or a parallel pillar to higher academic education?**

Online unter:

[https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe39/host\\_michelsen\\_bwpat39.pdf](https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe39/host_michelsen_bwpat39.pdf)

seit 25.05.2021

in

***bwpat*** Ausgabe Nr. 39 | Dezember 2020

**Berufliche Bildung in Europa – 20 Jahre nach Lissabon und am Ende von ET 2020.**

**Entwicklungen und Herausforderungen zwischen supranationalen Strategien und nationalen Traditionen.**

Hrsg. v. **Karin Büchter, Karl Wilbers, Hubert Ertl, Dietmar Frommberger & Franz Gramlinger**

[www.bwpat.de](http://www.bwpat.de) | ISSN 1618-8543 | ***bwpat*** 2001–2021

***bwpat***

[www.bwpat.de](http://www.bwpat.de)



Herausgeber von ***bwpat*** : Karin Büchter, Franz Gramlinger, H.-Hugo Kremer, Nicole Naeve-Stoß, Karl Wilbers & Lars Windelband

**Berufs- und Wirtschaftspädagogik - online**

# HÅKON HØST & SVEIN MICHELSEN

(Nordic Institute for Studies on Innovation, Research and Education, Oslo & University of Bergen, Norway)

---

## The Norwegian vocational college: heterogenous aggregate of intermediate educations, or a parallel pillar to higher academic education?

---

### Abstract

For long the Norwegian vocational college<sup>1</sup> was placed in the periphery of general system formation policies in education and remained a residual in technical education, based on praxis values and local support from industry. In 2003 the vocational college was extended to cover a wide range of institutions and programs and defined as a separate level in the educational structure. Recently, through the turn towards labour market relevance in education, the vocational colleges have experienced considerable political attention as well as increased public financing. Under their new name, higher vocational education, the colleges are now intended to provide employees without higher, academic education, with a stronger foothold in the labour market. Previous policy decisions on limiting the vocational college to level 5 in the national qualification framework are now being reconsidered. Organizational rationalization processes have furthermore strengthened the capabilities of the schools to engage in higher education programs. These developments may provide a new basis for the development of a practical higher educational pillar parallel to academic higher educational.).

**Keywords:** VET, vocational college, higher vocational education, level 5

### Introduction

We see it as essential that the formation of the vocational colleges is studied in relation to the total structuring of the educational system. During the last 50 years the Norwegian education system has changed from a relatively loose configuration of institutions regulated separately or according to category, into a more integrated field structured by comprehensively organized levels rather than disparate ladders. The transformation and consolidation of upper secondary and higher education as two comprehensive levels have taken place through a series of legal adjustments, where regulations governing individual types of institutions have been integrated into an encompassing framework step by step. The Norwegian vocational colleges (presently level 5 in the national qualification framework) have for the most part remained at the outskirts of these general system formation policies. For long it remained a residual in the education system, based on praxis values and local support from industry. We can trace a clear line from the initial efforts to develop regulations and institutions for the practical-professional technician

---

<sup>1</sup> In Norwegian the name is Fagskole.

and the establishment of the technical vocational college in 1968, to current efforts to define a new educational level and new space for the vocational colleges in the educational system. But in political terms, the vocational colleges have moved from the periphery to the centre of political attention.

The aim of this article is to describe and understand the development and characteristics of the Norwegian vocational colleges. The historical development has been divided into three different phases. The first phase includes the initial period leading up to the introduction of the law on technical vocational colleges in 1968 to the turn of the millennium. It was a period where the technical vocational colleges were mainly influenced by local working life actor constellations and contexts, more or less unaffected by ongoing national level processes of institutionalizing unitary educational levels. The second phase starts with the formation of a new and broader vocational college system through the introduction of a law on vocational colleges in 2003, which included all intermediary educational institutions located in the grey zone between higher and upper secondary level. However, the reform left the vocational college in an ambiguous position. The third phase includes the period after 2016 and up to 2021, where the vocational college and their praxis profile have experienced unprecedented political attention. For the first time they have been provided with a strong role in the educational policy, and relations to the educational system has been put on the political agenda. The attention given to VET in general and the vocational college system in particular, in Norway, can also be understood as inspired by the strong promotion of VET and lifelong learning by the EU the last decades.

Our research questions are: What characterizes the development of the Norwegian vocational college system, when it comes to recruitment, position in the overall educational system, governance, and relations to the labour market? To what extent are central features of the technical vocational colleges being reproduced in the new and broader system of vocational colleges?

## Data

Research done on the history and development of the vocational college field in Norway is scarce. In the article the part on the technical vocational college is mainly based on investigations at the University of Bergen on the Norwegian skilled worker, the Norwegian VET system, technical schools and technical vocational education and the technical profession in the 1980ies and 1990ies (Sakslind 1991, 1993, Halvorsen 1993, Michelsen 1995, Korsnes 1996). The parts discussing the establishment of a broader vocational college system, and the new political focus, are based on several investigations conducted at Nordic Institute for Studies on Innovation, Research and Education in the period of 2016-2020 (Høst and Tømte 2016, Høst 1997a, Høst 1997b, Høst et al. 2018, Høst et al. 2019, Skålholt et al. 2020). We have also based the article on public documents and statistics on the number of students and schools.

## **Phase 1: Education for the practical professional technician**

### **Historical background**

Since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the formation and organization of the lower technical schools in Norway had been a difficult issue. Educational institutions had been formed for the elites and for the rural population, but technical education was lagging behind (Seip 1981). A number of schools were eventually formed on the basis of local interest constellations and private initiatives. They evolved as parts of an emerging parallel technical system with specific recruitment traditions and practice orientations that set them apart from classical education (Halvorsen 1993). The different schools harboured different aims and were related in different ways to each other and to local working life constellations. They were therefore often characterized as heterogeneous and incoherent. As such they reflected specific features of the Norwegian industrialization process, which was patchy, hesitant and local in character (Hodne and Honningdal Grytten 2000). On the one hand they were related to and prepared for specific functional areas and tasks in the firm as technicians. On the other hand, these schools were also perceived as instruments for social mobility and careers in general (Sakslind 1991). The first consideration pulled these schools towards the needs of the firm, while the second paved the way for the construction of relations between different school types and levels in the technical education system where the lower school were considered as preparatory for higher schools. The formation of The Norwegian College of Advanced Technology (NTH) in 1910 paved the way for national hierarchical systematization policies and an emerging divide between two core groups and two educational traditions; practice-based technicians and theoretically schooled civil engineers, a divide that could not easily be mediated through individual careers in the educational system. In working life these distinctions were much more porous, and educational background as a technician provided possibilities for entering jobs with engineering responsibilities, where becoming an engineer was achievable on the basis of solid work-based practice (Halvorsen 1993).

In the post war II period, the educational system was transformed fundamentally. We can connect these reforms to the upper secondary comprehensive school reform, the higher education reform and the formation of the technical vocational college. The state intervened with organization and national regulations. The main question was how to meet the demand for more education among the large cohorts of young people. In this process notions of a separate technical educational system gradually evaporated. A new centralized, state governed educational system based on the logic of comprehensive levels and standards emerged. The old orientations towards local and regional working life needs were weakened as technical education increasingly was seen from a centralized educational system perspective. In the technical field this meant the systematic reduction of practice requirements, and the building of higher engineering education on general education and the gymnasium. The engineering schools were elevated into the new higher education space and academized.

## **The technical vocational college**

The technical vocational college act from 1968 can be regarded as a countermove designed for the continuation of the old praxis tradition in engineering. The technical vocational college was an alternative for those which had gone directly into the labour market after finishing basic education and eventually wanted to continue educational after some years of working life experience. These schools were also an alternative to firms which wanted to recruit lower technical personnel based on practical experience on the shop floor.

In administrative terms the technical vocational college was allocated to the upper secondary level, even if it was acknowledged that the education held a higher level. It was designed as a two-year education recruiting students from primary and lower secondary school. A minimum of two years of practical experience from technical work, or a trade- or journeyman's certificate were formal requirements for admission (Sakslind 1993). The reform can also be seen as a necessary follow up reform caused by the academization of the engineering schools. Until the 1960ies these schools had admitted a combination of students with lower upper secondary education and solid practical experience as well as students with an educational background from general upper secondary education). But from 1970 and onwards upper secondary general education was formalized as an obligatory admission requirement. Practical experience was no longer asked for, and the duration of the education was extended from two to three years. This created space for a new consolidated technician category in the space located between the engineers and the civil engineers on the one hand and the industrial worker on the other. Forecasts also provided estimates for a considerable growth potential for such a category in the industrial firm as a consequence of rationalization and automation processes in industry. This would create a demand for a more practical oriented technician and middle manager, who could serve as a link between planning and production (Halvorsen 1993). The technical vocational colleges and the apprentice system were only loosely connected. The Norwegian skilled industrial worker was heterogeneous as a qualification category (Korsnes 1996). The minority of skilled workers in industry in the 1960ies and 70ies were certified, many had not served as apprentices but earned their status through a combination of VET schooling and on the job training (OJT). Admission requirements to the technical vocational college reflected this heterogeneity. The technical vocational college primary orientation was towards industry, and formal connections to master artisan training and certification (Meisterlehre) were not developed.

## **The characteristics of the technical vocational college**

The technical vocational college provided new opportunities for local working life actors. The threshold for establishing a vocational college was low, and the number of schools increased considerably. After ten years, in 1978, 30 technical colleges had been established, and in 1992 the number had increased to 62 (Sakslind 1993). The schools were spread out through the country, most of them were small, on average the schools had 30-40 students. Few technical colleges had separate campuses. Mostly they were located together with upper secondary schools, maritime schools or engineering schools. Program profiles were in general developed by local constellations of working life actors and educationalists rather than national policies

and standards. Many suffered from problems of attrition and temporary lapses in student demand. The formal intake capacity of the technical vocational college was on a similar level as the engineering schools, but in practice the number of students registered was merely 50-60 percent of the anticipated demand, and the average number of candidates in 1973-1986 was around 1750 annually (ibid.).

Even if the admission requirements for the technical vocational colleges were lower secondary school exam combined with two years of practical experience or a trade- or journeyman's certificate, the length of practice in the firm could vary; from prolonged experience in technical positions to very little or none at all (ibid.) Furthermore, a background from upper secondary general education could compensate for weak practical experience. Hence, the technical vocational college remained a mix of further education for skilled workers and initial vocational education for those with little or no experience. The mix of student qualifications and the character of local admission practices clearly affected the quality and profile of local school programs. Admission practices remained unclear and varied, compared to the more homogeneous admission requirements which defined upper secondary and higher education programs. In practice, the shape and quality of vocational college programs in the various regions could gravitate in different directions. With a majority of students who had little practical experience and low or inconsistent support from local industry, programs and practices might recede to levels similar to upper secondary vocational education. In programs where classes comprised students with strong work experience in technical positions and a trade- or journeyman's certificate, as well as strong and continued support from local firms and firm networks, the programs could equal or even surpass the quality of similar programs in engineering (Sakslind 1993). These conditions produced various types of local "grey zones" between the engineers and the technician category in the technical field, where the absolvents might return to technical positions, lower management or to skilled worker positions in the firm.

The relations between the technical vocational college and higher education were weak. While higher education was managed by the state, the technical vocational college were managed by the county municipalities in conjunction with upper secondary education. The technical vocational colleges were formally recognized as "higher" than upper secondary education, but not as high as higher education. They were constructed on the basis of the practical tradition in engineering and the practical needs of the firm. The technical vocational college type did not "fit" with the general development in the educational system, which made the vocational college into a contested institution, fraught with ambivalence and contradictory demands. During the 1980ies attempts were made to cleanse the vocational college of its praxeological components and admission requirements. It was suggested that the vocational college should be elevated by strengthening the admission requirements in general subjects, for instance pre-courses in mathematics (Sakslind 1993). These wishes were, however, blocked by a coalition of representatives from the vocational and technical schools and working life organizations. These interests also tried to forge a new connection to the growing apprentice system apprentice system by defining the vocational college as the higher end of the skilled worker education and training rather than the lower end of the engineering hierarchy.

Several initiatives were taken at the national level to stimulate a debate to clarify the position of the vocational college in the education system. Following a resolution in the Parliament, a commission was set up to look closer into the question of how to position the technical vocational college in the overall education system.<sup>2</sup> The commission presented its report in 1988, in which suggested the formation of a national council responsible for accreditation and quality control of programs.<sup>3</sup> Quite illustrating for the lack of continuous political engagement in the technical vocational college was that the Parliament never asked for this report to discuss it (Sakslind 1993).

Defending the practical profile of the technical vocational college did not mean the working life organizations and actors were satisfied with the situation. In 1992 a conference on the technical vocational college was arranged, where representatives from the schools, the interest organizations for engineers and technicians and branch organizations together made a resolution expressing a rather critical view on the development (Sakslind 1993):

- The marketing of the schools was too weak
- The county municipalities role as owners was too weak
- Linkages to the local labour markets were not good enough
- The Ministry shows little interest in governing the technical colleges
- Schools were often established as employment measures
- The growth of schools, subjects and education offered were out of control, and the quality of the education insufficient
- Students from upper secondary school enter technical vocational college without practical experience to an alarming extent

## **Phase 2: A new and broader vocational college system**

At the turn of the millennium politicians again turned their interest towards the vocational college question. Structural rationalization processes at upper secondary and higher education level had provided space for new solutions to the vocational college problem. The architecture of the new upper secondary level recombined school-based and firm-based training in a fixed, statutory sequence consisting of 2 years of education in school followed by 2 years of training in the firm as an apprentice, often called the 2+2 model. The reform provided space for firm-based apprentice training in all VET tracks, and traditional school-based VET programs were reorganized according to this template. Quantitatively this contributed to a considerable increase in the number of apprenticeships and skilled worker certifications (Michelsen and Høst 2018).

In higher education several consecutive reform waves had led towards a system for mass higher education, where the expansion of universities has been supplemented by the inclusion of other institutions and programs, systematically increasing the range of qualifications covered by the system. Norwegian higher education was developing towards a unitary system under one

---

<sup>2</sup> Innst. S. nr. 279 1984-85

<sup>3</sup> Innstilling om teknisk fagskole. Arbeidsgruppen til å vurdere struktur i teknisk fagskole. RVI, mars 1988

common law for higher education. These reforms contributed to a structural rationalization and academization of the university college sector, which historically was formed around professional educations supplying the regional labour markets (Kyvik 2009). The comprehensive system characteristics of Norwegian higher education provided strong pull towards mimetic processes, where standardization has been strongly monitored by regulatory and professional institutions. Through several merger waves higher education institutions have been fundamentally changed into large bureaucratic institutions led by stronger hierarchies (Bleiklie, Enders and Lepori 2017). Through these processes technical programs have been dis-embedded from their prior specialized institutional moorings. Bachelor and master programs in the technical field have developed under higher education institutional autonomy, producing conditions for more distance to employer preferences and orientations. In tandem, structural rationalization processes in upper secondary education and higher education has opened new space for the growth of the vocational college level.

This time the vocational college debate circled around two alternatives, to round up all vocational institutions that had not been allocated to upper secondary or higher education levels into a new level in the educational structure regulated by one law, or to organize this heterogenous aggregate of intermediate educations into a market-based system of continuing and further educations, without any significant public regulation (Høst and Tømte 2016). In 2003 Parliament concluded on the desirability of a new, comprehensive vocational college law for all intermediary institutions located in the grey zone between higher and upper secondary level. The vocational college level could now be built on the foundations of a comprehensive system of general and vocational upper secondary education tracks, which also integrated apprentice training.

The new vocational college level came to include a wide range of institutions and programs, like bible schools, astrology schools, art schools, health education programs, IT education, accounting, maritime schools, and pilot schools. The old two- year standard length of vocational college programs were abandoned allowing for the addition of one-year-programs and even half-year educations were included. The new vocational college system may quite roughly be divided into five main fields, which included more than 90 percent of the students (Høst and Tømte 2016):

- The technical vocational college
- The maritime schools
- Health care educations
- Economic and administrative educations
- Creative educations

The new vocational college system reproduced the ambiguity of the technical vocational college in representing both further educations and basic educations. As the VET tracks did not provide direct access to higher education, the vocational college became an option for applicants with a skilled worker certificate and ambitions for further education and careers in the field. For the most part the technical vocational college and the maritime schools, both with a long tradition, recruited students with a skilled worker certificate and practical work experience. VET



programs in the numerically strong welfare sector have assumed increasing importance, and further education programs for skilled workers have been formed in the vocational colleges.

However, the vocational colleges also recruit students from general upper secondary education, most of them without any relevant experience from the labour market. The economic-administrative and the creative programs are directed towards students with a general education certificate who do not want to continue to academic higher education. These educations were directed towards parts of the service sector where apprentice training had not succeeded in establishing a strong foothold. In this field vocational college education may thus be seen as basic education, competing with apprenticeships from upper secondary level. The different levels of the educations in the vocational college system are also reflected by the various length of the programs. The technical, maritime, and creative programs are mainly designed as two-year educations, while health and social care, and economic-administrative programs are one-year- or half-year-educations.

In principle, the extended space provided for the vocational training college opened-up for new growth prospects. But the new and reconstructed apprenticeship-based upper secondary VET tracks did not make vocational college education a natural choice for further education. Instead, it has become more and more common for VET students to add a year of general subjects to gain admission to university colleges and universities (Nyen et al. 2013). The result has been a growing share of youth opting for higher education and a new wave of student expansion of universities and university colleges, while the vocational colleges remained in the shadow of youth attention. In 2015 higher education reached 280 0000 students, while the vocational college educations in comparison had managed a mere 15 000 students.<sup>4</sup>

Consolidation and standardization processes have also affected relations between higher education and the vocational colleges. In 2003 the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), a state agency was formed as a key actor in higher education and vocational college education quality accreditation, thus also watching the borders between these levels. Attempts to develop more advanced vocational colleges by constructing hybrid education solutions has been regarded as dilution of quality and checked.<sup>5</sup> For vocational college educations to develop further the only way was strengthening the academic content and weakening the practical elements to gain accreditation as a university college education. In practical terms, the emerging vocational college system was caught between the internal dynamics of established levels and fields.

### **Slow processes and lack of internal dynamics**

Similar impediments also affected internal dynamics in the sector. In order to establish more adequate conditions for internal coordination and collaboration the Ministry of education initiated the establishment of a national vocational college council in 2010. At the time the

---

<sup>4</sup> DBH, the national DataBase for Higher education statistics in Norway.

<sup>5</sup> Se f.eks. Teknisk fagskoleutdanning i Vestfold. Revidering og godkjenning for dekksoffiser og maskinoffiser. NOKUT. April 2015.

Vedtak om avslag på søknad om akkreditering av bachelorstudium i høyere yrkesfaglig utdanning. NOKUT. August 2018.

institutionalization of a new council consisting of interest-based actors had become rare, as the state moved on towards the development of specialized state agencies as instruments for the governance of the educational sector rather than permanent councils (Hudson 2007). The national vocational college council consisted of a mix of heavy political representation from the employer and employee organizations, and representatives from the most important of the vocational college fields. In some of these fields separate professional councils were also established, developing an advisory role towards the schools. The councils were not supplied with a dedicated administration which could contribute to policy advisory development and case processing. Instead, the Ministry took on responsibility for the organization of the administration, a task which eventually is delegated to a new state agency.<sup>6</sup>

The central task for the national vocational college council was to coordinate different interests and educational fields. No single group commanded a majority in the council, and the council operated on the basis of strong norms of consensus formation. In such a structure it is extremely hard to advance partial solutions beneficial for some of the institutions rather than others. This means some key questions did not even gain access to the table. By avoiding adversarial decisions in vital questions, however, the council was not able to shape policy options for the ministry, which in turn lost interest in the council (Høst and Tømte 2016).

The vocational college issue was also constrained by the national discussion on the national qualification framework (Almerud 2020). Vocational college education was placed at level 5 in the framework, while for instance a two-year program in the university college was placed at level 6. Furthermore, vocational college students were not awarded ICTS-points similar to students in university colleges and universities, which made it difficult for vocational college students to apply for university studies.

The Master artisan certification institution has decided to remain an institution recognized by the working life organizations, and do not intend to seek recognition in the education system. To avoid interventions from the educational authorities, the master artisan certification institution does not want to establish any formal relations to the vocational college system (Høst 2017).

### **Relations to the labour market**

The vocational colleges comprise a heterogenous group of programs, where relations between programs and positions in the labour market and in working life vary significantly. The technical vocational colleges have not managed to strengthen their position in the labour market much since the 1970ies or 80ies. For a skilled worker, the completion of a vocational college program in most cases results in career development and higher positions in the firm, but this is an individual matter, and does not reflect positions or titles for this group in the industry. In some areas of the technical sector clear links between education and positions in the firm have emerged. Electricians with an exam from vocational college are certified as installers, and the maritime schools educated skilled workers from maritime trades are certified as ship officers (Høst 2016). Vocational college in health and social care, the most rapid growing education,

---

<sup>6</sup> Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education (DIKU)

offers skilled worker specialization, but the care workers' positions in the hierarchical structure as assistants to the registered nurses is not changed (Høst 2017, Skålholt et al. 2020). In this particular field of work, the division of labour between the different occupations is structured by the higher education professions, primarily the registered nurses, and nothing less than a bachelor degree from higher education is recognized as a basis for advancement. This has contributed to the reproduction of a strong pattern where young people attending health care education at upper secondary level often add an extra year of general subjects in order to access higher education, instead of applying for a vocational college program (Nyen mfl. 2013). Through such processes vocational college education has been dominated by adult health care workers with an ambition to specialize, not to advance (Høst 2017). A new phenomenon is that also skilled workers in the technical field bypass the technical vocational programs and opt for a bachelor's degree instead.

Vocational college education also comprises a large group of basic educations directed towards the service sector. They attract young people trying to get a foothold or strengthening their position in the more liberalized part of the labour market entrance. You also find vocational college educations training the student to become firefighters, train drivers or pilots, basic vocational educations seen as more advanced than initial VET. These educations also recruit students from general upper secondary education.

### **Phase 3: The turn towards labour market relevance**

In the last few years strong focus, which we call “the labour market turn”, have evolved in public policies and practices. This turn eclipses a focus on new relations between the employers and education institutions and more efficient relations between the different levels in the educational system and. In the EU, increased permeability between VET and general education, and lifelong learning has evolved into a major focus in European education and training policies and the objectives of and the European Qualification Framework (EQF). In Norway a new set of interrelated goals and policies for labour market fit, increased practice orientation, and increased permeability between the world of work and the world of education have emerged. The trend towards labour market relevance have also exposed higher education institutions to a more diverse set of pressures, towards regionalization and the logic of vocationalization, towards increased practice orientation, practice oriented bachelor and master programs and towards employer influence. In that process the vocational college has gradually received more political attention as a potential reform lever for increased labour market relevance in the educational system.

Central actors from the vocational college system have succeeded in gaining support from a large majority in the Parliament to the objective of raising the status of the vocational colleges. Key questions concerning the recognition of the vocational college education have suddenly been brought to the forefront of education policy. In 2017 Parliament passed a resolution stating that the proper name for the vocational colleges was higher vocational education. Although the implications are not obvious, it clearly indicates that the vocational college sector should be developed from a distinct level into some kind of parallel pillar to higher academic education.

This has challenged the neat picture of national standardization and an educational system structure by clear hierarchical levels.

Vocational college education used to be limited to a maximum length of two years, but now this can be dispensed with. New regulations have allowed for prolonging the duration of vocational college programs to three years if required from working life actors. As regional actors explore alternatives and outcomes under conditions of considerable informational and regulatory uncertainty, local schemes for the upgrading and expansion of vocational programs transcending established regulatory boundaries have been formed. The Ministry of education has recently started to investigate possible ways of changing the national qualifications framework, to make it possible to raise some of the vocational college educations from level 5 to level 6 (Almerud mfl. 2020). One of the main alternatives presently discussed is the acceptance of advanced practice-based knowledge as a criterium in line with research-based knowledge for level 6. If accepted, this will represent a sharp change of direction in policies for the national qualifications framework, which has been based on definitions developed by representatives from higher academic education from level 6 and further.

### **Structural rationalization**

The vocational college ecology is also changing in organizational terms. They have evolved into larger institutions due to pervasive rationalization processes. A number of colleges have merged, while others have been shut down. While the number of vocational colleges had reached over a 100 in 2016, this has been reduced to 65 in 2020<sup>7</sup>. Even if vocational colleges still are very small compared to most universities and university colleges, there has been a sharp increase in the number of students in a few, dominating vocational colleges. Six public and six private vocational colleges today together represents around 75 percent of all students in the vocational college sector.<sup>8</sup>

The drivers propelling structural rationalization are many and diverse. The vocational colleges have been affected by administrative reforms at the county level. As the number of counties in Norway has been reduced from 19 to 11, each new county has merged its vocational colleges into one college. Among the significant number of private vocational colleges, representing about 50 percent of the vocational colleges, a few schools are now expanding fast, partly through mergers or takeovers, partly through specializing in the fast-growing segment of online education. The private colleges, some of them representing the voluntary sector, some of them commercial, are eligible for and can compete for public funding in the same way as public vocational colleges. Mainly, however, they are based on student fees.

Furthermore, new quality regulations and procedures have made the situation demanding for the smaller vocational colleges with scant administrative capacity. Larger colleges, if satisfying certain criteria, can also be awarded the right to accredit new programs in defined areas on their own. The combination of these elements seems to permeate the vocational college organiza-

---

<sup>7</sup> DBH, the national DataBase for Higher education statistics in Norway.

<sup>8</sup> DBH, the national DataBase for Higher education statistics in Norway.

tional field and has probably created a strong pull towards mergers and structural rationalization processes.

### **Strong growth in funding and students**

The Vocational colleges are for the first time awarded an important role in education policies. The mission of the vocational colleges is to contribute to further education for young adults with an exam from upper secondary education in general and VET in particular, to make them more qualified to meet upcoming restructuring demands caused by digitalization and automation in many industries. They are expected to be a tool in policies for lifelong learning and for the reduction of the number of unemployed outsiders. In this matter the vocational colleges are being highlighted and described as more flexible and adaptable than the universities and university colleges.

Political interests have been followed by an increase in funding and students. The vocational colleges for the first time in history in 2019 experienced a larger increase in the number of publicly funded study places than universities and university colleges. Before and during the Covid-19-crisis the state has also allocated a significant amount of money to the vocational colleges for the provision of flexible and short courses directed towards unemployed in order to facilitate reentry into the labour market or towards employees in need of further education.

The number of vocational college students has increased by more than 40 percent from 2018 to 2020. The fact that there is also a significant increase in studies financed through student fees tells us that the growth is not just an effect of extraordinary state funding the last two years<sup>9</sup>. The growth in the number of students is strongest in new areas like health and social care, and IT, not in the traditional parts of the technical colleges, which still dominate the rhetoric around the vocational college. The same pattern could be seen when the apprenticeship system was universalized in 1994, where the large increase in numbers took place in the new areas and the new trades, not in the traditional core represented by the artisan and technical trades.

### **Conclusions**

The technical vocational college from 1968 may be seen as an effort to provide space for the development and maintenance of the practical-professional technician in an age dominated by system level building, the expansion of general education and academization. The technical vocational college was formed by local industry and working life interests rather than central state educational policies and did not develop a clear profile in the national educational system.

The new law in 2003 meant the generalization of the vocational college, which no longer was limited to the technical sector. In principle, the vocational college level now was extended to include any education above the upper secondary level which is not accredited as higher

---

<sup>9</sup> DBH, the national DataBase for Higher education statistics in Norway.

academic education. Although national in scope, the vocational colleges are intended to cater for local labour market needs.

Student growth in the vocational colleges has primarily taken place in the new fields after 2003, not in the traditional technical field. This has a clear parallel to similar developments in the apprenticeship system when it was universalized and extended to comprise all sectors of working life in 1994. The vocational colleges have evolved into larger institutions due to pervasive rationalization processes, and we can note a sharp increase in the number of students in a few, dominating colleges. Still, there is much to suggest that the new vocational college has produced a similar kind of heterogeneity that previously defined the technical vocational college, but in a slightly different form. Vocational college education varies considerably between different fields. It can take the form of basic education or further education, and the length and level of programs as well as their relations to the labour market varies quite a lot.

Through the labour market turn, new priority has been given to lifelong learning and openness between the different parts of the educational system, in particular towards increased permeability between VET and general education. In that process, the vocational colleges have quite suddenly experienced more political attention. With broad support from Parliament, the educational authorities have raised the ambitions for this school type. Under its new official name, the higher vocational education, the vocational colleges have been allocated more resources and more publicly financed student places in 2019 and 2020. Today the vocational colleges are intended to provide employees without higher, academic education a stronger foothold in the labour market, strengthen lifelong learning and contribute to firm competitiveness.

Institutionalization of the vocational college field has been a slow process. The formation of a separate council for these colleges was intended to further internal sector dynamics. But the council has operated on the basis of strong norms of consensus formation avoiding decisions in vital questions. Thus, the council was for a long time not able to provide direction and policy advice on critical issues. The development of the vocational colleges has been constrained by the requirements of the state agency for educational quality, NOKUT. New and extensive regulations have also made it necessary to increase administrative capacity, which in turn has contributed to structural rationalization in the organization of the vocational college field.

What the new definition of the vocational colleges as higher vocational education actually implies is still vague. Central actors representing the vocational colleges have criticized the strong limitations imposed on this school type, as they have not been allowed to develop programs with a duration longer than two years, and not above level 5 in the national qualification framework. So far efforts to move beyond these constraints have been checked by NOKUT. National educational authorities are reconsidering this, opening for local experiments and exceptions. This may provide a new basis for the development of a practical higher educational pillar parallel to academic higher educational.

A closer integration of the vocational college educations in the overall educational system is fraught with ambiguities. Structural rationalization and standardization may also imply less flexibility to adjust to local conditions, which have been one of the core strengths of the vocational colleges. Neither is it obvious that these reforms will check the academic drift. Higher

education institutions may also develop strategies integrating downwards in the higher education space blurring older regulatory boundaries between institutional types and levels.

## References

- Almerud, M., Ricksten, M., Jallow, A. B., Pettersson, I., and Melin, G. (2020). *Utredning om mulig parallell struktur i nasjonalt kvalifikasjonsrammeverk for livslang læring*. Stockholm: Technopolis.
- Bleiklie, I., Enders, J., and Lepori, B. (eds.) (2017). *Managing Universities: Policy and Organizational Change in a Western European Comparative Perspective*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hodne, F., and Honningdal Grytten, O. (2000). *Norsk økonomi i det 19. århundret*. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.
- Hudson, C. (2007). Governing the Governance of Education: the state strikes back? *European Educational Research Journal*, 6(3), 266-82.
- Høst, H., and Tømte, C. (2016). *Styring og styrking av en fragmentert sektor. Evaluering av Nasjonalt fagskole råd*. Oslo: Nordic Institute for Studies on Innovation, Research and Education.
- Høst, H. (2017). *Råd og sekretariat i fagskole sektoren*. Oslo: Nordic Institute for Studies on Innovation, Research and Education.
- Høst, H. (2017). «Eget behov for faglig fordykning». *Om fagskole utdanning i helse og sosial*. Oslo: Nordic Institute for Studies on Innovation, Research and Education.
- Høst, H., Lyby, L., and Schwach, V. (2019). *Fagskoleutdanningens kunnskapsbase*. Oslo: Nordic Institute for Studies on Innovation, Research and Education. Online: <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/2631167> (20.02.2021).
- Høst, H., Skjelbred, S.-E., and Røsdal, T. (2018). *Hvordan er gjennomføringen i fagskoleutdanningene? En undersøkelse av særtrekk ved helsefag, kreative fag og tekniske fag*. Oslo: Nordic Institute for Studies on Innovation, Research and Education. Online: <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/2562817> (20.02.2021).
- Korsnes, O. (1990): *On the Social Construction of the Skilled Industrial Worker*. AHS Series B 1990-4. University of Bergen.
- Kyvik, S. (2008). *The Dynamics of Change in Higher Education. Expansion and Contraction in an Organisational Field*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Michelsen, S., and Høst, H. (2018). Norwegian VET and the ascent and decline of social democracy 1945-2015. Chapter 8, 146-171, in Michelsen, S., and M.-L. Stenström (eds): *Vocational Education in the Nordic Countries: The Historical Evolution*. (252). London and New York: Routledge.

Nyen, T., Skålholt, A., and Tønder, A. H. (2013). Overgangen fra fagopplæring til arbeidsmarked og videre utdanning. In Høst, H. (ed.). *Forskning på kvalitet i fag- og yrkesopplæringen*. Oslo: Nordic Institute for Studies on Innovation, Research and Education.

Sakslind, R. (1998). *Danning og Yrkesdanning. Utdanningssystem og nasjonale moderniseringsprosjekter*. Oslo: NFR KULTs skriftserie nr. 103.

Sakslind, R. (1993). *Fagskolen og den praktisk-profesjonelle tekniker. Om sosial konstruksjon av en kvalifikasjonstype i den norske kontekst*. SEFOS/AHS. Universitetet i Bergen.

Seip, J. A. (1981). *Utsikt over norsk historie 2*. Oslo: Haugen bok.

Skålholt, A., Madsen, A., and Skjelbred, S.-E. (2020). *Fagskole utdannedes karriereveier: Funn fra en undersøkelse av personer uteksaminert med fagskole utdanning i 2017 og 2018*. Oslo: Nordic Institute for Studies on Innovation, Research and Education. Online: <https://hdl.handle.net/11250/2655896> (10.03.2021).

## Citation of this article

---

Høst, H./ Michelsen, S. (2021): The Norwegian vocational college: heterogenous aggregate of intermediate educations, or a parallel pillar to higher academic education. In: *bwp@ Berufs- und Wirtschaftspädagogik* – online, issue 39, 1-15. Online: [https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe39/host\\_michelsen\\_bwpat39.pdf](https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe39/host_michelsen_bwpat39.pdf) (25.05.2021).

## The authors

---



### Dr HÅKON HØST

Nordic Institute for Studies on Innovation, Research and Education  
NIFU

0653 Oslo, Norway

[haakon.host@nifu.no](mailto:haakon.host@nifu.no)

<https://www.nifu.no/en/employees/haykon-hast/>



### Prof SVEIN MICHELSEN

University of Bergen, Department of Administration and Organization  
Theory

5020 Bergen, Norway

[Svein.Michelsen@uib.no](mailto:Svein.Michelsen@uib.no)

<https://www.uib.no/en/persons/Svein.Michelsen>