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Quality Regimes in Vocational Education and Training

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Introduction

These years the European Union works strategically on improvement of quality in VET systems – a strategic aim pointed out in the Copenhagen Declaration from 2002. Since 2002 the union has been working out a common framework for quality improvement in VET systems to be used in all member states. This framework is called Common Quality Assurance Framework (CQAF). Another reason why the importance of quality assurance in VET is growing in Europe is that VET institutions take over more responsibility than ever within national restructuring processes towards competitive and knowledge based societies.

The independence of vocational training institutions on national level (outsourcing of training departments, increased responsibility of vocational schools) increasingly requires VET institutions to prove the quality of their work and their ability to develop it (Blings, Spoettl & Becker 2007). Thus, the European VET systems are characterized by processes, which on the one hand support decentralisation and on the other hand ensure central control with the quality of VET provision. In this situation a key challenge for approaches to quality is to achieve balance between the political/ ministerial need for control and the mutual trust among VET stakeholders in a decentralised system (Cort 2005: 7).

In Denmark as well the Ministry of Education has aimed at promoting a systematic approach to quality assurance at provider level combined with the establishment of tools for central control. We hypothesize that a certain type of quality regime, drawing on neo-liberalism and new public management (NPM), has increasingly dominated the policies of the Danish VET programmes since the nineteen eighties, and we try to describe the different varieties of this regime and to trace its political and educational basis.

Notions of quality

The modern use of the concept of quality combines meanings drawn especially from different historical contexts. One meaning, developed initially in classical Greek philosophy and dominant until modernity, is that quality is excellence, the highest form to be achieved within a given area of activity. The Greek concept of *arete* denotes excellence but also virtue, because virtue is connected with performing a function in life and society. The fact that the word *arete* has the same root as *aristos*, which was generally used to denote the nobility, signals that quality was associated with those who the gods had given special powers and a high social status. Even today some dictionaries define “people of quality” as people with high social status.

From the 17th century onwards new meanings were added to the concept of quality. One background for this is the development of market economies, where businessmen began to target wider markets for their consumer goods (Reeves & Bednar 1994: 420). This meant that producers had to include the consumer preferences and behaviour in their considerations, and quality was increasingly perceived as a combination of the fitness for use *and* the cost of a product. This conceptualisation of quality later developed into two main forms, one associated with the emergence of mass production in the United States and defining quality as conformance to specifications, and one associated with post-industrial economic development and defining quality as meeting and/or exceeding customers’ expectations (Reeves & Bednar 1994: 421f).

Shifts in the understanding of quality undoubtedly have some association with economic development; but in a broader perspective they should also be seen as part of the modernization of Western societies. In this process the hierarchical structures of the religious worldview gradually lost its power, and the world was increasingly perceived as something that could be changed through human action. The link between quality and social status was still there, but both were something that could be achieved by much wider segments of the population.

In public policy the concept of quality was introduced relatively late and mainly as part of new public management. Dahler-Larsen (2008) identifies several factors that have contributed to emergence and dissemination of discourses on quality in public policy. A fundamental precondition is that the political ideologies which for a long time dominated modern history have lost much of their distinctiveness and evocative power. For citizens this contributes to a process of reflective modernisation in which individual strategies for balancing means and ends, for avoiding risks and achieving success become a major preoccupation. States are thus confronted with a much wider range of citizenship needs and demands. Because state policy is less defined by clear political goals much state activity is perceived as organised service provision, and finding the right organisational recipe becomes a constant concern of

government officials and policymakers. In this perspective the notion of quality may be attractive to both citizens and policymakers because it appears as non-ideological (embodying no vision of a different society) and generalised (adaptable to many different contexts). Because the focus on quality is related to such fundamental social developments Dahler-Larsen rejects the view that this is just a passing fad in public policy; he expects the “quality wave” to continue and be further institutionalised (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 67). I would add that one further factor contributing to this is the fact that quality still has the ring of something special, associated with high social status.

The concept of “quality regimes” implies that dominant ideas of quality used in specific social fields reflect the structures and power relations in these fields. In a quality regime certain criteria of quality achieve dominance in policy and public discourse while others are marginalized. Quality is not a neutral category; while the social and cultural bases of quality regimes are complex, they are certainly there.

The prehistory of VET quality

According to Cort (2005) the quality policies from 1990 to present time reflect changes in policy goals and thus mark a process of “rolling” implementation of quality “thinking” in the Danish IVET system. However, in order to see what was new and different in quality policies we briefly look back at the situation and the policies in Danish VET in the previous decades.

In the nineteen sixties the number of colleges providing VET were reduced (from 360 technical colleges to 63) and the colleges were transformed from private organizations run by the local trade/business community to independent public organizations run by a board of public and private stakeholders. The VET providers were relocated from the Ministry of Trade to the Ministry of Education, and this meant that VET programs were increasingly influenced by a traditional educational logic (Koudahl 2004: 77). One sign of this was that more teaching in general subjects was introduced in the VET programs.

The Danish IVET system is based on a dual training principle, i.e. periods in school alternate with periods of training in an enterprise (Cort 2005: 3). Since the relocation of IVET system to the Ministry of Education there has been a division of labour between the Ministry and the social partners, where the latter are responsible for the in-company training. The Ministry of Education more or less leaves it to the social partners to assure the quality of this part of IVET programs, but the Ministry still has the overall responsibility for the education policies and for ensuring that the IVET programs are consistent with this policy. The Ministry lays down the overall objectives for IVET programs and provides a framework within which the stakeholders, i.e., the social partners and the

colleges, are able to adapt curricula and methodologies to needs of the labour market and for trainees (Cort 2005: 4). The active participation of the stakeholders at all levels is a main characteristic of the VET system.

The relocation of VET programs to the sector of formalised education was part of a broader political effort. The Social Democratic party, which was the main governing party in the sixties and the seventies, pursued the ideology of “equality through education” and has faith in the ability of the educational system to affect the social composition of the Danish people in a more equal direction (Koudahl 2004: 80). In terms of quality equalising educational policies tend to focus on effects. In other words the main issue in implementing policies is outcomes instead of input, process, and output (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 116-118). The basic idea is that public efforts should make a difference, and distributional effects become the central criteria of quality. In relation to VET programs this meant increased equality attained by increased education – a notion that a better society was possible if people gain initial and continuing education. Since the 1960'es the free and equal admission to education has constituted a fundamental element of the Danish welfare state, an element that liberal and conservative forces treat with great caution even though it conflicts with some of their principles.

So it seems that the public sector of the sixties and the seventies is characterized by efforts aiming at improving quality defined as effects. But in fact quality is not an explicit issue in educational policy doing these years. In the eighties, however, political power changed and this soon had an impact on educational policy. In 1983 the recently established conservative-liberal government launched a “modernisation program”, which focused on decentralization of responsibility and competences, mechanisms for market control and users' freedom to choose from a range of public services (Dalsgaard & Jørgensen 2007: 11). Also, the liberal Minister of Education Bertel Haarder started a process of decentralization and “marketization” of the education system. Since then these neo-liberal and NPM inspired ideas have continuously influenced reforms of the Danish VET system.

Decentralization and quality from “below” – a first phase

Within vocational education neo-liberal ideas had a clear impact on a major reform of the IVET system adopted in the parliament in 1989. With this reform new steering mechanisms are introduced. VET colleges are to operate within a system of management-by-objectives instead of fixed national rules and curricula. New regulations and guidelines on IVET are introduced as framework regulations and the colleges are to make local education plans and adapt those to the needs of local trades, industry, and labour market. The overall aim of these efforts is to increase the responsiveness of the IVET system

regarding changes in technology, production and work organization (Cort 2005: 7).

Also, the changes of the IVET system imply a change of status of the VET colleges. The colleges are changed to be independent public organizations funded not through a fixed yearly budget, but through a combination of fixed grants and taximeter rates based on trainee intake and completion rates. Behind the changed financing is an intention to make the colleges more market oriented, more competitive, and more professional in their overall management. The increase in colleges' budgetary control and autonomy in the adaptation of IVET provision is accompanied by national quality initiatives in order to ensure a homogeneity of national provision and maintain national standards (Cort 2005: 7). In this first phase – from 1991 to 1995 – of the implementation of quality assurance and development at the VET colleges the primary aim of the Ministry of Education is to “get started”. As the colleges have no tradition for quality assurance it becomes important to introduce the quality concept incrementally and involve the colleges in a bottom-up process. Pilot projects are carried out within the framework of the research and development programme (Forsøgs- og Udviklingsprogram – FoU) and methods and tools for quality assurance are developed at local level. However, there is no coherent or systematic national strategy for VET quality assurance and development (Cort 2005: 8). At a more general level the Ministry of Education launches several major projects on quality assessment and development in these years, but because they focus mainly on higher education and upper secondary schooling the models and results are of little use in the field of vocational education.

A consequence of the implementation of taximeter grants is that economy and finances become the focal point of the managerial decisions in the colleges. The reform introduces new educational principles based on a holistic perspective to IVET programs, where the college teachers are to secure a vocational content of and learning progression in the teaching. The holistic perspective on IVET is aimed at developing a vocational pedagogy based on the students' experiences and resources. However, because of the changed funding system pedagogical issues become subordinated to economic issues, and the principles of holistic and trade integrated teaching is in reality de-emphasized by the colleges (Koudahl 2004: 93). According to Koudahl (2004) the 1989 reform is characterized by the contradiction between the holistic approach to IVET programs and the delegation of competence to local decision making with the consequence that weak students are being sorted out (Koudahl 2004: 93). The colleges do not have economic incentives to hold on to students with limited resources to fulfil an IVET program.

The 1989 VET reform indicates a movement towards a quality regime in which the students of VET are a key determinant of quality. Not, however, in terms of social equality in the student “output” like in the 1960'es and 70'es. Instead the

students are perceived as users of a public service, users with their individual wishes and demands. The VET system is not to pursue general political goals like equality but allow users as much freedom of choice as possible. By introducing taximeter grants per student the government ensures that completion rates as well as drop-out rates affect the financing of the colleges directly. That means that the colleges are encouraged to act responsive towards wishes from the students and that the colleges are motivated to prevent drop-out and to support completion among the students. However, this logic works only to a certain degree. If the students are too weak it is too expensive to the colleges to hold on and make the students complete. Solidarity and equality through education are no longer political aims.

The 1989 VET reform thus introduces initial steps towards establishing user demands and wishes as quality criteria and a quality regime oriented towards customer satisfaction in the tradition of the industrial – and later on also the service – company (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 134). The user satisfaction perspective on quality becomes more apparent in later efforts on quality in the IVET system, and we will return to it later in the paper.

The Q-strategy – a second phase

A national “Strategy plan for systematic quality development and assessment of results in the vocational college sector” – also known as the “Q-strategy” – is introduced by the Ministry of Education in 1996. This indicates a second phase of quality efforts in the Danish IVET system and the strategy is partly based on the results of the many pilot projects (FoU projects) initiated doing the first phase. With the Q-strategy the aim is to implement systematic quality assurance and development at all vocational colleges in Denmark. The Ministry still pursues a decentralization approach in the sense that it lays down only the framework for quality assurance and development. The VET providers are free to choose (and construct) their own quality concept, but ALL providers are obliged to a process of continuous self-evaluation. The ministerial argument behind this decentralized approach to quality is that the IVET colleges differ much in terms of size, program provided and organizational culture (Cort 2005: 8).

The systematic quality assurance and development that emerges in this phase is based on quality systems or quality models. The inspiration comes from business management strategies. In the 1980s and 1990s a focus on the producing organization as a system entails an introduction of a number of quality models. The firm has to relate production to market analyses, sale and strategy – relations, which are secured by management and organizational processes (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 29). The aim of quality models is a systematic and a total organizational perspective on quality. Total Quality Management (TQM) is an example of a quality model based on the notion that everything

that happens inside the organization influences the quality served to the customer.

The decentralized approach to VET assurance quality leads to the adoption of range of quality models by the colleges. In 2007 a telephone survey among providers of technical IVET programs shows that different quality concepts or models are being used. The EFQM Excellence Model (European Foundation for Quality Management) has a leading position, while fewer colleges have developed their own concept (Table 1).

Table 1: The use of Quality Models in Danish VET Colleges

Quality model	Colleges	Percent
EFQM	20	43%
Own model	10	21%
MARS ¹	2	4%
ISO9001 ²	5	11%
ESEV ³	2	4%
TQM	1	2%
Q-measuring ⁴	2	4%
Other models ⁵	5	11%
Sum	47	100%

Inspired by TQM the EFQM Excellence Model is a holistic model, which is based on the notion that systematic and holistic quality development leads to success (The State Centre for Competence and Quality Development 2003: 11).

The Excellence Model is based on eight basic excellence-terms⁶, which describe the present behaviour characterising the excellence enterprise and public organization. These basic terms are inspired by the Total Quality Management

¹ MARS is a model developed by the Danish Institute for Educational Training of Vocational Teachers in cooperation with a number of VET colleges. MARS stands for Goal (Mål) - Activity (Aktivitet) - Results (Resultater) - Self-evaluation (Selvevaluering).

² ISO9000: 2000 is a standard, which requires a certification of the organization to use. It is Danish Standard (Dansk Standard), who certifies an organization. Contrary to other models, the ISO9000 model is quite expensive to use, because an organization must pay for the certification and ongoing updates to new versions of the standard.

³ ESEV is an evaluation tool developed by the ESB Network – a network focusing on evaluation and benchmarking between colleges. ESB stands for Evaluation – Cooperation – Benchmarking (Evaluering-Samarbejde-Benchmarking). ESEV stands for the VET colleges' Evaluation Tool (ErhvervsSkolernes Evaluering/Værktøj).

⁴ Q-measuring is a statistical evaluation tool.
⁵ Other models are for an example a measuring tool developed by the Danish Ministry of Education; ShowQuality (VisKvalitet), which providers of CVET are obliged to use.

⁶ These terms are *result orientation, customer focus, leadership and adherence to objectives, leadership through processes and data, development and involvement of employees, ongoing learning, innovation and improvement, development of partnerships, and society responsibility* (Centre for Competence and Quality Development 2003: 17-20).

concept and they represent specific values by describing an *ideal state of organization*. By evaluating these terms through giving points – and by external evaluation by an assessor – it is possible to “measure” the organization in relation to the ideal state of organization (Centre for Competence and Quality Development 2003: 17). Also, the basic terms are transformed to a model consisting of nine interrelated strategic themes called *criteria*⁷. Thus, according to the European Foundation of Quality Management (2008) the Excellence Model can be used as a tool – on basis of the nine *criteria* – to self-assessment, as a way to benchmark with other organizations, as a guide to identify areas for improvement, as a basis for a common vocabulary and a way of thinking, and as a structure for the organization’s management system. It is striking how this model omits to determine in any precise way what quality means in relation to an ideal state of organization. What is an ideal state of organization? The state Centre on Competence and Quality Development describes how the Excellence Model put focus on improvement of quality in broad terms, i.e. user experienced quality, quality in the organization’s service, and organizational quality, which for instance are leadership, strategy processes and development of employee competences (Centre for Competence and Quality Development 2003: 12). In the point system mentioned above two key *criteria* are “the bottom line figures” and “user satisfaction”. Is “being in the black” and “high scores on user satisfaction” equal to high quality then? Such a system to assure and develop quality does not in the end help you defining quality – it only makes procedures and organization.

By not presenting a distinct definition of quality the EFQM is much in line with the Danish Ministry of Education. The Q-strategy from 1996 is not based on a formal definition of quality. Instead the Minister, Ole Vig Jensen, offered a relative understanding of quality in education by formulating the following definition:

“(…) it is not possible to say anything definitive and universal about quality in an education system. It is neither possible nor desirable to authorise one specific concept – be it in regard to methods or objectives and values. This is a basic democratic principle, which takes into consideration the fact that it is possible to achieve the same goals by different routes and with different means and methods” (Ministry of Education 1996: 7).

Behind this definition lies the assumption that through dialogue a common understanding and common guideline could be established which could constitute a framework for systematic quality assurance and development within IVET (Cort 2005: 8). I should be noted that Vig Jensen represents a

⁷ These *criteria* are leadership, employee, politic and strategy, partnership and resources, processes, employee results, customer results, society results, and key results (Centre for Competence and Quality Development 2003: 20).

somewhat different approach to quality than Haarder, the minister who launched the quality wave in Danish education. Haarder was part of a liberal-conservative coalition and firmly rooted in neo-liberalism while Vig Jensen was part of a government led by the Social Democrats and had a strong commitment to democratic participation. The quotation above reflects this, but the democratic emphasis had little impact on quality assessment.

An overall outcome of the Q-strategy is that quality work of the colleges is considerably professionalised. An evaluation from the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) in 2004 documents this. EVA concludes that the main part of the colleges have a comprehensive and systematic practice of self-evaluation. Yet, EVA also concludes that the colleges mainly focus on the internal parts of quality assurance and development, i.e. the pedagogical practice of the college. In general the colleges do not focus on ensuring coherence between overall objectives of IVET programs and the content and planning of the teaching. Furthermore, EVA states that the systems for following self-evaluation are not sufficiently developed (EVA 2004). Cort (2005) sees the narrow focus in the colleges as a drawback of the bottom-up approach that has been prominent in the quality strategy of the Ministry of Education (Cort 2005: 8). Cort argues that the connection between national quality of IVET and local quality of IVET not has been clear enough, and that the colleges might have concentrated too much on issues most important to them and probably also the most manageable.

In 2000 the Q-strategy is formalised by an incorporation of national rules on quality assurance and development in the VET legislation. The national rules stipulate that both the colleges and the trade committees are to undertake continuous quality assurance. But the colleges are still free to choose their own quality concept and there is no prescribed national model or system. The second phase in the development of the VET quality regime is thus characterized by the overall policy aim to establish a quality system for systematic self-evaluation and follow-up procedures within framework governance at provider level. This process is supported by continuous regional and local quality efforts, while the Ministry of Education places itself in a supportive and inspiring role. Thus, the role of inspection and external evaluation is played down (Cort 2005: 9).

Another reform (The Reform 2000) is adopted by the Parliament in 2000. One of the aims is to prepare the vocational students and trainees to act on a globalised and knowledge based labour market. Another aim is to improve the IVET colleges' ability to compete with the popularity of the upper secondary schools (the "gymnasiums"). The reform thus leads to a more "theoretical" curriculum for the IVET programs and it attempts to reorganize the organization of teaching in order to bring needs, demands and wishes of the single student in focus and improve the responsibility of students towards learning.

The Danish Reform 2000 is in line with tendencies in other European VET systems. In 2006 Grubb ascertain that many European countries are concerned with the kind of skills that students master in their VET systems, including academic or general competencies. The countries therefore want to upgrade the quality of VET to offer skills that they perceive are necessary for employers and for competitiveness (Grubb 2006: 1). Part of this is to make VET programs more attractive to young people who would otherwise choose more academic streams of secondary education. In a way quality strategies may be seen as part of this exercise, because certified and publicly proclaimed quality can help raising the social status of VET colleges and attract “better” students. The single student as focal point in and indicator for the colleges’ quality assurance marks a tendency which is continued and strengthened in the next phase.

External evaluation and quality indicators - a third phase

In the third phase focus shifts from internal evaluation at provider level to external evaluation at system level. Quality systems or models are by this time fully implemented at the colleges and these have also had time to develop continuous internal evaluation and assessment. The first sign that official policy is changing towards external evaluation is the establishing of the Danish Evaluation Institute (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut – EVA) in 1999. EVA is designed as an external, independent body for quality assurance and the development of Danish teaching and education. In many ways EVA continues the work of the earlier Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education, which developed a comprehensive model for quality control (rather than development) including elements of peer review, self assessment and survey methods (Rasmussen 1997).

In 2003 the focus on external evaluation speeds up with an introduction of principles of output management. The introduction of this new principle is supported by an offer from the Ministry of Education to the colleges to enter an agreement to develop quality within centrally stipulated priority areas. To enter the agreement is voluntary – though there is a quality grant, which is released in the end of the year as a “carrot” to the colleges to enter the agreement. If a college enters the agreement it has to take initiatives, evaluate and document activities within the centrally formulated priority areas. In 2004 the priority areas are learners’ systematic quality development, teachers’ strategic competence development, professionalizing school management, and colleges’ contact to enterprises and local community (Cort 2005: 10).

This type of output management can be perceived as a continuation of the taximeter rate system. However, a great difference is that the colleges do not have the same freedom of prioritising and budgeting. Hence, output management is a way of centralising and gaining control over the activities of the colleges within a decentralized IVET system (Cort 2005: 10). This

centralising process continues. A next step is the Ministry's introduction of national quality indicators. In 2003 the Ministry of Education presents six quality indicators:

1. test and examination results;
2. completion rates;
3. completion times;
4. drop-out rates and times;
5. transition rates to other education programmes;
6. rates of transition to the labour market.

The aim of these indicators is to establish a system, by which an overall, systematic and quantitative monitoring of quality in the education system is possible. The system is supposed to enable screening of all educational institutions on an annual basis and hereby identifying institutions, which show dissatisfactory results or quality in their training provision (Cort 2005: 11). It is further argued that the data produced by this system will provide a better foundation for external evaluation of quality.

With the introduction of quality indicators and indicator-based inspection, the Ministry of Education strengthens the overall external evaluation and monitoring. The official approach is shifting from decentralized quality assurance to centralised control and inspection (Cort 2005: 10).

Actually, this shift is paralleled from "below". In 2003 a group of colleges start their own evaluation network; the Evaluation-Corporation-Benchmarking-network (Evaluering-Samarbejde-Benchmarking-netværk – ESB-netværk). Today more than sixty colleges and upper secondary schools from all parts of Denmark participate in the network activities, which focus on benchmarking between the member institutions. The aim of the network is to define indicators for benchmarking, develop common standards, concepts, methods and tools for benchmarking and improve "best practice" via benchmarking (ESB-netværket 2008). The network offers measuring and benchmarkings in the areas of student satisfaction (Elevtilfredshedsundersøgelse – FTU), employee satisfaction (medarbejdertilfredshedsundersøgelse – MTU) and enterprise satisfaction (Virksomhedstilfredshedsundersøgelse – VTU). In such exercises of benchmarking the quality of IVET becomes a question of removing variations from a specific standard. When colleges are being benchmarked on a given standard it creates the impression that colleges with a benchmarking score under this standard are less effective and professional than colleges on level of or above the standard. The logic of this quality regime is that deviations from the standard are suspicious (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 111). Quality becomes defensive and that it is "quality" to avoid falling outside the standards. Organizations and especially political actors adopt standards on public service to signal responsibility and action, but also in the case of a "shitty" case to be able to remove the responsibility – often downwards the system to the

providing institution. Then it is the institutions' responsibility to document that service fulfils the standard (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 112-115). Thus this regime often results in blame-games and responsibility avoidance.

The ESB-benchmarking on student satisfaction also reflects a quality regime mentioned earlier in this paper, where quality is determined as user satisfaction. From the perspective of representative democracy this can be seen as a valuable counterbalance to bureaucratic public institutions. Often the imbalance of power between the public institution and the single user is extensive. Knowledge, resources, rules, and organization favour the system and public institutions have the tendency to stiffen in a certain institutionalised pattern or practice (Krogstrup 1997). Thus measurement of user satisfaction can be perceived as leading to reduced power imbalances and increased service adaptations (Dahlberg & Vedung 2001).

The implementation of the user perspective on differs from institution to institution. Two main approaches may be identified; a "top-down" oriented approach, where the producing institution uses surveys to measure the user satisfaction according to a number of pre-defined criteria, and a "bottom-up" oriented approach where it is attempted to let the users define the focus and the categories of the assessment (Dahler-Larsen 2008). The ESB network clearly bases its activities on the former approach and so does the Ministry of Education in the external indicator-based evaluation.

But the user perspective has weaknesses. First of all the definitions on which it is based are not always clear; who is the user? Is only the single student to be perceived as user of the IVET colleges' service or does the user-term also includes parents, enterprises, social partners, local community? Secondly, it is worth reflecting on how the term "use" is determined and understood. The use of an IVET program is not only about participating in teaching and training, it is also a question of developing the students' understanding of her-/himself, general education, employment and future perspectives⁸. That is why it might be difficult to objectify the use of given service to a wider extend (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 135). A further problem with the user perspective is that when wishes from the user are made independent from the context it entails an increased risk that the user himself becomes inconsistent. That means that even though one should wish something, you may not appreciate what you get. It becomes very difficult for public institutions to direct their activities in the basis of user wishes, because the wishes no longer are connected to a responsible subject, an order or a project. In other words there is no guaranty that increased responsiveness and attention towards meeting the wishes of the users result in

⁸ According to the Law on Vocational Education and Training (BEK 1518) the IVET programs serve to fulfil two aims. On the one hand the programs must provide the trainees with vocational qualifications, which are formally recognized and in demand by the labour market. On the other hand the programs must provide the trainees with general and personal qualifications that open the trainees' possibilities for lifelong learning and for active citizenship (Cort 2005: 3).

increased quality (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 138). Finally, quality defined as user wishes has a tendency to reduce quality assessment to superficial/shallow experiences like comfort and service (study environment, admission to teacher resources, tools, IT, and the content and character of teaching materials) instead of more complex qualities like democratic decision making (Dahler-Larsen 2008). The political consumer as phenomenon tends to leave out elements of debate, commitment, solidarity, coordination, obligation and weigh of pros and cons that constitute democratic participation of a genuine citizen (Lang & Gabriel 1995: 100).

The question is to what extent increased use of user-oriented quality mechanisms is the answer to the political worries. Not only in Denmark, but also in England and U.S. the politicians are concerned about secondary school completion rates, and they hope new approaches to VET can encourage “reluctant learners” to stay in school (Grubb 2006: 2). In Denmark a new reform is introduced in 2007 as a continuation of various initiatives towards making the IVET programs competence-based. The aim therefore of the 2007 reform is to change the orientation of all IVET programs more towards competence and learning outcome. The introduction of competence-based programs is to be seen in light of the transition towards a lifelong learning system, in which formal, non-formal and informal competences are to be recognized (Cort 2008: 18-19).

To sum up: since the mid nineties (the second phase) the quality assurance and development of the IVET colleges have been based on systematic quality models (like EFQM) and have increasingly focused on student satisfaction, quality indicators, standards and external evaluation. Together these characteristics constitute a concept of quality where quality is determined accordance with capacities of an organizational system which monitors the quality of services.

Quality as abstracted organisational recipes

The quality perspective enjoys popularity these years. There is a dominant evaluation ideology which describes what the organization itself must do to be ready and prepared for evaluation. Organizations need to have an evaluation culture and evaluation capacity (Dahler-Larsen 2006) and to demonstrate that their quality systems are in place (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 143). This tendency we see in the VET system in that the regulations stipulate how all VET providers must document that they have and use a system of quality assurance and development. The colleges must meet the requirements described in the quality rules (Regulation on IVET – Order no 1518 of 13/12/2007, chapter 2). In this way the providers will also meet the requirements of the QOAF:

The Common Quality Assurance Framework

The Danish Quality Principles within COAF

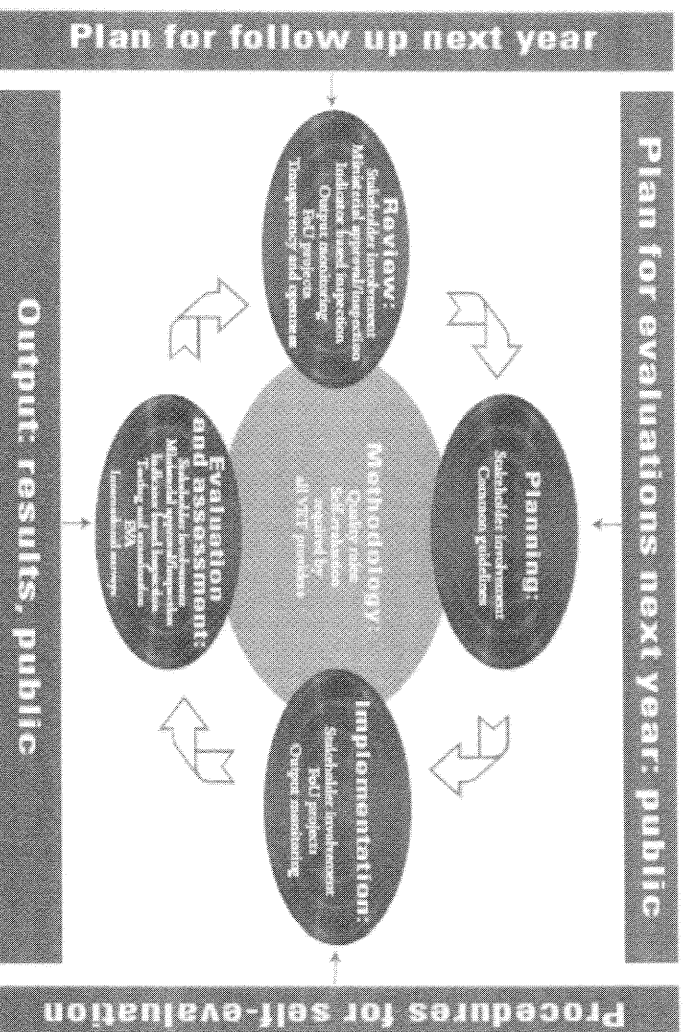


Figure 2.

Source: Cort 2008: 14.

Furthermore, the VET providers must document that their quality systems match the four phases of the COAF model: planning, implementation, evaluation and assessment, and review (Cort 2008: 21).

The anchoring of quality assurance and development in organizations is a way of reducing complexity. When quality assurance is decentralized to the VET colleges the controlling institution (the Ministry or EVA) is satisfied with monitoring the quality system instead of the material, relational and contextual elements quality in the single situation (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 145). An abstraction takes place from the level of actual service and production to the level of the system, and this has a complex reducing and relieving effect for the controlling institution. We see that in the Ministerial aim of the six quality indicators (p. 8). By constructing general quality systems it is possible to engage all parts of a VET college in making regular quality assessments. In this way you minimize the risk that those efforts in greatest need for evaluation are those which in fact manage to avoid ad-hoc evaluations. This is the governance rationality behind the monitoring systems (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 145). Another advantage of quality defined as organisation and systems is the predictability that follows from this perspective. The contracting authority will often prefer

(although not explicitly) evaluations to deliver predictable results, because unpredictability concerns problems.

This increased use of quality systems entails an *abstraction* of the quality (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 29). The concept of quality is neither bound to production nor utility. Quality is being “encoded” on a meta-level in organizational recipes, procedures and processes (Røvik 2005). Dahler-Larsen (2008) terms the tendency an *organizationalisation of the quality*. Quality becomes a property of the organizational system that produces the quality and not – as earlier – of the single product or service (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 29). Quality defined as an organizational system plays a significant role in the contemporary focus on establishing evaluation culture, evaluation capacity, documentation systems, and quality assurance in public service. The assumption seems to be that we have quality problems because we have failed to establish ample quality systems (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 142). A consequence of organizational quality systems is a certain degree of routinization, standardization, and abstraction of evaluation and quality (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 146).

The organizational perspective and especially the word “quality assurance” entail an “expectation gap”. An illusion of quality being “ensured” is created, but the system itself is meant for identification of cases and situations where quality failed (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 148). However, it is clear that the employees who work on the actual products and services often experience that the abstract myths legitimizing the organizational quality system meant are not connected to the real processes through which quality is being delivered to the citizen or user. Danish research in evaluation and quality assurance supports this picture. There is a risk that student satisfaction measuring causes dysfunctional use of evaluation, for instance avoidance of confrontation with students in the classroom, teachers shutting themselves off from colleagues and taboos of the use of management (Moldt-Jørgensen 2007). Also, conceptions of quality among those being assessed (employees) often do not balance the criteria or standards to which the quality systems refer (Bjørnholt 2006).

In VET colleges evaluation may be experienced as decoupled from the everyday work of teachers and as rituals without any effect on teaching practice (Guldberg et al 2006). A lack of agreement between pedagogic values and the systemic concept of VET quality is identified and evaluation is often made the responsibility of the single teacher rather than a mutual issue between teachers and management (The Danish Institute for Educational Training of Vocational Teachers⁹ 2006). Finally, practice assessment (used in apprenticeship) appears to VET students as meaningful, while summative and formalistic assessments (grades/ markings and examinations/ tests in VET colleges) cause criticism, opposition, or indifference among the students (Tanggaard 2007). This also

⁹ Danmarks Erhvervs-pædagogiske Læreruddannelse (DEL)

contributes to the difficulties the teachers are facing in their efforts to assure quality.

Thus, quality systems seem to become even more resource demanding in use. If quality systems take up more organizational resources it can cause a number of problems to the quality system. The organizationalisation of quality assurance entails that quality becomes difficult to discuss. The anticipation of quality assurance becomes more important than engaging in critical debate (Schwandt 2007). If teachers cannot recognize their own work in the criteria of the quality system they may be right. The aim of the systems might no longer be to describe, what is actually going on, but to design the future through anticipating quality assurance (Dahler-Larsen 2008).

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