



A qualitative vocational education and training: Education for quantity or quality?

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Abstract

This article¹ discusses the contemporary discourse of 'quality' in upper secondary vocational education in Sweden. The study is based on a selection of government policy texts that preceded the reform of upper secondary education in 2011. The purpose is to present how the concept of quality gets its meaning, and to discuss this from a perspective of competence, knowledge and qualification in order to renegotiate the concept of quality. Hence, the article also discusses how an extended quality concept could contribute to a changed view of Swedish upper secondary vocational education and training (VET) from an economic, individual and social point of view, in terms of both content and attractiveness.

A widened approach to quality in VET could lead to a change in the view of, and the discussion about, VET as such. Our purpose is to emphasize the importance of a broader understanding of how quality in VET can be understood and offer a more nuanced and expanded understanding to the contemporary discourse of VET quality, and thus offer opportunities for a more attractive VET.

Keywords: attractiveness, discourse, vocational education and training, vocational knowledge and skills, quality



Introduction

The quality in vocational education and training, or the lack thereof, was discussed in 2016, the year appointed by the Ministry of Education, The Swedish Trade Union Confederation, and the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise as the Year of Education (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016a; WorldSkills Sweden, 2016). The purpose of this article is to discuss and renegotiate the meaning of the concept of 'quality', as used in Swedish government policy texts about upper secondary education. In the contemporary discourse of quality in VET, which grew strong before the 2011 reform of upper secondary education, quality is expressed primarily in relation to the student's amount of employability – with the purpose of adapting to demands of productivity in working life. The more students initially are able to produce in their employment, the higher the quality of upper secondary vocational education is said to be (Terning, 2016). We argue that this connotation of 'quality' lacks aspects such as key competencies, vocational knowledge and skills, and qualifications. A reconstruction of the concept of quality in VET could lead to a change in the view of, and the discourse about, VET as such. In addition, it could initiate discussions about what it means to train in a profession, to be able to do the same as well as what may be reasonable to expect from the professional after three years of education. An extended way of defining the concept of quality could contribute to increase the attractiveness of VET².

The discourse of 'quality' in VET

The narrative of what a vocational education should be emerged in the discussion that took place in connection with the reform work, which occurred during the writing of a new curriculum for upper secondary school 2011 (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a) in Sweden. For upper secondary education, it was discussed that the education:

[s]hould include high-quality educational pathways for students whose aim is to study at university, or who want to target a particular profession or craft and become employable in this area directly after upper secondary school, or who want to continue with higher vocational education. (Alliance for Sweden, 2006, p. 19, our translation)

An upper secondary education of high quality is in the quote formulated to include different courses for different categories of students. These student categories are assumed to have different ambitions where one category wants to continue study at university, the second wants to become employable, and the third wants to be able to continue to a higher vocational education. What the students have in common is that they are assumed to require a high-quality secondary education in order to be prepared for life after secondary school.

This narrative suggests an idea of the present such as globalized, with integrated economies and an increasingly difficult competitive situation. Sweden's future is expressed as needing a 'qualified workforce with good education' (Council on Legislation, 2009, p. 34), an assumption that makes it possible to argue that the 'Swedish upper secondary school must have such an orientation and such quality that young people have a good opportunity to meet the demands of the future' (Council on Legislation, 2009, p. 34). The idea of contemporary society and what the school assignment should be is expressed as requiring a rise in quality that can be achieved by the following changes: increased clarity, deeper cooperation with working life and workplace-based education. The following text clarifies how these concepts are expressed and are believed in the reform work of the new curriculum.

Clarity

The term 'clarity' gets its meaning in relation to the criticism of the previous education's ambiguity. The criticism contains that students, when choosing upper secondary school, do not really know what the education leads to. This ambiguity is considered to cause delays, re-selection, lower student motivation, later entry into the labour market – mainly among students of the vocational programmes (Terning, 2016). In order for students to make the 'right' choice in relation to their future dreams and their degree of motivation, the student is said to require:

[c]lear information about what the education contains and where it is leading. It is also clear that the chosen education will infuse what it promises. It is also important that young people get the education they want, it is a significant factor for successful studies. (SOU 2008:27, p. 186, our translation)

In the Swedish government official report 'The Future Road – Reformed Upper Secondary Education' (SOU 2008:27) from which the quote is taken, it is emphasized that the student receives information about the content of the education and what it leads to after finishing upper secondary education. The quote also assumes that the student's motivation will increase if the student 'knows' what kind of work the education leads to and that it has a content that corresponds to what is demanded in working life. Increased clarity – with the meaning given in the quote – is expressed as a success factor that can reduce dropouts and re-selections. The importance of 'young people getting the education they desire' together with an idea of pupils' different interests and capacity' (Dir. 2007:8, p. 3) provides an opportunity to reform the upper secondary school:

Different interests and capacities for studying must be used in preparatory education, vocational education and apprenticeships. [...] Better opportunities to choose specialization can increase student motivation. [...] More young people than hitherto should be given the opportunity to pursue the education they begin. Through new high-quality vocational and apprenticeship education [...] and relevant admission requirements for upper secondary schools, exclusion from upper secondary school should be able to significantly decrease. (Dir. 2007:8, p. 3, our translation)

This statement from a government directive says that students who choose upper secondary school are expected to have an interest and capacity for either pre-university education, VET, or apprenticeship education, a performance that legitimizes a categorization of upper secondary school students as either theoretical or practical (Terning, 2016; see also Carlbaum, 2012; Panican, 2015). This assumption allows three divided programmes in upper secondary education. Through clearer inputs and outcomes, changed eligibility rules and more hours of vocational subjects and fewer hours of general subjects on vocational and apprenticeship programmes, the quality of these tracks can increase.

Here, the three separate tracks are made legitimate by an idea of different motivation levels of different categories of student and different ideas about what to pursue after the upper secondary education. The students who choose vocational or apprenticeship education are said to be more likely to be practical, have lower motivation, lower grades from compulsory school and with a desire to choose in line with their supposed ability with the goal of completing the education as an employable person. An upper secondary school with clear inputs and outcomes, clarity regarding expectations and a clear requirement to become employable are motivated in the discussion based on a narrative of upper secondary students' different wishes (Panican, 2015; Terning, 2016).

Collaboration between working life and school

The idea of vocational and apprenticeship students' wishes of becoming employable is expressed in accordance with the interest of those who are expected to receive students after school, such as private and public employers (Government Bill 2008/09:199, p. 44). Through this assumption, working life is legitimized to influence the content in VET: 'How to formulate the goals', which in turn is pronounced as a guarantee that 'quality level is maintained' (SOU 2008:27, p. 319). Different industries have different requirements why education must differ (SOU 2008:27). What is said to be important is that the 'outcome, the exam is at the correct level' (SOU 2008:27, p. 24), namely, in line with working life skills and competence requirements, which according to the European Qualifications Framework for Higher Education is level 4. In this way, the interaction between working life and school is perceived as a quality measure; the more interaction and influence over education, the higher the quality can become (Government Bill 2008/09:199; SOU 2006:102; SOU 2008:27).

Work Place Learning (WPL) in VET

The articulated idea of students' and employers' mutual view of content and goals with VET legitimizes the assumption that, in order to become employable, the students must be given the opportunity to recurring practice:

[o]f what awaits after upper secondary school and given time to practice and consolidate their knowledge. (SOU 2008:27, p. 177, our translation)

The categorization of the vocational and apprenticeship student as a practical person who wants to learn in a workplace context creates space to legitimize 15 weeks of workplace-based learning (WPL). During WPL, the student will be given time to apply and practice skills and competences expected after finishing secondary education. In this way WPL is said to be a necessary part of VET. It is also assumed that a:

[s]tudent without WPL does not have the same opportunities to establish him- or herself on the labour market and the education does not provide the right skills. (SOU 2008:27, p. 28)

Here, workplace-based learning is expected to be decisive in terms of securing quality in VET. WPL is expressed as a kind of guarantee for the student to possess the required skills and thus be qualified for employment. Thus, WPL provides an opportunity for both the student, the employer, and the principal of the upper secondary education to secure the quality of the student's level of competence so it corresponds to what employers, through collaboration with the school, have defined (Terning, 2016).

In the discussion of reforming upper secondary education in 2011, WPL is considered to contribute to higher quality VET. The assumption that vocational students are practical and uninterested in theoretical studies makes it possible to create tracks with different inputs and outcomes, where VET will lead to employability which is perceived to be in line with the wishes of both the students and future employers. This narrative also allows for increased collaboration between work life and school, which gives work life more space to influence the content of VET. In order to assure the quality of the student's skills, the importance of workplace-based learning is formulated, without WPL the students are said to not have the same employability.

Qualitative VET where the student becomes employable is expressed as an education that both students and employers demand. Responsibility that increased clarity, collaboration between school and working life, and WPL, will lead to an emerged quality should be shared between the student, the school, and the workplace; the important thing is *that* the quality increases, not *how* it increases. The discussion about the importance of increasing the quality of VET is constituted in relation to a globalized world with its demands for higher productivity. It is in the light of this idea that the requirements for higher quality are to be understood: the requirement for high quality in VET is also a requirement for adaptation to the global competitive situation. Through clear inputs and outcomes, as well as amended admission requirements, failure choices and delays should be avoided (Carlbaum, 2012; Lundahl, 2008; Terning, 2016). Through a higher percentage of hours in vocational subjects, the education is expected to be

more efficient. Collaboration and WPL are expected to help increase employability. In this way, according to Terning (2016), the quality requirements with its adaptation to prevailing conditions can be perceived in terms of disciplining schools, students, and employers.

Responsibility for increased quality – in the sense of higher productivity – is thus formulated as a common social project where employers are given space to influence the content of the vocational education. The students are expected to take advantage of learning the skills and qualifications demanded by working life. In relation to a harsh global competitive situation that requires increased productivity at the lowest possible cost, the talk of quality in relation to economic aspects gives VET the role of a ‘training place’ that educates employable individuals in a short time perspective. The emphasis on quality in relation to economic aspects implies that other meanings of the concept of quality do not fit within the dominant discourse, which could bring individual and social values that can help to deepen the understanding and value of VET.

Re-negotiation of the dominant quality concept

In this part of the article, we study concepts such as vocational knowledge and skills (a synonym that we use in the text is vocational knowing), competencies and qualifications, which we claim are needed for an extended quality concept. We start with a reasoning about what is perceived as an occupation and then move on to discuss the concepts in order to visualize the more tangibles side that VET has to deal with and implement in both education and in the issue of quality in vocational education and training.

Occupation

At international level, the concept of work, and thus occupation, can also be analysed using the International Labour Organization classification system ISCO:08 (ILO, 1986). The ILO is the UN trade union for employment and labour. The ILO’s classification system states that occupation is ‘set of jobs whose main tasks and duties are characterized by a high degree of similarity’ (ibid., p. 11). Occupation could be understood as a group of jobs that are similar in concepts of the knowledge, skills, abilities, education, and work experience required by employees in order to successfully practice an occupation. Occupation is perceived here as multifaceted and thus not easy to determine the meaning of, even though we use the word daily and expect ourselves to agree on the meaning. When the individual makes use of his/her knowledge and actions, he or she can perform them as general actions or occupational actions. When performing occupational actions, the individual combines different kinds of knowledge and skills into more or less successful individual occupationally focused actions, thus providing his or her skills for making a living.

On a more general level, 'occupation' is perceived as a more limited statement than work, since 'occupation' has a similar knowledge and experience base. An occupation is distinguished from 'work' by specifying the organizational structure of the work, usually with the help of applying division of labour. Society regards division of labour as an important organizational principle, and according to Durkheim (1997), it creates cohesion and mutual needs between people – through an occupation, we depend, in a way, on each other's actions in society. We interpret cohesion here as a unifying 'putty' in a society. Thus, occupation can be described as a precise division of labour in the community in which we carry out conscious, goal-oriented, and productive actions that bond us together. As the ILO describes an occupation, it has a knowledge and experience base that is necessary for anyone to be able to successfully practice his or her occupation. The goal-oriented and productive actions can develop and change our physical environment and these actions are connected with a social process (Ulfsdotter Eriksson, 2012). The discussion about occupation connected to VET can be understood as having the basic purpose of offering students the opportunity to participate in a socialization process by learning an occupational knowledge base as well as an experience base, thereby gaining the opportunity to become part of a community of practice. Occupation then becomes not just a simple skill, to perform something that provides support, but the 'putty' that creates cohesion in society.

It is reasonable to assume that different occupations make different demands on knowledge, skills, and individual actions. In addition, an occupation also requires a combination of achievements, which in themselves may have different knowledge bases. For example, the care profession (nursing) has a knowledge base based on knowledge of the human body and soul, in contrast to the knowledge of the computer engineer's, which is primarily based on technical and mathematical knowledge. Differences in the knowledge bases of occupations are a reason why the division of labour is a valuable tool for specification and specialization. Differences in knowledge bases lead to the fact that an occupation may be more or less complex or specialized, and the knowledge base can be perceived as cross-disciplinary. Cross-disciplinary sciences encompass the integration of different disciplines to become multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary.

When we now know that occupation can be described as a 'putty' that brings together people in society, being complex and interdisciplinary, it may be meaningful to re-think precisely what knowledge-based vocational knowledge and skills comprise, so that we may be able to give VET the recognition it deserves. The cross-disciplinary occupation therefore leads us to describe knowledge. This leads us to concepts such as competence and qualifications, which can be discussed as the quality in VET.

Knowledge and knowing

When we discuss theory of knowledge in this article knowledge has its basic meaning in the word *be able to* (Swedish Etymological Dictionary, 2010) and originated in words such as 'feel', 'know', 'be familiar with', which can be interpreted as a knowledge of the world and the conditions in it. To be knowledgeable can be perceived here as 'a verb form of being able to in the sense of being capable of' (ibid.), in other words, an activity in the world that manifests itself in different kinds of action. Aristotle, in a knowledge context, links action to the individual and to deliberately conscious behaviour. Historically, Aristotle's concept of knowledge in the book *The Nicomachic Ethics* (translated by Ringbom, 1967) is divided into three forms of knowledge. 1) Our cognitive ability to create science – so-called theoretical knowledge. Once we know, we are convinced of a relationship and know the reasons for it. 2) Practical knowledge is when we can produce something in relation to a specific goal. This is a production concept in conjunction with a true intellectual plan, in other words, the individual has an intellectual plan for productive actions. 3) Practical intellect, wisdom – the so-called judgment ability, as good actions are a goal in itself. To do well to yourself and people in general involves both ethical and/or political action.

We focus on practical knowing, because in the context of occupational knowledge and skills, the other two forms of knowledge include and help us better understand the meaning and extensiveness of practical knowing. Practical knowledge can be referring to the individual's handiness and ability to create and produce something with a purposeful goal, but also to conduct logical thinking processes. These skills and abilities assume that the individual has a proper intellectual plan for his actions, and access to functioning rules for the intended action. Through this intellectual plan, there is knowledge of both the action and the method of implementation. According to Aristotle, practical knowledge is not only practical skills for implementation, it also includes intellect and reason. Practical knowledge thus includes knowledge of the action and the basics behind it – it is specialized knowledge and as such also objective and subjective. This means that the acting individual deliberately uses both knowledge of the action and the methods for its implementation, as well as reflection on the value and accuracy of the action. Practical knowledge is thus a person's ability to act in accordance with reason and good judgment in order to achieve intentional goals. We can understand that lack of reason and good judgment leads to unreasonable actions. Such acts exclude science. Ill-advised actions also exclude practical intellect – meaning actions with a good purpose when the individual's actions are valued in relation to the good. Thus, an individual with good vocational knowledge and skills in the implementation of various types of occupational task uses all forms of knowledge, both theoretical and practical knowledge as well as intellect. These forms of knowledge create opportunities for the individual of

conscious and sensible actions. When reasonable actions take place in an occupation, we perceive that the individual has a vocational knowing relevant to the occupation.

Vocational knowledge and skills/vocational knowing and its various aspects

Based on the previous text about work, occupation, and knowledge, vocational knowledge and skills can be perceived to be complex. Therefore, we can start our discussion about vocational knowing based on interdisciplinary thinking where multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary perception of vocational knowledge and skills, especially in education, can prove to be fruitful. From the multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary fusion of different knowledges and knowledge bases, skills, competencies, values, and attitudes the individual possesses and can use, a complex and multi-faceted image of vocational knowing evolves. It is reasonable to think that there are therefore several ways of describing and giving meaning to the concept of vocational knowledge and skills in general, and in vocational education and training in particular. Below are some aspects that can be included in the vocational knowing and how they can be characterized. We start with the concept of competence and continue to qualifications.

Competence

The researchers have had difficulty agreeing upon the definition of the concept competence even though considerable work has been done. Therefore, the concept is used in different ways, both in colloquial speech and in scientific texts. The researchers, according to Svensson (2009), nevertheless agree that competence is individual-oriented and puts core focus on the individual, and today the concept is linked to lifelong learning.

People's lifelong learning is manifested in several international and national declarations by organizations including the EU Commission. In the EU Commission's text on lifelong learning, decision makers agreed to use the term key competencies (EUR Lex, 2018) for the competences that are general and which each individual is expected to live in order to function in a flexible and changing society. On an overall level, competence in the EU context is defined as 'a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are adapted to the current area' (ibid.). Based on these dimensions, the EU has identified and defined eight key competencies that it believes all individuals need to acquire for themselves to fulfil 'personal development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment' (ibid.). Key competencies include the following areas: communication in the mother tongue and foreign languages, mathematical knowledge and basic scientific and technical skills, digital skills, learning to learn, social and civic skills, initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness, and cultural expressions (EUR Lex, 2018). These general skills can be perceived to be the ones that promote the indi-

vidual's own development, require activity, and support development in technology, society, and science. When we examine closely how the EU's competence concept has been transformed into the Swedish formal education context, for example in upper secondary education, we can see that the Swedish National Agency for Education (2011b) does not put emphasis on the concept of competence. They use concepts such as collaborating, using equipment, managing information, acting in a linguistic and communicative way, solving problems, planning and organizing tasks, quality awareness, aesthetic approach, development orientation, implementation of tasks, and solving practical problems. Consequently, the concepts are more concretely written in verb form and thus focus on activity. For example, it means that activities such as problem-solving should be offered in the education so that students can practice competence during the education to later demonstrate their vocational knowing in different contexts.

The difference between the EU's and Swedish National Agency for Education's key competences is primarily that the latter lack scientific and technical competences, learning to learn and cultural competences. However, the curriculum for the upper secondary education, (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a) also includes these skills. They are written in other concepts, for example, that teaching should have an international perspective, teaching will be based on science and proven experience, and that teaching will stimulate further learning. Sweden has, in upper secondary education, applied the EU's eight key competences to create opportunities for increased mobility and education comparability between countries. Thus, competencies are perceived as a general concept aimed at giving individuals transferable knowledge, skills, competencies, and attitudes that they can apply in relevant contexts.

Our pupils in upper secondary education, those who choose vocational education and training and those who choose university preparatory education programmes, are therefore expected to be able to perform certain tasks successfully using general competences. They are expected to be able to adapt and function in a flexible labour market and to master new situations by utilizing their general competences, and therefore society expects that pupils in vocational education and training also learn them. Students should also be able to quickly acquire new knowledge and skills, as well as to use our cultural tools (artefacts) in order to contribute to their own quality of life and the country's productivity. The ability to develop and use general knowledge, both across different occupations and over time, therefore becomes important aspects of education (Helakorpi, Aarnio & Majuri, 2010; Nijhof & Streumer, 1998; Tsagalidis, 2008). These aspects can, in turn, be understood as concepts of transfer (Kilbrink, 2013) and are presented in The Council of Legislation's text as follows: 'that young people get a good foundation to meet the demands of the future' (Council of Legislation, 2009, p. 34). Thus, we can describe the general skills as a door opener to a social community and society, which can be perceived as the 'putty' we previously talked about.

However, can mastery of general competencies mean that the individual possesses vocational knowing? No, it is unlikely and therefore we will switch to something more specific in the context of vocational knowledge and skills – that which is considered specific for each occupation and which distinguishes the occupations from each other. The concept used in the literature for this is ‘specific occupational knowledge’ (Helakorpi, et al., 2010; Nijhof & Streumer, 1998; Tsagalidis, 2008).

Specific occupational knowledge is that which is specified and specialized in each field of work through division of labour. Unlike general competencies, specific occupational knowledge thus defines the occupation itself. For example, nursing’s specification is being able to take care of a sick person’s body, and sometimes his/her soul, as opposed to the computer engineer’s specification, which requires knowledge in technology. These two occupations have different knowledge bases with different types of complexity, as well as different conditions for individual and productive actions. The computer engineer can try out different solutions without it leading to serious consequences. The nurse can hardly take the approach ‘Let’s try and see what happens’ because the consequences can lead to human suffering. By identifying specific occupational skills in the different occupations, the distinctive character of the occupation can be clarified. Despite this opportunity, according to Helakorpi et al., (2010), this is very difficult and costly to do. However, it is expected that those (occupational teachers and supervisors at the WPL) responsible for the education of the specific occupation should be able to integrate the occupation’s distinctive character for the prospective skilled labour (professional life) in the relatively short period of VET.

The incorporation of specific occupational knowledge does not only serve as an entrance to an occupation, it also forms the pupil’s identity. It is created and shaped in very large concepts through relevant vocational knowing in the nature of the occupation, its culture, and praxis. Occupational culture and its praxis are aspects that are mainly taught in authentic situations and environments through workplace-based learning, WPL, although it is also less common in the school environment. However, it is also not enough to possess specific occupational knowledge in order to be called skilled in a specific occupation (Kristensen, 2001; Kämäräinen, 2002; Tsagalidis, 2008). Based on the above reasoning, we can conclude that qualified labour needs both general competences and specific occupational knowledge in order to carry out the profession in a qualified manner in an open market. In addition, it is important to add a task perspective in these general competencies and specific occupational knowledge, which we will now do by reasoning about the concept of qualifications.

Qualifications

Qualifications focus on the requirements of the work and are based on the requirements of the task of the person who will perform it. Knowledge of the work's qualification requirements is assumed to be fundamental to the performer in relation to quality at work and therefore qualifications can be related to the work processes (Ellström, 1992), not to the individual. This means that someone will implement these processes with the help of his/her vocational knowing to meet the requirements of the task. Different occupations undoubtedly have different qualification requirements and require more or less implementation skills and skillfulness of the performer. However, a pupil in VET lacks experience-based knowledge of the work requirements and quality of work. In VET, this means that the pupil needs to know which requirements the work requires and how a good work looks. This imposes demands on the teachers' WPL supervisors' ability to exemplify, convey, and allow the pupil to experience core work processes in order to learn what good work is and what qualities the work process and results contain. Consequently, both the teacher and the WPL supervisor are responsible for the quality of the pupil's access during the education. From a qualification perspective, this in turn assumes that the education, and especially the interaction between school and working life, is such that it offers opportunities for meaningful qualitative learning outcomes (Government Bill 2008/09:199; SOU 2006:102; SOU 2008:27) where work processes and work demands are clear for the student. In this context, the WPL training sites are extremely important. Consequently, in relation to the concept of qualifications, the education should provide the pupil with knowledge of the requirements of the work as well as the ability to develop in different general competencies. Competencies and qualifications are therefore relational and contextual.

Thus, competence focuses on the ability of the individual to perform his or her work successfully, with the ability to meet the qualification requirements of the work at the right level in relevant contexts. This means that a skilled person has both vocational knowing of the qualifications of the job and knowledge and skills related to the subject. When the individual acts professionally, he or she can successfully fulfil the requirements for the task at hand by using his or her skills and thus demonstrate his or her vocational knowledge and skills.

Now we can summarize our reasoning using Ellström's (1992) descriptions of vocational knowing. Ellström's reasoning of vocational knowing is based on competencies and on the qualification's concept. The former includes points 1-3, and the latter points 4 and 5 below. Ellström's concept categorizes the meaning of vocational knowing through five relational competence concepts: 1) occupational competence such as formal skills, 2) actual competence, 3) utilized competences, 4) actually required for execution and 5) prescribed and demanded for a job (*ibid.*, p. 38, our translation). In his analysis of the concept of vocational knowing, Ellström assumes from the individual perspective in a working life context

in which the individual's versatile competence and the qualifications demanded at work, are activated in the requested actions. As we interpret Ellström, we find an individual perspective, an action perspective, and a claimant perspective that meet the needs of an individual during the use of the relevant competence. This is probably less applicable to an 18-year-old pupil who has usually begun his or her skills building from nothing at the age of 16.

Discussion

In this concluding part of the article, we initially ask the question why 'occupational concepts' such as knowledge, skills, competence, and qualification are not included in the dominant discourse of quality in upper secondary vocational education and training in Sweden. To answer this question, we use Terning's dissertation (2016), in which she argues that since the late 1980s there has been a dominant idea of society supported by market economy rationality – which has been strengthened in the past ten years. Within this idea, concepts such as globalization, competition, growth, higher productivity, individual freedom of choice, and flexibility are seen as guiding principles in social development as well as the narrative of quality in VET. This, as previously stated in the text, means that vocational education and training is given value in relation to its ability to make the pupils employable – the pupil's value is assessed by his or her ability to efficiently produce and thus generate profit and return for entrepreneurs and shareholders. The demands for productivity for maximum growth also lead to a focus on quantity rather than quality. This weakens the concept of quality and contributes to the fact that quality in the meaning of occupational terms does not fit into the dominant narrative about the purpose and objectives of VET. The contemporary focus on productivity and growth only creates space for an idea of the pupil's life whose dreams of adulthood are consistent with the employers. Accordingly, they are said to have a common goal to boost growth, which requires adaptation to global conditions. Therefore, the time in upper secondary education must be utilized as efficiently as possible, which limits the time for developing general skills and competencies.

Five years after the implementation of the 2011 curriculum, the admission figures for upper secondary education show that from the 2007/2008 academic year to the 2015/2016 academic year admission to vocational education has decreased from about 42% to about 26% of youth cohorts (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2017, table 4). Thus, it is possible to problematize the predominant narrative of the pupil in vocational education who is said to be primarily practically interested and theoretically uninterested and whose interest primarily is about adapting to the requirements of economic growth. However, is this identity really what the applicant for VET wants to be offered? In a survey, Panican (2015) describes how pupils in the ninth grade of compulsory school describe that

choosing an upper secondary vocational programme categorizes them as tired of school, unmotivated and less ambitious. Choosing a vocational programme is thereby perceived as a less attractive choice. It may therefore be appropriate to critically discuss what it could mean in the long run to stick to a skill-oriented training in which either the value of education itself or the products are seen from another point of view than the market economy. How many young people are prepared to choose a secondary vocational education and training that clearly leads to a less flexible goal in working life – at a time when theoretical and higher education studies are valued beyond practicality – and in which we value freedom of choice, flexibility, and individual development. The meaning of the concepts of freedom of choice is expressed for the pupil in VET as to ‘avoid’ studying theoretical sciences, knowledge that they are not likely to be interested in or need in their upcoming working life.

As we indicated in the argumentation above, there is no recognition of a broader quality concept in a context where quality in vocational education and training is discussed. We believe this understanding is not sufficiently nuanced, hence we want to argue for a renegotiation: a renegotiating of a concept of quality that also includes professional concepts such as vocational knowledge and skills, competence, and qualifications. In line with previous reasoning, practical knowledge includes more than a simple skill in doing. Being able to master the complex practical knowledge and the multifaceted skills, as well as the understanding of the qualification requirements of the job, require long experience – which is not reasonable to expect after three years of vocational education and training. However, the employers expect that pupils of vocational education will be able to master the profession in both familiar and new work situations immediately after education, but experience has shown that this can hardly be achieved. The attainment of professional experience is expected of pupils through workplace-based learning. It is the WPL supervisors that will act as responsible for providing relevant, diverse, and authentic experience in the profession and its particular nature in VET.

In addition, within an extended meaning of the quality concept, an aspiration must be added to understand the concepts of profession as a relational, interdisciplinary, and contextual subject. In this way, VET can be given its rightful content and a relevant context in society. In our opinion, education can contribute to formal competencies, while vocational knowledge and skills are more difficult to achieve during a three-year education, as a pupil usually starts the professional journey in the absence of knowledge of the particular nature of the profession – he or she starts from zero. Another explanation why it may be difficult to achieve the required actual competence may be that it is individual-based, while the preference in interpretation (demand) lies with the recipients, which in many cases may have insufficient knowledge of the vocational education content. The formal

skills and actual competence are therefore not consistent with the expected competence. It does not do this, which is partly based on different ways of talking about it, and partly that the recipients have different expectations. It is also affected by the fact that the conditions for vocational education are not always optimal. However, if the requested competence is fully clarified, the result of vocational education can achieve the correct level, i.e. in line with the formal knowledge, competences, and qualifications required for vocational knowledge and skills, and provide a vocational qualification with recognized competence, which in turn is assumed to lead to employability (SOU 2008:27). Education in school environment cannot teach everything that may be required in the future, but it can create learning conditions and offer tools to meet the diverse needs of the future (Helakorpi et al., 2010; Kilbrink, 2013). From a societal point of view, education has other purposes than fulfilling the required skills of working life. It should also provide schooling – which should be offered to students in upper secondary vocational programmes. Finally, we argue that a lower focus on productivity in terms of quantity would allow space to include recognition of a broader concept of quality and thus include recognition of the school's societal assignments, which overall could contribute to increase the attractiveness of upper secondary vocational education.

Endnotes

¹ The article has previously been published in Swedish at <http://worldskills.se/vad-vi-gor/rapporter-artiklar/> i *Fokus på gymnasial yrkesutbildning – En antologi om hur yrkesutbildningen kan förbättras*.

² The Swedish upper secondary school is a tuition-free form of schooling which offers 18 national programmes. Upper secondary school also offers introductory programmes and programmes that deviate from the national programme structure. The national programmes are divided into two main areas where the student chooses either a vocational track or a programme which prepare for higher education. Vocational programmes can also be done as upper secondary apprenticeship training. In 2011, when the Swedish upper secondary school was reformed, the focus of vocational education changed from a broader civil education to an education for employability. Since this change was implemented, the number of students in vocational education has fallen.

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