



## Editorial: Academisation and academic drift of vocational education and training

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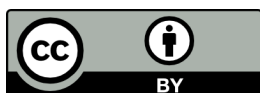
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This special issue with a selection of peer-reviewed papers is one outcome of a conference, organised by the VET and Culture Research Network<sup>1</sup> at the Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet) in September 2023. The focus of this conference was to explore the topic of academisation and academic drift regarding vocational education and training (VET). The VET and Culture Research Network celebrated its 30 years in Oslo. Therefore, the special issue begins with an article that provides memories and reflections on its journey by long-term members **Anja Heikkinen** (Tampere University) and **Liv Mjelde** (OsloMet).

Until recently, research and policy discourses on academisation and academic drift have focused either on growing aspirations among populations towards academic pathways or non-university ('professional') institutions striving to operate like universities and be included in the tertiary sector. Due to its diverse, contextual interpretations and definitions, discourses focusing on VET have remained scattered and incoherent.

However, in recent years the term academisation has been coined in the context of VET reforms in Europe. Especially in the German-speaking countries and regions with a strong dual VET system, academisation also expresses a fear of alienation and of jeopardising the core of VET, which is based on skilled work, experiences in the workplace, and dominance of practical learning. Many young



people choose a VET route due to the prospect of experience-based learning beyond schools and integration based on qualifications in the world of work and the community of practice there. However, if parents, firms, and the public see academic tracks with further options for studying in higher education as more promising than VET, it is not a surprise that more young people choose them instead of VET programmes. One consequence of this demand to expand and open up VET for higher education access may therefore be an academic drift of the whole VET system. Such a drift is an often deliberate, but sometimes also unforeseen institutional dynamic that raises the status within education (but not necessarily in the world of work).

This is a global phenomenon happening in most countries as the rise and expansion of academic institutions play a more important role in the whole education system. These effects on vocational education may be ambivalent. On the one hand, a more permeable VET system strengthens its position by helping to enhance – as some international organisations like OECD and EU and comparative studies suggest – the ratio of academics. On the other hand, a boost towards institutions, which enrich their profile with academic knowledge and certificates endanger access to VET. Such a policy may jeopardise VET programmes which aim to qualify people with basic practical knowledge, skills, and competencies oriented towards the needs of the labour market and the ability to solve specific problems based on experience. By enabling learners to cope with complex situations they don't focus as much on formal levels and certificates as traditional educational programmes. The contributions of this special issue are unfolding the debate and further perspectives on academisation and academic drift discourse, recognisable in different countries.

The first research article, *Academic drift and metabolic alienation in vocational education*, by **Anja Heikkinen** (Tampere University) suggests the revision of historical research on vocational education, reflecting on a selection of Finnish studies through the theoretical lens of social metabolism and from a critical ecological perspective. Consequently, the academisation of VET can be considered as an aspect of a capitalist growth regime. This is assumed to undermine the possibility of addressing the planetary crisis through sectoral measures across occupational and educational hierarchies.

**Svein Michelsen** (University of Bergen) and **Håkon Høst** (Nordic Institute for Studies in innovation, research and education, Oslo) also highlight from a historical perspective the drift towards more and higher qualified educational credentials in Norway. In their article, *Norwegian higher vocational education: Between academic drift and labour market relevance*, they argue that the trend is not specifically an academic drift but a reaction to labour market signals leading to a re-orientation of VET including more school-based elements.

Regarding the topic, academic drift is less explicit as a result of education institutional reforms in the article of **Elisabeth Hovdhaugen**, **Torgeir Nyen** and

**Asgeir Skålholt** (Nordic Institute for Studies in innovation, research and education, Oslo [Hovdhaugen & Skålholt], and Fafo, Oslo [Nyen]), *Avoiding tracking? Vocational students who take the supplementary programme for university admission*. They trace the development of a specific Norwegian programme which opens opportunities for VET learners to access academic higher education. They find the institutionalist approach to academic drift and conversion vital in explaining the growing importance of such a programme.

**Philipp Gonon** (University of Zurich) and **Lorenzo Bonoli** (SFUVET, Renens) offer a similar perspective on the academisation of VET in their reconstruction of the hybrid programme of combining a vocational certificate with a specific vocationally based baccalaureate degree in Switzerland. In their contribution *Two waves of academisation of VET in Switzerland: Threat or way forward?*, they trace the start of the reform in the 1960s and depict its development as a response to growing public expectations and internal pressures inside VET.

Switzerland as a case for different kinds of academic drift in and around the VET system is the focus of the article *Academic drifts in vocational, professional, and continuing education: A multi-perspective approach for the case of Switzerland* by **Jörg Neumann, Thomas Ruoss** (both SFUVET, Zollikofen), and **Markus Weil** (University of Teacher Education, Zurich). The authors demonstrate the complexities of academic drifts and different tensions in three central areas of VET. Their analysis helps to understand VET and academisation more deeply, showing how much they depend on the context.

**Franz Kaiser** (University of Rostock) highlights in his article *Academic drift of technical VET teacher education in Germany, Sweden, and other Nordic countries* the recent academisation of teacher training in a comparative perspective. He shows the effects on the development of VET research and how it has led to gains and losses for VET teachers education at the same time.

While the articles introduced in the first part include a historical perspective, the following inquire about present-day practices and considerations regarding VET and academisation. **Liana Roos** and **Karmen Trasberg** (University of Tartu) focus in their article *The unmet potential of higher education graduates as boundary crossers to vocational education and training* on the individual perspectives of academics in Estland, who add a second vocationally based education which allows them to find a new job in the world of work.

**Lars Gjelstad** (Western Norway University of Applied Sciences) unfolds an ethnographic perspective on academisation in his article *Countering academisation of VET through local collaboration: A situational analysis from Western Norway*. The article develops a conceptual and methodological framework for dealing with the complexity of the actors, social practices, and institutions involved in shaping the purposes of vocational knowledge practices, informed by reflections on a network of local actors strengthening the quality and attractiveness of VET in the

region. The article finds ethnographic research essential to understanding the diverse, contextualised meanings of the academisation of VET.

**Mohammed Asaduzzaman** (Islamic University of Bangladesh), **Anja Heikkinen**, **Santeri Sorsa** (both Tampere University), and **Pamela Wadende** (Kisii University) ground their reflective article *Vocational education in the academic drift or arrogance of academia in front of planetary crisis* on a Global North–South configuration. They argue that the discourse on the academic drift in VET expresses an epistemic rift between academic and vocational education, dominated by conceptual frameworks from the Global North, and indicating ignorance of academia of local knowledge and educational traditions in other parts of the world.

This special issue is exploratory, referring to cases in Norway, Finland, Estonia, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, Bangladesh, and Kenya. The various articles highlight particular aspects of academisation and academic drift, reflecting on different problem areas with diverse links to VET. The contributions from different countries show that academisation and academic drift are complex phenomena that require a broader historical and contextual analysis. The articles show the diversity of reasons for academisation or academic drift. One is the context of academisation as part of a global capitalist growth regime, but also competitive advantages of nations can be a driving in expanding higher education. Another reason is the adaptation to more complex work tasks in industry and services to meet the demands of improved technology. The struggle for recognition and prestige and better chances of success in a changing economy and society motivates educational institutions to ‘upgrade’ with academic knowledge and pursue their programmes to be more attractive to potential learners.

We appreciate the time and commitment of all the referees who volunteered to support authors and editors to improve their contributions. We are also grateful to OsloMet and the Norwegian team for their collaboration in organising this inspiring event, especially Prof. Dr Evi Schmid’s careful arrangement and commitment to this conference. We hope the special issue raises interest among readers and encourages future research and discussion about academisation in vocational education.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> <https://vetandculturenetwork.wordpress.com/>