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Norwegian higher vocational education: Between academic drift and labour market relevance

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Abstract

Norway has been characterised as a hesitant and slow reformer in higher vocational education (HVE) reform policies. However, a shift can be identified, where HVE has moved from a residual position towards the centre of policy attention. Policies have gradually picked up speed, and there is a turn towards upskilling and labour market relevance policies expanding access to new and more advanced forms of practically oriented types of vocational education and training (VET). The unprecedented growth of Norwegian HVE have created new political controversies and tensions. The systematics of developments and drivers in higher vocational education have not been much explored. We have analysed the structuring of HVE as an organisational field in a Norwegian setting, focusing on three different mechanisms: coercive isomorphy, mimetic isomorphy, and normative isomorphy. We have identified two different types of isomorphic pressure: academic drift and labour market relevance, and their interaction in the structuring of advanced practical forms of education and training. We argue that the structuring of Norwegian HVE should be interpreted as a sharpening of the labour market relevance profile in Norwegian education rather than academic drift.

Keywords: higher vocational education, academic drift, labour market relevance, institutional theory, isomorphy

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Introduction

In this paper we will analyse the structuring in the Norwegian higher vocational education (HVE). OECD defines HVE as 'post-secondary programmes and qualifications that prepare students for specific occupations or careers, which are beyond upper secondary level, and that would normally require at least six months full-time or equivalent preparation' (OECD, 2014, p. 22). There is no common internationally recognised definition of HVE (Bathmaker et al., 2017), and available research has documented a variety of state specific developmental trajectories in this area. Norway has been characterised as a hesitant and slow reformer in educational reform (Bleiklie, 2009). This most certainly is the case as far as HVE reform is concerned. This heterogeneous ensemble of schools and educational programmes was not included in the two great reform waves in Norwegian upper secondary and higher education where new boundaries were shaped between the two levels in the educational structure. These schools were considered as vocational schools located above the level of upper secondary education but below the threshold of the higher education level in the new educational architecture. For long it was unclear what to do with these schools, political attention was scarce, and their development suffered. Since then, Norwegian policies for HVE have gradually picked up speed. In 2018, a government proposal formally defining these schools as higher vocational education received support from all parties in the Norwegian Parliament as well as the labour market partners (Høst et al., 2019) . For the first time in history HVE moved to the centre of political attention. Polls have repeatedly suggested that an increasing number of youths find HVE an attractive option and labour market demand for these skills seems substantial.

Therefore, we ask: In which direction is HVE moving? Based on an institutionalist perspective and available data, the article discusses whether we can trace signs of emerging academisation, or if we can observe a sharpening of the labour market relevance profile of the HVE field.

Background and perspectives

Norwegian skill formation: Structural conditions

Our analysis is informed by the literature on comparative skill formation (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012) and the Nordic model (Ansell, 2010; Esping-Andersen, 1981) emphasising redistribution and welfare, high participation rates, huge public investments (Pontusson, 2005), small private investments in education and the comprehensive school as a basic form of organisation (Antikainen, 2006). The Nordic model is furthermore characterised by the strong role of the state, a high level of collective organisation in working life, and a

consensual policy style, where policy formation is embedded in an elaborate system of consultation and compromise. In historical terms the Norwegian version has been characterised by a peculiar combination of weak apprenticeship traditions and a weak academic tradition (Michelsen & Høst, 2018; Lauglo, 1995). Norwegian higher education (HE) today is about OECD average measured by the number of students enrolled. VET has developed a surprisingly strong profile. Approximately 50 percent enrol into VET programmes in upper secondary education, and the number of apprentices has increased significantly the last 40 years.

The Norwegian educational system has been formed and rationalised into a ladder structured by comprehensively organised and regulated levels. Through a series of reforms, the old diversity of parallel school types has gradually been broken down and integrated into a comprehensive system organised under the purview of the Ministry of education. Educational expansion has for a long time been driven by student demand rather than managed according to labour market requirement. The combination of such structural features has received little attention in the comparative literature on HVE. Most available studies emanate from continental skill formation systems (Di Maio & Trampusch, 2017; Graf, 2016; Graf & Lohse; 2021; Graf & Powell, 2022), where educational systems traditionally have been organised as disparate or parallel ladders (Heidenheimer, 1997; Baldi, 2021) and early demarcations between general education and VET (Allmendinger, 1989). We argue that Nordic types of structural settings like the Norwegian should be more explored as they represent distinct preconditions for the shaping of HVE policies and structures.

Theoretical perspectives

We connect to institutionalist theory, where we analyse the ongoing formation of HVE as an organisational field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This type of field analysis has gained considerable traction in higher education but has not been much applied in HVE. We argue that Norwegian HVE is well suited for this type of analysis, due to its small size, its former institutional heterogeneity, and emerging formal legal homogeneity. The core dynamic in field formation is institutional homogenisation (Riesman, 1958) or isomorphy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Riesman (1958) argues that American colleges modelled themselves upon each other. He compares them to a 'snakelike procession' where the avantgarde forms the head, and the middle part tries to catch up where the head once was (Riesman, 1958, p. 35). This resonates well with DiMaggio and Powell's seminal contribution, where organisations in a field increasingly mirrors each other. Interaction between organisations in the field will intensify over time, and intermediate arenas and structures for articulation of interest, dominance relations, coalitions, and cliques of actors will emerge (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

The development towards isomorphy is in DiMaggio and Powell's approach based on three different mechanisms: coercive isomorphy (regulations), mimetic isomorphy (homogeneity based on uncertainty), and normative isomorphy (based on norms and values) (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008). Regulations can have very direct implications for organisations in the field which forces them in a particular direction. But they also look towards other organisations with high prestige in the field and imitate their structures, symbols, and strategies as a basis for their own strategies to create legitimacy (Holmberg & Hallonsten, 2015) and reduce uncertainty. This may produce decoupling and considerable distance between symbolic adaptations and ordinary activities that goes on (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Normative pressures also play an important role in structuring processes in the organisational field, where norms are developed, legitimated, and shared. This happens in two ways; through legitimation created by knowledge producers from relevant organisations and through the development of networks and venues. In these networks and venues professional organisations may have key roles to play.

Newer contributions to institutional theory emphasise the significance of competition and the development of niches, where units in the organisational field can be pressured in different directions (Scott et al., 2017). A combination of institutional logics might provide different guidelines for strategic development in the field and clique formation (Thornton et al., 2018). This presupposes a certain autonomy for the individual organisation in the field and space for interpretation of rules and values for innovators, producing conditions for new demarcations (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). In such cases isomorphic pressures might primarily apply to similar organisations in the field and provide a basis for different types of organisational positioning.

Dynamics in the HVE field

When a heterogeneous ensemble of organisations become embedded in an emerging organisational field, powerful processes are created where variation is constrained (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The central question here is which direction(s) these isomorphic processes take. Here we will focus two types of isomorphy, academic drift and labour market relevance, which can highlight developments and tensions in the HVE field.

Academic drift

Insights from studies of isomorphism can be easily connected to academic drift. Academic drift is a complex and multidimensional concept that often has been used to analyse long term processes in higher education in a direction where academic knowledge, research, and research-based teaching achieve dominance in the polytechnic and college sector (Kyvik 2009; Neave, 1979; Pratt & Burgess,

1974). These studies emerged in the 1970s and the concept soon became increasingly popular in HE studies (Tight, 2015). Academic drift can be broadly related to the process of aspiration to achieve university status and to resemble universities (Huisman, 2023, p. 199) and is often measured by any increase in academic institutions and students in the field of higher education (Baker, 2014). Other contributions emphasise academic drift as a type of goal displacement or 'mission creep', where legitimate goals provided by the government have been supplanted by illegitimate, taking place in the dark, where vocational institutions have been transformed and reemerged as academic (Morphew & Huisman, 2002). Higher education studies often emphasise that public regulations might constrain academic drift, but it is also acknowledged that normative and cognitive pressures might become so strong that formal regulatory boundaries might erode over time (Huisman, 2023; Kyvik, 2009). The main gist in academic drift studies implicitly or explicitly emphasise HE organisations and staff as the main drivers of academic drift, but for the most part, studies of academic drift have not specified the 'who's' and 'what's' of academic drift (Huisman, 2023).

In this case we interpret academic drift as a specific type of pressure which create isomorphy within the field of HVE, and that this structuration process will be oriented towards imitation of higher education field structures. As communication within the HVE field intensifies, we expect increased isomorphy based on academic values in the formation of program profiles and organisation structures; first in the vanguard organisations and then in the middle organisations 'in the snakelike procession'. We explore three different drivers of academic drift: coercive isomorphy, mimetic isomorphy, and normative isomorphy. At the field level, academic drift processes might in turn unleash chain reactions in form of changing recruiting patterns, changing value orientations, changing cognitive patters, and new forms of interaction extending upwards towards the field of higher education.

Labour market relevance

The concept of labour market relevance is also quite broad and covers a range of different elements. It represents an attempt to grasp a different isomorphic logic, where educational institutions, organisational fields, or the whole of the educational system becomes more oriented towards the labour market and the world of practice (Harwood, 2010). Labour market relevance has emerged as a key concept in the increasing political emphasis on employment, labour market integration, and the expectations of the world of work towards the educational system in Europe.

In higher education this type of process imply significant tensions, and studies in this area often contrast the logics of higher education to the logic of the enterprise (Scott & Kirst, 2017). This has led to a strong focus on student

transitions into the labour market (Kivinen & Nurmi, 2014) as well as the influence of labour market organisations and employers on qualification profiles and learning outcomes (Kvilhaugsvik, 2022). In other areas of the educational system associated with vocational or professional education, the logic of labour market relevance has often been more or less taken for granted, but also here there is an increased emphasis on employers needs and smooth transitions into the labour market and employment.

We consider labour market relevance as a source of increased isomorphic pressures in the HVE field. We explore three different drivers of labour market relevance, the same as we used for analysing academic drift: coercive isomorphy, mimetic isomorphy, and normative isomorphy. As communication within the field expands and intensifies, we expect increased homogeneity closing in on values of practice, the organisation of connections and linkages to working life and employers in the formation of qualification profiles and programmes, as well as regulation and monitoring activities. In that process dominance relations, coalitions, and cliques will crystalise, where organisations and actors will attempt to expand in such directions. These pressures might align or evolve into different interpretations based on different notions of labour market relevance.

We can also envisage the interaction of countervailing isomorphic pressures towards labour market relevance and academic drift in the form of mixes or hybrids combining different institutional field logics (Thornton et al., 2018). One example would be the development of programmes which combine strong practical elements with academic theory and research-based teaching. We maintain that the analytical distinctions based on different types of isomorphism and their combination may be useful for understanding the development of HVE as an organisational field as well as the development of different positions in the field, where different groups of organisations form and move in different directions.

The case of Norwegian HVE, data and methods

We have analysed the development of HVE policies, the stream of reforms, and the development of regulations and regulatory institutions as well as the structuring of the field in terms of organisational actions, institutional underpinnings, and norms. The methodology may be described as process tracing where we draw on evidence from a sequence of developments in the field (Bennett & Checkel, 2015). Data have been extracted through our own research, analysis of available empirical sources, from evaluation reports, candidate surveys, annual reports on the condition of HVE as well as available statistics. Research on HVE and its development in Norway is not well developed. For the most part it is centred around applied research and grey zone literature. Public

reporting practices is still in its infancy, and the quality of the quantitative data often poor. The parts dealing with the formation of HVE as a distinct level and policy developments mainly relies on reports produced by the Nordic Institute for Studies of innovation, research and education in the period of 2016–2024 (Alne et al., 2023; Høst & Michelsen, 2021; Høst & Tømte, 2016; Høst et al., 2019; Høst et al., 2024), as well as the special report on HVE by The Norwegian Advisory Committee on Skill Needs (2022). As far as the analysis of academic drift, we have relied on empirical studies of what the literature considers as the first major academisation process in Norway (Kyvik, 2008; Neave, 1979). In this process a series of vocational schools were elevated and reconstructed as higher education institutions with a strong emphasis on research, where the old vocational model was academised through a sequence of steps. This allows comparing academic drift in the HVE field with prior academic drift processes in HE.

Contours of HVE as an emerging organisational field

Before the turn of the millennium, HVE could be regarded as a residual in a new and emerging educational structure. The big political issue was whether these schools should be developed into a new comprehensive system of institutions and programmes regulated by one common law, aiming at the formation of a new and clearly defined educational level between upper secondary and higher education, or whether they should be organised as a more heterogeneous market-based system for continuous and further education and training (Høst & Tømte, 2016). In 2003, the Norwegian parliament passed a new common law for all programmes and educational institutions in the grey zone between upper secondary and higher education. The aim was the formation of a new school type, the vocational college, and a separate and clearly defined level in the educational system, where adequate quality would be secured through public certification and control.

The political consensus in parliament closed in on the need to develop a new school type, the vocational college, on the foundations of a strong practice-oriented profile. The vocational colleges were taken out of the upper secondary regulations and relocated into a separate legal framework. According to the new law, this type of education should build on knowledge and experience from one or more vocational fields, shaped in accordance with the requirements of working life, and based on close contact with the world of work. Finally, that the candidates should be able to enter the labour market and work immediately after completion of the programme. The target group was not only absolvents from the numerous upper secondary VET tracks but also comprised students with a completed exam from general upper secondary tracks who preferred a more practical programme to academic higher education.

Since 2003, Norwegian HVE has changed considerably, especially the last five years, see Figure 1. After a period of stillstand, student number expanded from 15,000 in 2018 to 32,000 in 2024, and forecasts predict a doubling of this number.

Figure 1. Number of students in Norwegian higher vocational education 2016–2024, 2 year courses and shorter courses (Statistics Norway, table 11621).

A significant part of the growth can be attributed to increased state funding, as well as a huge increase in demand for programmes financed by student fees. Still, the level of state funding for HVE must be considered as low, compared to HE. In 2019, 44 percent of total financial resources available came from the Norwegian state (Diku, 2021), while the equivalent number for HE is 91 percent (Kompetansebehovsutvalget [KBU], 2022; Meld. St. 19 (2020–2021)). Nearly all student fees come from private vocational colleges (97 percent in 2020), where more than 50 percent of the students in HVE are registered (KBU, 2022). In comparison, the total financial contribution from the employers is low. Just 3 percent of HVE students receive full wages during the programme, while 6 percent are partly compensated. More than 50 percent of the students combine participation in a HVE programme with part time work. In general, students in HVE look clearly distinguishable from HE students. The average age of the students is 32 years, and half of them come from families without a higher education background (Alne et al., 2023). As such, HVE seem to provide possibilities for groups that have not been well represented in HE.

Programme profiles and recruitment patterns

A central background for understanding the character of HVE programmes can be identified in the development of the upper secondary VET and the number of apprenticeship contracts, see Figure 2.

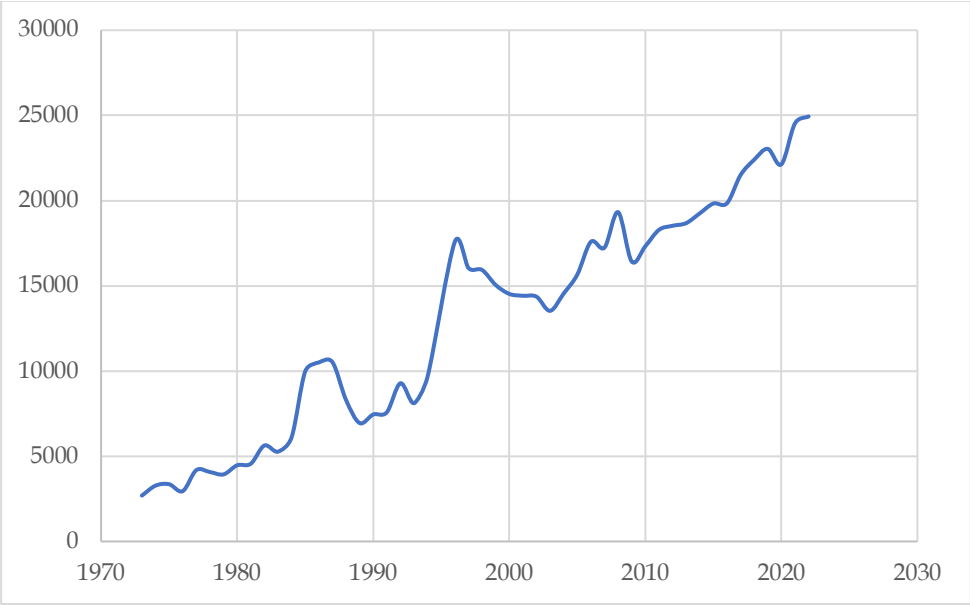

Figure 2. Number of apprenticeship contracts in Norway 1970–2022. For the years 1970–2007: Høst et al. (2008). For the years 2008–2022: The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. Statistics Vocatonal Education and Training (Utdannings-direktoratet, Statistikk fag- og yrkesopplæring).

The growing trend demonstrates the expansion in the number apprenticeships and trades registered, as well as the exposure of apprenticeship to business cycles, as the level of unemployment strongly influences the number of apprenticeships offered in the private sector (Høst et al., 2008). The persistent growth represents a staggering contrast to the development of VET in most comparable European countries, where VET recruitment and apprenticeship reached a top in the 1980s and have since receded. This makes for development trajectories and possibilities in the formation of Norwegian HVE that are different from most comparable countries. The consistent trend also reflects the extension of apprenticeship from old core areas in industry and crafts to health, social care, and services where school-based education and informal on-the job training of youth and adults traditionally has been the dominant mode of recruitment and training (see Figure 3). Apprenticeship has become important in health and social care, but remain relatively small or insignificant in the growing

service sector compared to industry and crafts which are still dominating the apprenticeship system.

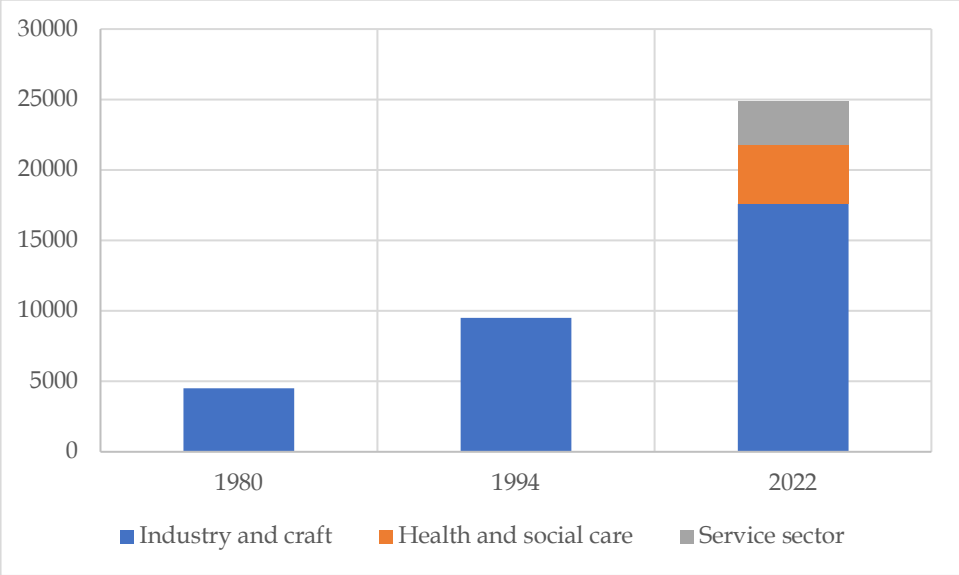

Figure 3. Number of new apprenticeships in Norway 1980, 1994 and 2022 distributed by labour market sectors. For the years 1980 and 1994: Høst et al. (2008). For the year 2022: The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, Statistics Vocational Education and Training (Utdanningsdirektoratet, Statistikk fag- og yrkesopplæring).

HVE programmes normally consist of different mixes of students with a variety of educational backgrounds and work experiences. However, some distinct variations and patterns can be identified. Two of the main programme sectors, Industry and craft and Health and social care, primarily recruit students on the basis of a skilled worker's certificate, often combined with skilled worker experience. This allows constructing more advanced programme skill profiles. In the service sector, the apprenticeship system has historically been weak or almost non-existent. In the creative, economic-administrative, and IT programme areas it has been hard to recruit enough students with a skilled worker's certificate, and recruitment has primarily been based on attracting students from general education tracks. This creates conditions for practical programme profiles with a more basic orientation. In these areas, students from general education tracks can also find a vocational route to the labour market.

While the whole HVE system is growing, the strongest growth rates can be identified in the lower end of the programme structure, in programmes with short and medium duration profiles (level 5.1 up to 90 study points in the National Qualification Framework [NQF]). The number of students in two-year

programs (level 5.2 up to 120 study points in the NQF) is also increasing, but growth rates are significantly lower (Statistics Norway, see also figure 1).

The high growth programmes comprise both advanced programmes based on recruitment of students with skilled worker's certificate and more basic programmes based on students without a trade specific background. In the lower end of the HVE programme structure we can also observe an interesting novelty, a large growth in 'micro' courses (5 study points or less). This type of courses has expanded significantly in a noticeably short time. The supply of micro courses now covers students with a general education background, students with a skilled worker certificate and practical experience, as well as students who has not completed an upper secondary study programme (Aspøy et al., 2022).

While full time students traditionally have constituted a large majority of HVE students, part time studies combined with work has emerged as a new normal in almost every type of programme (Report on the Condition of Higher vocational education, 2023). This is combined with a strong growth in the shorter programmes, and both tendencies may be explained by the fact that HVE programmes have become increasingly oriented towards applicants that are already settled in the labour market.

Organisational homogenisation and structural rationalisation

We can also observe significant changes in the organisation of the field. One expression of this change is the transformation of a large number of small, specialised, and locally embedded organisations towards a smaller number of bigger organisations with a larger number of students and a more diversified programme portfolio. From 2016, the number of vocational colleges has been reduced by more than 40 percent. The largest of the vocational colleges has reached more than 4,000 students. Six private and six public schools now comprise 75 percent of all HVE students (Høst & Michelsen, 2021). Increased access to financial resources and an increasing number of students have opened new possibilities for extending activities, programme diversification, and modularisation, facilitated by the development of a solid learning environment as well as the build-up of administrative capacity and quality management.

Nevertheless, remnants of the old, specialised model based on a tight connection between the college and a particular study programme area are still around, even if their share is reduced. In 2016, 32 colleges had less than 50 students, and in 2022, this number had been reduced to 17. For this type or HVE organisations, the build of necessary administrative quality and capacity is demanding as well as costly. A growing divide has been evolving between two cluster groups of vocational colleges, characterised by big and professional multi-campus organisations with a diversified programme portfolio and high administrative capacity on the one hand, and a diminishing group of smaller

vocational colleges with fewer students, thin programme portfolio, thinner learning environment, and lower administrative capacity on the other.

State regulation, intermediary venues and networks

The increased state intervention in HVE provided the basis for a stream of new regulations, but also for the formation of regulatory and intermediary institutions and venues for interest articulation, policy advice, and coordination. In collective skill formation systems, the labour market partners (the employers and the unions) are normally strongly involved in the governance of VET (Gonon & Maurer, 2012). Strong involvement allows them to intervene in the interpretations of regulations and secure what is perceived as an appropriate level in the enforcement of rules. This is also the case as far as the governance of apprenticeship in Norway is concerned (Michelsen & Høst, 2018). But not in HVE, where the responsibility for monitoring quality was allocated to the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance In Education (NOKUT); a single purpose, semi-autonomous (QA) institution, empowered to implement and oversee the national system for accreditation and quality in higher education. The vocational colleges now became dependent on study programme accreditation from NOKUT, which also got the important task of monitoring the legal boundaries between HVE and academic HE.

The development of the regulatory framework, new financing arrangements, and regulatory practices have had considerable consequences for the vocational colleges. New demands for quality assurance and procedures, administrative capacity, and a more professional administration to secure systemic conditions for quality and transparency have required more resources. The net result has been increasing pressures towards standardisation and structural rationalisation, where the larger colleges have developed towards a new role as 'flagships' or 'head' in the HVE procession with high regulatory legitimacy.

The initial lack of progress in the field enticed the Ministry of education to initiate the formation of a national council for HVE in 2010. The council was structured as a mixture of the tradition from HE, based on representation from the various types of HVE colleges, and the VET tradition, based on strong representation from the labour market partners and their organisations. Quality and accreditation issues were not included as a formal task area for the council, as this task belonged to NOKUT. This constellation prevented the council from exercising direct administrative influence on quality monitoring, accreditation, and boundary control. Apparently, not much authoritative decision-making has been going on in the council (Deloitte, 2023), but it has no doubt contributed significantly to the intensification of communication and networking within the field. In the new advisory structure, where each subfield in HVE is organised in a separate sub-council, both private and public vocational colleges are

represented, and representatives from the larger vocational colleges are particularly active. They have also become increasingly involved in international networks and accreditation committees in other countries.

The pattern of representation in the council has also allowed the peak labour market partners to act as intermediaries between state skill formation initiatives and HVE institutions in the development and implementation of shorter modularised courses (micro-courses) at the branch level in industry (Aspøy et al., 2022). The 'tripartite skill initiatives' have evolved into an important approach in the lifelong learning strategy of the state, where the government has provided the financial resources, and the labour market partners have provided linkages between the relevant branch organisations, firms, unions, and a variety of different educational institutions. The gradual build-up of the state skills initiatives and target groups during the COVID 19 pandemic and its aftermath has transgressed established boundaries between HVE and upper secondary level. To facilitate the inclusion of HVE organisations as skill providers, NOKUT accreditation arrangements and procedures had to be adapted to the new situation. In turn, this situation has necessitated legal re-regulations and formal extensions of older HVE boundaries at the lower end. At present there is in fact no lower legal boundary for HVE.

At the higher and more advanced end of the HVE programme structure things are different. Communication with HE communities for the formation of more advanced higher vocational programmes does not seem to be well developed, and networks and personnel flows that span the HE and HVE divide are scarce. It is probably fair to say that Norwegian HE has not contributed much to the development of norms of practice and programme profiles in HVE. The field has so far relied heavily on similarities and translations of practice norms and rationalisations emanating from the lower end of the engineering profession (Halvorsen, 1993) for scientific legitimation and on the labour market organisations for political legitimisation.

The intensification of labour market relevance

The general perception of HVE as labour market oriented and close to practice represents the core common understanding of Norwegian HVE. The representatives from the various colleges and areas in HVE invariably present themselves in such terms. Norms of developing programmes in collaboration with the employers are widely shared (Deloitte, 2023), and the majority characterises this type of collaboration as comprehensive.

Nevertheless, critical questions are increasingly being asked about the practice-oriented profile in the HVE field. This testifies to the mounting pressures towards homogeneity in the field, where the 'lack of profile' issue has condensed into different aspects and policy agendas. In 2003, the aim of HVE was defined

in terms of a separate, distinct, and regulated level in the educational structure between higher education and upper secondary education, and candidates from this school type should be able to enter the labour market immediately after completion. However, reports from several state commissions have concluded that the profile of Norwegian HVE and HVE colleges is unclear and contradictory (KBU, 2022). Questions have been asked if HVE has become 'overstretched' (Deloitte, 2023), or whether some colleges are 'decoupled' or 'loosely connected' to labour market relevance in their daily activities (cf. Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Furthermore, the HVE candidates' survey indicates that there are significant differences in employment rates between candidates from basic and advanced HVE programmes after completion (Alne et al., 2023).

Questions raised are how labour market oriented HVE programmes actually are, and whether the more basic programmes really have a proper place within HVE. Especially programmes in the creative and economic-administrative area have been contested, due to the low employment rates among the candidates after completion. In other areas of working life, for instance in the technical and the maritime sectors, there is substantial demand for absolvents with a HVE background (Alne et al., 2023), The combined effects of 'green shift' policies and strong market pull from oil-related industries have improved employment and career prospects for candidates with advanced practical skills in this area significantly. Still, available data suggest that there are considerable local as well as firm-specific variation in the appreciation of the more practical qualification profiles compared to other available qualification profiles from HE (KBU, 2022). In the health and welfare sector, HVE expansion can lean on the emerging lack of qualified personnel as well as the need for increased flexibility in health work organisations. There are also signs of increased competition with personnel educated in HE, where work organisations are permeated by strong authorisation and title requirements. In practice, many of these areas are closed for HVE absolvents, and HVE qualifications often do not offer much prospect for promotion and mobility upwards in the organisational hierarchies (Alne et al., 2023; Høst, 2017).

As far as the actual character of linkages between the world of work and HVE is concerned, a number of different features have been discussed in various types of literature. In the literature on decentralised cooperation in VET, content definition of programmes, the organisation of training and learning in the form of cooperation matching of demand and supply, employers' needs for skilled labour, co-financing, monitoring, and quality control (Emmenegger et al., 2019) as well as processes and stages of the cooperation process has been discussed (Bolli et al., 2018). The literature on policy instruments points towards the significance of regulations and their possible impact on labour marked relevance (Kvilhaugsvik, 2022). In a number of white papers, learning outcomes and

employer panels have been suggested as instruments to ensure quality and relevance, as well as increased cooperation with employers in higher education (Tellman et al., 2017).

Available data suggest that cooperation between vocational colleges and working life is both substantial and heterogenous. A new study indicates that labour marked panels have emerged into a national standard for collaboration between the colleges and representatives from (local) firms (Høst et al., 2024). Panels serve multiple purposes, including regulation, information, learning, and a symbol of external engagement. They allow the vocational colleges and study programmes to cooperate with employers on issues of shared interest. They also serve as documentation of employer involvement to NOKUT. Who the member of these panels actually represent – local businesses/branches or their own firm – varies a lot, very much depending on sector traditions for collective action. How these panels are organised, the number of members they have, their branch profile and what the panels actually are engaged in, also seem to vary significantly. Another source of labour market relevance which seems to be common, is engaging teachers in part time positions while at the same time holding a position in the specific field of work, in line with a long tradition in VET schooling. Learning outcomes as an instrument of labour market relevance does not seem to carry much significance.

Vertical upward extension and intensification of academic drift?

Another possible isomorphic pattern focusses on a particular type of homogenisation associated with academic drift. In the formation of the NQF in 2011, HVE was represented in terms of level 5 qualifications, in accordance with prior policy goals and guidelines. Since then, boundaries to HE has been continuously challenged in public debates. On a general level, the major actors in the HVE field, the colleges, the council and the labour market partners are in unison in their demand for increased space for growth and increased status for HVE. Strongly condensed the argument is: Coercive regulations and regulatory practices have created an artificial 'iron cage' which constrain the 'natural' development of HVE. The cage needs to be opened. These arguments are for the most part framed in terms of social (in)justice, more equality and equity between higher vocational and academic education rather than claims of labour market efficiency.

The rise of apprenticeships has played a significant part in the development of this narrative, where old injustices (VET has not qualified for HE education) must be rectified through vertical extensions. The national workers organisation (LO), the employer association (NHO) as well as the council has taken a clear position on the issue of vertical extension, and supported the construction of a separate educational ladder reaching above level 5 in the NQF. The policy implication is

that the more advanced types of practical skill formation programmes should be permitted to extend upwards and include accreditation at bachelor, master, and even PhD level (level 6, 7, and 8 in the NQF). The old goal for developing HVE as a distinct level in the educational structure has been downplayed and substituted by a new framing of HVE as a separate 'sector' or a separate 'pillar', parallel, adjacent, and equal in status to the academic HE 'sector'.

This raises an interesting question if or to what extent we can detect indications of academic drift in the HVE field? Academic drift can fruitfully be separated into a series of distinct elements or sequences (Neave, 1979). We connect to what is considered as the first great academic drift process in the recent history of Norwegian higher education where vocational colleges were transformed into university colleges (Kyvik, 2008). This transformation process evolved gradually.[1] Strongly condensed and simplified, it comprised the following main elements:

- A number of specialised vocational school types were elevated gradually to the new higher education space as university colleges, and thereafter subjected to comprehensive mergers into multiprogramme regional university colleges in 1994. The portfolio of short-cycle programmes in the redesignated institutions were gradually extended horisontally and vertically (up to NQF level 8).
- Academic theory became more important in the curriculum of the study programmes and practical training was reduced.
- A central mechanism for student transfers between different HE institutions was established and later institutionalised as a separate institution at the national level; The Norwegian University and College Admission Service (NUCAS), which coordinates admissions to undergraduate study programmes at all universities and university colleges.
- A new and more unitary regulatory structure was formed through two major legal amendments in 1995 and 2005.
- The university degree structure was extended to include the university colleges, providing the basis for an institutionally diversified but coordinated and comprehensive higher education space, where student degrees could be built on various combinations of programmes from several institutions.
- A separate council for university colleges was formed in 1986 and subsequently merged with the University Council in 2000.
- New names and measurements similar to the universities were introduced.

- Influx of personnel from the universities to the university colleges brought their identifications, practices, and preferences, and over time research-based knowledge was strengthened and relations to practice weakened. Positions and categories have been rearranged to include possibilities for research, and academic staff classifications standardised and homogenised. A high quota of senior academics at the university colleges are leaning towards research similar to the universities.

We can identify some similarities as far as the development of the HVE field is concerned. New names and new measurements have been introduced. The vocational colleges have achieved status as higher vocational education, new measurement scales like HE study-points as well as local student transfer agreements have been formed. HVE has been integrated into the Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service (NUCAS), which coordinates admissions to undergraduate study programmes at all universities and university colleges. A large number of specialised smaller institutions are in the process of being substituted by a smaller number of larger multiprogramme institutions.

The sum of these features can obviously be interpreted as sequences or elements in an ongoing academic drift process. But so far, the new names have primarily symbolic significance, and the measurements do not have similar valour. To some extent local agreements for student mobility have been developed. Still, it is entirely up to the various HE institutions to decide whether and to what extent HVE programmes can be integrated as parts in a HE bachelor's degree. HVE participation in NUCAS is selective and has not been imposed on private HVE institutions. For the majority of HVE institutions, neither collaborative relations nor student transfer agreements have been formed (Deloitte, 2023). HE has not caved in to mounting political pressures for national standardisation of student transfers (as in 1982), and transfers and communications with HE in general is low. The drift upwards is selective and narrow down to vanguard institutions in distinct sub-areas in the field, for the most part technical and maritime areas, and to some vocational colleges rather than most. So far there is not much to suggest that the whole HVE field has developed aspirations moving upwards towards academe, and strong regulatory practices have (so far) inhibited incursions on HE territories.

There is not much mobility of teaching staff from HE to HVE – at least not yet, and the structure of positions and categories in HVE and HE are not coordinated (Lyckander & Grande, 2018). Positions at HVE institutions are in general teaching positions, often part time, and practical experience from working life is highly regarded and rewarded. Research and development (R&D) resources are normally not included in positions offered, and rules of academic freedom do not

apply. As R&D resources are scarce or non-existent, research-based education in the normal definition of the concept does not apply either. This is not particularly attractive for HE employees with preferences for R&D and teaching based on research activities and research experience.

Discussion

In this article we analyse emerging Norwegian patterns in the development of HVE after the turn of the millennium. Norway has been characterised as a hesitant and slow reformer in HVE reform policies. However, a shift can be identified, where HVE has moved from a residual position towards the centre of policy attention. Policies have gradually picked up speed, and there is a turn towards upskilling and labour market relevance policies expanding access to new and more advanced forms of practically oriented types of VET.

We have analysed the formation of HVE as an organisational field, focusing on three different mechanisms: coercive isomorphy, mimetic isomorphy, and normative isomorphy. We have identified two different directions for isomorphic pressures: academic drift and labour market relevance, and their possible interaction in the development of advanced practical forms of training. We have also assumed that units in the field can be pressured in different directions, where a combination of institutional logics might provide different guidelines for strategic development in the field.

The development of Norwegian HVE is often perceived and projected as the institutionalisation of advanced institutions and programmes based on apprenticeship completion and practical experience in the firm. Nevertheless, HVE is also very much an area for more basic programmes based on general track credentials in areas where apprenticeship historically has been weak. Furthermore, growth rates are stronger and more pronounced in the lower end of the HVE space than in the higher end. In the lower end, the HVE space has extended downwards through the provision of short micro courses. Political initiatives in this direction have necessitated legal re-regulations and extensions of HVE boundaries, and at present there is in fact no lower legal boundary. We can also observe strong forms of coercive isomorphism restricting boundary trespassing, especially at the higher end of the HVE space.

Strong coercive pressures have interacted with mimetic and normative pressures in the organisation of the field as new arenas and networks have been formed. The old specialised small structure in HVE organisation has evolved into a divide between two clusters of vocational colleges, the big and professional actors with high vertical and horisontal extension of programme portfolios, a solid learning environment, highly professional, and with high administrative capacity, and a decreasing number of smaller schools with fewer students, a thin

programme portfolio, a thin learning environment, and low administrative capacity. The group of larger organisations have evolved as the most important flagship model in the field.

The field has since its inception been dominated by normative representations as close to practice, where HVE programmes are shaped in accordance with the requirements of working life and based on close contact with the world of work. The old broad understanding where the schools were regarded 'practical' in a broad sense has gradually been challenged by the intensification of field norms and new perceptions of HVE and labour market relevance. The tensions centre around a number of issues related to how close to practice programmes actually are, and to what extent the students are good to go into the labour market after the completion of the programmes. For the most part these variations boil down to differences between basic and advanced programme profiles as well as different sectoral training traditions and relations between education and work. But the tensions also testify to the pressures of mimetic isomorphism and symbolic adaptations towards practice orientation and labour market relevance in each of these areas. Labour market panels with representatives from local enterprises seem to have evolved as a standard for vocational colleges to secure labour market relevance in their study programmes. Most represent individual firms, but the composition, profiles, and agendas of the panels vary a lot. The panels also serve the important task of documenting labour market involvement.

Between academic drift and labour market relevance?

In this article we have argued that the Nordic model provides important structural conditions for the development of higher vocational education (HVE). Important feature of this model is high state involvement, a strong emphasis on welfare, high participation rates, huge public investments, and small private investments.

Secondly, we have emphasised the significance of the comprehensive school principle as the basic form or organisation in Norwegian education. A series of reforms have transformed the system into a ladder organised by comprehensively organised and regulated levels. The expansion of the comprehensive upper secondary school integrated vocational schools and the gymnasium, followed by the further integration of apprentice training in the VET part. This has provided Norwegian VET programmes with an integrated yet strong practical profile. At the higher end, the extension of HVE has been constrained by an increasingly homogenised higher education level, where non-university higher education institutions were formed, integrated, upgraded, and merged. Gradually a new comprehensive higher education space has been formed, regulated, and consolidated with a strong emphasis among staff on research and research-based teaching.

A number of practical vocational schools were left behind in the reform processes. They were subsequently redesignated as vocational colleges and remade aiming at the construction of a new distinct level in the educational system above upper secondary level. So, there is much to suggest that the Norwegian educational system in practice came to combine a comprehensive HE level with a comprehensive upper secondary level, with HVE located in between.

Recently this structure has been challenged by new policy issues of vertical HVE extensions and political visions of parallel pillar formation. In the lower end of the HVE space the labour market partners have been able to develop influence, and here the extensions are the most pronounced. In the higher end, the situation is different and more complicated. As the university colleges have drifted towards the universities and been academised, their old space has been 'vacated'. The labour market organisations (LO and NHO) have supported extension of HVE programmes upwards above level 5 in the NQF, and the whole HVE field seems united in demanding increased space and increased status for HVE.

So far there are few indications of an emerging academic drift in HVE, in the sense that study programmes have drifted towards academic values and structures, and contact patterns between HE and HVE institutions are as a rule not well developed. The lack of communication between HE and HVE has probably protected HVE institutions from academic drift but has also made it difficult to develop common agendas and hybrid forms for study programmes based on new combinations at the nexus between HE and HVE. There is not much sign of integration of practice with academic higher education elements compared to the German development (Graf et al., 2016). Senior staff in Norwegian university colleges seems much more research oriented than their colleagues in German 'Fachhochschulen' (Teichler, 2008), and there is considerable scepticism in HE towards the tradition of the practical and its ability to sustain educational programmes at bachelor and master level on its own. The employers have so far not been much involved in the funding of HVE programmes. We suggest that the development of Norwegian HVE should be interpreted as a sharpening of the labour market relevance profile in Norwegian education rather than academic drift, and there is still strong normative consensus on the preservation of the practical profile of HVE.

Endnote

[1] This part draws heavily on Ahola et al. (2014), Kyvik (2007, 2008), Mordt (1993), Neave (1979), as well as Teichler (2012).

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