Nordic Journal of Vocational Education and Training, 2025

Countering academisation of VET through local collaboration: A situational analysis from Western Norway

Lars Gjelstad
Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Norway
(legj@hvl.no)

Abstract

The article aims to demonstrate that although the academisation of vocational education and training (VET) is embedded in larger formations of symbolic power, it is a complex and non-linear process. One unfortunate aspect of academisation is the regulation of VET by external authorities (Billett, 2014), and one way to remedy it is to involve VET actors in shaping vocational education's purposes (Billett, 2010). The article argues that ethnographic research is essential to understanding the meanings of the academisation of VET. Although taking a particular empirical case as the point of departure, the article will primarily develop 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. The case informing my theoretical reflections is a network of relationships between school leaders, teachers, instructors in companies, a business association, and others who collaborate to provide vocational students with an apprenticeship in a region in Western Norway. The aim is to motivate local youth to choose vocational education, build better connections between schools and workplaces, and thus strengthen VET's relevance, quality, attractiveness, and social status in the region. I argue for the importance of contextualising academisation processes and the multiple and contradictory ways they influence vocational education. It is important to identify local manifestations and consequences of academisation and the diverse ways local actors in the field of VET deal with them.

Keywords: academisation, educational reforms, local VET systems, school-to-work transitions, youth culture, ethnography, situational analysis

NJVET, Vol. 15, No. 1, 204–225 https://doi.org/10.3384/njvet.2242-458X.25151204

Peer-reviewed article
Hosted by Linköping University Electronic Press

Introduction

In Norway, the integration of a diversity of local, trade-specific training practices into a national upper-secondary education system was part of more extensive modernisation processes, entailing, among others, bureaucratisation, standardisation, and systematisation (Olsen, 2011). This historical encounter between different institutional logics, different traditions of knowledge, and different principles of socialisation is embedded in larger formations of social class and symbolic power (Jørgensen, 2018a; Mjelde, 2006; Tarrou Høstmark, 1995). The processes of integrating vocational knowledge and learning practices into dominant educational structures are commonly (and often derogatory) analysed in terms of academisation. Thus, academisation is a concept with multiple meanings, including the subordination of vocational forms of knowledge and learning to academic ones and the integration of vocational education and training (VET) in management models not primarily designed to meet VET's specific needs. One critical dimension of academisation is the control and regulation of the vocational field by external authorities – by 'privileged others' (Billett, 2014). According to Billett (2014), the way to remedy these unfortunate aspects of academisation is to involve practitioners of the occupations as well as teachers, students, and others with a close interest in the field, in 'shaping vocational education's purposes and practices' (Billett, 2010, p. 2). In any form of education, including VET, there is always a 'struggle between those with the power to define what constitutes legitimate knowledge and those excluded from educational decision-making' (Brown et al., 1997, p. 13).

In this article, I will emphasise the importance of looking at the 'localisations' of these structural conditions. I argue that an ethnographic and situational approach is essential for mapping the cultural, social, geographical, and material situatedness of the persons, practices, places, and policies making up the fields of VET in a particular regional area. I build on a case study focusing on a series of initiatives introduced by a network of VET actors to provide more vocational students in a Western Norway region with relevant apprenticeships. An ethnographic, bottom-up approach may reveal the wide variety of ordinary, unremarkable work done by actors at the ground level to maintain and strengthen local VET systems. The purpose of this article is to develop some theoretical perspectives, extending from the analysis of the case, rather than summarising its empirical findings. Initiatives to strengthen local VET systems and counteract unfortunate aspects of current academic drifts must be analysed in relation to the complex circuits within which they operate. The meanings and consequences of academisation must be studied across contexts and at different scales. This 'ecological' perspective invites a situational analysis (Clarke, 2005, pp. 10, 18). As with all local VET systems, the case I refer to above relates to overlapping social fields and networks with distinct scales and organisational

dynamics. At one level of analysis, vocational education practices are shaped by national VET systems. On other levels of scale, these practices are simultaneously shaped by global trends in education, work and youth culture, and local particularities.

Therefore, I conceptualise the case from Western Norway as a dynamically changing network of networks with no fixed boundaries. I follow Bartlett and Vavrus' (2017) approach to case study research and their emphasis on the importance of attending to how historical, social, and economic developments of various scales shape the case. They describe the 'tracing of relevant factors, actors, and features' as an ongoing, iterative process (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 37).

In the next section, I will briefly outline the Norwegian VET system, focusing on the 1994 VET reform that fundamentally institutionalised the current main VET model. Although the 2+2 model (see below) may appear quite simple initially, it is full of contradictions, gaps, and partial connections. Ball, a prominent researcher in educational sociology, has emphasised how policies move through assemblages of actors 'in bits and pieces' (in Bartlett and Vavrus 2017, p. 73). This means it is essential to trace the 'localisations' of the Norwegian VET system ethnographically, that is, as an ongoing process of discovery and theorisation.

Localising the Norwegian VET

The Norwegian main model consists of 2 years of school-based learning followed by 2 years of apprenticeship. This model was established as part of a comprehensive educational reform implemented in 1994, which for VET meant that vocational courses were integrated with general studies education into a comprehensive upper secondary education system. More than one hundred trades were streamlined into twelve broad educational paths. Another significant change was the revitalisation and modernisation of the apprenticeship system. The apprenticeship system in Norway is based on a tripartite collaboration between the state and the labour market organisations, where local training agencies (*opplæringskontor*) play a central role in coordinating supply and demand (Jørgensen & Tønder, 2018, pp. 32–34). The Education Act regulates training in a company, and the county municipality must approve the company as a training company to have apprentices. It also meant that VET became subjected to a more centralised, bureaucratic control (Høst, 2009; Olsen, 2013). The comprehensive reform implemented in 1994 has been described as a turning point in the academisation of VET in Norway (Høst, 2009; Jørgensen, 2018b, p. 12; Olsen, 2013). This model was continued in the *Knowledge Promotion Reform* (Kunnskapsløftet) in 2006 (Olsen et al., 2018, p. 143).

An essential characteristic of the Norwegian VET system is an institutional gap between school-based and work-based learning (Jørgensen, 2018b). Michelsen and Høst (2015) provide a precise description of the Norwegian VET system that is worth quoting in its entirety:

> The Norwegian system for vocational education and training is difficult to place in international, comparative classifications. It combines features from dual systems with state school-based systems, it combines state involvement with company involvement in the form of organised company training, and it combines a separate system for vocational training with full integration in a comprehensive system for upper secondary education. It combines young people's right to upper secondary education with the company's right to take on apprentices. All 16–19-year-olds have an individual right to upper secondary education, but not to vocational training. The right to adequate training here applies when the student has first been accepted as an apprentice by an apprenticeship company. (Michelsen & Høst, 2015, p. 33, translation by author)

This paragraph summarises the intricate compromises set between academic and vocational interests in the Norwegian VET model. Since these institutional features always have to be played out in local contexts, it creates great space for shaping 'vocational education's purposes and practices' (cf. Billett, 2010), and it virtually *presupposes* a systematic, bottom-up collaborative work across institutions.

Because of the broad entrances into VET, *The Knowledge Promotion Reform* (2006) introduced a new subject called 'vocational in-depth subject'. Although it is part of the school-based training and teachers are responsible, the purpose is to give students a specialisation in a specific trade and relevant vocational practice (Nore, 2015, p. 185). In addition, teachers and trainers have to develop local plans adapted to the students' preconceptions and local conditions (Nore, 2015, p. 183). In line with the argument I develop in this article, Nore emphasises that the subject cuts across 'the institutional division of school and work, and […] can be seen as a compromise that carries *inherent tensions and dilemmas which must be resolved at the local level by vocational teachers and trainers*' (Nore, 2015, p. 184, italics by author). The 2006 reform thus creates even more space for local initiatives.

The Subject Renewal Reform (2020) introduced more specialised occupations. It also introduced new regulations for the mentioned in-depth subjects (YFF), effective from the 2021–22 school year. The reform provided new tools and guidelines and increased documentation requirements. The new regulation from the Norwegian Directorate of Education requires school owners to create 'local curricula' that detail which national competence objectives underpin the training in YFF (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020). In Norway, county councils are the formal owners of secondary schools. The county administration in Western Norway (Vestland) has developed guidelines that clarify the responsibilities of contact teachers. The fifteen tasks outlined in these guidelines for YFF indicate that

teachers have a wide range of duties, many of which are ambiguous. Additionally, there is increasing documentary work (Vestland Fylkeskommune, 2024). When discussing the county administration's role with teachers and others, they often maintain that the administrative practices are too far removed from the everyday life of teaching and that the bureaucrats have little knowledge about the realities that students and apprentices are up to.

In the regional case mentioned in the introduction, I follow the different practical work performed within the network of collaborating actors to examine some of the local dynamics involved in materialising the national VET system described by Michelsen and Høst (2015). Local circumstances enable and constrain the actors in distinct ways. One central part of my case study is to explore what this localised institutional complex means for the tracks available to youth and how it shapes young people's navigations (cf. Biggart, 2009; Heinz, 2009; Wyn, 2009).

An essential element of the 1994 VET reform was that all young people between 16 and 19 were legally entitled to upper secondary education. Older applicants were pushed out, and VET became more or less a youth-specific education (Høst, 2009; Vogt, 2018). Vocational learning sites have become important youth cultural arenas, and youth cultural practices are thus integral to vocational learning situations (Gjelstad, 2015). The integration of vocational and general studies programmes into a common system (Reform 94) occurred in conjunction with new global moments of youth cultural formations emerging in the 1990s. These ongoing, dynamic interactions between students' youth cultural identity formations and vocational learning practices are an unintended consequence of the Reform 94 policy.

A critical goal of the regional collaborative project in Western Norway is to strengthen and customise specific pathways between students, vocational sites, and local workplaces. This collaborative project's initiatives involve building education systems from the bottom up: bringing together schools, companies, and authorities and developing VET practices that match students' interests, teacher competencies, and employer needs (cf. Billett, 2014).

In this section, I have emphasised, with references to Michelsen and Høst (2015), that the dominant VET system in Norway consists of complex and multi-layered connections. In the next section, I will outline the spatiality and socio-materiality of the complex relations between youth, VET, and working life. I will trace some of the connections relevant to how school-to-work transitions are played out in an area in Western Norway. The construction of such a case, based on an existing regional collaborative network, is necessarily a selective process, both empirically and theoretically. The specific relationships that the actors create and recreate as part of the ongoing collaborative project also shape the 'case' and the alternative analytical lines that a researcher can pursue.

Constructing a case: Methods and ethnographic contexts

The case study builds on in-depth interviews and field research focusing on the transition of young people from school to work-based vocational education. It examines a region that has experienced remarkable industrial growth since the early 1970s, beginning with the construction of one of Europe's most advanced oil refineries in a remote area. In this region, people traditionally earned their living through activities such as sheep farming, fishing, and craftwork (Eltvik & Dyrnes, 2010). Field research is carried out at three upper secondary schools that together have fourteen classes of upper secondary level 2 students. The fourteen classes are divided into seven different occupations (Child care and youth work, Health work, Carpentry, Electrical power, Motor vehicles, Chemical processing and laboratory technician, and Industrial technology). Focus group interviews were carried out with students, and individual semi-structured in-depth interviews with teachers responsible for in-depth projects and the apprenticeship placement process. I also interviewed career counsellors, school leaders, training instructors in companies, and the head of a local training agency. The interviews took place, mainly during the spring of 2022, at schools and companies, and were followed by short observations of workshops, classrooms, staff rooms, canteens, and the like. Analytical notes after each interview session summarised key empirical findings and linked them to some tentative, preliminary theoretical concepts. Although the material is largely based on interviews, the overall methodological approach and analytical design are shaped by a situational analysis framework (Clarke, 2005) and my training as an ethnographic fieldworker. As mentioned, the purpose of this article is to present some of these overarching perspectives rather than summarise the study's empirical findings.

The region has a small population (50,000) and is characterised by a hierarchical city–country relationship. It was formerly a peasant and craft-oriented economy but is today deeply integrated into capitalist modes of production and circulation: petroleum industry, aquaculture, mechanical industry, and so forth. It is also a centre of 'green' industrialisation (Grøn region Vestland, n.d.). Moreover, it has become part of an ambitious welfare state. In this sense, the transformation of the region mirrors the more general development of the Nordic countries from poor to rich nation-states (Jørgensen, 2018b, p. 8).

The district centre has a population of 6,000. In addition, the district includes approximately twenty towns, each with populations ranging from 300 to 3,000. The growth of public administration and welfare institutions, such as nursing homes, kindergartens, schools, and police services, is also creating a demand for new categories of skilled work. There has been a massive development of transportation infrastructure (roads, bridges, and tunnels). The towns are located differently in relation to schools, shopping centres, restaurants, salons, factories,

etc. In the morning, teenagers travel to school from their hometowns by bus, boat, car, or motorbike. The schools thus become important gathering points where youth cultural orientations and identities are created, shared, and contested. At the same time, vocational students are, through internships, directed away from school and towards specific companies spread out across the region. The workplaces vary from small local craft businesses to large mechanical or installation companies. The industrial centre is a massive oil refinery in the northern part of the region. The oil refinery area is fascinating as it serves as a global hub for industrial production while remaining a truly peripheral zone regarding consumer and leisure facilities, lacking shopping centres, bars, or cafes. In this sense, it materialises the cultural contradictions of late-capitalist society (Bell, 1972). Youth orientations towards this place accentuate the hybrid identities of VET students, compelling them to negotiate between their vocational interests and their identifications with popular youth culture.

These spatial transformations profoundly shape how school-to-work relationships unfold in this area. With the massive building of transportation infrastructure, the county capital Bergen has come 'closer', and many youths, especially in occupations other than industry, want to study and work in the city. I will refer to the fourteen classes, divided into three schools and seven trades or occupations, as distinct 'vocational learning sites' to highlight that they are made up of different people, places, and practices (cf. James & Biesta, 2007). In this context, the concept refers to the central learning arenas at school where core elements of the occupation are being taught. Each learning site is influenced by several overlapping fields (James & Biesta, 2007, p. 26), each with its specific dynamics. The vocational learning sites are influenced by their location at a particular school, with their particular management, geographical location, and their relations to different 'employment fields' (James & Biesta, 2007, p. 27). Each vocational learning site is also different because it recruits different types of young people with their distinct school experiences, skills, attitudes, and identities. The teachers also bring their specific identities, knowledge, and pedagogical traditions (cf. James & Biesta, 2007).

In this region, vocational youths enter working life in a historical situation different from their parents. Today, the working life in the region is oriented towards aquaculture, oil and gas, wind farms, maritime sectors, and so forth, and this certainly shapes the aspirations of vocational students, especially in technology and industry programmes. Large companies in the area increasingly marketise their apprenticeship places as a springboard to a future-oriented career in global occupational fields. Technological programmes thus experience an increase in status and attractiveness. This is partly a result of systematic collaborative work to raise the quality of VET locally, to provide students with attractive placements and apprenticeship places, and to convince young people

that there are exciting career opportunities ahead for those choosing to take a trade certificate.

The 'situational map' (Clarke, 2005) sketched above shows that teachers, instructors, and learners take many factors into account when negotiating choices related to education, occupation, and apprenticeship. It also indicates the constructed nature of the case study. It is impossible to draw fixed boundaries around it. A multiplicity of shifting contexts shapes the everyday practices of students, teachers, and other VET actors.

VET actors' encounters with structures of academisation

VET actors are not passive victims of academisation. We may certainly analyse academic drift as part of a dominant culture, but it is not a homogeneous structure; rather

> It is layered, […] containing different traces from the past […], as well as emergent elements in the present. Subordinate cultures will not always be in open conflict with it. They may, for long periods coexist with it, negotiate the spaces and gaps in it, make inroads into it […]'. (Clarke et al., 1993, p. 12)

This quotation from 'Resistance through rituals' provides an apt conceptual framework for analysing VET's hierarchical yet complex relationship to the forces of academisation. The book has been essential for developing a 'conjunctural analysis' (Clarke et al., 1993, p. 10), which examines the convergence of various social dynamics at a specific historical moment. This analytical approach has inspired the situational analysis presented in this article.

The emergence of youth culture was centrally linked to the education system, especially the development of 'secondary education for all' and the 'massive extension of higher education' (Clarke et al., 1993, p. 20). This meant that young people were spending a large part of their youth 'in age-specific educational institutions' (Clarke et al., 1993) and that they became incorporated in what Coleman, in an American context, termed an 'adolescent society'. According to Coleman, the high school student 'is 'cut off' from the rest of society, forced inwards towards his own age-group […] and maintains only a few threads of connections with the outside adult society' (Coleman, 1961, p. 3, in Clarke et al., 1993, p. 20).

This situation, where young people are placed outside of productive life and socialised into an educational structure based on the cultural hegemony of a growing middle class, may aptly be described as a process of academisation. Norway's class structure, shaped by a long history of egalitarian movements (Bendixsen et al., 2018), is distinct from that of Britain and North America. However, there are similar dynamic structures of conjuncture between educational expansion and youth cultural formations. As mentioned, the most

significant break occurred in the mid-1990s, with a comprehensive reform that transformed a heterogeneity of training courses with a wide age range into an age-homogeneous structure (Jørgensen, 2018b, p. 14; Vogt, 2018).

Both teachers and instructors in companies remark in the interviews that youths' attitudes are a main 'barrier' to recruitment and training in VET. The youth I interviewed were simultaneously participating in various social networks that, in shifting contexts, shaped their identities, aspirations, and occupational orientations. The interview data and field observations also reveal fascinating interactions between young people's lives and their vocational identities and orientations. Different vocational learning sites receive different types of youth, with different identities and attitudes to academic work. It is therefore safe to argue that the academisation of vocational learning environments has various consequences for different students. In certain contexts, elements of academic knowledge can serve as valuable cultural tools that expand opportunities for vocational learning. However, in other settings, these same elements may restrict learning and contribute to feelings of alienation and subordination (Gjelstad, 2015, 2016).

Therefore, I argue for the necessity of analysing processes of academisation in the context of youth cultural orientations. To many youths who have experienced 'academic failure,' vocational education has offered an alternative, legitimate route to a respectable social position. A 'subcultural' attitude often characterises the learning cultures of vocational programmes. In industrial programmes, for instance, a technical vocabulary, tools, overalls, protection boots, and other elements associated with an occupational field may develop into a subcultural 'style' (Clarke et al., 1993, pp. 52–57) that may function as a form of resistance to academic schooling (Gjelstad, 2015, 2016). Youth cultural practices thus mediate the meanings and consequences of academisation.

Vocational youths must be recognised as vital cultural actors (Amit-Talai & Wulff, 1995). They develop 'hybrid identities' and participate in 'plural worlds' (Nilan & Feixa, 2006). In short, vocational students occupy ambiguous spaces between national ideologies, global markets, and local culture (Maira & Soep, 2005).

Although vocational students have become integrated into a school-oriented youth culture, or 'high school culture', with its internal status hierarchies (Milner, 2015), complex lines of similarity and difference may develop between vocational and general studies students. The school architecture also embodies the hierarchical relationship between vocational and academic studies. At the three schools part of my case study, the classrooms of general studies students are located on the upper floors of the main buildings, whereas vocational learning places are situated on the lower floors and often in adjacent buildings. This creates a situation where vocational and academic students are institutionally

'segregated'. Some vocational students told me that, at their school, there is a kind of 'mental fence' between themselves and general studies specialisation students. This suggests that class differences still exist, also at the level of culture, in Norwegian upper secondary education.

The consequences of policies and institutional structures differ significantly depending on the local educational and cultural contexts. In the geographical area of the case study, VET appeals to many young people, who often possess extensive knowledge of local work life through relations to family and others. VET students also interact with vocational cultures at school and familiarise themselves with various occupational environments through internships in companies. As a result, VET students find themselves positioned both 'inside' and 'outside' of an academically focused school culture. In other words, the processes of academisation are unevenly distributed.

In Western Norway, the Green Industrialisation has increased the status of VET. It has created a discourse that figures industrial work as exciting, advanced, and well-paid. This message is conveyed by vocational teachers and parents who work in the industry, as well as through job advertisements and company visits. Brockmann and Laurie (2016) argue that the category of 'the vocational' changes with dominant discourses, and in many parts of Western Norway, the focus on 'Green transition' leads to a re-framing of VET students' identities and orientations. Industrial occupations are increasingly being associated with 'advanced' technology in addition to demanding, proper work. The head of the vocational programmes at the largest school in the area notes that career counsellors sometimes think those who are 'weak' in theory should choose VET. However, they must understand that extracting oil from the North Sea is advanced. Therefore, he often had to inform the counsellors that students will encounter complicated mathematics in these VET courses. 'How will anyone build platforms in the North Sea without mathematics?' Parents must also recognise that a clever son or daughter might choose a technology or construction programme without experiencing it as a defeat.

High-tech companies in the region see skilled workers as central to their business. One of the managers was proud that most of their leaders came from the 'floor' and held a vocational trade certificate. These companies actively cooperate with vocational schools to get hold of high-performing vocational students. Vocational students are in high demand, and the most prestigious employers can attract the 'best' students. This situation changes the relative status between academic and vocational education and may lead to a broader understanding of what counts as legitimate knowledge in the education system.

Facilitating school-to-work transitions

In Norway, a primary challenge for students in the vocational programmes is that they cannot be sure whether they will manage to obtain an apprenticeship. Many students lack apprenticeships after their second year in school (Rapp et al., 2023). A collaborative network in the described region wants to convey a clear message to youth that schools and businesses are making a persistent effort to offer an apprenticeship to anyone starting a vocational programme at one of the local schools. What makes the network unique is that it covers not only a particular trade or industry but the whole range of occupations described before.

In 2023–24, 98% of those second-year students at the three upper secondary schools in this region who applied were offered an apprenticeship by the end of the school year. This is unique in Norway, where the average for 2022 was 80.6% (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2023). Four factors may explain the success: First, the schools in the region have a long tradition of extensive cooperation with companies and working life. This vast network of collaboration has been strengthened and systematised in recent years. Second, an extended and more considered use of internships. Third, to give all students information and practical advice on applying for apprenticeships, which is challenging for many students. Lastly, an early follow-up of students who struggle at school or otherwise.

At the outset, the network obtained an overview of the schools and the companies' needs for apprentices. The steering group of the network also wanted to raise awareness among politicians and other stakeholders about the importance of apprenticeships for the region's development. They also put an effort into informing politicians, at the local and county levels, about the opportunities and challenges associated with carrying out such an ambitious goal. These activities are essential in negotiating the interests of VET vis-à-vis external authorities (cf. Billett, 2014).

The coordinator leading the network is based in a local business organisation, but the county administration and three municipalities finance the position in part. Whereas companies often organise local training agencies in Norway within a specific cluster of occupations (Jørgensen, 2018a), the training agency covers this region's main occupations. The VET system here shares similarities with the one described by Rapp et al. (2023, p. 12), where the head of a cross-disciplinary training agency 'follows the students from ninth grade in secondary school all the way to earning their certificates as apprentices'. The coordinator mentioned above focuses on the school part of the training, while the local (cross-disciplinary) training agency is responsible for the apprenticeship period.

In Norway, the application process is rather complicated. All applicants must register and upload several documents on a common digital platform (vigo.no) within a specific deadline. The county administration will then send information

about the students to various approved apprenticeship companies. Students should also apply directly to companies that often have other deadlines. Another channel for the provision of apprenticeships is the local training agency. A student may also be contacted directly by companies. Therefore, a young person can receive several offers through different channels, creating a confusing situation. Students who take the initiative, quickly send emails, and are not anxious about making phone calls will often win the competition for the best apprenticeship contracts. Students also have varying degrees of knowledge about what companies are looking for, and they have different skills in handling meetings with potential employers.

The coordinator acts as an 'entrepreneur' by connecting people and channelling resources across institutional boundaries. The coordinator's role is 'to check that we are on track towards the goal', and an annual plan is made for when different actors will do which activities. The coordinator visits every fourteen level 2 classes at the three schools, informing students about the application process. The coordinator tells them, for instance, how to find companies on the online application platform and supports them in detail: 'Go in there, press that button there.' The coordinator repeatedly tells students, teachers, and school managers that none of the level 2 students should have their internships in companies that will not have apprentices the following year. The students are made aware that internship periods are a place 'where they write their CVs', and that 'you must be aware that you are being observed' and 'you must play your cards right'. The internship period, part of the mentioned mandatory 'vocational in-depth subject', is crucial for students and companies to get to know each other.

The business association has established a resource group, consisting mostly of retired business leaders with a good knowledge of local companies who visit VET classes and provide advice, motivation, and knowledge regarding the application process. For instance, they explain how to write an application text and a CV, perform correctly during a job interview, and so forth. This helps these young people overcome practical barriers.

The lengthy transition process of becoming an apprentice is a complex one. We may therefore consider the application process as an extensive learning and socialisation process. VET students gradually develop their vocational interests and ideas about where they want their apprenticeship. They also acquire specific 'biographies' consisting of grades, attitudes, skills, and social networks that make them more or less attractive to different employers. The differences in the students' opportunities to get attractive apprenticeships become increasingly visible throughout the application period. Some students get good marks early on, are motivated, know where they are heading, can exploit social relations and other learning resources around them, and get valuable internships and, in turn,

an apprenticeship that meets their aspirations. Others have little motivation, do not know what they want, have limited knowledge about available opportunities, get weak grades, and end up with less attractive apprenticeship places. Some also find themselves in a situation where they risk dropping out of the training course.

Young people facing these risks are closely monitored. The network has created an intervention model that involves close and flexible follow-up of individual students to discover early on who has challenges. They put teachers, career counsellors, welfare offices (NAV), and follow-up services (OT) in teams to find possible measures. The aim is that everyone should get into work, even if they are not ready for an apprenticeship. Through the collaboration, NAV can also provide more tailored guidance for those who drop out (many due to unfortunate forms of academisation). Previously, NAV received those students who struggled after the schools had given up on providing them with an apprenticeship. 'It is between the systems students fall through,' the coordinator emphasised. Now, schools and the welfare office work in parallel, trying to find an alternative pathway before the school year ends. In this way, they avoid these young people spending the whole summer holiday feeling miserable about themselves and having no plans about what to do when their friends start school or work in the autumn. In their article on a local VET system in Inner Norway, Rapp and her colleagues argue that: 'Building strong relationships among counsellors, students, and teachers enhances networks and knowledge in VET, bridging gaps between different systems' (Rapp et al., 2023, p. 4). In my case, NAV is also a part of the circuit.

Vocational teachers on the frontline between schools and workplaces

In most vocational sites, the contact teachers are at the forefront of providing apprenticeships, although their responsibilities and roles are unclear. The ambiguous role of teachers in the transition process is also understandable in light of the Norwegian VET system described by Michelsen and Høst (2015). According to the formal VET model, the teachers' responsibilities stop when the students finish their two school years. On the other hand, new regulations at the county level have strengthened the schools' responsibilities for preparing students for an apprenticeship and for using internship periods to connect students and companies. As mentioned, the Norwegian Directorate of Education decided that from the 2021–22 school year, schools and companies must collaborate to develop 'local curricula' for the 'vocational in-depth subject' (YFF). A dedicated vocational teacher who is well-acquainted with the local job market understands which students are suited to different companies' social and professional

expectations. Throughout the school year, the teacher gains valuable insights into students' motivations, skills, and maturity. They often know which companies are experienced in supporting students and which may require additional attention.

In the region, as elsewhere in Norway, there is a tendency for school managers to cut teachers' resources to follow up on students' internships. Although specified contact teachers are most often provided with the responsibility, there is a tendency for the administration to standardise and digitalise cooperation with companies to make things more predictable. Teachers themselves think they should be responsible for the placement of students. Cuts of resources for 'in-depth studies' (YFF) are a main source of frustration. Several teachers stated in the interviews that they do a lot of 'invisible' work that is difficult to describe. 'Those practices that can be formalised,' one teacher says, 'are not necessarily those that will bring success'. These statements indicate the underlying dynamics of successful partnerships between schools and companies. The extensive work that many teachers do daily to negotiate the expectations of students, school management, and companies is reminiscent of the situation Lipsky (1983) describes for so-called street-level bureaucrats. Anthropologist Vike claims that recent neoliberal reforms of the Norwegian welfare state have expanded the gap between ambitious political goals and a lack of resources. This means that prioritising and negotiating conflicting interests is left to those on the front line, leading to what he aptly describes as a 'decentralization of dilemmas' (Vike, 2018, p. 143).

The teachers often feel that they are excluded from decisions relating to the follow-up of students in the subject YFF. Some teachers see fixed agreements and dissemination plans as part of a larger trend of management and control of their work. In a community where they are familiar with some of the students, parents, and employees in companies, some teachers feel an additional moral pressure to go the extra mile to secure apprenticeships. Some also experience competition to achieve the goal of providing all students with an apprenticeship, and this has personal costs, such as increased stress.

The tendency to cut teachers' resources for following up on students' internships may be considered part of an academic drift arising from an abstraction of routines performed by administrators, disconnected from the enactments of occupational practice (Billett, 2014, p. 3). The administrative staff often do not know the concepts, norms, and cultures of the specific learning practices of the trade (cf. Billett, 2010). As Billett (2014, p. 18) also emphasises, developing a functioning network 'requires building relations, confidence and shared understandings and decision-making locally.' This requires knowledge, I argue, about the particularities of local circumstances.

The need for situational analysis

A situational analysis maps and analyses the complexities of unfolding social life (Clarke, 2005). The theoretical premises and potentials of situated analysis are inspired by recent turns in the social sciences towards socio-material complexity, situated knowledge practices, and the need for grounded, empirical research (Clarke, 2005). The anthropologist Tsing argues that 'seemingly universalizing systems […] operate in specific material and social contexts' and that these systems 'can only be charged and enacted in the sticky materiality of practical encounters' (in Bartlett & Vavris, 2017, p. 40). This perspective shapes my understanding of modernisation processes such as bureaucratisation, standardisation, and systematisation, which, according to Olsen (2011), characterise the development of VET.

Jørgensen outlines four challenges faced by the Norwegian VET system, all of which are relevant to my case study. The first is to offer students high-quality placements. The second is to increase the social inclusion of marginal youth. The third is to raise its current low esteem. The fourth is to ensure that students complete and obtain a trade certificate (Jørgensen, 2018b, pp. 7–8). The collaborative project relates to all these, at times conflicting, challenges. Jørgensen and Tønder (2018) highlight the complexity of VET systems in the Nordic countries, and they point out that trade-offs between different interests and goals will occur in any system. They conclude that it is difficult to generalise 'best practices' across contexts (Jørgensen & Tønder, 2018, p. 46). The case indicates that it is easier to achieve precise and tailored compromises at a local level and that a situational analysis can help map and identify spaces of action.

So far, the article has emphasised that various measures for countering the unfortunate standardisation of VET, such as those coordinated through the regional collaborative project, have different meanings for different teachers, students, and companies. It has pointed out the diversity and complexity of vocational students, the differences across vocational programmes, and the socio-geographical situatedness of students, schools, teachers, and workplaces. An important reason for the success of the collaborative project is that they work organically from the bottom up, learn along the way, and correct for changes and unintended consequences. The actors engage in ongoing dialogue to find solutions and clarify their roles, interests, and responsibilities.

One central question is what insights can be generalised beyond this case study. It is important to note that this case is located in a relatively small-scale community. The relations between scale and organisational dynamics of social interaction are essential. For example, which measures can be transferred from a semi-rural to an urban context? The article offers an alternative to a 'positivist' tendency to evaluate different measures separately. Some research projects adopt an instrumentalist or technocratic understanding of learning and teaching,

aspiring to identify a set of 'best practices' to be transferred to all schools (James & Biesta, 2007, p. 102). Like certain forms of evidence-based research, this approach is grounded in the belief that one can reach general claims about educational means and aims (James & Biesta, 2007, p. 119). Perhaps the most important lesson from James and Biesta is to create a 'maximum space for localised initiatives, creativity and professional judgement, and creating more synergistic cultures to support and reward such initiatives' (James & Biesta, 2007, p. 126). An important task for VET researchers is to explore and critically examine the shifting and multiple contexts of local initiatives by directing our analysis to their preconditions and consequences. Bartlett and Vavrus (2017, pp. 15, 38) argue in favour of a process-oriented approach to comparison rather than looking for isolated variables. One has to look for the elementary processes since 'similar processes lead to different outcomes in some situations' and 'different influences lead to similar outcomes in others' (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 15).

I follow Bartlett and Vavrus' (2017) approach to case study research and their emphasis on the importance of attending to how historical, social and economic developments of various scales shape the 'cases'. Since all measures will have unintended consequences, the most important thing is understanding the specific cultural and social contexts in which the interventions occur.

Summary: Countering academisation through local collaboration

The conceptual starting point for this article is a case study of a network of VET actors located in a region in Western Norway collaborating to motivate local youth to choose vocational education, to build better connections between schools and workplaces, and thus to strengthen the relevance, quality, appeal and recognition of VET in the region. Collaborative work is, therefore, central to counteracting the unfortunate aspects of academisation. The goal is to continuously support students in developing their vocational identities, expanding their knowledge, building careers, and creating networks. Additionally, the collaborative network helps students overcome the most immediate social, cognitive, and affective barriers they encounter when moving from two years of school-based education to apprenticeships. The application process is a critical first step in helping students break away from school peer groups and move into the adult world of work.

The transitions are organisationally complicated because young people have an individual right to education but not to an apprenticeship. After integrating VET into a comprehensive upper secondary school system in the mid-1990s, the two years at school combine academic subjects and subjects based on relatively autonomous VET knowledge traditions. The last two educational reforms have met some of these challenges, but have not altered this structural situation.

The ways these organisational features are being localised differ from VET programme to VET programme, depending on local occupational structures but also on students' attachments to their places of growing up, access to local schools, peer networks, vocational aspirations, and lifestyle orientations. This means that young people not only have to navigate the labyrinths of localised VET systems but also reflexively find their way through social and geographical landscapes. An ethnographic, bottom-up approach makes visible the practical barriers and considerations of students, the day-to-day work of teachers, and the dilemmas and costs associated with maintaining institutional orders and political objectives.

Since we are dealing with complex and open systems, the significance of particular measures cannot be derived in advance but must be empirically explored and described. The heterogeneous structure of the Norwegian VET model has an inherent room for manoeuvre, which regional VET actors expand further. This article has emphasised the non-linearity and the multi-directionality of academic drift. I have therefore argued that contextualising academisation processes is crucial due to the various and sometimes contradictory ways they influence vocational education. It is important to identify local manifestations and consequences of these extensive processes and the diverse ways local actors in the field of VET deal with them. Therefore, a situational analysis is essential to assess specific measures for facilitating school-to-work transitions.

The most important way to counteract the negative aspects of academisation is probably to help young people create a focus by relating students' social worlds to vocational matters and by providing recognition, a sense of mastery, and practical help to overcome various barriers that they encounter in everyday life (Mahler et al., 2023).

An essential consequence of the 1994 Educational Reform was the creation of age-homogeneous school classes, which transformed VET into a 'youth education,' meaning that VET students, in many respects, became part of a school-centred youth culture. Young people's relationships with peers are crucial for forming vocational learning cultures and school-to-work transitions. Although an unintended consequence of the mid-1990s Reform policy, it is an important and under-researched aspect of the academisation of VET in Norway.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank everyone who participated in the case study, the two anonymous reviewers for their substantial and valuable comments, and the special issue editors for their helpful guidance in completing the article.

Notes on contributor

Lars Gjelstad, PhD in social anthropology, is an associate professor of sociology at the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences. His research focuses on youth and vocational education and ethnographic, comparative perspectives on vocational learning and knowledge practices. Gjelstad has also conducted extensive anthropological fieldwork on youth, education, and urban culture in Indonesia.

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