

Capacity for reform: the changing roles of apprenticeship in three Nordic countries

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Summary

Despite similar societal systems that have given rise to the concept of a Nordic model, the vocational education and training (VET) systems in the Nordic countries are strikingly diverse. This article provides an analysis of why the role of apprenticeship in the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish VET systems evolved along different paths from the late 1970s until the present (2020). During this period, the most fundamental changes took place in Norway, as apprenticeship was established in most VET programmes through a major reform in 1994. Sweden took the opposite course in the 1990s and instead strengthened the statist and school-based nature of its system. In Denmark, a dual system with apprenticeship where the social partners have a decisive influence has remained largely intact. We argue that differing policy positions taken by organised labour are important in order to explain the three countries' different trajectories over the last 40 years.

Résumé

Malgré des systèmes sociétaux similaires qui ont donné naissance au concept du modèle nordique, les systèmes d'enseignement et de formation professionnels (EFP) des pays nordiques sont extrêmement divers. Cet article analyse les raisons pour lesquelles le rôle de l'apprentissage dans les systèmes danois, norvégien et suédois d'EFP a évolué différemment entre la fin des années 1970 et aujourd'hui (2020). Au cours de cette période, les changements les plus fondamentaux ont eu lieu en Norvège, l'apprentissage ayant été introduit dans la plupart des programmes d'EFP par le biais d'une réforme majeure en 1994. La Suède a pris la direction opposée dans les années 1990 et a plutôt renforcé la nature étatiste et scolaire de son système. Au Danemark, un système dual d'apprentissage où les partenaires sociaux ont une influence décisive est en grande partie demeuré intact. Les auteurs soutiennent que les positions politiques divergentes adoptées par les syndicats sont importantes pour expliquer les différentes trajectoires des trois pays au cours des 40 dernières années.

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Zusammenfassung

Trotz ähnlicher gesellschaftlicher Systeme, die das Konzept eines „Nordischen Modells“ entstehen ließen, gibt es erhebliche Unterschiede zwischen den Berufsbildungssystemen in den skandinavischen Ländern. Der vorliegende Artikel analysiert, warum sich die Lehrlingsausbildung in den dänischen, norwegischen und schwedischen Systemen seit Ende der 1970er Jahre bis heute (2020) so unterschiedlich entwickelt hat. Während dieser Zeit fanden in Norwegen tiefgreifende Veränderungen statt, als die betriebliche Lehrlingsausbildung im Rahmen einer umfassenden Reform 1994 zu einem festen Bestandteil der meisten Berufsbildungsprogramme wurde. Schweden entschied sich in den 90er Jahren zum entgegengesetzten Weg und stärkte die staats- und schulorientierte Ausrichtung des Systems. In Dänemark blieb ein duales System mit Lehrlingsausbildung und einem beträchtlichen Einfluss der Sozialpartner weitgehend intakt. Wir sind der Meinung, dass differierende grundsatzpolitische Standpunkte der Gewerkschaften ein wichtiger Punkt sind, um den unterschiedlichen Kurs der drei Länder in den vergangenen vierzig Jahren zu verstehen.

Keywords

Vocational education and training, apprenticeship, Nordic countries, historical institutionalism

Introduction and analytical framework

The Nordic countries are often associated with a number of shared features, such as generous welfare states and highly organised labour markets. Together, these characteristics have given rise to the concept of a ‘Nordic model’ (Dølvik et al., 2015). Within education, a comprehensive, publicly funded school system has been the core of the ideal Nordic model, with equity, social inclusion and welfare as important policy goals. However, as concerns vocational education and training at the upper secondary level, there is no common model, but rather a striking diversity between the Nordic countries. Denmark has a dual apprenticeship-based vocational education model, very different from the statist, school-based model of Sweden, while Norway has developed a hybrid model, with apprenticeship training following school-based education in the ‘2+2’ model. This combination of different VET models within similar societal systems provides a particularly fruitful ground for comparative research (Jørgensen et al., 2018).

In this article, we analyse how and why the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish VET systems have evolved differently between the late 1970s and the present. We focus here on the role of apprenticeship. Our contribution lies in a comparative analysis of the role played by the social partners in the reform processes over the last 40 years, and particularly that of organised labour. In this period, the Danish and Swedish VET systems did not change fundamentally, while the Norwegian VET system was transformed by a comprehensive reform in upper secondary education in the 1990s in which apprenticeship gained a central role. More recently, Swedish policy-makers have tried to establish apprenticeship training as an alternative option to school-based VET. Thus far, however, this does not represent a transformation of the Swedish VET system.

Our analytical framework is inspired by historical institutionalism. Within this framework, the evolution of national systems is analysed as a historical process in which the organisation of different employers (artisans, manufacturing) and labour (skilled workers, unskilled workers), and their relative strength versus the state are important factors in shaping the VET system (Streeck, 1989; Thelen, 2004). Established sets of institutions create cognitive, normative and regulatory incentives and constraints (Scott, 1995), but there is also room for agency and change (Thelen, 2004, 2010). All Nordic countries share the strong role of the social partners as an important

institutional requirement for apprenticeship. However, coalitions between the state and the social partners in the three countries analysed have developed along different trajectories (Jørgensen et al., 2018).¹ While the positions of employers are crucial in analyses of VET, the Nordic countries also have strong labour movements with historically divergent views on VET, both within and between countries. The positions and influence of the trade unions are therefore important factors to include in the analysis. The Nordic countries are also characterised by a strong state, with positions on VET that primarily reflect changing governments, but with different ties to employer and labour interests. We analyse how the Nordic VET systems have evolved according to the interests, beliefs and relative strength of these major actors.

In our analysis, an important explanatory factor for change (or stability) are the positions taken by organised labour, which probably reflects the special position (or power) of the labour movement in the Nordic countries. Social democratic governments have generally been more sympathetic to labour interests compared to centre-right governments, but the *policy positions of organised labour* have not been the same in the three countries. These positions are partly related to *union structure*, especially regarding whether skilled and unskilled workers are organised within the same unions, as illustrated by a comparison between Denmark and Sweden. Theoretically, craft/skilled worker unions have incentives to support skilled work and apprenticeship-based VET in politics and collective bargaining, while encompassing unions would have to balance the interests of skilled and unskilled workers and thus be less likely to support an apprenticeship-based VET system. However, the positions of organised labour cannot be reduced to such structural factors, which is clear when comparing the Swedish and Norwegian cases. The *positions of employer organisations* are also important, and these are at least partly attributed to differences in *industrial structure*, as the large industrial enterprises of Sweden have traditionally had less interest in a collective apprenticeship-based system than the small- and medium-sized firms in Denmark and Norway. The positions of the social partners are formed through specific historical processes, which constrain and condition later choices, but clearly do not determine these, as shown by the reform of the Norwegian system in the 1990s. Some *institutions*, for instance forums for tripartite discussions on VET, would seem most likely to facilitate VET reform that involves apprenticeship, but are no guarantee for successful reform. In the time period we study, there are also time-specific differences in the *industrial relations climate* during the late 1980s and 1990s that made apprenticeship dependent on tripartite cooperation a less attractive option in Sweden than in Norway.

Our article is based on three types of data sources. First, we rely on committee reports and government propositions to parliament regarding the VET reforms in Sweden in 1991/1994 and 2011 and in Norway in 1994. Second, we have drawn upon previous literature describing the historical evolution of the Nordic VET models (see among others Dobbins and Busemeyer, 2015; Jørgensen, 2018; Jørgensen et al., 2018; Michelsen and Stenström, 2018; Nyen and Tønder, 2014, 2015; Olofsson, 2010; Thunqvist et al., 2019). Third, we have conducted personal interviews with the main actors that were involved in the 1994 reform in Norway.²

1 See publications from the Nord-VET research project on the project website: nord-vet.dk.

2 Interviews were conducted with individuals in the following positions during the period leading up to the reform: the minister of education, the head of the department of upper secondary education in the Ministry of Education, the head of the confederation of employers (NHO), the chief individual responsible for education within the confederation of trade unions (LO) and a special advisor in the main teachers' union (Utdanningsforbundet).

The Nordic VET systems from the late 1970s until today

In this section, we describe the evolution of the VET system during this period, country by country, and analyse what factors drove change or caused stability.

Denmark: a stable commitment to apprenticeship training

Denmark has the most classical dual vocational education model within the Nordic countries, with a system that has many similarities to the German VET system (Jørgensen, 2014: 7). Apprenticeship plays a pivotal role in the VET system, and apprenticeship training is governed by employers and skilled worker unions through the principle of ‘self-governance’ (Juil and Jørgensen, 2011; Jørgensen, 2018). The monitoring of trade examinations and approval of training places are among the responsibilities of the social partners. The skill profiles for the apprenticeship trades (i.e., the vocational curricula) are based on the advice of national trade committees, with equal representation from the social partners. Each committee is responsible for at least one VET qualification.³ The state has traditionally avoided intervention in apprenticeship training and has concentrated on regulating the school-based aspect of vocational training (Juil and Jørgensen, 2011: 292). The relative autonomy of the social partners represents a normative constraint on state involvement in the governance of apprenticeship training. The trade unions and the employer organisations are represented on an equal footing in the bodies regulating the Danish VET system. This is different from the German model, in which the employers have a more dominant position (Juil and Jørgensen, 2011: 291; Thelen, 2004).

The Danish VET model has deep roots. The first law on apprenticeship training was passed as early as 1889, providing a regulatory framework for the training of apprentices in the workplace. When the apprenticeship system in Denmark was reformed in 1937, the governance of the system by the social partners became an integral part of Danish VET (Juil and Jørgensen, 2011: 291). In 1956, the former full-time work-based apprenticeship system was replaced by a dual system with a combination of school-based training and apprenticeship. The intention was not to replace apprenticeship training but to maintain it as an integral part of the VET system. A clear separation between vocational and academic tracks at the upper secondary level has endured despite the introduction of a nine-year comprehensive school, including the lower secondary level, in 1975 (Jørgensen, 2018).

In the late 1970s, basic school-based education was introduced as an alternative to apprenticeship through the ‘EFG’ reform (Basic Vocational Education). The reform was based on a critique from the left wing of the Social Democratic Party, who argued that apprenticeship training was more a form of exploitation of young people than a form of learning. However, the apprenticeship system remained under the control of the social partners, due to the strong cross-class alliance between employers and craft unions in Denmark (Jørgensen, 2014, 2018: 16). In 1991, the liberal-conservative government introduced a wide-ranging reform of the VET system. The reform effectively fused the EFG with apprenticeship training. After the reform, the standard VET programme had an introductory period of 6–12 months of school-based education and training (*grundforløp*). Apprenticeships would normally last three years after this introductory period. The reform also involved a decentralisation of control to the vocational colleges (Juil and Jørgensen, 2011: 298).

³ Apprenticeships are furthermore funded through a system of collective training levies for all employers, which are allocated to the companies that provide apprenticeships (Michelsen and Stenstrøm, 2018).

Following this, several reforms have taken place, driven in particular by declining interest of young people in VET. However, neither of these have significantly changed the role of apprenticeships within VET. Despite the strong position of skilled work and apprenticeships in the labour market, apprenticeship training has at times been portrayed as a social policy measure in the policy discourse. Low interest from young people and low completion rates led to the latest reform of VET, which was agreed in 2014 and implemented in 2015. The reform was based on an agreement⁴ between all political parties, apart from the left-wing Enhedslisten after tripartite discussions in an ad-hoc committee on VET reform failed to reach a consensus.⁵ The reform introduced a number of changes, one of the most important of which was a standardisation of the initial school-based training across programmes. However, the reform changed only the school-based part of vocational education, leaving the apprenticeship system more or less unchanged.

Jørgensen (2018) argues that the apprenticeship-based Danish VET system has been supported by ‘an enduring cross-class alliance’ of employers and craft unions. On the employer side, the apprenticeship-based VET system has relied on the dominant position of small- and medium-sized enterprises and of craft/artisan employers, and the relative absence of large industrial firms. On the labour side, the organisation of workers in skilled worker unions has led organised labour to support apprenticeship. The strong coalition between employer organisations and trade unions has secured an enduring support for an apprenticeship-based dual system. The weaker position of the Social Democratic Party compared to Sweden, and to a lesser extent Norway, has also reduced the influence of the forces within the labour movement that were sceptical with regard to apprenticeship (Dobbins and Busemeyer, 2015). Although these factors helped sustain a VET system that stands out as the prime Nordic example of the dual model, it is interesting to note how the view of Denmark is turned around when Denmark is compared to other dual systems, such as that in Germany. Nelson (2012) sees the strong position of the Social Democratic Party in Denmark and strong union involvement (including the organisation of unskilled workers within peak organisations) as instrumental factors in creating a Danish dual VET model that is more inclusive, produces more flexible skills, and has a stronger tripartite element in governance – all aspects which often are regarded as ‘Nordic.’

The actor coalition that ensured that the Danish dual system ‘survived’ the integration process within upper secondary education in the 1970s also helped to preserve the distinctive characteristics of the Danish system after 1980. Support for apprenticeship-based VET continues among the coalition of employer organisations and skilled worker unions that created the system. Both Jørgensen (2018) and Dobbins and Busemeyer (2015) see a strong element of path dependency in the evolution of the Danish VET systems over recent decades. The institutional stability rests to some extent on the power the cross-class coalition of interests continues to wield over politics. The main labour confederation LO has not put forward any proposals to replace apprenticeship training with school-based VET to reduce inequalities, nor has the political left seriously questioned the role of employer-led apprenticeship training in political negotiations around VET in the 21st century. Instead, these forces have concentrated on incremental reform within the established

4 Aftale om bedre og mere attraktive erhvervsuddannelser. Regeringen, Venstre, Dansk Folkeparti, Socialistisk Folkeparti, Konservative Folkeparti og Liberal Alliance (24. februar 2014) [Agreement on better and more attractive vocational training between the Government, the Liberal Party, the Danish People’s Party, the Socialist People’s Party, the Conservative People’s Party and the Liberal Alliance].

5 The social partners also wanted to discuss compulsory education, which was not part of the committee mandate, see (in Danish): <https://www.altinget.dk/arbejdsmarked/artikel/eud-udvalget-opgiver-at-naa-til-enighed-om-erhvervsskole-anbefalinger> (accessed 4 December 2019).

VET system. The position of organised labour may reflect the weak power base of low-skilled workers within the Danish LO, but the organisations of unskilled workers have (from the 1990s) also prioritised upskilling strategies and becoming part of the apprenticeship system rather than pressing for a generalist VET system and wage solidarity. In recent decades, the Danish LO has accepted skills–wage differentials related to skilled/unskilled work (thus underpinning apprenticeship) in return for expanded rights to continuing education and training – which, after 2006, also includes rights for unskilled workers (Ibsen and Thelen, 2017: 421–424).

Sweden: scepticism towards apprenticeships

A state-regulated, school-based VET system evolved in Sweden through a series of changes in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, in which first apprenticeships and later in-firm schools were marginalised. Unable to agree on a social partner-led vocational education system, the social partners eventually agreed that initial vocational education would be provided by the state. VET then became a consensual issue within industrial relations (Lundahl, 1997). Gradually, VET became integrated into a unified education system at the upper secondary level, where vocational and academic programmes were offered within the same schools, with a common core of general subjects. By the 1970s, the school-based VET had become primarily a domain for education authorities with little involvement from the social partners. Apprenticeship training played only a minor role.

One of the reasons for the decline of apprenticeship training was a strong scepticism towards apprenticeship within the labour movement. A broad vocational education was seen as the best way to provide educational opportunities for all, while apprenticeship training would maintain social inequalities and inhibit solidaristic wage policies. This position became the leading position in the Swedish labour movement during the late 1950s and 1960s (Olofsson, 2005; Petterson, 2008).

During the 1980s, pressures mounted for change in VET at the upper secondary level, as the two-year school-based model was deemed insufficient to meet shifting needs caused by more rapid changes in technology and work organisation. However, that did not change the positions of organised labour and employers towards apprenticeship. In 1986, an expert committee recommended increasing vocational education to three years, with more time for general subjects, and with more workplace training, but through placements rather than apprenticeships (SOU, 1986).⁶ The committee had representation from the main labour and employer confederations LO (Land-sorganisationen) and SAF (Svenska Arbetsgivareföreningen), and both confederations broadly supported the committee's main recommendations. The employer organisations wanted to improve the labour market relevance of VET, not through apprenticeship, but through increased employer influence on school-based VET and more workplace training (Lauglo, 1993; Thunqvist et al., 2019). The labour unions, on the other hand, wanted to further integrate vocational and general education in order to reduce class differences (LO, 1986).

The only actor that supported apprenticeship training in the ensuing process was the Conservative Party-led government that came to power in late 1991, but lack of support from employers and the economic crisis of the early 1990s meant that plans for apprenticeship reform were shelved. Instead, when a reform was implemented in 1994 with the Social Democratic Party back in power,

⁶ The description of the political process around the 1991 reform builds primarily on Thunqvist et al. (2019) and Lundahl (1997).

a consensus had been reached between the employer organisations, trade unions and large-scale industries to support a broad school-based vocational education with only minimal elements of workplace training. The reform that followed (programgymnasiet) can be seen as a continuation of the principle of broad schooling for all, and even as a strengthening of the unified nature of the upper secondary school system (Thunqvist et al., 2019). The 1991 reform followed some of the main recommendations from the 1986 committee and extended all school-based VET programmes from two to three years. These programmes would now provide general access to higher education. Vocational programmes were broad and relied on more specialised training in the firms after graduation, thus not achieving the aim of the main employer organisation (SAF) of increased labour market relevance. Instead, the result was that the involvement and influence of employers and unions on VET weakened further.

The position of organised labour is an important factor in explaining why apprenticeship training was originally discarded in favour of a statist, school-based model and why this model became strengthened through the 1991 reform. The organisation of Swedish labour in broad unions, encompassing both skilled and unskilled workers, stimulates such skills policies (Ibsen and Thelen, 2017). However, there was also a strong belief within the LO in the normative value of a broad education system for all, to counteract class differences – a belief that stretched beyond pursuing union members' interests. This position continued in the political process leading up to the 1991 reform, in which the LO supported an emphasis on broader skills, increased time for common subjects and even a broader programme structure than originally proposed (Prop. 1990/91: 85)⁷. Second, SAF did not advocate apprenticeships either, despite wanting stronger labour market relevance and influence over VET. This was partly related to the strong position of large companies. Third, it seems likely that a long, ideologically grounded tradition for school-based VET placed normative/belief-based constraints on both sides, but there were also legislative and organisational institutional barriers against apprenticeship as a policy option. There is a long-standing tradition in Swedish industrial relations to resist 'interference' from the state in agreements between employers and unions, which does not facilitate introduction of apprenticeships.⁸ This has also prevented the establishment of institutions to support apprenticeships, such as an apprenticeship act and tripartite governance structures for VET (Olofsson, 2005). In comparison, the first apprenticeship act was passed in Norway in 1950 and as early as 1889 in Denmark.

As in Denmark, responsibility was also shifted in the 1990s from the central government to the local school level. Later, the number of private schools increased, combined with a liberalisation of school choice (Olofsson and Thunqvist, 2014; Virolainen and Thunqvist, 2016).

After 2000, youth unemployment, high drop-out rates and a predicted shortage of skilled workers in manufacturing, construction and health care put apprenticeship back on the agenda (Olofsson and Wadensjö, 2012). In 2006, a centre-right coalition returned to power and tried to re-establish and strengthen apprenticeship, inspired by Sweden's Scandinavian neighbours, Denmark and Norway (Olofsson and Thunqvist, 2014). These attempts resulted in a pilot programme in 2008 and a broader reform in 2011 (Lagrådsremiss, 2011; SOU, 2011). A stronger division between programmes preparing students for academic higher education and programmes preparing them for the labour market was at the core of the reform (Thunqvist et al., 2019). In the new programme structure, apprenticeship was introduced as an optional alternative to school-based vocational

7 Prop. 1990/91:85 Växa med kunskaper – om gymnasieskolan och vuxenutbildningen. [Grow with knowledge – about upper secondary and adult education].

8 This principle stems from «Saltsjöbadavtalet» – an accord from 1938.

programmes. This may be seen as a process of layering (Thelen, 2004), where new institutions co-exist with the older institutions rather than replace them, which has the potential for changing the VET system more profoundly over time. However, thus far it would be incorrect to conclude that a major change of the VET system has happened. The core elements of a classic dual model are still lacking in Swedish VET. Apprenticeship training is optional, and while the number of students in apprenticeships is increasing, it is still small compared to school-based VET. Approximately 12 per cent of VET students were in apprenticeships in 2018–2019.⁹ The support among the social partners is limited. Apprenticeship training is still governed by the central government and individual schools, not by the social partners, and there are no tripartite structures for the governance and development of vocational training. However, in a few trades, an employer-managed apprenticeship system remains outside the formal education system, which apprentices enter after completing upper secondary education.

The attempts to strengthen workplace-based training and to introduce apprenticeship received some support from the social democrats and the confederation of labour unions (LO) ahead of the pilot programme in 2008 and the broader reform in 2011. One reason was probably the layered approach, in which apprenticeships did not replace the school-based system. However, both the LO and the Social Democratic Party had become more sympathetic to efforts to strengthen workplace-based training, and when the centre-right government pushed for re-introduction of apprenticeship, they did not oppose it. This gradual change in political preferences has been described as a partial convergence in views on VET between different interest groups (Dobbins and Busemeyer, 2015). The reasons for the changed policy stance are not fully clear, but the framing of apprenticeship reform as tying school and work life closer together, and the establishment of new tripartite bodies at the school and national level, may have played a part. The change may also be seen as a reflection of a weaker labour union power base due to the declining strength of the Social Democratic Party (Dobbins and Busemeyer, 2015).

Norway: extension of apprenticeship through reform

The Norwegian VET system remained largely unregulated until after World War II. A law on vocational schools for industry and crafts was passed in 1940 and implemented in 1945. An apprenticeship act was passed in 1950, providing a regulatory framework for apprenticeship training. Initially, the scope of the apprenticeship act was confined to towns and urban areas (Nyen and Tønder, 2014). The employers and the different trades were granted a strong formal position within the legal framework. Each trade covered by the apprenticeship act was regulated by a separate national council with representation from employers' and workers' associations. The National Apprentice Council was established as a tripartite arrangement between the state, employers' and workers' associations, but the initial capacity for coordination across trades was low (Michelsen and Høst, 2018: 149).

The apprenticeship act of 1950 was largely inspired by the Danish dual system, formally requiring apprentices to combine workplace training with theoretical education and certification. In practice, however, it was possible to obtain status and wages as skilled workers locally without formal education and testing. In 1966 the law was revised, formally enforcing school attendance for apprentices. At the same time, however, experienced workers within an area regulated by the

⁹ See: <https://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/statistik/arkiverade-statistiknyheter/statistik/2019-03-07-statistik-over-gymnasieskolans-elever-2018-19> (accessed 4 December 2019).

law were granted the right to obtain a skilled workers certificate by passing a journeyman's examination without formal schooling or apprenticeship. The experience-based trade certificate provided a mechanism for mobility from unskilled to skilled work mainly through work experience. This pragmatic approach has been a characteristic feature of the Norwegian VET system.

The regulatory framework, as well as established traditions for apprenticeships within crafts and parts of the industry, provided conditions for the revitalisation and extension of apprenticeship. In the 1970s, there was a significant increase in the number of apprenticeships in crafts and industrial trades. In 1974, a common law for both general and vocational upper secondary education was introduced (Nyen and Tønder, 2015). Highly specialised and practically oriented VET tracks in the new comprehensive upper secondary school provided a wide range of combinations of school-based vocational education and apprenticeship- or firm-based training (Michelsen and Høst, 2018; Olsen, 2008).

In 1981, the apprenticeship act was replaced by a new vocational training act. The new law provided a regulatory framework for tripartite cooperation and extended the scope of the law to the whole country (not only towns and urban areas). In addition, the law laid a foundation for establishing new trades outside the established domain of crafts and industry (Nyen and Tønder, 2015). In each county municipality, autonomous councils in apprentice training were established, providing considerable autonomy to the social partners. The county vocational training boards were responsible for the certification of training companies, approval of new apprenticeship contracts and the supervision of the quality of training (Michelsen and Høst, 2018). In addition, joint employer-owned training agencies were established, strengthening coordination between firms and making it easier for firms to take on apprentices. The state apprenticeship grants to companies were also increased, making apprenticeship training more attractive to employers (Nyen and Tønder, 2015). Combined with a general upturn in the economy, these changes led to a revival of apprenticeship and VET in the early 1980s.

A major challenge to the diversified VET programme structure was that many young people ended up without formal qualifications or moved horizontally from one basic course to another without progressing. In addition, there were capacity problems in upper secondary education caused by larger cohorts of young people and reduced labour market opportunities for them. Faced with these challenges, the Labour Party government initiated a reform, with a statutory right to upper secondary education for 16–19-year-olds as an important aim. The reform initiative received strong support from the social partners. A public committee was established, with representation from the employers and trade unions, which also spurred talks between the main employer and labour organisations. These talks ended up in a joint declaration signed by the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) and the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NHO) (entitled the 'Joint Declaration on Vocational Education and Training in Schools and Workplaces'). The NHO and LO both supported apprenticeship within a broad vocational education. The social partners argued that apprenticeship training was a way to secure occupationally relevant competence for the labour market. From the LO's point of view, establishing new occupational trades based on apprenticeships could also raise the status of and wages for workers.¹⁰

In the report from the public committee (NOU, 1991: 4), a school-based model (like Sweden's) and a model in which all training took place in the companies were both discussed and rejected. The committee believed that a school-based model (without apprenticeships) would not sufficiently involve companies and social partners, with potential detrimental effects on the quality

10 The interview was with the LO secretary responsible for education.

of training during work practice placement periods as well as the availability of such placements. A purely school-based system was also deemed too costly, as the capacity within upper secondary schools was already severely limited. Furthermore, the committee emphasised that a dual model combining school-based training and apprenticeship would stimulate cooperation between schools and companies and increase the motivation for young people to complete their education (Nyen and Tønder, 2014: 81).

The main elements of the resulting Reform 94 were based on the above-mentioned public committee report and the joint declaration by the social partners. Most importantly, Reform 94 meant that apprenticeships were formally integrated into almost all VET programmes. At the same time, all VET programmes provided a broad theoretical base, including general subjects. The reform established the 2+2 model as the main model for VET, with two years of primarily school-based education followed by two years of apprenticeship. The VET programmes start out broadly, with increasing specialisation towards the apprenticeship (Nyen and Tønder, 2015).

Following the changes brought about by Reform 94, the governance structure for VET was also reformed. The mandate of the National VET Council was redefined, and the autonomy to supervise the quality of VET was withdrawn. At the regional level, the social partners lost control over the regional apprentice councils to the county municipal executive. Peer control and informal contacts with training firms were replaced by increasing formalisation, audits and quality control frameworks (Michelsen and Høst, 2018).

With Reform 94, Norwegian VET became a hybrid system combining elements from the dual system (e.g. the strong position of apprenticeships and the way assessment is carried out¹¹) with elements of the state-regulated system (e.g. the deep integration of VET into an education system where educational authorities officially have the final word) (Nyen and Tønder, 2014: 24–28). The reform led to an increase in the number of new apprenticeships annually, from around 8000 in 1990 to almost 18,000 in 1996, which amounts to close to a third of the relevant cohort of young people (Nyen and Tønder, 2014: 80). A later reform in 2006, the Knowledge Promotion Reform (Kunnskapsløftet), left the fundamental features of Norwegian VET largely unchanged, such as the central role of apprenticeship and the 2+2 model as the main model.

We argue that the integration of apprenticeship training in upper secondary education in Norway through Reform 94 represented a major institutional change. Several factors facilitated this change. Traditions for apprenticeship had developed over time and were gradually expanded to new trades and geographic areas through legislation. The combination of traditions and a regulatory framework made apprenticeship training feasible and available as a training model. To the trade unions, the reform provided young people with structured pathways to become skilled workers and potential union members. Furthermore, the established opportunity for unskilled workers to become skilled workers through the experience-based trade certificate made it possible to unite different interests within broad unions with both skilled and unskilled workers. Each of these conditions made it easier for trade unions to support apprenticeship as a major part of the reform.

Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed changes in the VET systems of three Nordic countries – Denmark, Norway and Sweden – from the late 1970s until today (2019). We have used a historical

11 Competence is tested through a practical theoretical test, which is usually assessed by skilled workers within the trade.

institutionalist framework focusing on the positions of employer organisations, labour unions and the state. The established sets of institutions create cognitive, normative and regulatory constraints, but there is also room for institutional change, through changes in beliefs or the relative power of the actors.

A striking feature when comparing the three countries is the importance of the role of organised labour. The importance of unions reflects the strong role played by organised labour in the Nordic countries, and their close relationship to the historically dominant social democratic parties. In all the Nordic countries, egalitarian ideals and the aim of using the education system to reduce social inequalities influenced the debate on VET in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly within the labour movement. Sweden still stands out, as these influences were not balanced by the same employer and labour interests as they were in Denmark and, to a lesser extent, Norway. Although there were also different views on apprenticeship within the labour movement in these countries, the Danish skilled worker unions supported apprenticeships, while the main Norwegian union was more sympathetic to apprenticeships than their Swedish counterpart. In the time period we studied (1980–2019), the Danish skilled worker unions continued to support apprenticeship, and the Norwegian LO agreed to important changes and reform in the 1980s and 1990s that reinstated apprenticeships at the core of almost all VET programmes. In contrast, the Swedish LO continued to support school-based VET as a way to achieve social inclusion and reduced inequalities.

A comparison between Denmark and Sweden alone may lead to the conclusion that union structure is the most important factor for determining the position of organised labour, especially as union structure is shown to lead to different labour strategies in a number of areas (Ibsen and Thelen, 2017). The Danish union structure with skilled worker unions have led organised labour in Denmark to support apprenticeship while the Swedish union structure with skilled and unskilled workers organised in the same unions led to VET policies favouring a generalist and school-based VET. However, the case of Norway shows that this explanation is too simple. Although the Norwegian union structure is more similar to the Swedish than the Danish, the Norwegian LO actively chose to support apprenticeships when a reform of upper secondary education came onto the agenda in the late 1980s. The LO saw the establishment of new trades as a way of raising status and wages for new groups (Nyen and Tønder, 2014: 73). The different positions of the Norwegian and Swedish LOs seem primarily due to different beliefs among the labour union leaders in Norway and Sweden on the relative benefits of apprenticeship training at that point in time. A contributing factor was that Norway already had a tradition for apprenticeship and an institutional framework that facilitated apprenticeship training as a policy solution, such as an infrastructure for tripartite discussions on VET and apprenticeship legislation with procedures for establishing new trades – both of these were lacking in Sweden. There was also a more consensual industrial relations climate in Norway than in Sweden in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Dølvik and Martin, 2000), which made it easier to arrive at apprenticeship training as a policy conclusion.

It is, however, worth noting that the positions of employer organisations also differed between Sweden and Norway, with the main Norwegian employer confederation (NHO) supporting apprenticeships, while their Swedish counterparts (SAF) wanted more labour market influence on the school-based VET. The different industrial structures may be part of the explanation, with large companies capable of organising extensive in-firm training dominating in Sweden, but not in Norway. However, for the employers, too, the lack of a legal and institutional framework supporting apprenticeship resulting from the policy of non-interference by the state in industrial relations may have played a part in making apprenticeship less attractive for Swedish employers.

While a number of interacting, structural factors worked against apprenticeship in Sweden, the decision by the government and social partners in Norway to choose large-scale reform with

apprenticeships at the core of VET was not obvious. There was a window of opportunity for major reform shaped by a perception of crisis in the VET system and available resources (i.e., reduced cohort size, financial resources from active labour market policies), but the actual solution was rooted in the beliefs of the central actors that an apprenticeship-based VET system would serve both their and society's interests (Nyen and Tønder, 2015). When the reform was decided upon, the strong position of the social partners helped implement the reform, most importantly by mobilising firms and public enterprises to take on the required number of apprentices. The Norwegian case shows the capacity for reforms that can transform the VET system, based in this instance on political initiative and tripartite discussions. However, the case description also shows how the institutional prerequisites for reform were built up over time through a path-dependent process.

Between 2000 and today, Sweden has made potentially the most transformative changes, through introducing apprenticeships alongside school-based VET as a policy response to youth unemployment and drop-out problems. This time, the social partners, including the LO, accepted apprenticeship as an alternative way of organising training within the vocational programmes. The reasons for the changed policy stance are not fully clear, but the layered approach and the establishment of tripartite structures for cooperation seems to have influenced the decision by reducing opposition to apprenticeships. A weaker power base of organised labour also played a part. It should be noted, however, that the Swedish statist school-based system by and large remains. The number of apprenticeships is small, and the apprenticeship institution itself is different from that of the dual VET systems. Most apprentices are not employed, and apprenticeship training is governed by the central government and individual schools, not by the social partners.

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