



Editorial: Assessment in Nordic VET

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Ten years ago, during a research exchange at Stockholm University, we organised a workshop on assessment in Nordic VET. At that time Viveca Lindberg had recently undertaken a review of Swedish research for Vetenskapsrådet (the Swedish Research council), in the field of assessment (Forsberg & Lindberg, 2010). During the work they also had a side-view to the other Nordic countries and summarised there were hardly any scientific articles on assessment in vocational education and training in a Nordic context. During the workshop we decided to invite Nordic colleagues who we knew were enrolled in projects dealing with different aspects of assessment in VET to contribute to an anthology on assessment. Most of these contributions were related to upper secondary (16+) education, a few also to adult education. 18 abstracts were accepted in 2010. Unfortunately, the original publisher withdrew due to reorganisation at the university and the development process was placed on hold for several years while we tried to find a new publisher in one of the Nordic countries. The fact is that many publishers do not want chapters written in different Scandinavian languages as our invitation to the authors indicated. Finally, in 2018, we were lucky to reach an agreement with this journal (NJVET) to publish a special issue on assessment in Nordic VET. Here there are possibilities for multi-lingual publications (English, Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish). On the road, we of course lost some of the contributions. Some published in other journals, some have withdrawn their contributions due to outdated content and contexts. Nevertheless, we are pleased to present eight peer-reviewed research articles and one magazine article.

Together the articles represent much of the complexity dealing with assessment in vocational education and training, although some of the data may be a bit old.



The Nordic context

Although the Nordic countries share many cultural and welfare values ('The Nordic Model'), VET is organised and run in different ways across national borders (Jørgensen, 2018; Michelsen & Stenström, 2018). The influence on VET from social partners differs, and so do the state regulations. In the period 2010–2020, there have been national educational reforms influencing VET in all countries, and since the 1990s, supranational governance from bodies like CEDEFOP and OECD have had an increasing impact on national reforms. There are, in principle, four different VET systems.

Sweden still has a school-based VET. However, since the millennium shift, workplace-based learning has been implemented and developed, labelled *upper secondary apprenticeship education*, a permanent parallel pathway to school-based programmes with a form for practical examination at the end (Panican & Paul, 2019). As such, vocational teachers play a major role in Swedish VET – though with decreasing impact on later courses of the programmes.

Finland used to have a school-based VET-system like Sweden. As in Sweden, the European evaluation at the end of the 1980s critiqued the lax connection to working life. Since then, Finnish VET has also increasingly emphasised the importance of workplace-based learning and internships, with the aim of strengthening relevance as well as employability. The role and responsibilities of VET teachers target the boundary-crossing aspects between schools and companies. The final assessments in Finnish VET are organised as 'skill demonstrations' involving cooperation between schools and companies. The recommendation from the latest reform in 2018 is that all examinations related to vocational competences should predominantly be organised at workplaces.

Norwegian VET is a sequential dual model with two years of school-based education and two years of apprenticeship. The learning arenas are equally worthy, with the schools responsible for the first two years and the training establishments responsible for the apprenticeship. This means that VET teachers' roles and responsibilities are limited to the school-based part, including a separate subject based on internships in companies (20–30% of the curricula). Teachers are responsible for the assessment of learning from these internships and students report a variety of assessment practices (Sandal, Smith & Wangensteen, 2014). After the apprenticeship period, there is a practical trade or journeyman's examination organised in companies and assessed by skilled representatives from working-life. From 2020 a new structure in VET and new curricula will be implemented.

Danish VET has a strong tradition of apprenticeship after initial school-based training. The apprenticeship also includes shorter periods of school-based training (often called a 'sandwich-model'). This model was modified in 2014 with more flexible pathways, including possibilities for longer initial school-based

training. VET teachers' responsibilities are limited to the school-based part, but part of their competencies include transfer between arenas and between theory and practical work. Journeyman's examinations have a long tradition in Denmark and are organised by the social partners in different trade committees as well as assessed by a tripartite committee ('skuemestre').

When dealing with assessment in Nordic VET, we must consider the different educational models, stakeholders, actors, regulations, traditions and cultures that frame the various programmes, and as such, affect assessment procedures and practices (Lahn & Nore, 2018). This special issue addresses different aspects of assessment.

The complexity of assessment in VET

Vocational education and training is conducted in upper secondary schools, adult education, workplaces, NGOs, through private experiences and, increasingly, through internet resources. Assessment deals with possibilities as well as requirements for admission, for learning to become a professional, for documentation and validation of vocational competencies and of prior learning – in fact assessment is present from entrance to exit (and legitimation). The actors are students/apprentices, peers, teachers and trainers, customers or clients, colleagues, sensors etc. Assessment is a key component in vocational didactics and in vocational teacher education. But, as many actors are primarily connected to workplaces without any formal competency in assessment, nor any in-depth knowledge of curricula, we experience different views on the competencies to be assessed. Mulder and Winterton (2017) describe the tensions between competence-based and competence-oriented assessment in VET. The former is based on learning outcomes as described in the curricula and often used in schools, the latter being quality requirements to work performance at workplaces. As internships and apprenticeships become more common in Nordic VET, we may expect more competence-oriented and discretionary assessment by trainers in companies. This poses a special challenge to teachers that are not skilled in the trades their students are aiming for and yet are responsible for the assessment (Berglund, Höjlund, Kristmansson & Paul, 2017). According to Hager (2017), extensive use of schematic forms and procedures are common if the assessors are newcomers, unexperienced or lack up-to-date competencies in the trade.

Crossing boundaries between different learning arenas is not new, but challenges students as well as assessors to support the process of becoming a professional worker along with the development of key competences and transversal skills (Nägele & Stalder, 2017).

Assessment of prior learning is part of the life-long learning policy in Europe, giving unskilled people a 'second chance' and immigrants a possibility for integration into working life or further education in the recipient country.

This complexity in means and goals, learning arenas, traditions and cultures as well as political intentions was the backdrop for the design of the original book and now this special issue. The articles represent perspectives as seen from the individual student/apprentice, from teachers and from a more political/structural view. Two articles are more conceptual and overarching.

Outline and perspectives – article overview

The first conceptual and overarching article is by **Lene Tanggaard** in Denmark and presents *The five A's: An assessment model for vocational education*. It is a heuristic method to describe and reflect on assessment practices studying the simultaneously related and dynamically interacting roles of Actors, Action, Audiences, Artefacts and Affordances. The article questions the distinction between summative and formative assessment and asks how artefacts supporting boundary-crossing can strengthen the formative assessment and how apprentices can take more responsibility for their own assessment.

The second conceptual article by **Hilde Hiim** in Norway asks the question; *What is vocational competence and how can it be evaluated?* Based on Norwegian laws and regulations with definitions of competence, curriculum frameworks and assessment procedures, Hiim questions the relationship between these components in the light of rationalist, pragmatic and critical epistemology. A main question is what kind of assessment procedures are relevant to express students' development of vocational competence. She also argues that theoretical, practical and social aspects of vocational competence are holistic and makes a claim for professional judgement.

Two articles represent the teacher/trainer perspective. The first one by **Ingrid Berglund** in Sweden presents *VET teachers' assessments in the borderland between school and work: Based on studies of Swedish upper secondary apprenticeship education*. Based on VET teachers' dual professional identities and their responsibility for assessment and grading of students' vocational competences both in schools and at workplaces, she introduces VET teachers as border workers. Students' transitions between schools and workplaces challenge teachers' assessment and boundary practices in building and construction.

The second article with a teacher perspective is based on assessments of vocational certificate tests in floristry and written by **Camilla Gåfvæls** in Sweden: *Professional certificate in floristry education*. It is a study of five teachers' assessments of floral arrangements including the importance of the use of botanical materials and negotiations of the performed work. The tests are driven by the florists' trade council and implemented to secure student's employability at the end of VET. The dual roles of VET teachers as both florists and teachers are obvious as they discuss vocational knowing based on an assessment protocol, with the student's own teacher as a main player in the negotiations.

Three articles represent the perspective of the individual. The first is by **Kaja Reegård** in Norway, on vocational socialisation in the sales trade: *The apprentice's encounter with the assessment logic of working life: Vocational socialisation in the Norwegian sales trade*. The article examines the role of formative assessment in a labour-market sector characterised by high turnover, part-time work and low formal education. Three assessment practices are analysed: 1) through customer interaction, 2) through gradual access to more complex work tasks and responsibility, and 3) through registered and monitored individual sales figures. Apprentices described customer evaluation as being of great importance to their learning and becoming sales professionals.

The second article by **Martina Wyszynska Johansson** in Sweden is about feedback in workplace-based learning. In *'You're doing good': Feedback in workplace-based learning from a perspective of the experienced curriculum*, the examples are from focus group interviews with students in the Swedish 'Barn- och fritidsprogrammet' (Children and leisure). They outline different aspects on feedback: 1) students' work with implicit and partially explicit feedback, 2) feedback on professional care, 3) feedback on care-oriented or customer-oriented treatment, and 4) students' work as brokers between feedback in school and feedback at workplaces. The article argues for more divergent assessment practices with self-assessment in the foreground for the process of becoming in people-centred service professions.

The third article is on *Caretakers' experiences of validation* written by **Per Andersson** in Sweden. Caretakers are a group where vocational learning is primarily informal and as such, a group with potential for recognition and validation of prior learning. The article is based on phenomenographic analyses of how caretakers in a property management company experienced a validation process. Experiences are described as an opportunity for personal development, as a matter of assessment and control, or as 'only scratching the surface'. Some experienced the value of prior learning, some also new learning and some no learning at all. The findings are integrated in a model where the relationships between the individual and the validation process is described as a developmental, a credit-exchange, or a critical relation.

The importance of recognition of immigrants' competencies both for employment and for accessing further vocational education is described in the article *Immigrants' vocational education and employment in Finland*, by **Johanna Lasonen, Marianne Teräs** and **Carine Cools** in Finland. The article explores the employment challenges for adult immigrants based on their vocational competencies and young immigrants' access to education. Results show that immigrants generally get their competencies validated for employment when they have an overlapping or further vocational education from Finland. Regarding youth, entrance to vocational education requires language knowledge and motivation for societal

integration as well as a support system. As such, cooperation between the authorities, homes and the youths may prevent drop-out.

A magazine article, written by **Erik Døving** and **Anita E. Tobiassen** in Norway, is also included in this special issue. The article *Validation of prior learning in Norwegian municipalities* describes and discusses how employers facilitate the validation processes for unskilled healthcare workers. Employees regard validation as a steppingstone to fulfil vocational education, whilst employers regard the validation as of limited value. It turns out that information about the possibilities for recognition and validation of prior learning is limited in the municipalities. Targeted information to immigrants is recommended, as they represent a large group of unskilled healthcare workers.

This selection of articles represents a variety of perspectives regarding professions and vocational competencies, contexts and frameworks, roles and responsibilities. Many of them represent and discuss boundary crossing – between school and work – with students as brokers and teachers as boundary workers. They also present models for understanding and analysing assessment practices, as well as epistemological perspectives. We hereby invite you to fruitful scientific discussions on some of the many similarities and differences concerning assessment in Nordic VET.

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