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## **Vocational teachers in the Swedish and Finnish vocational education systems**

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### **Abstract**

Vocational education in Finland and Sweden has many similarities, including the cultural values of Nordic welfare state action, school based system and VET teachers with a large experiences in working life. In order to examine the similarities and differences at the level of the actors, vocational school teachers from both countries will be analysed with a quantitative survey, based on previous research and expert surveys in the countries. In both countries efforts are currently being made to promote work based learning or apprenticeship models in vocational education and training, which also places changing demands on teachers as well as globalisation, digitalisation and inclusion.

### **Keywords**

vocational teachers; comparison study; sweden; finland; vet system; school based

## **1 Introduction**

Both the Swedish and Finnish VET systems are school-based systems that formulate an integrative claim, although with different solutions. A common political aim is that no one should be disadvantaged on the basis of neither social/ economical background nor geographical location. This is an important part of the welfare state education policy of the Nordic countries and includes vocational training (Michelsen & Stenström 2018). Further education (post-secondary, adult or higher education) should also be available, following a vocational school decision.

At the same time, the link to developments in the occupations on the labour market presents a major challenge. Work based learning and apprenticeship are powerful themes in the actual discourse in both countries (Fjellström & Kristmansson 2016; Berglund, Hjölund, Kristmansson & Paul 2017; Finnish Government 2018). One strategy to enable the educational institutions to realize a strong linkage to the work life in Finland and Sweden is to hire experienced workers as teachers for school and offer them a short term study besides working (Isacsson, Amhag & Stigmar 2018).

The Finnish system and VET teachers are at the forefront because of the current VET reform in 2018 (Finnish Government 2018; Rintala; Jussila & Nokelainen 2018).

In this paper, we describe the background of one of the rare studies of cross cultural research on VET in Finland and Sweden (Hjelmer, Lappalainen & Rosvall 2010). A basic assumption is that the cultural backgrounds of the countries influence the education system. But still we don't have empirical proofed answers to the following questions:

What political decisions are formulated in the area of conflict between central curricular guidelines and control and regional structuring?



How can vocational education and training be developed for a rapidly changing society in countries with small populations (5 respective 9 millions) and what does this mean for learning in vocational schools and in the qualification of teachers?

The study presented descriptions based on research literature analyses and interviews with researchers and policy makers. The focus is on developing an online survey of vocational school teachers in Finland and Sweden with a single questionnaire for both countries, based on qualitative expert interviews in Finland and Sweden (Kaiser 2018). The survey took place at the beginning of 2019. Findings will be presented at the conference in Valencia and published at the end of the year. Differences in the attitudes and educational pathways of teachers in the two Scandinavian countries should become clear, as should the influence of the different sector-specific and vocational cultures and contexts.

The aim is a country comparison which provides information for the further development of the German qualification and recruitment of vocational school teachers (Kalisch & Kaiser 2019). Furthermore suggestions for the discourses in Sweden, Finland and Europe will be provided.

## **2 The Nordic VET approach in Sweden and Finland**

The Nordic states invest more money in their educational system than the countries in continental Europe. As Michelsen and Stenström (2018) described “In contrast to the liberal countries, there are higher standards at the lower end of the skill hierarchy.” (p.2) The aims of vocational education are individual self-steering, success at the labour market, competence for further development (learning), inclusion and civil engagement. Trying to strength the linkage to the labour market demands on the one hand brings VET in contradiction to the second aim: prepare students for changes and higher education. To cope with that the Nordic countries developed different ways (Jørgensen, Michelsen, Olofsson & Persson Thunqvist 2018). That’s the case for the different histories of the two countries as well, but VET in Sweden and Finland show similar developments in recent years (Virolainen & Stenström 2014; Olofsson & Persson Thunqvist 2018).

### **2.1 VET in Sweden**

In Sweden, VET is integrated in a comprehensive upper-secondary education, which since the 1980s includes almost all 16-19 year olds in the so called ‘gymnasium’. A reform in the early 1990s meant that vocational educational programs were stronger integrated within a decentralized, competitive and goal oriented organization (Alexiadou & Lundahl 2016). Vocational as well as academic programs should give eligibility to higher education (in fact it is only the case with the addition of more courses and a strong engagement of the students). Education should be flexible and prepare for broad sections of the labour market, rather than for specific professions in difference to the German system (Kaiser & French 2017). Fifteen weeks of the 3-year education in upper secondary ‘gymnasium’ are devoted to work place training. Branches should have influence on the content of the VET programmes on regional and national level. To continue more specialized training programmes higher VET programmes are offered as well as general adult education (Weinert 2010) and apprenticeship after initial VET in upper secondary school in some branches. Recent reforms developed programmes for disadvantaged people (language and introduction programmes) strengthen advanced VET (Bollin 2017) and tried to reform the VET programmes in gymnasium to link them stronger to the demands of the labour market (Sveriges regering 2008, Olofsson & Persson Thunqvist 2018), To set up an apprenticeship model with half time at the workplace is another pathway to bring more and especially students with less ability to theory to become qualified and employable (Fejes 2010), but less than 10 % of the students choose that way. At the same time the partici-

pation in the school based VET programmes has been decreasing. The following table shows the points of analytical comparison of VET and the teacher education in Sweden and Finland.

Table 1 The Systems and VET teacher education in Sweden and Finland

Aspects of comparison	Sweden	Finland
Status of VET and participation rate	Middle / low (decreasing)	High (increasing)
Steering	State, municipality, social partners, branch representatives	State, municipality, social partners, branch representatives
Finance	Full state funding, including further and adult training	Full state funding, including further and adult training
Level of initial VET	Upper secondary school	Upper secondary school
Duration	3 years	3 years and shorter
Involvement of practice	15 weeks (increasing at the end)	Minimum 15 weeks (increasing at the end)
Possibility to enter academic studies after that	(formal) yes	(formal) yes to Universities of applied science (UAS), former days branchspecific higher VET
Apprenticeship model	6 % in initial VET & in electricity and building/construction branch 3 years duration after initial VET	18 % only 3% as youth, most of them as adults, now implemented stronger in initial VET
Assessment VET	VET teachers Regional branch experts and	Regional branch experts and VET teachers
Entry requirements to Teacher education (TE)	Qualified professional Certificate & work experience & validation on NQF level 5	Bachelor / Master and 3-5 years work experience
TE-Duration, provider	90 ECTs ( $\pm$ two years), Universities,	60 ECTs (One year), Universities of applied science
Content and methods in TE	academic, education science, democratic leadership, teaching didactics, peer learning, blended learning, self-assessment	Pedagogy, working life analyses, competence, counselling, ethics, democracy personalized development, peer learning, self-assessment
Assessment TE	Formative and summative, written and oral presentations	Formative portfolio, written papers
Job possibilities	Upper secondary school (VET programmes), in some cases only one subject in the programmes, adult education, advanced VET	Upper secondary school (VET programmes), adult education, advanced VET, Universities of applied science

(Table content based on interviews and on Alvunger 2016, Andersson 2018, Berglund & Lindberg 2012; Fejes & Köpsen 2012; Heikkinen 2003; Isacsson, Amhag & Stigmar 2018, Mahlamäki,-Kultanen, Muttonen, & Javonen 2018)

## 2.2 VET in Finland in difference to Sweden

In Finland as well as in Sweden most of the VET programmes offered in upper secondary schools. Contrary to Sweden in most cases they are located in separated school buildings. The participation in the VET programmes is even higher (40%) than in Sweden (20%) (Stenström & Virolainen 2017). The idea of the 1990<sup>th</sup> educational reform was individualisation and s gave students more freedom in choosing courses and set up a stronger linkage between VET programmes and higher education with a parallel establishing of universities of applied science. To get stronger linkage to labour market in the start of 2000<sup>th</sup> the on-the-job-learning periods in initial school based VET were derived from curriculum. VET teachers and workplace instructors had to work closer together. A flexible apprenticeship model with competence based assessments had a long tradition for adults to offer them further career choices and to reach the demands of companies. The reform of 2018 tries to transfer this model in initial VET (Finnish Government 2018). This current reform offers more and more individualized training plans, self-assessment and work-based as well as self-learning phases. That allows students to try education in apprenticeships model and to return in the school-based VET as well as to change from school based VET into payed work without finishing the qualification. This freedom and flexibility of the current reform is discussed critically in Finland (Kaiser 2018; Rintala, Jussila & Nokelainen 2018).

## 3 Tasks and pathways of VET teachers

As shown in table 1, there are a many similarities in Swedish and Finnish VET and the study programmes to become a VET teacher. One of the major difference are the educational pathways to teacher education (in Finland a minimum Bachelor degree in the teaching subject is needed to enter) and the more academic shape in Swedens teacher education in contrast to the more personalised and competence oriented approach in Finland. “The challenges when introducing academic studies for practioners, who do not have prior experience of university studies, have been challenging both Sweden and Denmark” (Isacson, Amhag & Stigmar 2018, 47) Digital learning is widely used in both countries (Brauer, Kettunen Hallikainen 2018) and students are already employed in parallel (Fejes & Köpsen 2012)..

Their tasks in schools are similar in both countries because of the school-based, practical oriented approach of teaching in the VET schools. Teachers introduce students in workshops to cut hair, clean and repair cars, care for older people and to build electronic circuits for example. Besides that they supervise and asses students practice (Räkköläinen 2011) and written tasks and organise teacher-teamwork, peer education and networks to the regional economic life to get companies for the work based learning. In both countries the VET teachers usually work for public and in some cases for private schools and providers for further training. In Finland they can work as teachers in Universities of applied science as well. As Sweden has problems at the moment to find enough VET teacher students (especially in the technology roeinted programmes) in Finland it is difficult for the Finnish speaking applicants to get into the programme (Mahlamäki,-Kultanen, Muttonen, & Javonen 2018, Interview at Åbo Akademie 2018).

## 4 Research questions and the design of the comparison study

In October and November 2018 it was planned to carry out 5 to 10 expert interviews with VET teachers in both countries to reconstruct their educational pathways, motivations to become a teacher and their attitudes and value orientation. In a seminar with Swedish speaking Finnish teachers and school principals in Helsinki the two authors of the paper shared the idea to set up a standardized questionnaire on the pathways, regions, subjects and some open ques-

tions on strength and weaknesses of each countries system, after having some talks with the teachers.

The survey with approx. 20 topics was carried out in the beginning of 2019 as an online survey. Access to the interviews was via various meetings at conferences as well as forwarding to universities, colleges and educational administration with a request for support. There was no representative pre-selection of respondents.

Central theses are:

- The educational pathways differ significantly from country to country.
- The values and attitudes show a high degree of similarity and deviate more strongly from one country to another due to the different backgrounds of the teachers in the sector than due to the different countries.
- The situation of vocational schools has an influence on the appreciation of vocational education and training.
- Moving one's own place in the curriculum vitae induces a broader targeting of vocational education and training.

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