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## Higher VET in Sweden - A new approach to curricular formation

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### Abstract

This paper concerns a study on policy on Swedish Higher Vocational Education (HVE). It's focus is on how policy define what knowledge should form curricula in HVE. Documents have been thematically analysed using Bernsteinian theory of recontextualization and conceptualisation of knowledge as either horizontal or vertical. Findings show that the creation of curricula has been positioned away from the national public context and positioned in the local contexts of programme provision. It is also found that knowledge in HVE programmes should be generated in the production of goods and services and is considered legitimate if selected by employers. The paper discusses how HVE reproduces existing social divisions and students' positions in social hierarchy as wage labour workers and that the definition of knowledge is based on employers' demands, neglecting knowledge forming autonomous workers and individuals with full democratic inclusion and participation in civic practice.

### Keywords

higher vocational education; curriculum; labour market relevance; educational policy

### 1 Introduction

Basic conditions for citizenship and democracy may be described as the right to be included, socially, culturally and personally (Bernstein, 2000). Another condition is the right to participate in civic practice at the level of politics and in processes where order is constructed, maintained and transformed. One key to these democratic conditions is education, or more precisely, knowledge which support inclusion and participation. New forms of post-secondary vocational education and training (VET) are emerging in countries all across the world, and the diversity of provision in institutional contexts as well as in working life is expanding. Relating vocational higher education to stratified power structures and social mobility, the question of knowledge in VET curricula and how it is decided is thus crucial. This paper deals with this issue, particularly the Swedish post-secondary VET.

In Sweden, post-secondary VET is since 2009 provided in a state-funded tertiary system called Higher Vocational Education (HVE). The system of HVE is a market of both public and private provision and characterised by great employer influence. Swedish HVE is one example of the global overall expansion of higher education in tertiary systems, which in different formations can take the form of for instance, two year 'short-cycle' higher education provisioned by universities, applied baccalaureates in community college, higher level and degree apprenticeships trough in-company training, or hybrid programmes that combine vocational and academic education (Bathmaker, 2017; Hippach-Schneider, Schneider, Ménard, & Tritscher-Archan, 2017). This expansion is widening the accessibility to higher education and that may be providing possibilities of social mobility for disadvantaged groups historically excluded from higher education (Marginson, 2016).

However, growing participation in and expansion of accessibility to higher education doesn't infer reduced inequalities or possibilities of social mobility (Marginson, 2016).



Higher education in the Nordic countries, where egalitarian system design has shaped universities, are however considered examples of systems distributing social power broadly. If vocational higher education in general, and HVE in particular, also is to provide social power it must likewise offer students access to empowering knowledge (Bathmaker, 2013; Wheelahan, 2015).

The aim of this paper is to present a study of policy, on Swedish HVE, which purpose is to identify what knowledge policy define for curricula in HVE. This is done to enable a discussion on this vocational pathway in higher education and reproduction of social power relations.

## **2 Higher Vocational Education – The Swedish system for post-secondary VET**

Swedish post-secondary VET is since 2009 organised in what is called Higher Vocational Education (HVE). Post-secondary VET had previously been scattered across different public (as well as private) funding systems and incorporated in different pedagogical traditions. Alongside state funded initiatives concerning initial VET in public adult education the establishment of the HVE system have been implied to reflect the then ruling conservative-liberal government's 'work strategy', a principle making employment the one crucial bearer of social inclusion (Andersson & Wärvik, 2012). In the HVE, programmes are only approved if there is an explicit demand from employers pledging their needs and involvement. The education providers compete amongst each other in a tendering-like process for approval and government funding by displaying their degree of association to employers making these pledges. The providers of HVE programmes are primarily privately-owned education businesses but programmes are also provisioned by, for example, public adult education organizations, actors in popular education or universities (National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, 2018b). However, employer representatives are always the majority of the members of the so-called management boards of each HVE programme, following whose instructions the education providers are to run their programmes (*SFS 2009:130 [Regulation of Higher Vocational Education]*). Employers on these boards are expected to contribute by creating curricula, offer placements with supervisors for work-based learning and to continuously work with quality assurance. They are also to contribute financially through monetary contributions or by reducing costs of consulting fees charged by representatives of working life who take part in the programmes as educators.

In the last two years the number of students in HVE programmes has been stable around 50,000 (National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, 2017, 2018c). This is 10% of all students in Swedish higher education (Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2017). In the year 2022, the number of HVE students is intended to be 70,000, indicating a rapid expansion. (National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, 2018a). Because many students enter HVE after gaining experience from several years of working life, not directly after finishing upper secondary education, the average age of the HVE student is 31 (National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, 2017, 2018c). Graduates are intended to qualify for jobs such as driving instructors, technicians in the waste- and energy industry, facility managers, accountants or project managers in the construction industry, to mention a few of the hundreds of occupations towards which the HVE programmes are targeted.

## **3 Method and theoretical framework**

This is a qualitative study and data is fourteen Swedish policy documents published between 2006 and 2017, relating to Swedish post-secondary VET and the establishment of HVE. The documents have been analysed through a theoretical thematic analysis based on the theory of recontextualization and the conceptualisation of knowledge realised as either horizontal or vertical discourse (Bernstein, 1990, 1996, 1999).

#### **4 A new approach to curricular formation**

Findings show that in the Swedish system of HVE creation of curricula has been positioned away from the national public context and positioned in the local contexts of programme provision. Neither policy documents nor the responsible national agency defines the content to be taught in HVE programmes. There is no national curriculum, no outlining of core competences and no specified occupations towards which the programmes are to be targeted.

Policy distinctively charges the education providers with the responsibility of recontextualizing horizontal discourse of working practice in the making of curricula by pointing out the necessity for the transformation yet not taking responsibility for or controlling this process at a national level. The recontextualizing principle deployed in HVE also positions authority over the selective process of ‘what’ and ‘how’ to employers. Policy has constructed a system in which employers and education providers convene directly with one another to articulate and select what knowledge an HVE programme should reproduce in order to meet the needs of specific employers. Effectively, the recontextualizing of knowledge into pedagogic discourse is mainly carried out with the direct involvement of agents from the field of production of knowledge, in this case representatives of working life.

Furthermore, findings show that policy also defines that knowledge in HVE programmes should be generated in the production of goods and services and that knowledge is considered legitimate if it is selected by employers. The knowledge defined for HVE curricula is knowledge developing the procedural repertoire of HVE students with strategies useful in production. Noteworthy is that the definition of knowledge for HVE as coming from working life isn’t lacking components of ‘theory’. Included in this definition is what is labeled as ‘theoretical anchorage’. This is vertical discourse reduced to strategies meant to improve the repertoire of the HVE students, i.e. to make them better, or more productive, workers. This is vertical discourse (re)contextualized to the procedural level of horizontal discourse which is so to speak embedding ‘theory’ into ‘practice’. This definition of knowledge in HVE curricula infers the use of segmented pedagogy aimed at specific goals highly relevant to the student and that preferably includes features of the original context and practice (Bernstein, 1999). What knowledge is defined for HVE thus not only demarcate subject matter, the ‘what’ of HVE, but also its framing, the ‘how’ in provision of HVE programmes.

#### **5 Discussion**

Drawing on findings from an analysis of policy documents regarding HVE this paper argues that formation of curricula for HVE programmes is based on an idea of supply-and-demand. With the purpose of supplying hiring companies and organizations with graduates, the intention is that, by initiating an HVE programme, an employer can expect, within two or three years, to have some 20 to 30 graduates to choose from when hiring. The graduates in this line-up have been trained according to a curriculum created to generate the qualifications the employer needs in its enterprise. By then, the employer has also had the chance to ‘test run’ students during their training by offering them placements for the work-based learning portion of the programme. It seems the policy makers are taking for granted that the many employers involved in processes of creating curricula in local contexts of HVE programmes have the will and ability to select knowledge for high quality curricula based on what is useful in production. However, UK experience shows that it is problematic to assume this works well (Young, 2006). In light of the experience with employer bodies funded by the state to create curricula, which revealed both unwillingness and inability, the question is raised of what the resulting curricula of the local processes for every HVE programme in Sweden actually entail.

Furthermore, implications for social power relations and students’ possibilities of social mobility in this approach to curricular formation can be described from two perspectives.

Firstly, as curricula are created in local processes, in which employers are positioned as the authority, it ties the programmes and their students to these employers through specifically adapted knowledge and outcomes in curricula. It locks the students to pre-defined positions in the local labour markets. It also inserts the logics of the stratified labour markets, and the general inequalities that follow with the organisation of wage labour, into the HVE programmes (Avis, 2012). Thus, HVE reproduces existing social divisions and the students' positions in social hierarchy as wage labour workers. No matter how advanced their repertoires may be, they are still based on segmented knowledge of practice tying the students to the contexts of that specific practice. Secondly, as the definition of what knowledge should form HVE curricula is based on meeting employers' needs of workforce suitable for production, the original definition neglects knowledge forming autonomous workers with abilities to reflect on situations and actions and to create innovative knowledge in their occupational field (Brockmann, Clarke, & Winch, 2008). This is knowledge that is necessary for full democratic inclusion and participation in civic practice (Bernstein, 2000).

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### **Biographical notes**

Johanna Köpsén is PhD student at the Division of Education and Adult Learning with a Master degree in Social and Cultural Analysis and a background as project manager and strategist in Higher Vocational Education. Her research focuses on vocational education and she teaches at the Vocational Teacher Training programme and at the Division of Sociology.