

Schmid, E. (2021). Balancing Standardisation and Individualisation: How Counties Develop Two-year Apprenticeships for Low-achieving Students in Upper Secondary VET in Norway. In C. Nägele, B.E. Stalder, & M. Weich (Eds.), *Pathways in Vocational Education and Training and Lifelong Learning. Proceedings of the 4th Crossing Boundaries Conference in Vocational Education and Training, Muttentz and Bern online, 8. – 9. April* (pp. 321–325). European Research Network on Vocational Education and Training, VETNET, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland and Bern University of Teacher Education. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4600717>

## **Balancing Standardisation and Individualisation: How Counties Develop Two-year Apprenticeships for Low-achieving Students in Upper Secondary VET in Norway**

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### **Abstract**

This paper studies two-year apprenticeships for young people who struggle to complete upper secondary vocational education and training (VET), and the scheme's regional implementation in the counties. Using a multi-case study approach, two contrasting strategies are presented. Both strategies are intended to meet the local need for skills, however, in different ways. While one county has chosen a standardised approach, based on an analysis of the labour market for low-skilled persons, the other county has favoured individualised procedures and developed apprenticeship curricula together with individual training companies, tailored to the prerequisites of individual learners. Based on these two cases, the paper discusses both strategies in view of the inclusion of low-achieving students in VET and their employability after apprenticeship training.

### **Keywords**

apprenticeship, school-to-work transitions, curriculum development, multi-case study, social inclusion

### **1 Introduction**

This paper focuses on training practice certificate scheme, a two-year apprenticeship in upper secondary vocational education and training (VET) in Norway, and its implementation in the counties. The scheme is aimed at a low level of vocational competence (EQF level 3) and does not correspond to certification at upper secondary level. However, two-year graduates may continue their training to obtain a full trade certificate (EQF level 4). The main target group for the scheme is young people who may have poor grades and high school absence for whom more practical training in a company at the beginning of VET is more suitable than two school-based years within the regular 2 + 2 model (two years of school-based training followed by two years of apprenticeship) (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). Similar programmes are found in Denmark, Germany and Switzerland (Di Maio et al., 2019; Kammermann et al., 2011; Schmid, 2020; Schmid et al., 2021).

After a trial period of several years in different counties (see Høst, 2016), the two-year apprenticeship scheme was rolled out nationally in 2016, and counties have since been obliged to offer a two-year apprenticeship in at least one VET programme. Specifically, this implies the development of curricula for two-year apprenticeships that are supposed to be standardised at a regional level in order to meet the local need for skills and to ensure that the apprentices build



up competencies needed in working life (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). The competence goals must be selected from the national curricula of the corresponding VET programme and be identical, but the counties are free to select goals they consider adequate for regional implementation. This paper studies the development of two-year apprenticeships in the counties and the strategies they employ to meet the local need for skills. Consequently, the paper addresses the following research question: *How do counties ensure the local need for skills is met when developing two-year apprenticeships?*

In many countries, the process of developing apprenticeship curricula involves engaging with representatives from industry to define standards and intentions behind the enactment of curricula, as well as formulating occupation-specific learning aims and goals (Billett, 2011). VET may be defined as a factor linking education and work that provides competencies and skills for development and economic wealth, focusing on learning while working (Gonon et al., 2008). One of the main objectives of VET is employability, which in short may be defined as “the ability of the individual to fulfil requirements for employment” (Kammermann et al., 2011, p. 380). At the same time, however, VET is also supposed to enhance social inclusion and to provide equal access to education for all, including young people with special needs (Larsen & Persson Thunqvist, 2018). Short-track apprenticeship programmes, such as the training practice certificate scheme, are seen as a measure to ease school-to-work-transitions for young people who are at risk of not accessing or completing upper secondary education (OECD, 2018), and are thus positioned in the interface between economic and social goals (Di Maio et al., 2019).

## 2 Method

The study is mainly based on qualitative data. So far, only five out of eleven counties have introduced the scheme. Interviews were conducted with those responsible for the scheme’s implementation in all five counties in autumn 2019. The interviews had an average duration of 30 min. and focused on the process of selecting occupations for two-year apprenticeships, the development of curricula and the underlying conceptual ideas and strategies (for more details on the interview process, see Schmid et al., 2021).

The analysis was guided by the following three questions: 1) Who was involved in the process of curriculum development? 2) How was the need for a specific two-year apprenticeship identified? 3) Which occupations were chosen for the development of curricula? A table with information related to these three questions was developed to compare the strategies employed by the counties. The analysis revealed different approaches to the implementation of two-year apprenticeships, which can be characterised along the dimensions of standardisation and individualisation. While some counties developed standardised curricula, others favoured more individualised procedures. This paper presents the two counties that show the most pronounced contrast. Thus, the present study can be characterised as a multi-case study. According to Stake (2013) and Steward (2012), multi-case studies are defined as studies of a particular phenomenon at a number of different sites. Multi-case researchers are interested in difference, thus, contrast or variance in examples of the phenomenon of study become a significant research tool (Stewart, 2012).

In autumn 2020, the interview data were supplemented with statistical information on the apprentices provided by the counties. In this paper, information about the number of apprentices per county and within the different occupations was used.

## 3 Findings

### 3.1 County 1

County 1 lies in an urban area and is dominated by service industries. Despite a long tradition of VET, the proportion of students in vocational programmes at upper secondary level is well

below the national average of around 45%. However, with 52 apprentices in two-year programmes since 2016, county 1 has had the largest number of two-year apprentices so far. County 1 is the only one out of these five counties to have conducted an analysis of the local need for low-skilled workers before selecting occupations for two-year apprenticeships. The person responsible for the scheme in county 1 explained: *“So, we thought, where are they used to training young people? And where is it possible to get a job after two years if you don’t want to go on to take a full trade certificate? It must be in the sales, service, transport and hospitality industry. I think they employ most young people, and yes they have a stable need for skilled people.”*

The county authority consulted an external advisory company, which offers support to Norwegian businesses, in connection with the labour market analysis. Unlike the four other counties, no individual training companies were involved in the process at that time. Based on their conclusion, those responsible for the scheme in county 1 decided to offer three occupations for two-year apprenticeships: sales, cookery and logistics. However, so far, most of the apprentices have been in sales (44 out of 52).

### 3.2 County 2

County 2 is quite a small county in a rural area of Norway. There is a strong VET tradition in county 2, and more than half of school leavers start VET programmes at upper secondary level. This county wanted to offer a broad range of two-year programmes, as explained by the person responsible: *“After the trial period, we wanted to offer options in all programmes, depending on the industries that wanted to take in apprentices, plain and simple. So, our starting point was the labour market and its possibilities, and the prerequisites of individual apprentices.”* Thus, the curricula for the two-year apprenticeships were developed together with individual training companies that were willing to take in apprentices for a two-year period. At the same time, as explained by the informant from county 2, curricula for two-year apprenticeships were devised for specific learners, and competence goals were selected individually: *“So we select what is practically realisable, depending on the boy’s prerequisites and the working tasks in the given company, plain and simple.”* A teacher was further involved in this process who was supposed to follow up and guide the apprentices in the training company.

Consequently, the county developed comparatively many curricula in a wide range of different VET programmes, from aquaculture, carpentry, health work and landscaping to welding. So far, county 2 has had 31 apprentices in two-year programmes in 18 different occupations. These curricula do not constitute standardised curricula but may be adjusted for new apprentices: *“So we have dynamic curricula, they’re not fixed at the moment.”* However, the person responsible for the scheme from county 2 explained that this approach was labour intensive and further clarified: *“We’ve already started considering whether we want to start standardising. And to start making greater demands of the young people.”*

## 4 Conclusion

Both the strategies presented are intended to meet the local need for skills, however, in different ways. In county 1, the local need for skills was examined by an analysis of the mid- or long-term need for low-skilled workers. Based on their conclusion, three two-year apprenticeship programmes were developed. So far, the vast majority of apprentices have been in retail sales, all following the same curriculum. Compared to the other counties, this approach stands out due to its high level of standardisation.

In county 2, on the other hand, the local need for skills was intended to be met by involving individual training companies. Here, two-year apprenticeships are adapted to workplace settings and the apprentice’s personal and vocational capacity. Thus, this approach stands out due to a high level of individualisation.

Research from Switzerland indicates that the transition to the labour market may be more difficult for those who have completed an individualised programme than for those who have completed a standardised short-track programme (Kammermann et al., 2011). Without regional or national standards, the aims and objectives of individualised programmes may remain unclear, and employers may consider such programmes “black-box”. In Switzerland, individualised programmes were replaced in 2002 by standardised two-year programmes due to lack of recognition in the labour market (Kammermann, 2017). Since 2005, two-year graduates receive certificates that are standardised at the national level. However, the law foresees individual support measures to help two-year apprentices successfully complete their training.

In Norway, however, the counties do not envision transition to the labour market after two years, but the national goal of permeability to the regular VET programmes is crucial. Overall, the findings show that the number of apprentices is very low in all five counties, and the counties consider the employability of two-year graduates as severely limited. According to those responsible for the scheme in the counties, the majority of apprentices go on to take a full trade certificate after obtaining a two-year certificate, and most of them get an apprenticeship contract in the same company.

The main intention behind the development and implementation of two-year apprenticeships in Norway is to include low-achieving school leavers and youth at risk of dropout in upper secondary education. All interviewees emphasised that the target group is mainly school-weary youth for whom more practical initial training in a company is more suitable than two school-based years. Thus, individualised curricula, adapted to the workplace setting and to the apprentice’s prerequisites, may be used as a measure to include young people in upper secondary VET and to promote the company’s willingness to take in apprentices – despite the fact they lack the first two years of school-based VET, under the regular 2 + 2 model. By offering strongly practice-oriented training from the start of VET, two-year apprenticeships may thus contribute to reducing dropout from upper secondary VET (see also Høst, 2016).

This approach shows similarities to the Danish approach where curricula in short-track programmes are highly individualised to adapt to the specific needs of apprentices. As in Norway, two-year apprenticeships are largely used as stepping stones to further training (Di Maio et al., 2019). Consequently, a possible conclusion is that highly individualised programmes, such as in Denmark and partly in Norway, are intended to ease the transition to regular programmes for young people who are not yet ready for regular training programmes. Highly individualised short-track programmes may thus serve as pre-apprenticeships, contrary to more standardised programmes, such as in Switzerland, where labour market integration after two years of training is pursued – in addition to the national goal of permeability to regular programmes – and considered a success (Kammermann, 2017).

In a next step, further research is suggested to investigate the transition to regular VET programmes after two-year apprenticeships, and the completion rate of students who started education and training with a two-year apprenticeship.

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### Biographical notes

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