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This paper describes the education system in Bergen (and Norway, as the system is universal within the country). We first give a brief descriptive outline of the education system from birth to adulthood, expanding mostly on the stages before and after upper secondary. Then we return to upper secondary education, and dwell in more detail especially on the relation between vocational education and training (VET) and the general branches qualifying for admission to higher education. Throughout these sections, we want not only to give an account of the structure of the educational system, but also of some central political intensions. We then turn attention to the flow through the upper secondary education system. Thus, in the last section we dwell on differences in participation and outcome.

Description of the types of education provision from birth to adulthood

In 2009, an individual, legal right to a place in a kindergarten institution was introduced in Norway. The proportion of children attending kindergarten has grown significantly over the past decade. This has also been the intension of the mainly social democratic¹ coalition in power during most of that time span. In order to stimulate participation especially by children with a minority language background, core time free of charge is offered in particular urban areas, also in Bergen. The motive has been to stimulate Norwegian language skills and enhance children's preparation for school. In 2012, 97 per cent of the age group 3-5 years was in kindergarten, nearly half of them in private owned kindergartens (Statistics Norway, 2014).

At six, children enter a ten-year comprehensive basic education. There are no admission requirements at any stage in the 10 years of schooling, meaning that pupils are not retained in order to repeat grades. Another hallmark of the Norwegian compulsory school is the absence of streaming. Traditionally the idea of a comprehensive school system has been strong, meaning that children and young people born in the same year should be brought together into the same classroom, providing them with the same subject matter content for as long as possible throughout the years (Aasen, 2006). Historically, the school has been considered crucial in the endeavours to promote solidarity, cohesion and cooperation (Telhaug & Mediås, 2003). As in other parts of the

¹ The Labour party, The Socialist Left Party and The Farmers party, now replaced by a conservative-liberal government.



world, however, the residential segregation due to differentiation of housing prices, especially in urban areas, has an impact on who goes to the same schools.

Furthermore, there are no requirements for entering upper secondary school, apart from having completed compulsory school. This means that the birth cohort, which will turn 16 the year when they complete the 10th grade, are all formally qualified for upper secondary school. Moreover, having attended 10 years of compulsory school, with or without having passed the exams in all subjects, is the prerequisite for acquiring the individual, statutory right to three years of upper secondary education.

Nearly the whole cohort (97 percent) enters a three-year non-compulsory upper secondary education. Admission to upper secondary education is fairly unrestricted, and based on grade point average (GPA). The statutory right grants each applicant a place in one out of three chosen study programs. Competition occurs whenever there are more applicants than the number of places allocated by local education authorities. Thus, admission to the popular study programs will depend on the applicants' GPA. Overall, more than four of five applicants are admitted to the study programme of their highest priority (Frøseth et al. 2008).

A number of measures have been introduced in lower secondary education with the aim of strengthening the completion of upper secondary education. Career guidance is one of these. A new subject, the *Elective Program* was introduced in lower secondary school in 2008. A main idea is that students in lower secondary school should be given the chance to try out possible program alternatives in upper secondary before they apply. Strengthening of the cooperation between the two types of schools, which are located in different buildings and owned by the municipality and county respectively, is another purpose of arranging for the students at lower secondary to get to know upper secondary study programs.

Another, large-scale priority area is named *New Possibilities*. It was initiated in 2011 targeting low achieving students in the last year of lower secondary school. A key goal was to improve basic skills in pupils at risk of dropping out of upper secondary school through intensive training in reading, writing and numeracy. Bridging the transition to upper secondary and continuing intensive training onwards is part of this nationwide effort to reduce the dropout rates. Measured by grades at the end of the 10th year, there was no evidence that the targeted young peoples' achievements had improved compared to students at a similar achievement level. In fact, there were signs of the contrary (Lødding & Holen 2013).



Upper secondary education consists of three general programs and nine vocational programs. The former encompasses: (1) general academic studies; 2) music, dance and drama; 3) sports and physical education), and the latter: (1) building and construction; 2) design, arts and crafts; 3) electricity and electronics; 4) health and social care; 5) media and communication; 6) agriculture, fishing and forestry; 7) restaurant and food processing; 8) service and transport; 9) technical and industrial production).

The students in the general programs will follow a direct 3-year line through upper secondary. The main path through VET is a so-called 2+2 model, which means two years of school followed by two years of apprenticeship in a firm. In line with the statutory right, those who are not successful in acquiring an apprenticeship place, are to be offered a third year of school as a substitute to an apprenticeship place, after which they may present themselves for apprenticeship examination. We will return to this issue in connection with the actual flow through the system. Through the 2+2 model it is possible to qualify for approximately 180 different occupations. Another path leads to 11 different occupations and consists of 3-year school based vocational education. The last year can also be substituted by a general course, leading to qualification for higher education.

Qualification for higher education is obtained as general admissions certification, having passed all subjects pertaining to the study programme in upper secondary school, or special admissions certification. Admission to some studies in higher education requires concentration in particular subjects, most often mathematics and sciences. Furthermore, in the admission to higher education extra points are awarded to those who have concentrated in such subjects, especially for advanced maths and physics.

Vocational qualification is obtained by having passed in all program subjects in school and the apprenticeship exam at the end of an apprenticeship. Basic competence is the term used for all other outcomes. This can be planned through carefully choosing the aim, or it may be received by default, which is most often the case (Markussen et al. 2011b).

With the exception of few and mostly small and publicly supported private colleges, universities and university colleges are state owned. With the exception for a relatively large private business school, there is no tuition required for entering higher education institutions. In 2003, the degree structure in Norway was changed to a 3 + 2 + 3 (Bachelor, Master and PhD) structure, and a new grading and quality assurance system was introduced in accordance with European standards, following the Bologna process. In general, the university colleges are regionally dispersed, while the universities are situated in larger towns. The most important higher education institutions in



Bergen, attracting most students are the University of Bergen, the Norwegian school of economics and the university college of Bergen.

The university colleges predominantly offer 3-year professional Bachelor programmes, alongside professional programmes from one to five years, including teachers training. Quite a few of them also offer Master's programmes. For the country on the whole, the university colleges provide decentralised access to higher education and they generally attract students with a more diverse social origin than the universities (Støren, Wiers-Jensen & Arnesen, 2011).

Teachers at upper secondary schools, especially those teaching in the general programs, most often hold a full university degree (cand.phil., cand.real etc, Master of Arts, Master of Science). This is often the case with teachers in lower secondary as well, although this is not a formal requirement. A conversion of the 4-year teacher's training to a 5-year Master's degree for teaching in primary and lower secondary schools is to be carried out by 2017.

Upper secondary: The relation between vocational and general programs

A particular relationship between the two main tracks, vocational and general, has developed in Norway. Even though other countries systems have inspired the Norwegian model, it differs from those models formed in the Scandinavian countries, Sweden and Denmark.

From the 60ies there has been continuous efforts to mould the general and the vocational education at the upper secondary level into one unified system. A major leap was taken with the reform implemented in 1994, when the statutory right to three years of upper secondary education was also introduced. The reform was launched as a response to the reduction of job opportunities for young people and capacity problems especially in the vocational branches (Markussen et al. 2011b). The principle of apprenticeship training was brought into the formal, school-based educational system and applied to far more occupational qualifications than the classical ones of long standing. The latter have also traditionally been male dominated. With another reform implemented from 2006, these tendencies have been strengthened rather than changed. As a consequence, training to become a nurse assistant is based on apprenticeship, as is training to become shop assistant or cleaner. These latter occupations fail to attract young people, who in any case will be able to get such jobs even without a craft certificate. The mainly male dominated classical trades and crafts, such as carpenter, plumber and electrician are less accessible without the entitlement of the trade certificate.



The process of integrating the vocational tracks with the emphasis on apprenticeship training and the general tracks qualifying for university studies has been long and complicated. The building of the 2+2 model is a result of compromises, and therefore to some extent characterized by ambivalence. With the reform of 2006, the opening up for possibilities for changing study program after the first and second year was another endeavour in making upper secondary education more integrated and unified.

Still, one could say that there is a hindrance built into the structure of upper secondary education, in that the county is the owner of the school-based education during the first two years, while industry and the world of work own the apprenticeship training. The transition between the second year of school and apprenticeship is crucial, especially for those applying for an apprenticeship place and not having the achievement basis for embarking on the supplementary programme for general university and college admissions certification.

The so called vocational path to higher education (two years in a vocational track followed by a year qualifying for higher education, with or without apprenticeship along the way) is often praised by stakeholders in the industries as providing a relevant basis for studies in e.g. engineering. The large number of students in health and social care who top the two years in this vocational track with a supplementary year qualifying for higher education, can opt for relevant studies at university college, thereby acquiring higher competencies and status in the labour market, compared to those with a trade certificate from upper secondary education and training.

As a response to the evaluation of the Reform 2006, the many protests to the rigidity of the 2+2 model, and not least concern for the students who may have difficulties in attending two more years of classroom based education after compulsory school, experiments in other and more alternating arrangements have been introduced. These are presently under evaluation.

Completion and dropout in upper secondary education

Dropout rates are higher in vocational compared to general tracks. Statistics Norway measure achievement of qualification from upper secondary education five years after the start. The completion rate is 83 within the general tracks and 57 percent in the vocational tracks. The dropout rates within the two main branches are eight and 26 percent respectively. In both branches around 7-8 percent complete without passing all exams. In the general tracks, two percent use more than



five years, and in the vocational tracks, this occurs to nine percent. This situation has been nearly unchanged for the 15 cohorts that started in upper secondary school from 1994-2008.²

This means that the dropout-problem in upper secondary education in Norway is mainly created in the vocational tracks. Out of all dropping out of upper secondary education in Norway, almost four out of five come from a vocational track.

The students leave at all stages, but a great majority leaves the vocational tracks after year two. Not all those leaving the vocational tracks drop out. Some of them changes track and choose an additional general academic course. The result is that every fourth student who commenced a vocational track ends up with a qualification for higher education (Markussen et al., 2008).

As every fourth vocational student drop out, every fourth changes course, and nearly 10 percent do not pass all exams, the result is that even if half the cohort commence a vocational track, five years later only 16 percent of the cohort have achieved a vocational competence.

In analyses done trying to explain drop out in Norway, the main explaining factors are gender, minority/majority-background, social background (measured through different variables), school-engagement (measured through different variables) and level of achievement when entering upper secondary school (measured by grades from lower secondary school). Level of achievement has the strongest direct effect on the outcome of upper secondary, but as social background has indirect effect on both achievement and school-engagement, the conclusion is that social background has great importance in explaining different outcomes of the education system (Markussen, Frøseth & Sandberg, 2011). Success in the school system is largely dependent on social background, today as 40 years ago: "(...) the education system does to a great extent reproduce the social inequalities that exists between their parents" (Hernes, 1974: 236).

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² As achievement of qualification from upper secondary is measured after five years, the 2008-cohort is the last for which there are statistics



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