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# The wicked problem of making VET attractive – dilemmas in Danish VET policy

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## ABSTRACT

Vocational education and training (VET) has become political centre of attention, seen as a solution to many contemporary societal problems. The EU, for example, regards VET as playing a vital role in digitalisation and the transition to a green economy, pointing to the need to attract more students to VET rather than general upper secondary education. Both transnational organisations and national governments highlight as a central problem that VET is generally not held in high esteem. Parity of esteem is an issue that has been discussed by both policymakers and researchers for many years, but the problem remains. This article focuses on Denmark as a single-case study with the aim of understanding the complexity of efforts to enhance the esteem of VET. I trace how the problem has been represented in VET reforms over the past 25 years and discuss the findings, drawing on the concept of ‘wicked problems’. The key argument is that parity of esteem is a wicked problem, and it cannot be ‘definitively described’ as it is embedded in conflicting interests and divergent representations of problems in VET – and beyond as VET is closely tied to other societal institutions such as the labour market, with varying wage structures and working conditions for different occupations and trades. As such, the problem of esteem comprises many interdependent factors for which there is no simple policy solution.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

Vocational education and training (VET) is currently attracting a great deal of political interest, with both transnational organisations and national governments outlining policies aimed at strengthening VET and making it more attractive as an educational pathway (see, e.g., *National implementation plan – Denmark 2023*; *National implementation plan – The Netherlands 2022*; OECD (2023a), (2023b) Declaration 2020). This interest is driven, among other things, by the transition to a green economy and by digitalisation where especially AI is expected to change skills requirements in the labour market (Green 2024). Furthermore, forecasts predict that there will be a shortage of skilled workers by 2030 (Damm, Nielsen, and Jensen 2021; *Labour and skills shortages in the EU: an action plan 2024*) that can only be addressed by attracting more participants into VET.

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The 2023 edition of the OECD's *Education at a Glance* points to the fact that participation rates in VET at upper secondary level vary from country to country while underlining that despite a high average participation rate of 44% VET enrolment across OECD countries, VET is in many countries 'still seen as a last resort' (OECD 2023b). The Declaration (2020) emphasises that it is important for EU Member States to 'promote VET as an attractive and high-quality pathway for jobs and life' (p. 7). Meanwhile, VET's lack of 'parity of esteem' with other educational pathways is a problem that haunts many countries.

Parity of esteem is also a central theme in VET research with the aim of understanding the problem and not least to overcome it. According to Relly, the calls for parity of esteem 'have persisted for over 70 years' and she is critical of the term which she perceives as mere political rhetoric drawing on the English context as a case (2021). Young is also rather critical to achieving parity of esteem between programmes at upper secondary level (Young and Hordern 2022). Other researchers investigate possible solutions to the problem of esteem. Rintala and Nokelainen (2020) focus on the quality of learning environments in establishing esteem and Aarkrog (2020) investigates the role of the career guidance counsellors in basic schooling. A recent edited volume, *The Standing of Vocational Education and the Occupations It Serves*, points to complexity and hence a need for addressing different factors at individual, institutional and political level in establishing parity of esteem. Stalder, Choy, and Le (2022) argue that the standing of VET has become a global concern, albeit assigned different meanings across national contexts as 'VET's standing is quite country-specific' (Billett 2020). Regardless of country, the problem of esteem is intertwined 'between institutional and personal factors' (Stalder, Choy, and Le 2022, 14). Billett, Choy et al. (2022) point to the high aspirations and expectations of young people and their parents as a major factor, positioning 'VET as being an inferior post-school option to participation in higher education' (p. 19). This points to individual preferences as a cause of VET's lack of esteem, with one solution being to support, guide or even steer young people's decision-making processes. Aarkrog (2022) investigated esteem in the Danish context with a focus on students' decision-making processes at an individual level, arguing that teachers have a significant role supporting these decisions pointing towards the personal and social factors as significant in establishing esteem. The argument of the volume is that 'institutional level strategies are not sufficient' (Ibid. p. 24). Billett, Choy et al. (2022) call for a 'long-term strategic approach where a skills economy stands alongside the knowledge economy' and emphasise that what is needed is long-term development, not perpetual reforms and ad hoc development projects' (p. 29).

Whereas Relly (2021) and Young and Hordern (2022) are more critical regarding the possibility of achieving parity of esteem, Billett, Choy et al. (2022) seem more optimistic, although obviously recognisant of the complexity of the phenomenon, pointing to strategies implemented at multiple levels in a VET system as a solution to increase esteem. I shall add to the more critical outlook in this article where I address the problem of esteem using Denmark as a single-case study, tracing Danish VET policies over the past 25 years. I have a specific interest in how the problem of esteem is entangled with other political demands, resulting in political dilemmas. The many reforms reflect how policymakers call upon VET to solve a multitude of societal issues, of which esteem is only one. Each new reform represents new problems to which VET is considered the solution, and each reform gives rise to further problems whereby

policymakers end up in a vicious circle of repetitive reform (Jørgensen et al. 2016). I shall argue that there is no simple solution to the problem of esteem as policymakers are dealing with a ‘wicked’ problem entangled in diverging interests, policies, institutions and historical and cultural perceptions of VET.

### Methodological considerations

In terms of methodology, my analysis is inspired by Bacchi’s ‘What’s the Problem Represented to be?’ (WPR) approach in which policies are perceived as contributing to the creation of social problems as ‘particular kinds of problems’ rather than as solutions to exogenous problems that can be ‘objectively’ identified (Bacchi 2009; Bacchi and Goodwin 2016; Fristrup et al. 2024). Bacchi claims that policies are prescriptive and contribute to the production, for example, of VET as a particular part of the education system and VET students as particular kinds of students. Policies have direct effects – be they discursive, subjective or lived – on the practices of vocational schools, from the school’s leaders to its teachers, in a productive rather than deterministic sense. The WPR approach provides a basis for identifying what Head (2022) in his understanding of wicked problems (see below) would call the ‘framing’ of problems (but which Bacchi calls ‘representation’) and thereby deconstructing what is taken for granted – in this case, in VET policy.

The WPR approach consists of six questions and a seventh step to critical self-reflection. In this article, I draw on the third question by genealogically tracing changes in problem representations from 1999 to 2024. In the discussion, I also draw on question two and four looking into binaries and silences in the reforms. I conduct a synchronic analysis with specific focus on the reforms implemented during this period. My empirical material comprises policy documents, evaluations, and newspaper articles from the period. I base my analysis on documents either setting up or evaluating the various reforms implemented in the period:

Year	Document	Published by
2001	Hvordan gik det? Sammenfatning af erfaringer fra forsøg med eud-reformen i 2000. [What were the results? Summary of the experiences of pilot projects within Reform 2000]	The Danish Ministry of Education.
2001	Tanker om eud-reformen: en pædagogisk og organisatorisk udfordring [Thoughts about Reform 2000: a pedagogical and organisational challenge]	The Danish Ministry of Education
2006	Fremtidssikring af erhvervsuddannelserne [Ensuring VET for the future]	The Østerlund Committee under the Ministry of Education set up with the task to identify proposals for reforming VET
2014	Aftale om bedre og mere attraktive erhvervsuddannelser [Agreement on better and more attractive VET programmes]	Agreement between the Danish Government (the Social Democratic Party and the Social Liberal Party), the Liberal Party, the Danish People’s Party, the Green Left, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Alliance.
2017	Grundforløb på erhvervsuddannelserne efter reformen [Foundational VET courses after the reform]	Evaluation report published by the Danish Centre for Social Science Research
2018	Fra folkeskole til faglært – Erhvervsuddannelser til fremtiden [From basic schooling to skilled worker – VET for the future]	Agreement between the Danish Government (the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Alliance) and the Social Democratic Party, the Danish People’s Party, the Green Left, and the Social Liberal Party.

(Continued)

Year	Document	Published by
2020	Grundforløb på erhvervsuddannelserne tre år efter reformen [Foundational VET courses three years after the reform]	Evaluation report published by the Danish Centre for Social Science Research
2023	Aftale om rammerne for Reform af Universitetsuddannelserne i Danmark [Agreement on the conditions for reforming higher education in Denmark]	Agreement between the Danish Government (the Social Democratic Party, the Liberal Party and the Moderates) and the Green Left, the Danish Democrats, the Liberal Alliance and the Conservative Party.

Furthermore, I draw on Danish research of the various reforms and base the analysis on own knowledge of the Danish VET system having worked within various national and international projects since the late 1990s. Analysing and reflecting on 25 years of reform in the Danish VET system, I have the same impressions of circular movements rather than progression as described by Jørgensen et al. (2016) and try to understand it by drawing on the concept of ‘wicked problems’.

## Theoretical concepts

### *The concept of ‘wicked problems’*

I draw on Head’s understanding of ‘wicked problems’ as outlined in his book *Wicked Problems in Public Policy* (2022). Here, he defines ‘wicked problems’ as ‘those issues featuring high levels of complexity, uncertainty and divergence’ (p. 32), arguing that many policy issues have ‘systemic qualities’ in the sense that there are many interdependent factors at stake and political reforms may turn out to have ‘unpredictable effects elsewhere’ (p. 15). Furthermore, Head points to the fact that policy problems are often ‘framed’ differently by the various stakeholders in a system:

The framing of problems and solutions is expressed in different ways, through the language of economic benefits, ideological outlooks, group values and political loyalties. (p. 7)

Different ways of framing problems may lead to different solutions. In this sense, ‘problems’ are not exogenous to but constructed within policy and can be used to demand public attention and support. Head emphasises how political science has tended to overlook the importance of ‘framing or constituting of social problems’, an issue which Bacchi’s approach to policy analysis addresses through its concept of ‘problem representation’.

Head distinguishes between ‘simple’, ‘complex’ and ‘wicked’ problems (2022, 13ff). Simple problems can be defined ‘exactly or narrowly’ and are unlikely to cause major disagreement among stakeholders. However, Head cautions us to also scrutinise apparently ‘simple’ problems as they can be based on ‘naturalised’ understandings of the relationship between problem and solution (cf. Bacchi). Meanwhile, ‘complex’ problems are ongoing and recurrent ‘rather than being resolvable on the basis of scientific evidence, expert plans and competent project management.’ Such problems are characterised by institutional complexity and are persistent across time and space. Complex problems ‘typically provoke divergent views about the nature of each problem, responsibilities for addressing the problem, and the design and funding of policy responses.’ Even in the event of stakeholders agreeing to address the problem,

it is not easily solved due to its complexity. In defining ‘wicked problems’, Head draws on the work by Rittel and Webber who argued that social problems are ‘wicked problems’ which cannot ‘be definitively described’ (1973, p. 155). Instead, social problems are a matter of deliberation in a democratic society as ‘there is no objective definition of [e.g.] equity’ (Ibid, p. 155). Hence, solutions are not objective but dependent on how social problems are framed.

Turning to the ‘problem’ of parity of esteem, it can be perceived as a specific representation of the problem of VET. However, as my analysis will show, there are other – and to some extent contradictory – ways of representing problems in VET. Different stakeholders have different ideas about what VET’s role should be regarding education, employment, the economy, etc. A central trait of a wicked problem is that *it cannot be definitively solved*; instead, it will be the target of continuous political interventions ‘over and over again’ (Rittel and Webber 1973, 160). Esteem in VET is an example of precisely such a problem that, time and again, has been targeted by political resolutions.

### ***The concept of parity of esteem***

‘Parity of esteem’ can be defined as the (attempts to establish) equal esteem of VET vis-à-vis other educational sectors and implies that VET is generally perceived as less valuable than other qualifications. Research on the lack parity of esteem has tended to follow the fluctuating political interest in VET and its standing. In my analysis, I draw on the discussion of parity in an EU-funded Leonardo da Vinci project where researchers from eight countries explored the problem of parity of esteem to identify policymakers’ varying strategies to enhance the standing of VET (Lasonen 1996; Lasonen and Young 1998). The project showed that even in countries where VET participation rates were high, there had been political efforts to enhance VET’s standing, for example through increased permeability to higher education (HE). Four strategies for achieving parity of esteem were identified based on empirical studies in the eight countries. These strategies can be viewed as different ways of representing the problem of esteem, leading to different solutions. As a typology, they provide a good starting point for discussing how policy makers attempt to solve the problem of esteem:

- (1) In the vocational enhancement strategy, the solution is to enhance VET and make it more attractive to potential students through measures which maintain and strengthen VET’s distinctive ethos and identity in relation to general education;
- (2) In the mutual enrichment strategy, the solution is to enhance both vocational and general education through measures which allow each to draw on the other’s best features – a strategy that brings the two types of education closer to each other while maintaining their distinct identities;
- (3) In the linkages strategy, the solution is to give vocational and general education the same formal status, linking them through measures such as a common certification framework, arrangements for recognition of prior learning and credit transfer, and common curricular elements;
- (4) In the unification strategy, the solution is to abolish the distinction between vocational and general education by combining them within a unified system and developing a curriculum which integrates vocational and general elements.

These four strategies represent different political responses to the problem of esteem and thereby exemplify how ‘solutions’ are dependent on stakeholders and the specific context within which the problem is framed. In my analysis, I draw on this typology to discuss the political strategies pursued by shifting Danish governments and how even a combination of such strategies does not solve the problem of esteem.

## **The Danish VET system**

Before I move onto the analysis of VET policies in Denmark since 1999, I will briefly outline the Danish VET system and its main characteristics. The Danish VET system can be clustered together with the German, Austrian, and Swiss VET systems as it exhibits the characteristics of a ‘dual system’: firstly, the social partners are involved in the governance, administration, financing, and daily running of the system, and secondly, the system provides nationwide certification of occupational skills through dual programmes, that alternate between periods of school-based and work-based training.

The Danish VET programmes are divided into a foundation course, which is entirely school-based, and a main course, which is conditional on the VET student entering a contract with a company. In the main course, students alternate between working in a company and school-based education. Approximately two-thirds of the main course takes place in the company with the number of periods of school-based education varying between VET programmes. Programmes are completed with either a journeyman’s test or a final project exam (commercial training). A key strength of the dual system is that there are few problems transitioning to the labour market, keeping youth employment at a low level (Jørgensen and Smistrup 2007).

The Danish VET system is organised separately from general upper secondary education (*de gymnasiale uddannelser*) which also includes technical and commercial programmes, which are academic programmes. VET is closely related to labour market but has weak links to general and HE. Although, several programmes have been established to support VET students’ transition into higher education, it is still only a small minority (7 %) who choose this option (Dansk Erhvervsskoler og Gymnasier 2020). Hence, the Danish system has maintained a strong division between general and vocational tracks at upper secondary level.

### ***Tracing problem representations in VET policy from 1999 until today***

In the following, I trace changing problem representations in Danish VET policy and identify the strategies pursued in the various reforms.

#### ***A prize-winning system***

In 1999, the Danish VET system was awarded the Bertelsmann prize as one of the world’s best VET systems (Cort 2010a). One of the reasons for awarding Denmark the prize was the collaboration between the state and the social partners in which ‘the state intervenes as little as possible in vocational education and training’ (Stiftung 1999). Paradoxically, this prize was awarded at a time when the system was undergoing a major reform that represented VET as a solution to the problem of inclusion – an agenda promoted by the OECD (OECD 1996). During the 1990s, the 15–20% of

a youth cohort who do not enter upper secondary education had become a key political issue (Andersen 1997). Although the problem of 'academic drift' – i.e. an increasing number of young people opting for general rather than vocational upper secondary education – had grown since the 1970s, the key political concern in 2000 was to make VET more inclusive, which shaped the state's reform agenda.

### ***Reform(ing) 2000: solving the 95 % objective***

Reform 2000 refers to a series of reforms that began in 1999 with a number of pilot projects at selected vocational schools (Aarkrog and Juul 2001; Kaasbøl, Pedersen, and Størner 2001, Shapiro, Størner og Pantan 2001). These reforms were regularly adjusted throughout the 2000s when the objectives were not achieved. In Reform 2000, the main problem was represented as social inclusion of disadvantaged young people, alongside a secondary problem of attracting academically proficient young people to VET. However, the overriding policy objective was that 95% of a youth cohort gain qualifications at upper secondary level.

Reform 2000 drew upon theories concerning young people's cultural liberation from tradition, such as Ziehe's cultural theory, but also on Bjørgen's ideas of making students 'responsible for their own learning' (Cort 2010). These ideas were predominant in the 2000s and, in Denmark, were linked to the political 95% objective. VET was to cater to young people who would otherwise drop out of education entirely. The reform implied the introduction of more flexible modular pathways through the school-based part of VET, whereas the main apprenticeship-based course remained untouched. This is symptomatic of Danish VET reforms since the social partners are responsible for apprenticeships and successive governments have been wary of meddling with the main course as the availability of apprenticeships is key to the survival of the Danish VET system (Juul and Jørgensen 2011).

The reform changed the school-based elements by reducing the number of access pathways from 89 to 7 and making pathways more flexible. The rationale was that more flexible modular pathways would attract both academically 'strong' and 'weak' students. Strong students would be able to advance through the system more quickly while weaker students could take their time, prolonging the foundation course for up to 60 weeks. However, the reform overlooked several aspects regarding the target group for vocational education and training. Firstly, as shown by Koudahl (2006), many of those attracted to vocational training did not belong to the 'zapper generation' but were quite clear on their choice of education. Secondly, the 'weak' students were not a homogeneous group that could be characterised as 'practically oriented'. The division between head (intellectual work) and hand (practical skills) keeps cropping up whenever policymakers talk about VET, with a culturally embedded assumption that VET only involves work of the hand.

The 2000 reform was aimed at making VET more inclusive, which had a detrimental effect on parity of esteem. This criticism was voiced by many Danish researchers (Aarkrog and Juul 2001; Juul 2005; Koudahl 2006), many of whom were involved in the evaluation of Reform 2000, and it quickly became apparent that the reform magnified the problem of parity of esteem during the 2000s.<sup>1</sup>

Due to this criticism and, not least, falling enrolment and retention rates in VET, a series of adjustments to the reform was made. In 2006, the liberal-conservative government appointed a committee as part of a national Globalisation Strategy to

‘secure the future of the Danish VET programmes’ (Udvalget om fremtidssikring af erhvervsuddannelserne 2006). In the report from the committee, the problem represented was how to ensure the quality of the VET programmes at the same time as making them inclusive for the ‘residual group’. In the following years, the number of foundation courses was increased from 7 to 12 to more clearly highlight the functional relations between these courses and various occupational profiles. Furthermore, the degree of flexibility was reduced with the introduction of ‘foundation course packages’, intended to provide students with a more stable learning environment. Finally, incentive structures were introduced to hold vocational colleges accountable for the implementation of measures to reduce dropout.

There was widespread agreement that Reform 2000 failed: the 95% objective had not been achieved – on the contrary, during the 2000s, the drop-out rate increased from 30% to 45% while admissions to VET dropped from above 30% to approximately 20% of a youth cohort (Cort and Wiborg 2009). The strategy’s focus on inclusion was one reason why VET was perceived by many young people to be a less attractive pathway at upper secondary level. Another reason was parallel employment policies during the 2000s, which stipulated that young people under the age of 25 should enter either education or work to gain social benefits and in this way succeeded in making ‘almost all young people enrol [but not complete] a post compulsory program’ leading to the inclusion of academically weak students in VET foundation courses (Jørgensen 2014, 32). Head has described how policy interventions are sometimes not only ineffective but may even make matters worse (Head 2022, 38). Reform 2000, in combination with other policies in the 2000s (see below), may be an example of such a counterproductive policy intervention (Jørgensen 2014).

The central dilemma in Reform 2000 was how to balance the twin objectives of inclusion and making VET a more attractive choice. This was discussed both by policy makers and by researchers (Koudahl 2006, 2008; Udvalget om fremtidssikring af erhvervsuddannelserne 2006) and represented as a dilemma. To understand the reforms of the 2000s, it is necessary to provide some context: Policies in the 2000s were strongly influenced by the idea of the knowledge economy. Thus, another key policy objective in Denmark during the 2000s was to increase the number of university graduates to 50% of a youth cohort and there was generally more focus on STEM subjects as an innovative driver in the global economy than on vocational skills and the production of goods. Thus, the idea of the knowledge economy implied a ‘significant expansion of general education’ (Jørgensen et al. 2013, 1)

The discourse surrounding the knowledge economy changed after the 2008 financial crisis, with policymakers forced to abandon the idea of Europe as home to world-leading innovation and creativity and refocus on the manufacturing and production of goods, which led to renewed interest in VET. In Denmark, the then Minister of Employment (and current Prime Minister) Mette Frederiksen told the national newspaper *Berlingske Tidende*:

We must leave behind the dogma that in the future we will live off knowledge alone. Denmark must also be a skills economy (own translation). (*Berlingske Tidende* 2012)

This statement heralded a shift in education policy and the perceived role of VET in economic development. The next reform saw a marked shift in policy goals from inclusion to esteem.

### ***Reform 2014: representing the problem as a lack of 'esteem'***

The next major reform was introduced in 2014 (Regeringen 2014). This reform was partly based on the work of a commission involving the social partners and Local Government Denmark, which is a lobby organisation for the Danish municipalities. However, the social partners criticised the mandate given to the working group by the government (centre-left) and the Danish Trade Union Confederation and the Association of Danish Employers decided to publish their own joint recommendations for a new reform (Holst and Mortensen 2013). Both these organisations had an interest in making VET more attractive and one of their demands was the introduction of minimum requirements for admission to VET programmes, thereby putting an end to the inclusion policy where vocational schools had to admit all applicants in pursuit of the 95% objective (Klarskov and Vangkilde 2013). The social partners' lobbying was successful and in 2014, a new political agreement called 'Better and more attractive VET programmes' was adopted.

The overall aim of this reform was to make VET more attractive – especially to higher achieving school leavers – and to increase the overall number of students enrolling in VET programmes (Jørgensen et al. 2016). Thus, the problem representation changed in the 2010s from a matter of inclusion to a question of attractiveness. The reform was driven by a desire to meet the labour market's demand for more skilled workers.

The reform was partially inspired by Ontario, where the school system is governed through 'objectives'. The reform stipulated four 'clear objectives' (in Danish: *fire klare mål*) which could and would be continuously assessed:

- (1) Increase the number of young people entering VET directly after completion of lower secondary education – at least 25% by 2020 and 30% by 2025;
- (2) More students must complete a VET programme, with specific goals for completion rates;
- (3) VET must provide a challenging environment that ensures all students reach their potential, including high achievers;
- (4) Public confidence in VET and VET students' well-being must be improved (Regeringen 2014).

The latter is in fact two objectives in one and perhaps a good indicator of the difficulty of simplifying complex problems and distilling them into four clear objectives.

Several initiatives were the focus of efforts to achieve these objectives. Regarding the first objective, the problem was represented as VET being unattractive due to the lack of strong social environments for young people like those found in general upper secondary education – hence the solution was to –create 'similar' social environments. Young people entering VET directly after lower secondary education would now enter a foundation course with an emphasis on supporting a 'youth culture' with a range of social activities, events, and not least parties, all of which are a key part of school culture within general upper secondary education. To address the second and third objective, access to VET now required pass grades in both Danish and maths at the lower secondary level, with a new procedure introduced at lower secondary schools where teachers and guidance counsellors assessed whether pupils were ready for upper secondary education in terms of not only academic

skills and achievement but also their personal and social skills.<sup>2</sup> If assessed as not ready, pupils had to pass additional tests before entering upper secondary education. The third objective also included that more 'capable' students were given the opportunity to either enter a 'talent track' or supplement their VET programme with subjects from general upper secondary education (Regeringen 2014).

The reform included an underlying assumption concerning young people's choice of upper secondary education: young people were more attracted to general upper secondary education due to a better 'youth culture'. This included not only the 'party element', but also the idea that young people need to feel they belong to a group, which was something that had been adversely affected by Reform 2000 with its focus on flexibility and modularisation. The three-year general education programmes provided a more stable setting for young people, requiring vocational schools to rethink the learning environment they provided, including the school's architecture. In this sense, the reform sought to make VET more like general upper secondary education – an enrichment rather than unification strategy, but unilateral instead of mutual enrichment. Already in 2007, Jørgensen pointed to the fact that VET programmes are organised in a completely different way to general upper secondary programmes: following a one-year foundation course, students spend two-thirds of their time in company-based apprenticeships governed by a logic of 'production' and 'profit' and hence by different expectations of student behaviour (Jørgensen 2007).

The reform's implementation was monitored and evaluated by the Danish Centre for Social Science Research. They concluded that it was difficult to trace any differences in young (under 18) students' assessment of the youth culture in VET programmes despite the schools' efforts to implement the reform. Meanwhile, students aged between 18 and 24 saw the reform as having a negative effect on school culture (Slottved et al. 2020; Søndergaard et al. 2017).

As a strategy for achieving parity of esteem, the 2014 reform can be seen as an example of how the government pursued different strategies at the same time trying both to enhance the identity of VET and to create a possibility of mutual enrichment among programmes at upper secondary level. However, it was primarily the VET programmes that were expected to emulate the norms and practices of general upper secondary education in promoting a 'youth culture'. The focus on making VET attractive to young people had a detrimental effect among older students, where drop-out rates increased. The political dilemma now became how to create a learning environment that was attractive for both younger and older students – while still seeking to solve the broader problem of parity of esteem.

### ***Reform 2018: problematising lower secondary education***

The next reform was initiated only 4 years later in 2018 under the heading 'From lower secondary education to skilled worker – vocational education and training for the future' (2018). As the title indicates, the focus was on lower secondary education, introducing more 'practical' subjects and various bridging activities to support the transition to VET. Hence, the reform can in part be seen as an example of a mutual enrichment strategy – in this case, with VET serving as a 'role model' for lower secondary education. The idea, among other things, was to provide pupils with a foundation that could inform their choices in the transition to

upper secondary education, which included strengthening guidance at lower secondary schools:

Establish a national programme for upper secondary choices to help ensure that all lower secondary pupils are presented with a systematic, coordinated, and structured approach where guidance and teaching activities during the final years of lower secondary education are closely linked, and where teachers play a prominent role in supporting pupils' ability to make vocational and educational choices. (own translation) (Fra folkeskole til faglært – Erhvervsuddannelser til fremtiden 2018)

Guidance had already been given a pivotal role in the 2014 reform, but this role was now extended to encouraging more pupils to choose a VET programme. The problem was now represented as a matter of individual career choices, with guidance counsellors expected to play a 'pastoral' role, shepherding young people into VET (Aarkrog 2020). The 2018 reform was thus not a break with the previous reform, as was the case in 2000 and 2014, but sought to further develop aspects of Reform 2014. There was still a need to reduce dropout in VET and to attract more young people to VET programmes.

Over the past 18 years, the proportion of young people choosing VET directly after lower secondary education has fallen from over 30 % in 2000 to approx. 19 % in 2018. Furthermore, enrolment numbers among students over the age of 18 have decreased in recent years. (own translation) (Regeringen 2018, 3)

To meet the needs of the different target groups in VET, the government also promoted a vocational enhancement strategy: VET programmes were to strengthen their focus on vocational identity and '*berufsbildung*' as central and valuable characteristics. The schools were to develop new rituals and traditions to increase vocational pride and identity among students.

The overriding objective that 95% of a youth cohort gain qualifications at the upper secondary level was adjusted to 90% of young people gaining such qualifications before the age of 25 by 2030 and VET was no longer considered the 'solution' to the problem of inclusion. Instead, a new programme, basic preparatory education (FGU), was launched in 2017 for young people who do not make the transition to upper secondary education, hereby establishing an alternative route for low attainers (see Young and Hordern 2022). The 2018 reform continued the strategies of vocational enhancement and mutual enrichment. VET programmes were still expected to learn from general upper secondary education in terms of providing an attractive learning environment for young people; however, there was also greater focus on VET-specific characteristics and on supporting VET students' integration into professional communities and nurturing vocational identity and pride. Furthermore, lower secondary schools were now expected to embrace practical subjects that provide pupils with an insight into VET. At least for now, solving the dilemma of inclusion is no longer VET's responsibility, but the problem of esteem remains.

### ***VET as the 'golden standard' for education***

Current debates concerning VET in Denmark are informed by a representation of the problem as concerning the supply of labour. Recent prognoses show that there will be a lack of approx. 100,000 skilled workers by 2030 and the latest figures from April 2023 show that the number of applicants to VET has dropped from 20% in 2022 to 19.4% in

2023 (Børne- og Ungeministeriet 2023). The first 'clear objective' of Reform 2014 has not been achieved – far from it. This has led the Minister of Education, Mattias Tesfaye, to comment on the figures:

It is poison if we have a political objective that nobody believes we can achieve. I therefore propose that we bury it! It does not reflect the reality that most VET students are older when they start in a VET programme, and it takes the focus away from the enormous dropout rate in VET. (own translation) (Politiken 2023)

In other words, the Minister admitted that the enrolment objective is unattainable and wants instead to focus on how to prevent dropout. However, this change in how the problem is represented by the government did not get a positive reception from the Danish Trade Union Confederation, with the vice chairperson, Nanna Højlund, stating that the goal of attracting more young people to VET should remain. Danish Industry, which represent employers, also expressed their continued desire to increase recruitment to VET programmes. It should be noted that the social partners use the term recruitment rather than intake or enrolment, thus emphasising their focus on the needs and interests of the labour market. Such criticism was common across several organisations within the VET sector. Only the Danish Association of Employers reacted positively, commending the Minister for the shift in focus from increasing intake to reducing dropout.

The Minister launched a new strategy to increase permeability between VET and higher education, reasoning that VET qualifications should provide access to higher education programmes. He hereby introduced a linkages strategy to overcome perceptions of VET as a 'dead-end' in terms of educational pathways. This spilled over into a political agreement to reform HE in which the government prioritised VET. Until 2030, approx. 900 billion DKK (120 billion EUR) will be invested in new equipment, competence development for VET teachers, and the creation of more attractive social and professional environments at VET schools – particularly notable as previous political interest in VET has not been reflected in increased funding. Furthermore, a central ambition in the HE reform is to increase the number of labour market-oriented masters' programmes, i.e. programmes where part of the studying takes place in a company (Aftale om rammerne for reform af universitetsuddannelserne i Danmark 2023). In other words, HE programmes are to emulate the dual training principle that characterises Danish VET. A new problem representation in the 2023 reform of higher education is the belief that too many young people enter the university and young people's educational pathways after lower secondary education should be altered, for instance by changing admission requirements to general upper secondary education and reducing the number of places in HE programmes. In this respect, policymakers have moved away from the idea of the knowledge society to that of a 'skills economy'. Today, the focus is on strengthening VET and a 'vocationalisation' of both lower secondary and higher education.

Various stakeholders are currently trying to create a new societal narrative about VET in which skilled workers are the solution to the climate crisis, digitalisation, and competitiveness and productivity in a global economy. In other words, VET is being promoted at the political level and by interest groups as a solution to a wide range of societal problems with the risk of creating new dilemmas in VET policy. Overcoming the problem of esteem has become paramount to change young people's navigation through the education system.

## Attractiveness as a wicked problem

What can we learn from this single-case study of Danish VET policy? The constant reforms over the last 25 years serve as an example of the dilemmas facing VET policy: problem representations change over time, whether inclusion, attractiveness, meeting the needs of different target groups, or aligning lower secondary education with VET. In addition, there are the perpetual challenges of achieving synergy between school- and company-based learning within a dual system and, finally, the lack of sufficient apprenticeships. One reform replaces the next as the VET system is asked to solve new problems. Halász (2011) points to the fact that growing social complexity makes it increasingly difficult to design policy reforms. Policymakers often come to the realisation that 'solutions that seemed simple and logical during the period of designing policies lead to unexpected difficulties' (p. 585). New reforms result in new problems. Policymakers frequently focus on solving problems one at a time (Jørgensen 2009), oscillating between different policy objectives such as inclusion and vocational excellence. As Jørgensen states: 'The complexity implies that political initiatives very often have contradictory effects' (2018, p. x). The Danish case is a good example of such contradictory effects, where shifting governments have initiated new reforms to deal with the effects of previous reforms.

In the Danish context, policymakers have drawn on three of the four strategies identified by Lasonen et al.: vocational enhancement, mutual enrichment, and linkages. None of them has been successful pointing to the strategies as a descriptive typology rather than a prescriptive in terms of achieving parity of esteem. The only strategy that seems absent from the various reforms is that of unification, in the sense of providing a single-entry point to upper secondary education. This strategy nevertheless re-emerges every 20 years or so as a solution to the problem of attracting enough students to VET and is currently once again being promoted by Local Government Denmark (KL – Kommunernes Landsforening). However, the social partners have historically formed a strong alliance against political attempts to unify upper secondary education, monopolising control over the form and content of the main courses in VET, with access to apprenticeships based on the labour market rationality of hiring the most suitable candidate. Thus, a major silence in the reforms is the role of the companies in VET and their contribution to making VET attractive. The strategies focus on the school-based part and in some cases, on how to strengthen the interaction between school and workplace, however it has proven difficult to introduce requirements to the companies (Juul and Jørgensen 2011). The interests of especially the employers are a considerable factor in leaving the quality of the workplace a silenced area in the reforms.

The success of these strategies is hindered by the fact that they address wicked problems with many interdependent factors, often incomplete and in flux. Furthermore, as Head (2022) describes, 'complex policy problems involve conflicting interests and divergent perceptions' among stakeholders (p. 7). The changing problem representations over time show how VET is perceived both as an institution with its own problems that need solving and as a solution to other societal problems.

One conclusion might be that it is difficult to create VET programmes which are simultaneously inclusive, foster vocational excellence, are perceived to be just as attractive as general upper secondary programmes, can contribute to solving societal issues

such as the climate crisis, and meet any other political objectives that might emerge (such as satisfying labour market demands for skilled workers). Reforming VET is not just a matter of education policy but is situated at the intersection between education, employment, social, economic, and industrial policies. These policies may have different objectives that pull VET in quite different directions (see Billett, Elisabeth Stalder et al. 2022; Jørgensen et al. 2016; Young and Hordern 2022). Complex, entangled problems demand complex solutions – VET reforms alone are not enough. Head states that ‘every wicked problem can be considered a symptom of another problem’ (2022, p. 27). In this sense, addressing parity of esteem as a problem within VET is like ‘addressing the symptoms instead of the underlying causes’ (Ibid., p. 32).

The VET system must be situated within its historical, cultural, social, and economic context. VET is embedded in a historical and cultural narrative identifiable in the way policymakers represent VET as a problem – even when trying to promote VET programmes as an attractive alternative to general education. General education tends to be seen as the benchmark against which VET is measured, instead of emphasising its inherent qualities. VET is often described in terms of programmes for the ‘practically oriented’ or for ‘those who are tired of school’. The distinction between hand and head is used by policymakers to distinguish between not only VET and general upper secondary education but also between different categories of young people. While it may not be the intention, they reproduce a socio-cultural binary where general education is perceived as better than VET. The Danish Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, has on several occasions talked about educational snobbery, stating:

[...] we need to return to a more practically oriented school, where the content of some subjects is easier to understand than others. (own translation) (Berlingske Tidende 24 August 2021)

Implicitly, she hereby reproduces a cultural understanding of an educational hierarchy where VET is still placed on the ladder’s lowest rung. The policies of the 2000s exacerbated the standing of VET as the objective of attracting 50% of a youth cohort into HE led to a mass expansion and political prioritisation of the sector (Relly 2021; Rintala and Nokelainen 2020). This is really the essence of wicked problems: Policies in one sector create ‘unpredictable’ problems in another educational sector leading to accelerated reforming of the education system where policy makers end up struggling to reverse the effects of previous policies.

But more importantly, the hierarchical structure of the labour market is a central part of the problem of esteem. Across the globe, abstract academic skills receive more credit than vocational qualifications and, in most cases, also result in jobs with higher (life) earnings, better working conditions and better quality of life. Young states that essentially parity of esteem is an unrealistic goal as ‘esteem [...] is not based on education but on the destinations that particular educational pathway leads to’ (Young and Hordern 2022, 10). This implies that if parity of esteem was to be achieved, policy reforms would have to address unequal wage structures and working conditions in the labour market, not to mention the culturally inherited and deeply ingrained lack of prestige of certain occupations. Besides being off limits for policymakers in the Danish context, with its flexicurity model where the social partners negotiate wages

and working conditions, this would involve addressing the very wicked problem of equity in a capitalist economy.

## Notes

1. Teachers interviewed at the time would talk about their role shifting to that of a 'social pedagogue', teaching young people how to behave: 'In the main course, the changes are not substantial. It is the foundation course where the main changes have taken place. Here we have become social pedagogues and not teachers [...] (Teacher at a commercial college) (Cort 2011). Louw Vestergaard's dissertation (2011, 2013) showed how teachers developed strategies of concentrating on those students whom they assessed as able to successfully enter an apprenticeship and hence continue in the main course, whereas 'weak' students were marginalised.
2. This 'educational readiness' procedure was heavily criticised by guidance counsellors as having a stigmatising effect and was abolished in 2022.

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