AN ASSESSMENT OF SWEDISH HIGHER VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

The main aim of higher vocational education is providing the labour market of the country in question with a qualified work force. Nevertheless, because in Sweden higher vocational education is not provided by autonomous educational institutions, politics play a decisive role in the allocation of resources. Another important political factor is providing an alternative to unemployed young adults who would otherwise find it very hard to join the labour market. Ideally, the private sector, which represents the overwhelming majority of potential employers, plays a role in curriculum design of higher vocational programs, in the allocation of resources, in providing input to educational institutions and in providing internships for students. In Sweden, higher vocational education is less than a decade old and still has many shortcomings, from a low to very low quality to not meeting the demands of employers. The author of this article has worked in higher vocational education in Germany, at the Duale Hochschule Baden-Württemberg, and in Sweden, at the Folkuniversitetet and at the Travel Education Centre. The aim of this paper is to critically analyse higher vocational education in Sweden from a comparative perspective, and to suggest non political solutions to the many problems it faces.

Keywords: Higher vocational education, cooperative education, educational policy.

1 DEFINING THE AIMS OF HIGHER VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Higher vocational education differs from higher education both quantitatively (the duration of the study programs) and qualitatively. Higher vocational programs usually have a duration of one to three years, combining theory classes with internships. The aims of higher vocational education are also different from college or university education: While university education is much more research-oriented and aims to develop the critical thinking skills of the students, higher vocational education has as its main aim providing the students with theoretical and practical tools that will help them join the labour market. For this reason, research is not as relevant in higher vocational education. Higher vocational education is different from secondary vocational education, since applicants must have a high school certificate or equivalent in order to be eligible.

While theory plays a role in higher vocational study programs, it is the practical application of theoretical knowledge what counts, since the aim of higher vocational education providers is precisely to satisfy the needs of employers. Higher vocational education has to be resilient, due to the fact that the needs of the labour market change with time, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Whereas most universities in the West are autonomous, that is, they decide upon resource allocation, higher vocational education is dependent on governmental decisions for resource allocation: Universities might decide to keep offering purely theoretical programs, like philosophy, which do not satisfy the needs of the labour market, but which are fundamental in any institution which calls itself a university. Higher vocational colleges, on the other hand, depend on the demand of employers for certain qualifications and in Sweden, on politically motivated decisions, as will be explained below.

Curriculum design in higher vocational education is mainly utilitarian: the programs are short and therefore all subjects contained in the curriculum must have a practical applicability on the workplace. Subjects are thus chosen in terms of their future utility. As stated by Finch and Crunkilton, certain characteristics distinguish technical and vocational curricula from other curricula. The controlling purpose of technical and vocational curricula is the preparation of students “for useful, gainful employment.” [1]

In the same manner, what defines the success of a higher vocational school is not necessarily a high academic level (which from the perspective of employers is of course desirable), but much more the rates of placement in related occupations. As Grubb and Lazerson point out, “if an institution is overtly
vocational in the sense that its curriculum is vocational, but it fails to place its graduates in related employment, then its legitimacy is undermined and its standing among students will be eroded.” [2]

It is important to note that the nature of vocational education is dynamic, since the needs of the labour market change with time, and sometimes drastically due to socio-political and economic conditions. For this reason, another characteristic of successful technical and vocational education would be resilience- that is, flexibility and adaptability.

2 AN EXAMPLE OF HIGHER VOCATIONAL BENCHMARKING: THE GERMAN UNIVERSITY OF COOPERATIVE EDUCATION

Germany has three main types of tertiary education: The most prestigious one, with the longest programs and the most theoretical type is the university (Universität). A tertiary institution which calls itself a university must offer undergraduate and graduate programs, including doctorates and post doctorates. Universities offer programs in all areas, and these need not have any practical application. Such is the case of philology, philosophy and literature programs.

The second type of tertiary education institution is the German Fachhochschule. A Fachhochschule can be best described as a university which offers technical study programs. Many of the teaching staff come from the business world. These institutions offer students curricula that are much more praxis-oriented and shaped by the needs of the labour market. Groups are usually smaller than in universities, but in most cases it is not possible to obtain a degree above the M SC. Furthermore, Fachhochschulen are specialized in certain areas. Some study programs, like medicine, are only offered by universities.

The third type of tertiary education institution in Germany, one that has had a great success in terms of job placement is the University of Cooperative Education, known as the Berufsakademie until 2009. It must be stated that education in Germany is determined by each of the Bundesländer, or German states. This type of higher vocational education, combining theory with internships in equal proportions has existed in the state of Baden-Württemberg since 1974. The Berufsakademie changed its name in 2009, when it was granted recognition as a university of cooperative education, and its name is now the Duale Hochschule Baden-Württemberg. The characteristic which makes dual education different from other types of tertiary education is precisely the combination of theory and practice in equal proportions, as well as the active role played by local industries in the education of their future staff. At the time when the author worked at the Berufsakademie from 2002 to 2008, the job placement percentage of the graduates was 73%, usually in the company where they did their internships. Nowadays, according to DHBW data, the job placement percentage is around 80%. Another fundamental difference between universities and colleges and the University of Cooperative Education is that while it is up to each university or college to accept applicants, enrollment at the University of Cooperative Education is only possible after a training contract with a workplace training provider has been signed. Nowadays, the University of Cooperative Education has more than 9,000 partner companies.

2.1 DHBW- Strong Links between School and Employers

Partner companies of the Duale Hochschule Baden-Württemberg usually pay their student-employees a salary both during the theory and the internship parts of the program. This salary varies from €500 to €1000, depending on the partner company and the location of the college. The engagement of German companies in the education of their interns, which in most cases will become part of their staff, is quite unique. Grubb and Lazerson point out that “schools and colleges…are often at odds with employers, who are primarily concerned with immediate productivity and short-term profit.” [1] This is definitely not the case of the Duale Hochschule Baden-Württemberg.

This cooperation between vocational college and future employer is fundamental if the study programs are to be successful. Partner companies who finance the studies of their interns play a role in curriculum design. Whereas curricular success in other educational institutions is merely measured by student educational achievement, in (higher) vocational and technical education it is mainly measured through the results of that achievement, “results that take the form of performance in the work world”. [2]

According to the German newspaper Die Zeit, for each student accepted as intern by a partner company there are 33 applicants. [3] Students have only a second chance of presenting an exam in case of failing, and must be finished with the academic program within the time limit. This makes
sense if one takes into account that time lost by a student is money lost by his or her employer. Likewise, employers are non-beneficence institutions and would most likely not employ mediocre or less than mediocre graduates.

Higher vocational education has become very popular in Germany because it offers high school graduates on the one hand the possibility of studying without incurring into debt, and on the other hand, much greater chances of obtaining employment than if they decide to study a theoretical study program at a university. Another important factor is as Grubb and Lazerson state, “a trio of qualifications from employers, from schools and from the national government” [2] motivate students to apply to the University of Cooperative Education, since credentials from this institution are valued even more than university credentials by potential employers.

Moreover, employers not only decide which applicants will become students at the DHBW, give their input into curriculum design, but also make decisions regarding the teaching staff. While it could be argued that such an education is highly subjected to business interests, if one considers the raison d’être of technical and vocational education it can be stated that the DHBW is highly successful.

2.2 An example of Benchmarking in higher vocational education

There are a number of factors which account for the great success of the University of Cooperative Education of Baden Württemberg as one of the best higher vocational colleges in the world. Perhaps the most important of these is the engagement of local industries in the education of their future staff. On the one hand, these internships make higher vocational education available for capable students of different socioeconomic strata, since they offer applicants economic independence. On the other hand, the hands-on experience gained at a local company is valuable as work experience for the student and is recognized as such by other companies. Furthermore, the engagement of local industries in the education of their future staff guarantees that only qualified applicants are accepted as students. Companies which offer internships also have a say in the recruitment of staff and in setting academic standards. Since employers play such an important role in curriculum design, financing and the provision of internships, academic goals do not have priority over occupational goals. Furthermore, since decision-making is pragmatic and not political, the University of Cooperative Education does not have a problem with grade inflation and instructors can teach at a demanding academic level.

In the opinion of the author, another distinctive factor of the success of the DHBW is the high level of institutionalization of this higher vocational college. There is a long-term commitment between the Duale Hochschule Baden-Württemberg and its partner companies that goes beyond satisfying the immediate needs of employers. Furthermore, students usually do internships at different departments within the company, and in this way they gain broader skills and competencies that are valuable for other companies as well.

3 HIGHER VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN SWEDEN

In Sweden, higher vocational education is less than a decade old. On February 26, 2009, the Swedish Parliament approved the decision to start higher vocational educational programs in the country. These programs would differ from university academic programs in several ways: First, they would depend on the needs of the labor market; second, their curricular content would be determined by the relevance of the subjects for potential employers, and third, students would be able to influence the curricular content of the study programs. In contrast to academic study programs, which are often unrelated to the needs of the labor market and are much more related to scientific research and the arts, the aim of the new higher vocational programs would be “…to cover Sweden’s need for qualified labor.”[4]

In Sweden, higher vocational programs usually have a duration of one to three years, and do not necessarily have to include internships. Programs are formed on an ad-hoc basis: According to the regulations of the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, any individual or institution can start a higher vocational education program following a bid held every year. These programs can be subsidized or not- in this second case what the institution seeks is only accreditation.

A detailed curriculum for the program has to be presented: it has to describe all the skills, abilities and competencies prospective students are to gain after completing the program. The application has to include an analysis of employment trends and employers’ views of the present and immediate-future needs of their companies, since the programs have a maximum duration of four years. After four
years, programs have to be redesigned or discontinued and substituted by programs which meet the current needs of the labor market. The institutions have to apply again either only for accreditation, or for accreditation and funding as well, as most institutions do. The process can be compared to a tender, where the best proposals are the ones which obtain public funding.

According to the regulations of the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, institutions or individuals who offer higher vocational programs have to work together with representatives from companies or the business world, pundits, academics and others who can provide valuable input to the program. There is a maximum of 25 people who can form the advisory committee (ledningsgruppen). The advisory committee is supposed to fulfill a number of functions, like the revision of the curriculum, providing internships for students and giving conferences or seminars during the theoretical part of the program. The proportion of theory and practice is decided by the institution and the ledningsgruppen. Usually, two-thirds of the study program is theory and one third is internship.

3.1 Swedish Higher Vocational Education in Practice

As stated above, higher vocational programs are rather new in Sweden, and there is a general lack of institutionalization. The fact that the programs are ad hoc, just like the advisory committees of the prospective schools, makes a professionalization of the programs impossible. Even when programs are successful both in terms of academic achievement and job placement, these have to be either redesigned or wholly abandoned. There is no time for improvement, and no chance for a long-lasting cooperation of the actors participating in higher vocational programs.

In practice, companies have no say in student recruitment, which is left to the discretion of the educational institution. The criteria that matter most in student recruitment are quantitative and not qualitative: For every student admitted, the Agency gives a subsidy of around SEK 50,000 (€ 5,000) to the educational institution. Higher vocational schools and colleges advertise so all their vacancies are filled, because every vacant study place means an economic loss. The reality of this mechanism is that many times students who lack the skills, knowledge and motivation to study are accepted, and the effects of these decisions can be quite negative on other students as well as on the institution.

Moreover, educational institutions can not expel students for poor performance. Although the number of chances is not specified, students can have up to 5 chances to present exams and other assignments. In the experience of the author, it can be quite difficult for teachers to offer a high academic level when a proportion of the students lack the most basic skills, and the group’s performance is negatively affected.

A major problem is that measures are seldom taken in case of cheating or plagiarism. In the two institutions where the author lectured, there were cases of cheating and plagiarism, and in both institutions management decided not to take any measures against the students because of the economic losses their expulsion would mean. This behaviour is not only unacceptable in any respectable academic institution, but also gives a very negative example and creates demotivation in honest, hard-working students.

Furthermore, in the Folkuniversitetet, where the author lectured for the students of the higher vocational export management program, some students had still not found a company to do their internships in at the end of the semester. The head teacher had told the students that the institution was not responsible for internships, and some students did their internships at companies which had nothing to do with export management, for example, as salespeople in retail stores. There was little control of the companies, or that the students were actually doing their internships there. Contacts with the business community were very, very limited, and the author herself had to find internships for her students through the Stockholm Chamber of Commerce.

Another problem the author experienced was the strong influence students had on the curriculum and the lectures, and not always for the better. Although it is students that are the clients of the schools, the aim of higher vocational education is to satisfy the needs of the labour market by preparing capable, responsible, and competent staff. Very often, the students who enrol in higher vocational programs are not interested in learning but only in obtaining high grades, even if these prove to be deceptive when the time comes to prove their competencies at the workplace.
3.2 A long way to go

A very significant problem all education faces in general but vocational education faces in particular are educational policies. Sweden prides itself in being an “inclusive” country- that is, nobody should be left behind. Due to massive immigration in the last years from the Middle East and other regions with very low educational levels, the Social Democratic government under Prime Minister Stefan Löfven has as a priority the creation of low-skill jobs to combat rampant unemployment among the people with the least qualifications, who usually are foreign-born and often end up in gangs.

There is a conflict of interests between the business community, who desires cadres of highly qualified graduates, and the national government, who wishes to invest in the least qualified individuals with the aim of including them in the workforce and facilitating their integration into Swedish society. As has been presented above, one of the benchmarking criteria of Germany is precisely the tripartite cooperation of colleges, employers, and the government. Moreover, the policy of “inclusion” means in practice that students who do not have the skills, competencies and qualifications graduate from higher vocational colleges, but their performance is low and they often end up unemployed, which goes totally against the raison d'être of vocational programs.

Furthermore, the fact that higher vocational programs and cooperation between schools and the business community is ad hoc means that institutionalization will hardly be possible. One can say that while modern economies are dynamic, and the needs of the labour market change with time, the nature of the Swedish economy, dependent on high technology and exports, does not change overnight. Besides, there are certain skills that employers always want their workforce to possess, like leadership, interpersonal, career development, problem-solving, communication, the 3 R’s (reading, writing, computing), resiliency and, in the case of Sweden, good English skills.

4 CONCLUSION

Higher vocational education is different from other forms of tertiary education in the sense that it aims to satisfy the needs of the labour market. It is therefore logical that enterprises and other actors of the business community, who are the main employers in a market economy, not only provide internships, but also have a say in curriculum design and the recruitment of students and teachers. While governmental agencies have a role in the accreditation of study programs, their role should be limited if the aim of the programs is the satisfaction of the needs of employers. While the inclusion of the most marginalized members of society is desirable from a social and a political perspective, it can not be done at the cost of higher vocational study programs. Furthermore, as long as criteria for financing programs are quantitative and not qualitative, it is very unlikely for higher vocational education to improve, since every student who drops out for any reason means an economic loss for the educational institution, and it is highly undesirable for educational institutions to see their budgets reduced.

Employers play their role by providing opportunities to graduates and paying taxes. They should not be expected to be satisfied with graduates whose education does not meet their standards. The Swedish government has therefore to encourage more participation in education from the business community, for example by offering tax breaks for companies who provide internships, and keep politics out of higher vocational education. If Sweden wants to keep up with other highly developed economies, its focus has to change from equality to excellence.

REFERENCES


[4] Swedish Association for Distance Education, Vad är YH-utbildning/yrkeshögskoleutbildning?