

Chapter 4. Empowering social partners in vocational education and training in Sweden

Sweden has successfully built social partners' engagement in vocational education and training (VET) at the national level, but social partners' involvement at the local level varies affecting the quality of education and training provision. The chapter argues that Sweden may create a framework for systematic social partner involvement at the local level. The chapter discusses college initiatives that are led by social partners and drive local provision towards specific skills requirements, often in response to labour shortages. It argues that Sweden can strengthen social partners' involvement by drawing on this positive experience.

The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.

Introduction: Background

The introduction explores different forms of collaboration between stakeholders, including the social partners (employers and trade unions) in the development and implementation of vocational education and training (VET) policies. It compares the pattern of social partners' involvement in VET in Sweden with that of other countries.

The role of social partners

Strong VET systems involve social partners

One of the main purposes of VET is to meet the needs of the labour market. Governance arrangements therefore need to engage employers and trade unions alongside other stakeholders, such as government representatives, teachers, students and provider institutions. Employers play a particularly critical role, since they often share with schools the responsibility for provision of education and training, typically by providing work placements to VET students.

The social partners engage with VET systems at different levels

Social partner engagement occurs at national level, for example in agreeing the main policy features of the VET system; at local and regional level, for example in handling arrangements for work placements; and at sectoral level, often in designing specific programmes (for example, social partners representing the construction sector provide input in the design of VET programmes in construction). Table 4.1 shows the level of social partners' involvement across countries. Denmark and Finland, like Sweden, maintain arrangements for engaging social partners with individual institutions. The influence of social partners can be just advisory or consultative, or alternatively can involve full decision-making.

Table 4.1. The levels at which there exists an institutional framework for social partner engagement (2007 data)

	National	Regional	Institution/Local
Austria	✓	✓	
Denmark	✓		✓
Finland	✓		✓
Germany: apprenticeship	✓	✓	
Germany: school-based VET		✓	
Norway	✓	✓	
Sweden	✓		✓
Switzerland	✓		

Note: The framework for social partners' involvement at the institution level refers to formalised collaboration between institutions and companies at local level. It does not include individual companies providing work placements to students. For example, in Denmark it refers to Local Trade Committees that are set at the institution level.

Source: Tritscher-Archan, S. (2016_[1]), "Vocational education and training in Europe – Austria", *Cedefop ReferNet VET in Europe Reports*, http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2016/2016_CR_AT.pdf; Andersen, O. and K. Kruse (2016_[2]), "Vocational education and training in Europe – Denmark.", *Cedefop ReferNet VET in Europe Reports*, www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/denmark-vet-europe-country-report-2016; Protsch, P. and H. Solga (2016_[3]), "The social stratification of the German VET system", *Journal of Education and Work*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2015.1024643>.

How to design an effective model of involvement for social partners

VET systems engage the social partners in different ways. Effective arrangements should allow social partners to provide their input into VET regularly, in a timely manner, and in all relevant areas. Box 4.1 describes the form of social partner involvement in Denmark and Norway. In both countries, systematic arrangements give the social partners an advisory role either at regional or institution level.

Box 4.1. Involvement of social partners in VET in Denmark and Norway**Denmark**

In Denmark, social partners are involved at national and local level.

National level: Advisory

The national advisory council on vocational upper-secondary education and training (*Rådet for de grundlæggende Erhvervsrettede Uddannelser*) meets 8-10 times a year. It advises the ministry on the establishment of new VET programmes and changes in existing ones. The council includes representatives of the social partners, local governments and regional organisations, schools, teachers, and student associations. There are 31 representatives from the employer and employees organisations in the council (Undervisnings Ministeriet, 2018_[4]).

National level: Decision making

Around 50 national trade committees (*faglige udvalg*) are responsible for 106 VET upper-secondary programmes. These are composed of, and funded by, employer and employee organisations. Trade committees update existing courses and propose new ones, define learning objectives and final examination standards; decide the duration of the programme, and the ratio between college-based teaching and practical work in an enterprise; approve enterprises as qualified training establishments and rule on conflicts which may develop between apprentices and the enterprise providing practical training; issue journeyman's certificates in terms of content, assessment and the actual holding of examinations (Andersen and Kruse, 2016_[2]).

Institution level: Advisory

Each vocational college (providing school-based education and training) works with at least one local training committee that includes representatives of local employers and employees appointed by national trade committees, and representatives of staff, management and students appointed by colleges. Local training committees work closely with colleges to adapt the content of VET programmes to local needs, strengthen contacts between the college and local employers, and support colleges with the delivery of programmes, for example by securing work placements for students. They also serve as a link between local and national levels, ensuring that national committees have a good overview of local circumstances and that local policy is aligned with national objectives. For example, they assist and advise national trade committees in approving local enterprises as qualified training establishments and in

mediating conflicts between apprentices and enterprises (Andersen and Kruse, 2016_[21]). The national committees can devolve responsibilities to the local trade committees if they are better taken care of at the local level.

Norway

National level: Decision making

At the national level there is a National Council for VET (*Samarbeidsrådet for yrkesopplæring*) and nine Vocational Training Councils (*Faglige råd*), one for each VET programme, where social partners are represented. These bodies have an advisory role in respect of the first two school-based years of apprenticeship, but a decisive role in the last two work-based years of apprenticeship. The government has to take into account the proposals of the social partners unless they are against the law or involve a substantial increase in public spending.

Regional (county) level: Advisory

Social partners sit on 19 Vocational Training Boards (*Yrkesopplæringsnemnda*), one for each county. They provide advice on quality, career guidance, regional development and the provision in the county to meet local labour market needs (Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Education (SIU), 2016_[51]). County authorities are also responsible for approving enterprises that provide apprenticeship training. While counties are free to develop their approval procedure they typically involve social partners from the relevant sector in the process.

Source: Andersen, O. and K. Kruse (2016_[21]), “Vocational education and training in Europe: Denmark”, *Cedefop ReferNet VET in Europe Reports*, www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/denmark-vet-europe-country-report-2016; Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Education (SIU) (2016_[51]), “Vocational education and training in Europe – Norway”, *Cedefop ReferNet VET in Europe Reports*; http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2016/2016_CR_NO.pdf; Undervisningsministeriet (2018_[41]), *Om Rådet for de grundlæggende Erhvervsrettede Uddannelser - Undervisningsministeriet*, <https://uvm.dk/erhvervsuddannelser/ansvar-og-aktoerer/raad-og-udvalg/reu/om-reu>.

The challenge: Involvement of social partner at the local level is variable

Sweden has successfully built a national framework for social partner involvement

A previous OECD review of VET in Sweden, carried out in 2007 (Kuczera et al., 2008_[6]) expressed concern over weak social partner involvement in VET and weak links between VET and the labour market. Since 2007, Sweden has developed a permanent national framework for social partners’ involvement. In 2010, programme councils for each national upper-secondary VET programme were created (Statens offentliga utredningar (SOU), 2015_[7]). Thirteen sectoral National Programme Councils (*nationella programråd*) concern themselves with the 12 national vocational programmes and the fourth year of technology programmes (as explained in Chapter 1). Each council has 8-10 members representing industry, social partners, and sometimes national and regional authorities, and meets around six times a year (Ministry of Education, 2018_[8]). Councils advise the National Agency for Education on the quality, content and organisation of

upper-secondary VET for youth and adults, aiming to match VET provision to labour market needs. The councils advise on proposals for new subjects or courses submitted by the National Agency, which may lead to modification of the proposals, or possibly even their abandonment (Equavet, n.d.^[9]). Social partners reported to the visiting OECD team that they were generally satisfied with this framework. This is a major achievement, as international experience shows that establishing employer engagement in VET systems can be extremely challenging.

But at local level collaboration with social partners is variable

Schools are expected to set up collaborative arrangements with one or more Local Programme Councils (*lokala programråd*) in areas corresponding to the VET programmes available in the school. Local Councils are expected to include representatives from local working life, other stakeholders and social partners, and their role is to advise schools on how to adjust VET programmes to local labour market needs and support VET provision, for example by finding work placements for students. According to one survey of VET teachers, 75% reported working in schools where there was a Local Programme Council tied to the teacher's programme, and 6% report being in schools with joint councils for several VET programmes (Skolverket, 2016^[10]). But the same study shows that the influence of local council varies greatly (Skolverket, 2016^[10]; Statens offentliga utredningar (SOU), 2015^[7]). Local councils are not legally regulated (Ministry of Education, 2018^[8]), and schools are free to organise local councils to fit their needs, so that there is much variation in the quality of local partnerships. Connections between the national and local levels could also be improved. During the OECD's visits, various interlocutors expressed a view that National Programme Councils are sometimes not aware of local employers' needs.

Quality criteria for VET could better reflect occupational aspects of VET programmes

A recent government inquiry on upper-secondary VET argues that school inspections carried out by the School Inspectorate do not look at the quality of vocational training in VET programmes (e.g. quality of equipment, professional competences of VET teachers). (Statens offentliga utredningar (SOU), 2015^[7]) In some ways this is inevitable. While a school inspectorate can reasonably be expected to have expertise on the broad principles of VET, it would be unrealistic to expect it to provide subject experts who can assess the quality of teaching, the equipment required, or the key curricular elements in a course – say – in healthcare. Instead, quality assurance of this type needs to come from practitioners working in healthcare – the social partners.

Policy options

To empower social partners, Sweden may introduce the following measures:

- Building on existing local consultation arrangements, and the successful experience with colleges, Sweden could establish a more systematic institutional framework to engage the social partners at local level. This would promote collaboration between different stakeholders, and reinforce links between national and local bodies in which social partners are represented. A model inspired by the college initiative, in which programmes and institutions collaborate and meet the quality requirements of the social partners, could be encouraged.

- This proposition is linked to policy options advanced in other chapters of this report. Chapter 2 proposed the consolidation of VET provision in fewer but larger VET schools, facilitating social partner engagement as social partners would not have to engage with so many small institutions.
- Drawing on the Danish experience, local social partner organisations may serve as a link between local and national levels, ensuring that National Programme Councils are fully apprised of local circumstances and interests, and that local approaches take full account of national development.
- Stronger local engagement of the social partners would facilitate an enhanced role for the social partners in the quality assurance of local VET provision. This role could involve ensuring that national VET programmes are taught and configured so as to meet local labour market requirements, supporting the provision of work placements and apprenticeships, and quality assuring the work placements that are delivered. This might be underpinned by requiring school evaluations give credit to schools for facilitating such local engagement of the social partners, and the quality assurance which might follow.

Policy arguments and implementation

This section argues that social partners should be involved at all levels where VET policy is defined. In particular they should be more involved in development of quality criteria for the occupational elements of VET and evaluation of the outcomes.

Policy argument 1. A stronger institutional framework for the local engagement of the social partners in VET provision would have many benefits

Involvement of social partners improves labour market outcomes from VET

The engagement of social partners in VET systems helps to improve labour market outcomes for students and helps to meet the skills needs of employers. Strong VET systems, drawing on social partner engagement, yield benefits to employers by increasing the pool of qualified labour, and benefit students by facilitating their transition to skilled employment (Chapter 3 discusses in more detail benefits associated with work-based learning). In Sweden, a study looking at the provision of work placements in upper-secondary VET shows that a strong partnership between the school and local councils improves outcomes from VET (Skolverket, 2016^[11]).

It fosters innovation

The collective involvement of social partners in VET as a valuable spin-off, can encourage innovation in firms. Social partners are able to reflect upon, and share information, new technologies, production and training methods while updating the components of VET programmes. This effect is stronger for small firms, implying there is a transition of knowledge and innovation from larger companies to smaller ones (Rupietta and Backes-Gellner, 2012^[12]).

Policy argument 2. In building a stronger framework for social partners' involvement, Sweden can build on the existing College model

The social partners created colleges to address skills shortages and promote excellence in VET

Colleges are local initiatives, led by the social partners, to drive local provision towards specific skills requirements, often in response to labour shortages. To be included in a College, programmes and schools have to meet certain requirements established by the social partners, demonstrating their responsiveness to the labour market. The social partners set rules according to which each College is organised and standards for the programme that would like to become part of a College. Colleges have been created in sectors such as health, technology, transport and in the vehicle industry. They promote cooperation among municipalities, schools and local employers. For example, a College in technology (*Teknikcollege*) requires at least three municipalities to collaborate (Teknik College, 2018_[13]; Persson and Hermelin, 2018_[14]). A health and care College (*Vård och Omsorgscollege*), in addition, requires involvement of a county or a region (Vård och Omsorgs college, 2018_[15]). Schools that are part of a College have to work very closely with local employers to make sure the programme offered is relevant to the local labour market needs. Colleges may set up steering groups with industry representatives to ensure that programmes meet all the quality criteria. They may also define standards for work placements with companies, equipment used in school workshops and methods of teaching VET subjects (Teknik College, 2018_[13]).

The College has filled the gap in the system

Social partner investment in the College initiative suggests that the existing VET system has not met social partners' expectation in terms of relevance and quality of occupational preparation (Persson and Hermelin, 2018_[14]). It also shows that social partners are interested in getting more involved in VET, and that collectively they are well placed to contribute to the quality criteria of VET programmes. One study focusing on the *Teknikcollege* notes that in 2015 there were 150 schools certified to offer technical College programmes and more than 2 000 companies involved (Persson and Hermelin, 2018_[14]). According to the study, most of the technical VET programmes were part of the college scheme. Three-quarters of students enrolled in industry programmes and 40% of students in the Technology Academic Programme were in programmes certified by the College.

Policy argument 3: How to implement the proposed options

Social partners are well placed to contribute to the quality of VET programmes

Given that the college model defines a standard of excellence, guided by the social partners, there are good reasons for building on this model. Drawing on the college standard of excellence, quality criteria may be defined in terms of regional collaboration and the role of companies in provision of VET, requirements for work placements with companies, equipment used in school workshops and methods of teaching VET subject, etc. Social partners should be fully involved in development of these criteria, and support schools and companies in reaching them, for example by updating VET trainers on recent developments in the profession. They may also ensure some quality control. Reaching these objectives may require involvement of social partners at various levels. National

bodies, where social partners are represented, may be better placed to define quality criteria for specific national VET programmes while local bodies may advise and support schools with implementation of these criteria. Since social partner engagement in VET varies by sector. Development of a model drawing on the college example may need to start in sectors where social partner involvement in VET is already strong. Gradually, and after running an evaluation, a similar model could be expanded and applied in other sectors.

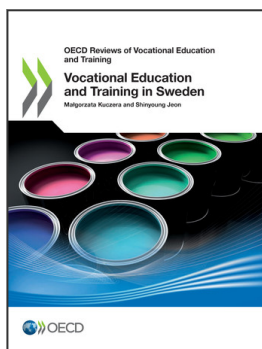
The proposed development should apply to all schools

Persson and Hermelin (2018^[14]) report that more than 90% of programmes certified by *Teknikcollege* are run by municipalities and few by independently run schools despite the fact that the independent sector enrolls approximately one-third of the students in industry programmes (Skolverket, 2014^[16]). In general, it makes sense for any agreed rules regarding co-operation with the social partners and provision of VET to apply in the same way to all schools, including both municipality and independently run schools. Data might be published on the schools that take part in such college schemes, and this could reasonably be part of the school evaluation process. The criteria, while demanding, should be reasonable. This means that they should be within the reach of schools catering to different populations.

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