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Quality on the Agenda!

In 2002 the Copenhagen process was initiated. An aim of this process is to promote cooperation in quality assurance and development among the EU Member States; in other words to bring quality in education and teaching on the agenda. Thus, the Copenhagen process has led to an increased focus on quality in Vocational Education and Training (VET) across Europe and the development of tools aimed at promoting transparency and a common basis for quality assurance and development\(^1\). Also in Denmark the majority of quality efforts in the VET system during the last two decades have been focusing on promoting tools and a systematic approach to quality assurance at both system and provider level (Cort 2005b: 3). The current educational policy in Denmark still focuses on systematic approaches to quality and on indicator based inspection of providers. The increased focus on quality – across Europe and within the single Member State – makes it vital to discuss the concept of quality in relation to VET. What is quality in Danish VET and how do systematic quality approaches or models contribute to an assurance of quality in the VET system? Thus, a significant distinction is the relation between a substantial quality concept and an overall procedural quality. A determination of a substantial quality concept concerns a first level of analysis (what is the “core” of the quality concept in Danish VET?), while a procedural application of quality (such as quality systems or models) to organizations providing public service concerns a second level of analysis.

With this paper it is my aim to initiate a discussion on how the quality concept is to be understood in relation to Danish VET. The paper is part of a PhD-project focusing on the use of and effects from evaluation and assessment in Danish VET colleges. The paper is introduced by a short description of the Danish VET system. Then the analysis of the quality concept related to VET (as a first level of analysis) will be followed by an analysis of how quality is being organizationalised in VET colleges (as a second level of analysis). This paper is work-in-progress and as such a first draft. That is why it does not present any concluding remarks.

The Danish VET system

The Danish VET system is part of the overall upper secondary education system. The aim of the VET programmes is to provide the students with vocational qualifications, which the labour market formally recognizes and demands. The VET programmes also provide the students with general and personal qualifications. In this way, a VET program provides the students with

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\(^1\) One of these tools is the Common Quality Assurance Framework (CQAF), which is aimed at inspiring stakeholders in VET at national, regional, and local levels in their work with quality (Seyfried 2007). Basically the CQAF-model consists of four element or phases inspired by the quality circle: planning, implementation, evaluation and assessment, and review (Cort 2005b: 10).
possibilities for lifelong learning and for active citizenship (Ministry of Education 2007a: § 1 art. 2). The VET programmes are based on a dual training principle, i.e. theoretical and practical education and training at a vocational college alternates with practical training in an enterprise. This principle ensures that the students and trainees acquire theoretical, practical, general, and personal skills which are in demand by the labour market. The in-company training constitutes approximately 1/2 to 2/3 of the entire programme. The VET system is also based on a principle of social partner involvement. Hence the social partners take part directly in the overall decision-making, in daily running of the VET system and in quality assuring efforts (Cort 2005a: 9). In this way quality can be viewed as built into the very fabric of the Danish VET system by involving all major stakeholders and entrusting them with the power to continuously adapt and renew the system in light of social, technological, and economic changes (Cort 2005b: 4). Finally the Danish VET system is based on a principle of lifelong learning. The system is flexible and modularised, which makes it possible to learners to take part of qualifications now, and later – when returning to the VET system – adding to their VET qualifications. In order to ensure coherence between different qualifications and competence levels the lifelong learning principle also involves an integration of initial VET and continuing VET$^2$ (CVET) (Cort 2005a: 9). Hence, the VET system is characterised by responsiveness and flexibility. I assume that these characteristics are of importance to a determination of quality in Danish VET programmes.

A Concept of Quality

In the early 1990s a change of course from central governance to targeting framework governance based on taximeter grants per student brought quality assurance and development on the political agenda. The new guiding principles from the Danish Ministry of Education were aimed at improvement of the overall responsiveness and effectiveness of the VET system (Cort 2005b: 7). Thus, systematic quality assurance and development was introduced as a compulsory element for all VET providers. The Danish Ministry of Education initiated a number of activities aimed at promoting quality “thinking” in the VET system. The implementation of systematic assurance and development were formed as a bottom-up process, which in 1995 became the national quality strategy for the sector (Cort 2005b: 28). During this process a Danish perception of quality was formulated by the Ministry of Education and laid down in the quality strategy for the VET sector. But this happened twelve years ago. A lot has happened since one should think. The question is to what extent the formulation – formulated as a national definition of quality and not as a

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$^2$ IVET (Initial Vocational Education and Training) encompasses the EUD programmes (erhvervsuddannelserne) which are provided by technical, commercial, and combined colleges. CVET (Continued Vocational Education and Training) encompasses the adult vocational training programmes which are provided by both technical, commercial, combined colleges, and adult vocational training centres. Thus, the same providers may provide many different VET programmes (Cort 2005b: 8).
definition concerning the VET system - from 1996 is being used today? In my research to find a reformulation of the perception from 1996 I have found Cort’s (2005b) report on quality in Danish VET. Cort refers to the 1996-formulation (Cort 2005b: 6): “(…) it is not possible to say anything definitive and universal about quality in an education system. It is neither possible nor desirable to authorise one specific concept – be it in regard to methods or objectives and values. This is a basic democratic principle, which takes into consideration the fact that it is possible to achieve the same goals by different routes and with different means and methods” (Ministry of Education 1996: 7). This perception of quality is broad (maybe that is why it still represents the Ministry’s official perception of quality?). Actually, it is striking how ambiguous these formulations are, they tell almost nothing about how quality is to be perceived in Danish VET. Corts’ comments on the above quoted perception of quality is that “In Denmark, quality in VET is perceived primarily in regard to providers and learners, with the aims of ensuring correspondence between the national VET objectives and the local VET programmes, and of securing the quality of the individual providers” where the term provider refers to vocational colleges, adult training centres and enterprises (Cort 2005b: 6). Thus, according to Cort quality in VET is related to national VET objectives and the individual providers’ efforts on quality. As I perceive her comment it both concerns the first level of analysis (the substance of quality) and second level (the procedural quality) by focusing on quality of the individual provider. I will return to the question of the procedural quality later in this paper. In relation to the analysis at first level I agree with Cort that the national VET objectives play a significant role to a substantial definition of quality in VET programmes. The determination of VET objectives are based on involvement of the social partners. This involvement entails that the single VET programme - by fulfilling national VET objectives – sustains a national standard of VET skills and qualifications.

Also, the present Consolidation Act of the VET programmes (Ministry of Education 2007b) mentions the national VET objectives in relation to quality; the colleges’ “…ongoing data collection must

1) elucidate how teaching and chosen working forms support the objectives of the programme and the goals of the teaching and
2) entail a statement on and assessment of completion and drop-out”3

(Ministry of Education 2007b: § 8). According to this section of the act the colleges have to document that the national VET objectives are supported in the teaching. Thus, the importance of how the teaching is being planned and pedagogical choices related to this planning is suggested. Coherence between the objectives of programmes and teaching and the teaching/pedagogy is a demand. The section also points at a political focus on completion-rates and drop-out rates among the colleges’ learners. The overall objectives for the Danish education system are for 95 pct. (by 2015) of a youth cohort to complete

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3 Own translation.
a youth education programme at upper secondary level, and for 50 pct. to complete an education programme at tertiary level (Cort 2005b: 23).

The quotation above entails two different concepts of quality. One the one hand a focus on the objectives of programmes and teaching goals supports a concept of quality, where quality is being perceived as goal attainment. If the goals are achieved the quality is high (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 126; Vedung 1998). On the other hand a focus on rates (completion and drop-out) supports a quality concept, which perceives quality as a standard. It is quality if an object under assessment attains a set quantitative or qualitative order (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 108). To the controlling part (the Ministry of Education) extraordinary low completion rates and high drop-out rates are viewed as deviation from a given standard, where the deviation indicates that inexpedient considerations are taken or that someone is ineffective.

Quality as an organizational system
Another key issue regarding the Consolidation Act no. 1518 is the requirements for data collection. The colleges must document their efforts and results. This concerns the second level of analysis. By zooming out from focusing on one section to see all sections of the Act concerning quality in full quality is suppose to be ensured and developed by the colleges by (Ministry of Education 2007b: §§ 5-8):

- A quality system for the use of ongoing internal quality development and result assessment,
- Procedures of self-assessment and procedures of ongoing data collection,
- Self-assessment, follow up plans and action plans, which encompass methods, goals, and effect goals in relation to the performance on increased completion rates,
- Data collection on teaching and teaching methods in relation to educational objectives and teaching goals, and on completion rates and drop-out rates.
- Publishing principles for and results of the systematic quality work.

Thus, the Danish Ministry of Education seems to focus more on how to assure and develop quality and less on what quality is which is interesting in relation to my distinction between a first and a second level of analysis. It is striking to what extend quality is being perceived as dependent on the use of specific systems and procedures. This is an element of the policy that can be viewed as a consequence of abstraction and organizationalisation of the quality concept in relation to public services (Dahler-Larsen 2008). Organizationalisation of quality refers to a tendency characterised by that the subjects of quality assurance and developments are not single efforts or programmes but also the coordination and organization of those. Also, it concerns that public organizations know, they will be held accountable on their quality performance
and therefore take over responsibility to quality. Quality work is an integrated part of the way organizations function as a managerial and strategic relevant organizational formula (Røvik 2005). In sum these characteristics make it natural to lift up the level of analysis of quality from the single effort to the coordinating level or the organization (Dahler-Larsen 2003: 79).

Thus, the colleges play a significant role in the quality work in VET. The individual providers – the VET colleges – have a double responsibility concerning quality assurance and development: the providers must document their own procedures and results to the Ministry and the provider must ensure that quality is systematically anchored within their own organization and that a culture of evaluation is developed (Cort 2005b: 36). The systematic quality assurance and development are based on quality systems or quality models. In the 1980s and 1990s a focus on the producing organization as a system entails an introduction of a number of quality models. The production has to be related to marked analyses, sale and strategy – relations secured by management and organizational processes (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 29). The aim of quality models is a systematic and a total organizational perspective on quality. Total Quality Management (TQM) is an example of a quality model based on a notion that everything that happens inside the organization influences the quality served to the customer.

Inspired by TQM the EFQM Excellence Model is a holistic model, which is based on the notion that systematic and holistic quality development leads to success (The State Centre for Competence and Quality Development 2003: 11). A telephone survey from 2007 among Danish providers of technical VET programmes (technical colleges and combined colleges) shows that a main part (43 pct.) of the providers refers to the EFQM Excellence Model in relation to their systematic quality work (see table 1) (Frøche 2007).
Table 1: The use of Quality Models in Danish VET Colleges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality model</th>
<th>Colleges</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EFQM</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own model</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARS[^4]</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISO9001[^3]</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESEV[^6]</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TQM</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q-measuring[^7]</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other models[^8]</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Friche 2007

The Excellence Model is based on eight basic excellence-terms[^9], which describes the present behaviour characterising the excellence enterprise and public organization. These basic terms are inspired by the Total Quality Management concept and they represent specific values by describing an ideal state of organization. The terms are transformed to the tool RADAR and a point system. By evaluation on points – and by external evaluation by an assessor – it is possible to “measure” the organization in relation to the ideal state of organization (The State Centre for Competence and Quality Development 2003: 17). Also, the basic terms are transformed to a model, which consists of nine interrelated strategic themes called criterions[^10]. Thus, according to the European Foundation of Quality Management (2008) the Excellence Model can be used as a tool – on basis of the nine criterions - to self-assessment, as a way to benchmark with other organizations, as a guide to identify areas for improvement, as a basis for a common vocabulary and a way of thinking, and as a structure for the organization’s management system. It is striking how this

[^4]: MARS is a model developed by the Danish Institute for Educational Training of Vocational Teachers in cooperation with a number of VET colleges. MARS stands for Goal (Mål) - Activity (Aktivitet) - Results (Resultater) - Self-evaluation (Seljevaluering).

[^3]: ISO9000: 2000 is a standard, which requires a certification of the organization to use. It is Danish Standard (Dansk Standard), who certifies an organization. Contrary to other models, the ISO9000 model is quite expensive to use, because an organization must pay for the certification and ongoing updates to new versions of the standard.

[^6]: ESEV is an evaluation tool developed by the ESB Network – a network focusing on evaluation and benchmarking between colleges. ESB stands for Evaluation – Cooperation – Benchmarking (Evaluering-Samarbejde-Benchmarking). ESEV stands for the VET colleges’ Evaluation Tool (ErhvervsSkolernes EvalueringsVærktøj).

[^7]: Q-measuring is a statistical evaluation tool.

[^8]: Other models are for an example a measuring tool developed by the Danish Ministry of Education; ShowQuality (VisKvalitet), which providers of CVET are obliged to use.

[^9]: These terms are result orientation, customer focus, leadership and adherence to objectives, leadership through processes and data, development and involvement of employees, ongoing learning, innovation and improvement, development of partnerships, and society responsibility (State Centre of Competence and Quality Development 2003: 17-20).

[^10]: These criterions are leadership, employee, politic and strategy, partnership and resources, processes, employee results, customer results, society results, and key results (State Centre of Competence and Quality Development 2003: 20).
model omits to determine what quality means in specific in relation to an ideal state of organization. What is an ideal state of organization? The state Centre on Competence and Quality Development describes how the Excellence Model put focus on improvement of quality in broad terms, i.e. user experienced quality, quality in the organization’s service, and organizational quality, which for instance are leadership, strategy processes and development of employee competences (The State Centre for Competence and Quality Development 2003: 12). In the point system mentioned above two key criterions are “the bottom line figures” and “user satisfaction”. Is “being in the black” and “high scores on user satisfaction” equal to high quality then? Hence, a system to assure and develop quality does not help you defining quality – it only makes procedures and organization.

This increased use of quality systems entails an abstraction of the quality (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 29). The concept of quality is neither bound to production nor utility. Quality is being “encoded” on Meta level in organizational recipes, procedures and processes (Røvik 2005). Dahler-Larsen (2008) terms the tendency an organizationalisation of the quality. Quality becomes a property of the organizational system that produces the quality and not – as earlier – of the single product or service (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 29). When quality is being defined as an organizational system it gets to play a significant role in these years increased focus on establishing evaluation culture, evaluation capacity, documentation systems, and quality assurance in public service. The assumption seems to be that we have quality problems because we have failed to establish ample quality systems (Dahler-Larsen 2008: 142).
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