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NESET Country Report: Denmark

Equity Issues in Education

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Section 1. Main equity-related policy challenges

Which groups are most disadvantaged in relation to access, treatment and outcomes in this country?

Denmark has a long tradition of public welfare policies aimed at reducing inequalities and providing citizens with acceptable living conditions. During recent decades this tradition has been weakened and neoliberal policies have gained some support; but tax-funded and state organized social security, childcare, eldercare and education are still prominent features of Danish society. Most types of education are publicly-funded and free.

Disadvantaged groups cannot be defined by a single social logic (for instance social class); rather they are groups characterized by a combination of social distinctions. We argue that the groups in Danish society most disadvantaged in relation to access, treatment and outcomes are:

Young people who do not get an upper secondary education degree – either a vocational degree or a general degree giving access to higher education. This group includes a high proportion of young people with parents without an upper secondary education, low achievers in primary education, young people with low-income parents and youths with some kind of immigrant background.

Older people (+50) with little education past the lower secondary education level or with a vocational degree that has become outdated. As the number of unskilled (and even skilled) jobs in the Danish labour market falls, and younger people with higher levels of education become available, many of these older people are placed in a more vulnerable situation. If they become unemployed they find it very difficult to get new jobs.

What features of this country's education system contribute to and/or perpetuate educational inequalities?

In many ways Denmark's education system helps to reduce inequalities. However, some features do contribute to and/or perpetuate educational inequalities. The most important of these is:

The structure of upper secondary education, which is organized in two distinct sectors. This results in too little overall coordination of education at the upper secondary level, and it does not provide convincing alternative paths for those young people who do either not enter or drop out from the two main sectors. This problem has been evident for many years (Rasmussen 2002), but reforms have tended to focus on the individual sectors rather than on the overall system of upper secondary education.

Other features that lead to inequality are:

Opportunities for **parental choice of school**, especially in primary/lower secondary education ('Folkeskole'). There are two dimensions of this. One is the possibility of choosing a private ('free') school instead of the public school. This is an established tradition in Danish education, reflecting the view that parents should have the right to choose schools based on specific sets of ideas (religious, political etc.). Private schools are obliged to teach the same curriculum and offer the same degrees

as the public school. They get public grants covering approximately 70% of the costs per student, and get the rest through tuition. The other dimension is a so-called free choice of school, which allows parent to choose other public schools than those located close to their homes. This has been introduced more recently under the influence of new public management ideas. In Danish cities this has reinforced trends towards clustering of certain types of students in certain schools, leading for instance to schools with a much higher than average proportion of children from immigrant families (Hansen 2011).

The organization of higher education in two distinct sectors (universities and university colleges) combined with a complex combination of centralised state governance of study programmes and institutions on one hand, local institutional management on the other. This system probably improves the overall capacity and versatility of higher education, but it also leads to inter-institution competition and makes it difficult for students to see the consequences of different choices. And the only general policies concerned with equity are those focusing on student grants (where Denmark has a relatively generous system) and completion rates. There is no clear knowledge about the consequences for social equality among graduates, but major differences in employment and career opportunities can be expected.

Are there any particular funding (public and private broadly defined) dimensions to these inequalities?

Because **public funding and free education has a high priority** in Danish education policy, issues of equity are less related to funding than in many other countries. As mentioned above, there is a private school sector ('free schools'), and it has seen some growth (from 12% of all students in 2001 to almost 15% in 2011) in recent years, but yet no dramatic change. There is a question about the internal distribution of public schooling, because the 'Folkeskole' and pre-school institutions are funded by municipalities (who have their own tax base) while other education are funded by the state. The funding systems are mostly activity-based, in the sense that grants are based on the number of students and the number of exams passed; this is often criticized for giving efficiency priority over quality (see for instance Cevea 2013); but compared to earlier systems it can be said to improve equity in educational provision because educational institutions are rewarded for educational activity rather than for prestige. The practical training element of vocational education as well as in-service training for semi-skilled workers is paid for by employers and partly by employees, but in a generalized/collective form where contributions are collected in a dedicated fund; this improves equality in provision.

What other equity-related policy challenges in education and training in the country should receive attention?

Low achievement in basic skills is an important element in social inequality. Low achievement results partly from the characteristics of students (cognitive and senso-motoric potential, social class, gender, etc.) and partly from the characteristics of schooling (general/academic curriculum, routinized teaching etc.). Low achievement in the 'Folkeskole' impacts on subsequent educational choice and trajectory. Some of these students do not move on to upper secondary education but remain locked in moving between short-time jobs, unemployment and labour market training courses. Some of them enter vocational education but do not compete and get a degree. Like in many other countries, the PISA surveys generate national concern when Danish students come out with medium or even low scores in maths or literacy. However, a balanced assessment of this

problem is necessary. For many low achievers the skills acquired are in fact sufficient and they are in fact able to meet the demands of the labour market and modern everyday life, and even to enter and complete upper secondary education. Low achievement in basic school subjects is definitely a problem that should be confronted, but its impact should not be overrated. Also it is difficult to eliminate because social background is probably still the major determining factor.

Disadvantage and different ethnic groups. Generally learners with migrant background are a disadvantaged group in Danish education. This is part of a larger picture where migrant groups are to some degree marginalized in the labour market and in some instances concentrate in certain urban areas. However it is necessary to distinguish between different ethnic groups, gender and different contexts. Asian migrants tend to achieve education and jobs equally well as ethnic Danes, while migrants from Africa and the Middle East appear much more disadvantaged. Female migrant students also tend to achieve educational degrees almost as well as ethnic Danes, while male migrant students appear much more disadvantaged. In Denmark we have about 7 pct immigrants from non-western countries. Over 60 pct of the second-generation immigrants have parents from Turkey, Pakistan and Yugoslavia (Danmarks statistik 2012). In public debate Immigrants and Muslims are often mixed together although only about 4 pct of the population in Denmark are Muslim (PewResearch, Religion & Public Life Project 2011). The resentment towards Islam among some influential groups of Danes has limited the strategies available for improving the educational situation of migrant groups. For instance governments have opposed or only hesitantly accepted teaching migrant children in their native language simultaneously with teaching in Danish.

The challenges: On this background we see the following challenges as the most urgent ones in Danish education policy:

- *Enabling almost all young people to achieve at least an upper secondary education degree.* For individuals going straight through the educational system – without detours or breaks – this would have been achieved by the age of 20. The official goal has for many years been 95%, but this has been proven very hard to reach, and some policy actors are at present retreating from it.
- As part of this, it is a challenge to develop the system of secondary education in ways that *overcome the present sharp divided system between general/academic and vocational schooling* and give the system the capacity to include many of the young people who at present drop out and do not get a degree.
- *Developing the higher education system* (including short-cycle, medium-cycle and long-cycle higher education) in a way that combines high professional and academic levels with relevant competences for many types of work in a modern (knowledge-based?) society.
- Develop *combined education and labour market policies* that support the inclusion of graduates (secondary and higher) in the labour market and work
- Develop the institutional framework (including guidance, adult education and other measures) that makes *lifelong learning* a realistic option for citizens.

Section 2. Main relevant policy initiatives, reforms, measures; assessment

Improvement of the academic standards and lowering the significance of social background on academic results in the primary and lower secondary public school. These are two important goals for the government as well as for the Liberal Party of Denmark and Danish People's Party. They have agreed on developing the public school's strengths and academic standards in a reform of the public school. There are three main focus areas for the improvement of the students' academic standards: A longer and varied school day with more and improved teaching and learning, an enhanced professional development of teachers, pedagogical staff and school principals and few and clear objectives and simplification of rules and regulations. This agreement takes effect from Summer 2013 and is part of a larger reform of primary and lower secondary education (Folkeskolereform), including measures to include students with learning difficulties in ordinary classes, to integrate school with day-care activities, and to give more teaching time to core 'academic' subjects as well as to creative subjects. In connection with the reform the framework for teachers' work in primary and secondary education has been revised. The main aim has been to increasing teachers' presence in schools and classrooms in order to make the reform work. The framework was instituted by the government after collective negotiations between municipalities and the teacher union failed and resulted in a conflict (a lockout).

Vocational education reform: Vocational education and training in Denmark face significant challenges. Still fewer choose vocational education after primary school, and of the students enrolled one out of three is 25 years or older. Until 2006 around 30% of all students choose to start a VET education directly after lower secondary school (Folkeskole). This year (2013) only 19% were enrolled in vocational education and training. Only half of the students enrolled in vocational education in recent years completed a vocational degree. Many students have difficulty in finding an internship in a company. A new reform of VET focuses on initiatives to make vocational schools more active in establishing training placements in companies as well as measures to make more young people choose vocational education and to improve the completion rate. The proposed reform aims to have 25% of a cohort (rising to 30% in 2025) commence a vocational programme directly after lower secondary school and to improve the completion rate to 60%. (rising to 67% in 2025). The reform also aims to improve the social status of VET through enrolment based on school grades, and it established a common framework/institutional structure for all vocational education programmes.

Alternative secondary educational programme: To supplement the vocational education reform, the government is establishing a new secondary education programme called the 'flex programme'. This is to be a special programme for young people (15 to 24 years) who are not able to complete an ordinary upper secondary education programme because they lack of the necessary qualifications. The young people for whom this programme is designed are those who might be motivated to undertake vocational education and training, but without a realistic possibility of being able to complete a normal VET education, or take advantage of using other established programmes. The flex education programme aims to give the young people an education that suits their needs and increases their opportunities for jobs and livelihood.

Stronger measures for getting marginalized groups into education. For many years education and training has been one of the instruments of active labour market policy, being used to up-skill unemployed people in the hope of facilitating their way back into employment. Recent reforms have strengthened the role of education, making it mandatory for anyone deemed able. Young school leavers of 15-17 years old have to participate either in employment, education or activities preparing

for education (such as specialized courses supplementing basic literacy skills or training personal competencies) . If municipalities assess that the school leavers are not doing this they are supposed to withhold the economic support normally given to families with young children. Employment legislation now obliges young adults under 30, who are unemployed and living on social benefits, to enter education. If the municipal job centre assesses an unemployed young person as being able to complete a relevant type of education, the job centre has to oblige the person to enrol. Being over 18 the young adults will then be eligible for public student grants and loans (SU). Legislation even demands that the person must complete the programme in which they are enrolled. This is a large-scale attempt to move a significant group of people from 'passive' public welfare subsistence to education and the possibility of jobs.

Higher education reforms: The government's goal is that 60% of young people should complete some kind of higher education by 2020. This reflects the expectation that the skills learned in higher education are increasingly needed in a society where much of the work is becoming 'knowledge based', but also the ambition to give broader segments of the population access to the social mobility that higher education degrees have historically provided. Danish higher education includes programmes at three levels; 2-3 year professional programmes run mainly by business academies; 3-year academic bachelor programmes run by universities; 3-4 year professional bachelor programmes run by university colleges and 2-year master's programmes, continuing from a bachelor degree, run by universities. In July 2013 almost 63,000 applicants were offered admission to higher education, representing an increase of 44% since 2005. 59% of the young people who completed grade 9 (lower secondary) in 2011 are predicted to complete some kind of higher education. This massive expansion has put the structure and the funding of higher education under pressure, and current reforms are generally responses to this. The present Government has located and has focused on developing a common framework for higher education. The purpose is to improve coherence in the higher education system, ensure flexibility and avoid impasses (programmes with little possibility of transferring to another programme). As part of this all higher education is now located in one ministry (previously universities located in the Ministry of Research and other programmes in the Ministry of Education). An important initiative is a student grant (SU) reform proposed by government and recently passed by parliament. The goal is partly to reduce student grant expenditure, but mainly to save educational expenditure by getting students through the education system more quickly and efficiently. This involves more restrictions, rules and demands on study and exam activity for obtaining the grant. Seen in the perspective of equity these initiatives are contradictory. A widening of access has been and is a precondition for recruiting students from broader segments of the population and overcoming the traditional elite reproduction in higher education. There is no doubt that this strains the public student grant system (which was established not least on the basis of equity considerations) and the higher education budgets. However, the government response to this, focusing on detailed control of student activity and progression, risks marginalizing students with a non-academic background, who have less possibility to mobilize academic and economic resources in their families and networks (Lund 2013).

Regional coordination of adult education (VEU-centres). Denmark has a strong tradition and a versatile provision of adult education. Over a long period of time, starting in the 19th century, three types of adult education were established: the general learning and enlightenment of the folk high schools and evening schools; the 'second chance' general education of the adult education centres;

and the vocational training of the labour market training centres. To this have later been added part-time study programmes in higher education. On the one hand, the diversity has been a great strength in the Danish adult education, because adult education users have the option to choose according to their special needs and interests, but on the other hand, it has also generated a number of problems in the form of confusion for users and unnecessary competition between adult education institutions. Furthermore public support for some types of adult education has been reduced in recent years as part of the general efforts to control public expenditure. This has led to increased tuition fees and some reduction in participation, but the impact in the sector has been uneven. These developments raise the question whether the adult education system is able to make opportunities available to those young and mature adults who need them most. One policy response is to strengthen cooperation in the field, and this has been attempted with the creation in 2010 of the new VEU (the Danish acronym for Adult and Vocational Training) centres. The intention is that more adults will have the desire and the opportunity to participate in education and training. The VEU-centres are intended to provide a more manageable educational setting across institutions because users only need to attend one institution where they can receive the necessary advice.

Youth career guidance and counseling reform: The youth educational and career guidance and counseling reforms from 2004 and 2013 have a focus on giving young people professional help in career planning and transition from elementary school to upper secondary school and further on. Both reforms have good basic intentions concerning equality in education, but they still have unsolved dilemmas. The guidance and counseling guidelines before 2004 had an explicit focus on the individual need and wishes. With the 2004 reform government wanted to balance the need for society's work force with the needs and wishes of the individuals. This dilemma becomes very visible for the counselors when the government lays down specific goals for the student carrier paths – for example wanting 25-30% of the students to enrol in VET programmes. Another major dilemma is how to prioritize resources between limited guidance and counselling for all students and targeted guidance and counselling resources for students that are seen as having special need or at risk. The educational career paths and the choices they involve have become confusing and overwhelming for very many students, but with the recent guidance and counselling reform (2013) the government have introduced the so-called 20-80 strategy. The principle is that the 20% of the students who according to the statistics are 'at risk' are to have 80% of the counselling resources.

2. b. Assessment of policy reforms and initiatives

We comment only on the most important of the reforms and initiatives mentioned above.

Primary and lower secondary schooling (Folkeskole): The reform passed in the summer of 2013 is characterized by good basic intentions, but unsolved dilemmas. The original government proposals tried to balance improvement of teaching in core subjects (literacy, math, science) with time and space for creative and daycare activities; but the compromise achieved in parliament gave priority to the core subjects. This is in line with concerns for Danish students' level of achievement that over the years have been fed by the PISA surveys and other international comparisons. The PISA results have generally ranked Denmark among the mid-level OECD countries, and this is too low for Danish politicians and public opinion. More relevant than the rankings is the issue of low achievers who may lack the literacy and numeracy skills necessary for modern citizens. Expert opinion on the magnitude of this problem is divided, but it tends to be exaggerated because of focus on the rankings. Under

the previous government this led to the introduction of more exams in the 'Folkeskole' and a system of national tests, and this has been upheld in the recent reform. This comprehensive evaluation system tends to focus the attention of teachers, students and parents on achievement in core subjects and undermine the integration of play and creative elements in the school day.

As part of the reform government wanted to change the distribution of teacher work, so that teachers spent more time in classrooms and less on preparation and other associated tasks. No doubt a partial reorganization of school management was relevant (in order to improve flexibility and collaboration that could have a positive effect on equality on classroom level) but implementing this through a conflict with the teachers union can seem unnecessary and biased many teachers against the reform.

As mentioned above free parental choice of school was introduced by government in 2005. This reform has later been evaluated twice, latest in 2011 (Rambøl Management for UVM 2007 and 2011). The results are ambiguous. On one hand the 2005 amendment has a relatively limited impact on most of the municipalities and most schools. For almost half of the municipalities, the number of students admitted to another school than the district school was roughly unchanged from before the amendment, and another large group of municipalities has experienced only a slight increase in it. The evaluation shows that some municipalities, especially those in major cities, report that their possibilities for preventing ethnic segregation in school attendance have been restricted by the reform. This includes segregation among public schools as well as between public and private schools. Before the reform, some schools had a practice where they rejected a number of students with migrant background. This practice contributed to a distribution of migrant students in different public schools and thereby attracting 'strong students' (middle class) from both migrant families and Danish families in the public schools. Recently the Municipality of Copenhagen, fearing that too many middle-class families were moving children to private schools, has suggested limiting free school choice.

Youth career guidance and counselling reform: The 20-80 strategy introduced by the 2013 reform represents the intention to give priority to the students that have the greatest need for counselling. From a social equality perspective this can be seen as a good idea, but it also involves a great risk of stigmatising vulnerable students and making career guidance something that you are forced to have and that not everybody needs. This also points to the problem of making guidance efforts a matter of quantified resource levels rather than qualitative standards. A more versatile approach could for example involve developing different models for counselling where students can choose between collective and individualized models. But while the guidance system and its counsellors can help young people find their way in education, they cannot solve the basic problems of exclusion and dilemmas inherent in that the educational system and its role in society. This is something that decision-makers often tend to forget.

Upper secondary education, including the planned reform of vocational education: The Danish model of secondary vocational education is based on alternating elements of school-based teaching and practical training in companies and it has a governance system giving much influence to the social partners. These two features basically give it high quality; but the model has the inherent problem that it makes education dependent on training capacity in business. The current reform proposals try to meet the challenges mentioned above, falling enrolment of young 'Folkeskole' leavers in vocational programmes and high dropout rates, without compromising the basic model.

The reform proposal has been applauded by the main actors of vocational education (employers, trade unions, vocational schools) because it aims to improve the societal status of vocational programmes and reverse the strong trend of 'Folkeskole' leavers choosing the general/academic stream of upper secondary education. One of the arguments often given for the reform is the prediction that Denmark will soon lack skilled workers because too many young people have been seduced by the knowledge society rhetoric and have turned away from education preparing for practical and manual work. Oddly, the reform proposal does not try to substantiate this argument, even though it includes a quantitative goal (25% of a cohort). Government seems content to have projections of manpower needs come from the social partners or from think tanks sponsored by them.

The proposal to introduce a minimum grade from the 'Folkeskole' as a condition for enrolment in vocational education is also part of the attempt to improve the status of vocational programmes. Whether it will help attract more of the young people currently choosing general/academic programmes is hard to say; but it will certainly exclude some of the young people who leave the 'Folkeskole' without the necessary minimum grade. Enrolment based on grades will exclude a group of students from vocational programmes. A recent research report estimated that compared to previous enrolment some 4000 students each year would be kept out of vocational programmes by this element of the reform (Hvidtfeldt & Tranæs 2013). The ambition to introduce a common framework/institutional structure for all vocational education programmes has been met by criticism from the commercial streams of vocational education, because it severely reduces the amount of schooling available in these programmes. Commercial education is traditionally much more school-based than technical education.

The dropout problem in vocational education has been investigated in a recently completed major study (Helms Jørgensen 2013). It shows that around half of all the young people who start on a vocational education and training programme do not end up with a diploma. Some drop out, and some switch between different programmes. Many of them do so with the feeling of having gained experience and they may start on a new programme and complete it. But the study finds that there still are too many of the young people leaving school without any education beyond primary school.

The new special programme (flexuddannelse) seems narrow in the sense that the aim of the programme is focused on 'the shortest path to employment' more than on the opening of educational pathways through support, training and guidance and counselling. It is hard to see that the programme could represent any improvement on existing types of provision which include the 'production schools' (schools where learning and work practice are closely connected) and the individualised basic VET programme (EGU).

Higher education reforms: The common framework for higher education at universities and university colleges, which is gradually being introduced by the present government, is a positive reform which has been needed for many years. It will improve the overall coherence of higher education, make it easier for students to find their way and make it easier for government to facilitate a balanced development of the different sectors and levels of programmes and institutions. The crucial aspect of the reform of the student grant (SU) system is a strict framework aimed at controlling study activities. There has been much public debate about this, but it has had little basis in actual knowledge of the consequences. In our view the reform represents a too narrow approach, leaving students too little leeway for finding their way through higher education (Rasmussen 2012),

and there is a definite risk this will reverse the trend of recent years, where drop-out rates from higher education have dropped significantly. As noted earlier in this report, the situation could be especially precarious for students from non-academic backgrounds. This can only be an assumption; existing research confirms that social background (most often measured as parents' level of education) strongly influences the risk of dropping out (Larsen et al 2013), but of course the effect of specific types of reform is difficult to predict. But the risk should be taken seriously, and this seems not to be done at present.

Are there any foreseeable major future challenges that are likely to require new policies and initiatives (e.g. demographic changes)?

Innovation and the knowledge based society: Denmark is a small nation without many natural resources. It is often argued (by economists and historians) that a main reason that Denmark has managed to have a relatively high level of prosperity and welfare, and through this also a comparatively high degree of social equality, is a tradition for innovation and flexibility. The so-called Prosperity Index published by the Legatum Institute ranks Denmark as the country with the Europe's second strongest entrepreneurial climate in terms of citizens' opportunity to realize new ideas and influence their lives, incomes and wellbeing. In the 2006 report from the Danish government's top-level task force on strategic responses to globalization, much emphasis was put on innovation and creativity as resources for meeting the demands from the knowledge-based society. A year earlier an attempt had been made to map the distribution of creative and innovative competence in the Danish population as part of the national competence audit survey (UVM 2005). The survey showed that the highly educated are more creative and innovative than persons with lower levels of education and that skills and tools for innovations are only to a very limited degree acquired through education. This indicates the importance of addressing innovation and creativity in all levels of education and giving time and space for creative and innovative activities in school in order to reduce inequalities between citizens and employees with higher and lower levels of education. However, many of the latest educational reforms have not followed up on this; instead they have been given priority to teaching and testing traditional skills in core subjects (literacy, numeracy, science). Of course a reasonable level of achievement in these traditional skills is important for all members of society and a contribution to social equality. But if education policy continues to focus exclusively on this, it risks undermining the innovative capacity of Danish education and society and the longer term basis for welfare and equity. Educational measures aimed at establishing guidelines, contexts and activities to promote creative and innovative competence in all parts of the educational system are urgently needed (Rasmussen 2012). They should include:

- Pedagogies promoting students' disciplined independent and collaborative learning and curricula with substantial trans-disciplinary elements
- Versatile links between teaching and learning in educational institutions and different contexts in the surrounding – work, local community, public debates and other contexts.
- Forms of assessment and evaluation that fit and support these pedagogies, curricula and school-society links.

To be sure these elements are present in Danish education, but they need to be pursued much more systematically.

Section 3. Proposals for reforms and specific measures

There is continuous reform activity in Danish education, and we have presented some of the major recent or ongoing reforms and our assessment of them. In general we do not see a need for new reforms, rather a need to correct some of the assumptions behind and measures included in the reforms.

There is however one area of Danish education that needs a new or rather a more comprehensive reform, and that is upper secondary education. Denmark has organized upper secondary in two distinct sectors, one for general/academic schooling and one for vocational education. This division has a long history and the independent evolution of each sector has allowed them to develop significant qualities. But in present-day Danish society, with a high degree of integration and a relatively high level of education the lack of overall coordination of education at the upper secondary level becomes a problem. It does not provide convincing alternative paths for those young people who do either not enter or drop out from the two main sectors. And it allows the two sectors to continually compete for students, resources and political attention. This cannot be solved through reforms within each of the two sectors, or isolated schemes to accommodate those young people who do not fit in either sector. The necessary response is a comprehensive upper secondary school system with an overall institutional framework, not trying to fit the different types of education into one mould, but establishing an overall structure that allows students to navigate and educational actors to coordinate their efforts. The system should involve

- Raising the school leaving age to 18 years. Very few young people leave school before that age, and the change would clarify the situation of these young people and the responsibility of public authorities for their education.
- Establishing a comprehensive network of schooling opportunities, building on existing disciplines/subjects and practical training schemes from general/academic and vocational education, but introducing more pedagogical variety, transversal activities and possibilities for combination of subjects. All students should leave the system with either a vocational diploma or a general diploma giving access to higher education.

A reform along these lines is not an unknown idea in Danish education (Laursen & Rasmussen 2009). It has been proposed several times during the last four decades, most recently by the Social Democratic party - who heads the present government - five years ago (Socialdemokratiet 2008). It should be placed on top of the education policy agenda.

Section 4. Conclusions

Denmark has a long tradition of public welfare policies aiming at reducing inequalities but during recent decades this tradition has been weakened. Still most types of education are publicly funded and free. The main challenge in the reduction of inequalities is the inclusion of young people who are at risk of not getting an upper secondary education degree. This group of young people often

have parents without an upper secondary education, with low-income and maybe immigrant background. They may be low achievers that have had a 'hard time' in school. Another challenge is the inclusion of older people (+50) with little education beyond the lower secondary education level or with a vocational degree that has become outdated.

The challenge of equality in the public elementary school system: Although there are good basic intentions in the recent reform, there are still unsolved dilemmas between improvement of teaching in core subjects (literacy, math, science) and giving priority to creative and innovative elements. There has been a focus on evaluation and testing of achievement in core subjects, and this undermines the integration of creative elements in the school day. Low achievement in core subjects in the 'Folkeskole' is in fact an important element in social inequality, as it impacts on subsequent educational choice and trajectory. Still measures to improve achievement should not be allowed to undermine the learning of creative and innovative competences.

The challenges of equality and the structure of the upper secondary education: The structure of upper secondary education with two distinct sectors results in little overall coordination of education at the upper secondary level and fails to provide convincing alternative paths for those young people who do either not enter or drop out from the two main sectors. Too many young people in Denmark are leaving school without any education beyond primary school. The new special programme (flexuddannelse) was meant to deal with this, but seems narrowly focused on 'the shortest path to employment' more than on the opening of educational pathways through support, training and guidance and counselling. The relevant response is a comprehensive upper secondary school system with a broad spectrum of disciplines/subjects and practical training schemes from general/academic and vocational education, allowing students to navigate and combine different elements.

The challenge of equality and the organisation of higher education: The massive expansion of higher education has put the structure and the funding of higher education under pressure. Government struggles to improve coherence and efficiency while maintaining the societal benefits – including recruitment from broad segments of the population – of educating citizens to bachelor and master levels. The current reform of the student grant and study activity framework focuses on improving efficiency, but there is a risk that the measures will not only lower the quality of graduate skills but also create precarious situations for students from non-academic backgrounds, cancelling out some of the equity effects of increased participation.

The challenge of equality in lifelong learning and labour market measures: The Danish adult education system is versatile and allows younger as well as older adults to find part-time education according to their special needs and interests. The system is under pressure from reduced public grants and lack of coordination; but it still provides a high level of participation and equity compared to most other countries. Education and training have been strongly taken up in recent employment and welfare reforms, which have made it mandatory for anyone deemed able to enter some kind of education. It is too early to assess the consequences of this attempt to move people from 'passive' public welfare subsistence to education and the possibility of jobs. But it is questionable if the relevant education and training capacity is in fact available; if not, the result may be a 'creaming' of the more able unemployed into the more stable workforce and the locking of others in circles of useless job-training courses.

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