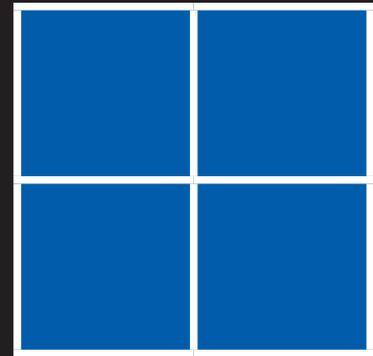


# Vocational Education and Training as a Career Path for Young People: Making Choices in England and Denmark

Natasha Kersh and Ida Juul

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**Natasha Kersh and Ida Juul**

**Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies (LLAKES)**

**UCL Institute of Education, University College London**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the issues of perceptions and motivations of young people towards Vocational Education and Training (VET) in England and Denmark. It specifically focuses on factors that facilitate their either positive or negative attitudes. Complex interdependencies between the labour market, young people's occupational choices, and career routes have been a focus of policy concern, discussions and research across European countries. VET, as a pathway for young people to a career, has been and continues to be open to wide interpretation and debate. The situation in most European countries is being characterised by a lack of parity of esteem, which relates to the perceptions of VET systems as the second-best choice, compared to academic routes. Enhancing the status and profile of the VET system is therefore a concern that has received much recognition in literature and policy papers on both national and European levels. This research paper draws on the findings from the 'Experiencing Inequalities' project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) carried out under the auspices of the ESRC Research Centre: Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies (LLAKES).*

*As noted, the paper compares two different contexts, England and Denmark, which enabled the researchers to reflect on the issues of perceptions and motivations of young people towards VET, specifically focusing on factors that contribute to their either positive or negative attitudes. The study compares the status and reputation of the VET systems in these two countries which, in the discussions about varieties of capitalism, represent two poles (Thelen, 2004): the paper focuses on England, which belongs to the so-called liberal market economies, and Denmark, which belongs to the coordinated market economies, indicating that coordination in the English labour market is secured mainly by market forces, whereas coordination in Denmark is based on cooperative structures involving the state and social partners. The analysis of the data has demonstrated that individual attitudes and perceptions need to be considered in the context of the policy debate and government policies in the area of VET. This research discusses the way young people frame and connect issues of participation, life chances and career choices and concludes that the problem of the parity of esteem exists in both countries in spite of the different national contexts in which the two VET systems are embedded.*

## **Introduction**

This paper focuses on how the VET system is perceived by young people, and the way this influences their decisions in choosing their educational route. The situation in most European countries is characterised by a so-called academic drift, which tends to position the VET system as the second-best choice. Enhancing the attractiveness and status of the VET system is therefore a concern that attracts political attention both on national and European levels.

Although the EU countries seem to face the same problem of a combination of academic drift and a decline in the attractiveness of the VET system, there are also important national differences.

This becomes obvious when Denmark and United Kingdom are compared. During the period 2000-2009, the highest increase in the proportion of students in general education occurred in the United Kingdom with an increase of almost 37 percentage points. Whereas Denmark recorded a rise in the relative number of general education students by more than 6 percentage points (Eurostat, 2012: 74). These differences are reflected in the number of students enrolled in vocational upper secondary education in the two countries (see note 1, p. 30). According to the European Commission (2012), 46% of all students enrolled in upper secondary education in 2010 in Denmark were enrolled in vocational upper secondary education compared to 32% in the United Kingdom (EurostatEurydice 2012: 74).

This study addresses that gap by focusing on perceptions of status and reputation of the VET systems in Denmark and England. We have chosen these two countries because in the discussions about varieties of capitalism they represent two poles (Thelen, 2004). England belongs to the so-called liberal market economies, whereas Denmark belongs to the coordinated market economies, indicating that coordination in the English labour market is secured mainly by market forces whereas coordination in Denmark is based on cooperative structures involving the state and social partners. The distinction is relevant as it indicates that England and Denmark will be inclined to choose different strategies in order to cope with challenges such as skills formation, global competition and the integration of new generations in the labour market. The recent recession has meant that the problems associated with the move from learning to earning have tended to worsen quite significantly. In the UK the proportion of employers that actually recruit young people leaving the education system at any level (school, college or university) has fallen – again a trend that started long before the onset of the recession (Keep, 2012). According to a recent CEDEFOP report, the probability of being employed (as opposed to being inactive) for VET graduates appears to be somewhat low in the UK, whereas in Denmark it is much higher (see CEDEFOP, 2013 for further info). This means that the difference between VET and general education returns is generally positive in Denmark (VET

graduates enjoy an employment premium), as well as in some other countries with a strong VET tradition. Negative VET premiums are present only in Estonia, France, Malta and the UK (CEDEFOP, 2013).

The different types of capitalisms represented by the United Kingdom and Denmark are among others things mirrored in the percentage of government expenditure used on education. In 2011 the total government expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP was 7.8 % in Denmark compared to 6.5 % in the United Kingdom (Eurostat, 2012). The difference reflects the fact that education is free in Denmark and that students receive grants that are very generous when seen from a European perspective (see note 2, p. 30).

Considering the differences between England and Denmark it is remarkable that the two countries seem to have in common the problem of declining prestige of VET. This paper considers the variations concerning the intensity in the academic drift by specifically focusing on the way students perceive the different sectors of education systems and legitimate their choice of either general or vocational upper secondary.

In considering the issue of young people's choices in deciding their educational paths, this paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- How has vocational education developed in England and Denmark in terms of policies, debates and social status?
- How do young people make their educational choices?
- How do the general perceptions of vocational vs. academic routes reflect on individual cases?
- What factors contribute to young people's career and occupational choices?

As mentioned above this issue of perception of vocational education by young people needs to be considered within the broader context of the role and status of vocational education in society in general. The first section of the paper will provide an essential context, consider some historical aspects of the debate and reforms of vocational education in England and Denmark and will reflect on the effects of the policies on young peoples' choices and motivations. The second section will investigate young people's perceptions of vocational education and training and their related choices, expectations and motivations. It draws on findings from qualitative data analysis of semi-structured interviews carried out in England and Denmark.

## **Part I: The context of vocational education and training in England and Denmark from the late 1970s until the present**

The differences between England and Denmark concerning the mechanism guiding both labour market and education policies date back to the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist society. In most European countries the control of apprenticeship was in the hands of the guilds until the guilds were abolished by law in the 18th and 19th century (Thelen, 2004, 93). This process affected apprenticeship in England and Denmark differently. As Thelen notes: ‘British apprenticeship survived because British industry remained dependent on skills, but apprenticeship training was fragile because it rested less on stable cross-class alliance than it did on a precarious balance of power between employers and skilled unions that could be (and was) repeatedly upset by shifting macro-economic and political developments’ (Thelen, 2004, 281-82). The result was that English employers were unable to coordinate their efforts to secure the stable input of skilled labour (Finegold & Soskice, 1988). In-plant training lacked monitoring devices and there was therefore nothing that could prevent British employers from using apprentices as cheap labour, for example, by training them in the use of a particular machine. Since training was uncertain in quality and its duration (typically 5-7 years), the value of formal apprenticeship was dubious as seen from the perspective of British youth. The absence of certification added to this, as there were many other ways for ambitious young men to achieve ‘skilled’ status (Thelen 2004, 283).

In Denmark the introduction of free trade and the abolishment of the control of the guilds over the apprenticeship system in 1862 likewise resulted in a looser tie between masters and apprentices. But in 1889 a law was passed which made written apprenticeship contracts compulsory. These contracts defined wages, working conditions and the length of the apprenticeship to a maximum of five years (law nr. 39, 1889). In Denmark the trade unions followed the same strategy as the English trade union movement in order to counter the use of apprentices as cheap labour. The Danish attempt to control the ratio between journeymen (i.e. itinerant workers) and apprentices proved more successful than in England as the strategy was to a great extent supported by the employers and their unions. (Nørregaard 1943). In Denmark the introduction of free trade in 1862 was followed by a reconstruction of the apprenticeship system and the building of a system of technical schools that was based mainly on private initiatives taken by the masters (Kristensen and Sable, 1997; Juul, 2009), and from the beginning of the 20th century the government began to play a major role in the financing and supervision of the VET system. However, this did not imply that the influence of the social partners disappeared. Instead, a system was created involving both the social partners and the state in the regulation of the VET. This system which was formalised with the Apprenticeship Law of 1937

is still functioning today. It has resulted in a collective commitment to the VET system from both the employers unions and the trade union movement (Juul, 2009).

In the following, we will analyse the changes the VET systems in the two countries have undergone from the 1970s until the present focusing especially on how the politicians in the two countries have addressed the issue of parity of esteem between the general upper secondary and VET system.

### *England*

In England, education is compulsory for children and young people aged 5 to 17: young people must stay in some form of education or training until the end of the academic year when they turn 17. Those young people who started year 11 in September 2013 or later will have to stay in some form of education or training until they turn 18. Between 11 and 16 years of age, most children attend mainstream secondary schools. These provide a wide range of academic and vocational subjects for children and young people. Post-16 Compulsory education and training could include full-time education, e.g. at a school or college, an apprenticeship or employment (over 20 hours a week) combined with part-time education or training. At 16, pupils can study towards a range of qualifications, such as academic qualifications (A levels) or vocational qualifications and/or an apprenticeship. All UK qualifications fit into a national framework.<sup>1</sup>

The conventional route for young people aspiring to enter higher education is to take a set of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) qualifications at the age of 16, and subsequently, a smaller set of A-level qualifications at 18. However, pursuing vocational education and training presents another possible route for higher education entrance. Students who follow vocational courses may also study towards GCSE qualifications and chose to take a range of qualifications (for example apprenticeships at level 2). The progression routes to higher education for young people in vocational education and training vary tremendously: a wide range of programmes are available beyond level 2, and upwards into higher education. Students' pathways are highly varied. Some take vocational courses before they start work and others combine vocational courses with work. Programmes and qualifications located at level 3 (which is equivalent to the upper secondary phase in one sense) can be taken by people of all ages and not just those who have progressed without interruption from level 2 (OECD, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> It includes nine levels (Entry level to level 8). Entry level is at the bottom and level 8 is at the top. The higher the level, the more advanced the qualification For more information, refer to <https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/compare-different-qualification-levels> [accessed 29.05.2015]

During recent years a number of reforms and initiatives have been launched with the purpose of improving VET for young people and adults and to make it more responsive to the needs of both employers and individuals. Factors such as low levels of productivity in the UK (linked to low levels of skill in the workforce), low levels of participation in training, and high differentials between social groups prompted the newly elected Labour Government in 1997 to develop a strategy focused on (1) raising standards and (2) inclusion (Leney et al, 2004).

It has been stressed (Stasz et al, 2004) that government policy for vocational learning has been directed towards two broad purposes. First and foremost is the economic objective. Policy-makers believe that higher levels of skill will lead to national economic growth, increased productivity for companies, and higher earnings for the individual. The second purpose is social. Vocational learning policy seeks to develop occupationally relevant skills at a number of levels. Research conducted by McCrone and Morris (2004) observed that vocational courses have been associated with a variety of purposes, such as (1) widening young people's experiences, (2) acting as a motivational tool, and (3) aiding progression on to post-16 studies. Furthermore, work-related learning for this age group could potentially (1) improve motivation and attainment, (2) improve attendance and behaviour, (3) improve self-confidence, and (4) positively influence young people's choices of post-16 courses. The success of this agenda for young people may vary from context to context and depends largely on a number of external and internal factors such as teachers' competence and support for students, students' attitudes, individual biographies, financial and social set-up, etc.

*A Basis for Choice*, published by the FEU in 1979, became an important policy paper in the context of the vocational education agenda. The document proposed a framework of general education within which there would be sufficient guidance to enable students to choose more intelligently their routes into the adult world, particularly that of employment. Such courses would provide a basis for choice (Pring, 1995). *A Basis for Choice* also stressed the importance of developing learners' transferable skills in order to ensure that options can be kept open for students (FEU, 1982). Furthermore, a review of courses conducted on behalf of the Further Education Unit (Pratley, 1980) identified that students on such programmes are likely to need help in areas such as (1) general education, particularly language and numeracy; (2) job-finding skills; (3) particular knowledge and abilities relating to one or more areas of employment; and (4) personal development. Through the Manpower Services Commission (later succeeded by the Training Agency) some important programmes were initiated in the 1970s to develop schemes for unemployed young people, such as the Job Creation Programme and Work Experience Programme, later succeeded by the Youth Opportunities Programme. The scheme introduced a six-month 'employment programme' – work experience, training and work preparation courses for unemployed school leavers. The programme, however, did not prove

successful in terms of solving the problems of either unemployment or social exclusion. An additional concern with these programmes was related to widespread abuses by employers who often saw these schemes as a source of cheap labour (Evans, 1991).

These rather ineffective initiatives were replaced by the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) in 1983. This was intended to be a modernised apprenticeship for everybody, committed to providing places for all 16- and 17-year-old school-leavers who were out of work in order to enhance their ‘employability’ (Lucas, 2007). The four-year Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) and the one-year Certificate in Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE) were introduced in 1983 and 1986, respectively. The TVEI was introduced to offer full-time students aged 14–18 ‘a four year course combining general with technical and vocational education’ in schools. The primary aim of this initiative was to make what was taught in schools be relevant to the world of work. The CPVE included common core options for developing skills in selected occupational areas, ‘job seeking and enterprise skills’, and local employers. As Evans (1991: 55–56) notes, the initiatives introduced in the 1980s

*[presented] a confusing array of possible pathways to young people as well as to teachers, counsellors and parents who seek to guide them and the companies who might offer them employment.*

During the 1980s Further Education (FE) colleges played an important role in providing ‘new vocational’ or ‘pre-vocational’ programmes by offering a range of courses which emphasised preparation for work in general, not for specific jobs (Lucas, 2007). In 1990 Youth Training replaced the Youth Training Scheme and became a significant programme for unemployed 16- and 17-year-olds until April 1998, when it was replaced by Work Based Training for Young People. Youth Training was delivered by training providers under contract to the local Training and Enterprise Council. Work Based Training for Young People has retained most of the main characteristics of Youth Training.

Taking the CPVE initiative further, General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) were introduced in 1992 at three levels (Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced). They were aimed at young people who wanted to keep their career options open and so were not ready to embark on specific NVQs. The introduction in the early-1990s of GNVQs to be taken by 14–16-year-olds and, more recently, GCSEs in applied subjects, means that aspects of a 14–16-year-old’s programme of studies may be vocationally related, providing what Pring (1995) defined as the prevocational context. With all the variety of vocational training courses that could be offered in different contexts (e.g. college or workplace), there are certain common features of this type of learning, such as incorporation of vocational relevance, providing opportunities for sampling or ‘tasting’ a range of jobs for the purpose of informing choice, taking into account individual needs and circumstances of

young people. Pring (1995) emphasises that the main stress of pre-vocational training should be on the processes (not outputs) that promote characteristics such as a more experienced and practical mode of learning; the utilisation of the community, including the world of work; reflection on personal and social relevance, requiring guidance and counselling; personal learning agendas, requiring the negotiation of learning objectives and the capacity to work and communicate with others. A wide range of vocational opportunities is available for learners at the end of compulsory education, including:

- qualifications within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)/the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF);
- other qualifications outside the NQF/QCF (e.g. RSA or City & Guilds, vendor qualifications offered by Microsoft and others);
- short training courses (not necessarily leading to a qualification);
- publicly funded work-based training, e.g. apprenticeships.

The issue of concern is linked to the question of confusion over a wide range of different qualifications or the jungle-like landscape of post-compulsory training in the UK (Unwin, 1999). A further, and very damaging, feature of the fragmented and turbulent vocational scene is that employers have little confidence – or indeed knowledge – of the awards whose main purpose is to prepare young people for entry to their businesses. In addition, as suggested by Dearden et al. (2000) research, the wage returns for many of these qualifications were negative. The additional returns associated with academic qualifications, taking no account of the time taken to acquire such qualifications, are typically higher than those associated with vocational qualifications at the same level (Dearden et al, 2000) Recent years have seen a widespread interest among different stakeholders in VET. Both current and previous governments issued major reports, each having quite different approaches to the problems raised by Britain's poor record in this field (Winch, 2012). The main objective of the Leitch Review of 2006 (H.M. Treasury, 2006) was raising the skills levels of the British workforce to facilitate the country's economic competitiveness. Some of the main targets identified by the Leitch Review included, as follows:

- Increase adult skills across all levels and aim to virtually eradicate low skills by ultimately getting to a position where 95% of all adults achieve a Level 2 qualification;
- Strengthen employer voice on skills and also rationalise existing skills bodies by establishing a new Commission for Employment and Skills;
- Increase employer engagement and investment in skills by reforming, relicensing and empowering Sector Skills Councils;
- Increase employer investment in intermediate and higher level skills;

- Increase people's aspirations and awareness of the value of skills and also develop a new universal adult careers service (H.M. Treasury, 2006).

However, as Winch (2012) concludes, the Leitch policy of developing the skills base of the British economy by awarding qualifications for workplace know-how already possessed was deluded. There was no intention to develop licences to practise and the award of the qualification made no contribution to the possessor's workplace know-how. It has been further observed that the Coalition government is pursuing a similar neo-liberal policy path while introducing new initiatives in the area of vocational education (Swift and Fisher, 2012). The Coalition government has recognised the need to carry on reforms in the sector of vocational education and training. The independent Wolf Review (2011), commissioned by Education Secretary Michael Gove, has further underpinned the significance of vocational education and training reforms.

As noted elsewhere, the Coalition vision was one in which young people would be empowered consumers of training opportunities and where informed choice in a market of opportunities would improve standards (Swift and Fisher, 2012). Improving the apprenticeship system and making colleges more responsive to individuals' and employers' needs has been considered to be an important focus of the present government agenda. This agenda is underpinned by the tradition of neo-liberalism that has been centred around features such as the promotion of free competition, deregulation, privatisation, internationalisation, consumer choice, and the use of market proxies in the public sector (Souto-Otero, 2012). However, various schemes in the area of vocational education and training have often been explicitly aimed at, and seem to have a greater impact on, those individuals who are not succeeding at school or at work, or whose skills do not meet the needs of the economy and therefore hamper their ability to reap society's rewards. Individuals with low skills levels are more likely to be unemployed or in insecure, underpaid employment (Swift and Fisher, 2012).

The conclusion is that major government vocational education policies and reforms have been driven primarily by economic (and to some extent social) purposes and less by the need to address the problem of enhancing the status of vocational education and training within society; it has been perceived as a 'second choice' option, while 'academic' education, especially as represented by the General Certificate of Education at Advanced Level (GCE A Level), has been widely regarded as 'the "gold standard" to which the best should aspire' (Swift and Fisher, 2012: 208). Michael Gove's<sup>2</sup> vision of vocational education and training that shaped the recent policies aimed to enhance prestige of vocational education. The policies have, in many ways, endeavoured to bring a balance between the academic and vocational education, specifically, by making the upper secondary education more subject-oriented and emphasising the significance of teaching and learning of English and Math in

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Gove is a British Conservative Party politician, the Secretary of State for Education 2010-2014.

14-19 curriculum. As From September 2013, students who fail to achieve a GCSE A\*-C in either English or maths at age 16 will be expected to continue to study these subjects. In addition, all students aged 16-19, whether doing academic study, vocational study or a mixture of both, should be offered a study programme which is based on their prior attainment with clear educational and/or employment outcomes. In particular students should spend most of their study programme time taking one or more substantial academic or vocational qualifications (equivalent in size to two A levels of 300 hours taken over two years); undertake a traineeship or extended work experience and take part in non-qualification activity such as tutorials, work experience or other work-related learning; This has been called a historic change, urgently sought by employers and badly needed if the UK is to compete internationally (Department for Education, 2013). However, as Young (2011) notes, two issues stand out in considering the implications of the Coalition government's approach to the 14–19 curriculum. One is the emphasis on knowledge that is expressed in the priority given to school subjects. The other issue is that they appear to avoid any consideration of the 14–19 curriculum as a whole (Young, 2011).

### ***Denmark***

The Danish primary and lower school *Grundskole* is comprehensive and covers both primary and lower secondary education, i.e. the first (grade 1 to 6) and second (grade 7-9/10) stage basic education.

In Denmark, upper secondary education divides into:

- General education qualifying for access to higher education which consists of (the general upper secondary education provision of the Gymnasium, the higher preparatory examination (HF-programme), the higher commercial examination (HHX-programme), the higher technical examination (HTX-programme).
- Vocational or technical education qualifying primarily for access to the labour market.

Vocational education and training (VET) consists of a basic and a main programme. The student must enter into a training agreement with a company approved by the social partners in order to accomplish the main programme. Programmes are free of charge to students, and students in the basic programme who do not have a training agreement can receive grants from the Danish State Education Grant and Loan Schemes if they meet the required criteria. In the vocational education and training programmes, the students are paid wages when they have entered into a training agreement. The wages are between DKK 8,000 and 12,000 a month.<sup>3</sup>

Currently, the Danish VET system is a dual system consisting of approximately two-thirds internship and one-third school-based learning. The system is based on two premises. The first is that

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.eng.uvm.dk/Fact-Sheets/Upper-secondary-education/Initial-Vocational-education-and-training-programmes> [accessed 16.3.2015]

government intervention has concentrated on the school-based part of VET. Apart from central legislation about the rights and obligations of the apprentice and the employer, the different reforms of the VET system have left the training in the workplace relatively untouched. The impact has typically been indirect, as changes in the structure of the VET system, in the curriculum and in the pedagogical practice have affected the balance and interplay between school-based and workplace-based learning and training. The second premise is related to the first. It suggests that the survival of the dual system depends on the willingness of employers to take on apprentices in sufficient numbers to meet the needs for skilled labour. Whereas the cost of training at the technical schools is financed by the state, the employers jointly finance workplace training. The economic foundation of the system is primarily based on the traditional concept of apprenticeship that implies that the apprentice trades work for training. This means that learning forms part of the working process. It also indicates that the training period is not only dependent on the time required to obtain the skills needed, but also on the working time needed to compensate for the cost of training (Juul and Jørgensen, 2011).

The first time the issue of parity of esteem between the different sectors of the education system was given political priority in the post-war period was in the late 1960s. The cause was the expansion in general upper secondary education, which resulted in a fear that the VET system would be transformed into a system for the less academically-oriented students. Efforts were made to make the system more attractive for academically strong students by approximating the curriculum of the VET to the curriculum of the general upper secondary (Juul and Jørgensen, 2011). The intention was also to make access to further education easier for VET students and to narrow the gap between the different cultures in Danish society.

However, the reform was not able to prevent the growth of general upper secondary and at the same time the reform was criticised for being in agreement with the aspirations and needs of the young people, who had actually chosen to enrol in the VET system. Reports showed that the motivation for young people to choose to enrol in the VET system was based on an interest in learning a specific craft rather than improving their general academic skills. In addition many of the students had chosen VET because they were looking for an alternative to the abstract and academic learning tradition they had experienced in their former school life (Juul, 2012).

The subsequent reform of the VET system was implemented in 1991. The focus was on how to attract students to the system by enhancing the profile of the VET system. The primary means was to introduce problem-based pedagogy that integrated general academic and vocational skills with a primary focus on the latter. It is characteristic that although the strategies chosen in the two reforms were very different their aim was the same, that is to say enhancing the attractiveness of the VET system. It is also noteworthy that the Danish VET system unlike the English never came to play an

important role in the training of unemployed young people. The VET system was instead seen by both the different governments and the social partners as having an important role to play in positioning of Denmark as an advanced industrial nation in the global economy. In this respect the Danish VET system avoided the risk of being perceived as a training offer for young people and adults with special needs.

As education politics began to focus on the issue of 'education for all', the status of the VET system slowly began to change. The VET system was to play a major role in fulfilling the government's target, that 95 percent of a youth cohort completes upper secondary education. This was to be achieved by attracting the potential remainder group. But at the same time the VET system should preserve its ability to attract students with an academic potential. The strategy chosen in order to reach these positional conflicting aims was to make the system more flexible and open to individual students choices. With the reform implemented in 2001 the VET system was transformed into a system consisting of a wide range of modules in order to make it possible for students to construct their own pathway through the VET. The argument behind the reform was this would make the VET system an attractive choice for young people with different aspirations and skills and at the same time adjust the system in order to meet the needs of a changing labour market (Matzon, 1999). It was argued that the decline of the industrial society and the transition to what was termed the knowledge society implied that not only academics but also skilled workers should be trained in the ability to reflect on their work, to work with information and communication technologies and form part of new less hierarchical work organisations that delegated more responsibility to their skilled workers (Christensen, Shapiro and Kjær, 2000: 20). The Ministry of Education declared that the needs of the labour market and of the individual learner were in fact identical. This made the fulfilment of the two different objectives seem an easy task. Seen from both the perspective of the individual student and from the perspective of the labour market the important issue was the development of the individual's capacity for problem solving. The VET students were to take responsibility for their own learning processes, which indicated a major change in the role of the teacher (Christensen et al, 2000).

The motivation and self-discipline of the student had now become a central factor in determining the results and success of the learning process at the technical schools (Andersen and Christensen, 2002), but as the organisation of workplace training had remained more or less unchanged, the result was a widening of the gap between school-based learning and workplace training.

Contrary to school-based learning, workplace learning forms part of a workplace culture where fixed standards of both quality and productivity do not leave much room for experiments and individual solutions. The mobilisation of motivation and self-discipline of the trainee that is essential in the

school is not required to the same extent in the workplace as the trainee is forced to follow the work rhythm and procedures of their colleagues.

Adding to the difficulties in implementing the neo-liberal-inspired learning concept of the VET system was the fact that the majority of the trainees seem to prefer on-the-job training to the constructivist learning concepts dominating learning processes at the technical and commercial schools. Their argument was that they found it difficult to manage the extended degrees of individual responsibility for learning. In addition, they tended to find the competencies they obtain at the workplace more relevant than the ones they trained for in the technical schools (Juul, 2005).

In the last 10 years the VET system has been subordinated to the general political goal that 95 percent of a youth cohort in 2015 completes upper secondary or VET. Whereas this policy in the 1990s was launched under the slogan of 'education for all', thus indicating that education was to be seen as a right, today the 95 percent goal is embedded in neo-liberal rhetoric pointing to the duty of every individual to secure his or her employability. Another difference concerning the 95 percent goal of the 1990s and of today is that today the VET system is appointed a special role in the fulfilment of the 95 percent goal, which was not the case in the 1990s (Regeringen, 2005). The assumption is that the easiest way to reach this goal is to encourage young people to enrol in the VET system and to prevent dropouts from the VET system as the high dropout rates from the VET system are seen as the main obstacle to achieving the goal. However, focusing on quantity and assigning the VET system a special responsibility to reduce the potential dropouts the VET system seems to be ignoring the issue of parity of esteem. This tendency is amplified by the fact that the 95 percent goal and the issue of dropouts from the VET system have attracted a lot of media attention, thus stressing the status of VET giving as second choice (Jørgensen, 2011).

The conclusion is that in recent years the question of the esteem and status of the VET system has moved to the background of the political agenda as employability and economic growth has moved to the foreground. Paradoxically, the issue of employability has resulted in a shift of focus from the special needs of the labour market to the needs and motivations of the students. The reason for this was that the issue of employability was related not to the VET system as such but to the labour market in general and to the concept of lifelong learning. The result was that the VET system was subordinated to a general political goal directed towards the whole labour force. The goal of this policy was to make the term unskilled obsolete and the VET system was assigned a major role in the fulfilment of this goal.

These policies, however, seem to have changed recently. An agreement between the social partners and the majority of the parties in parliament has been signed in February 2014. This agreement will

be followed by a reform of the VET system, which will be implemented in the summer of 2015. The main aim of the reform is to restore the attractiveness of the VET system and counter a development where recruitment to the upper secondary rises at the expense of the recruitment to VET. Today only 19 percent of the students from the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade go directly to the VET system. The goal is that this should be 25 percent in 2020 and 30 percent in 2025. At the same time the reform will imply that access to VET will depend on marks achieved in the 9th or 10th grade in Danish and Maths. A VET-student is required to have passed these two subjects in order to enter VET. For those who do not meet these requirements there will be further opportunities to obtain these qualifications (Aftale 24. February 2014). To sum up the differences and similarities between the political discourses in the two countries and their potential effects on perceptions of the VET is not an easy task. On the one hand, the two countries are today facing similar challenges consisting in an academic drift combined with a decline in the prestige and attractiveness of the VET system. On the other hand, the problems are not equally strong in the two countries. In spite of the fact that further education is free in Denmark and the level of students grants very generous, the increase in student enrolled in general upper secondary is much larger in England than in Denmark. Correspondingly a higher proportion of young people enrol in vocational upper secondary education in Denmark compared to England. This indicates that the loss of prestige of the VET system has been weaker in Denmark than in England. A comparison of the history of the two VET systems suggests that the Danish VET system has succeeded in maintaining the support and attention from both trade and industry and government. The issue of parity of esteem between general upper secondary and vocational upper secondary has until the late 1980s been high on the political agenda in Denmark. This has not been a concern for politicians in England to the same extent. Unlike in Denmark the English VET system has a long history of offering training possibilities to young people which special needs (Lane, 1996), thus reinforcing the public understanding of the VET system as a second choice. In the case of Denmark it is relatively new that the VET system has been assigned a special responsibility for giving young people with special needs an opportunity to complete a vocational upper secondary. This raises the question whether it is possible to fulfil the ambition of a greater parity of esteem between general and vocational upper secondary and at the same time live up to ambition that 95 percent of a youth cohort completes upper secondary? It also raises the question whether English and Danish VET students share the same notion of the VET system as being a second choice? In order to throw some light on these questions we have examined how English and Danish VET students reflect on their choice to enrol VET.

## **Part II: Vocational route and young people's choices**

### ***Perceptions of educational opportunities: vocational vs. academic routes***

The extent to which young people are equipped to make choices is closely related to their perceptions of educational opportunities, as well as their expectations, motivations and social backgrounds. As Winch notes, there is not only a problem of availability of choice for those who do not wish to go into higher education, but a problem of quality of what is on offer, as well as a dire lack of information on worthwhile choices (Winch, 2012). The following sections, based on the interview data undertaken in England and Denmark, will demonstrate what factors influence young people's choices and chances.

The interviews have indicated that students' perceptions of education are strongly related to their motivations and expectations, as well as their life chances. Our interviews aimed to underpin differences in perceptions of education, occupational choices and life chances experienced by students pursuing vocational routes and those following academic paths. In this research individual life experiences help to illuminate a bigger issue. The question of how young people make their individual occupational and career choices has been considered as significant in this research and, specifically, as it relates to the perception of academic vs. vocational education by young people, their parents and society in general. The interviews have demonstrated that young people in both countries are faced with the traditional negative outlook towards vocational routes within both their family and wider social settings, and this may result in demotivating young people to follow vocational paths as well as in creating barriers and lowering the self-confidence of those who choose to pursue vocational routes. The interviews have indicated that vocational education routes are sometimes perceived as a 'second choice' by the students.

The interviews undertaken in both countries have explored the issue of how vocational education and training is generally perceived in the society. The respondents have been able to give their views of how other people, e.g. their parents, friends or classmates, feel about vocational career paths and to what extent this may affect their own perceptions. Individual accounts have enabled us to illuminate issues that relate to the status of vocational education and training, specifically in comparison with that of academic education.

### ***Data collection and methodology***

The data on which this paper draws were originally collected in relation to the 'Experiencing Inequality' project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and carried out under the auspices of the ESRC Research Centre: Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies (LLAKES). From Autumn 2009 to Spring 2011, LLAKES researchers

collected data from adolescents and young adults in five countries for a project on ‘perceptions of inequalities.’ Four European countries and a city-state were chosen to represent different regimes of welfare (i.e. England, Denmark, France and Germany) and development (i.e. Singapore, as the developmental state).

The data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews with upper secondary school students (12 interviews in England and seven interviews in Denmark with students aged 16–19 years were carried out). The data were collected only in metropolitan areas: in and around Copenhagen (DK) and in the Greater London area (UK). In each area, up to three schools providing upper secondary education and one or two universities were selected. The selection of secondary schools was motivated by a desire to provide maximum variation on school ethnic composition. Among the upper secondary schools selected in each country at least one had a vocational and the other an academic profile<sup>4</sup>.

The data analysis, carried out with the assistance of the NVivo program, involved employing content analysis in order to identify the major themes through the process of open coding, which is a way of categorising the text in order to establish a framework of themes and/or categories.

The following categories emerged from the analysis of the semi-structured interviews: education, ability, age, class/social class, ethnicity, race, culture, nationality and language, family, gender, individualisation, motivation, perceptions of fairness at school, perceptions of the national education system. Each category refers to specific contexts (e.g. school, family), experience (perceptions of fairness at school) or identity perceptions (e.g. nationality or ethnic identities).

Our analysis has indicated that the categories are not mutually exclusive and they could be employed to consider factors that may affect the perceptions of young people’s motivations, choices and life chances by upper secondary school students.

### ***England***

The interviews in England have highlighted that the students feel that vocational routes do not provide the best chances in society from either financial or social prestige perspectives. Amanda, a student on a beauty therapy course, makes a point that undertaking her vocational route, in hairdressing, would not bring her proper financial rewards in the future, compared with other occupations:

*Like if I go out and I’m good at what I do and I go and get a good job, then I’d just think I deserve to get paid well for it, as to someone [e.g. in other occupational fields]*

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<sup>4</sup> Danish interviews were transcribed and translated from the Danish

*that just isn't really good at it but they can just about get through it, I think I should get paid more than what they should because I can do a better job than what they could.*

Kelly, a vocational education student undertaking a course in carpentry and joinery, noted that the 'sixth form college students across the road' are snobs as they look down at them (vocational education students). Emma, who is training to become an administrative assistant, reflects on the fact that one chooses the vocational education route because of financial or social disadvantage. She acknowledges that she is opting to do a vocational course, just because she is not financially secure enough to enter higher education:

*I just didn't want to go to university to get into the debt. The fact that there's so many debts and the fact that the courses are so hard to get on and so expensive, I'd rather work through the school and like the school ... and obviously the school will pay that way.*

In contrast, in Denmark, higher education is free and fully funded by the state (including provision of bursaries for higher education students). Therefore, in the Danish context the argument that relates to students' experiences of financial constraints would be somewhat different. The Danish students choose vocational courses not because they can't afford to pay universities tuitions fees, but rather because they wish to enter the labour market sooner rather than later and start a full-time job that would enable them to earn 'proper' wages instead of living on grants and low-wage part-time jobs.

The perceptions of vocational education and training by the students themselves and those around them are closely related to the issue of their individual choices. Our interviews aimed to identify what factors play a significant role in facilitating students' choices to enter vocational education and training. The English interviews have uncovered that in the majority of our cases, the students make their individual choices on the basis of contrasting vocational vs. academic education. Examples include, as follows:

- Those who enter vocational education because they had negative experiences within their previous academic education, e.g. (1) they have been 'labelled' as not clever enough, which made them feel discouraged from entering 'academic' routes; and (2) because of negative experiences within their academic education settings (e.g. lack of teachers' support or unfair treatment) they tend to project a negative outlook to all forms of academic education (e.g. higher education).
- Those who feel motivated towards their chosen professions. Depending on their experiences, they may develop motivation towards their profession (or on the contrary may feel disappointed in their choice).
- Those who enter vocational education because of financial reasons. This also relates to the question of family situation and social background. In such cases young people feel that they can't afford to enter higher education.

## **Denmark**

The interviews in Denmark show that the students feel that vocational education and the jobs it gives access to do not enjoy a high level of recognition and prestige in society. The specific instances have been related to the hairdressing industry, which, according to the interview data, is not regarded as a ‘proper trade’:

*They [people] do not regard it [hairdressing] as a trade. [...] A lot of people regard it as less valuable than other things. They do not understand why it takes four years – which is because you have to learn a lot of things. It really takes a long time to learn the different techniques. I think it is alright it takes the time it does. But I do not think it is alright that people have that view on it, as they do. It might not be rocket science, but you still have to think about what you do. You still have to work under pressure. I do not think the trade gets the recognition it deserves in society. [Extract from an interview with Inga, Denmark]*

Another respondent expressed similar views, claiming that the hairdressing trade has not been properly recognised by the general public. According to our interview data, there is a strong misconception about training for this profession, which is perceived as ‘easy’, and not requiring a high level of skills and abilities:

*In the beginning I was a little ashamed about it [about telling people that she wanted to become a hairdresser] because the trade has a reputation of attracting stupid people who know nothing. And I do not want to come off as a stupid person. I have always [noticed] that people have been looking oddly at me when I have told them that I wanted to be a hairdresser. But since I began in here and realised how difficult it can be, and how much theory you have to learn I no longer care what other people think as long as I know how difficult it is. I mean, it is just as hard as anything else. [Extract from an interview with Agnes]*

Our data have further demonstrated that this general social perception of vocational education, which is often considered a ‘second choice for young people’, has also been demonstrated in parents’ views and perspectives. The interviews have indicated that some parents generally tend to discourage their children from engaging in vocational education courses, arguing that academically oriented education provides better life chances. Inga, a student undertaking training to become a hairdresser, notes that her parents have strongly objected to her dropping out of high school and argued for the prospective financial benefits (such as higher salary in the future) associated with academic degrees as opposed to vocational education options:

*Initially I wanted to become a biologist, which my father was really excited about. I attended high school, but I did not have what it took. [...] You might say that they [parents] did not have a problem with me wanting to become a hairdresser. But they had lots of problems with me dropping out of high school, as my father told me that I could earn a higher salary and get far better opportunities as a biologist.*

As Inga further notes, explaining to her family why she wanted to become a hairdresser was difficult, specifically because the hairdressing profession has low status in society:

*It was tough having the discussion, explaining to them that I wanted to drop out of college. It was tough with the reaction from my father who got really annoyed with me because I did not want to finish high school because he considered hairdressing less prestigious than biology.*

Britta, another student of the hairdressing academy, has highlighted similar issues that relate to the low status of the hairdressing profession in society. She also noted that the majority of people generally assume that ‘you do not have to be clever’ to become a qualified hairdresser.

*Often it is like [this]: ‘Hairdresser – that cannot be that tough. I am in high school; that is much tougher.’ And obviously they [students in high school] have more homework, but you really have to learn. [...] actually some of my friends say that too: ‘seriously, it cannot be that difficult’. But they also think it is great because they can get their hair coloured for free and often. But still, because high school takes three years (and then you have to go to university afterwards) – and becoming a hairdresser takes four years. And in high school you have all the homework a lot [of homework] when you want to become a hairdresser – it is just that people they do not know what it takes. It is not something everyone can learn. Actually you also have to read quite a lot.*

The interviews with the students have indicated that the relatively low status of vocational education compared to the traditional ‘academic’ alternative has been recognised as a significant problem which may affect young people’s occupational choices or their perceptions of their chosen occupational choices.

### **Individual choices: Negative experiences in secondary schools: entering vocational education as an ‘opposite’ to the academic route**

The interviews with students have indicated that the young peoples’ individual occupational choices are affected by a number of factors, such as their experiences, social and financial backgrounds, as well as motivations and outcomes. The issue of negative previous secondary school experiences have often been noted as significant in this context. The students’ previous experiences in mainstream secondary schools have been contrasted with current (or future) vocational education provision. In such cases, vocational education has been perceived as more positive and motivating in contrast to their past learning experiences, thus enabling young people to make their occupational choices.

### ***England***

The English interviews supported the view that the young people undertaking vocational courses tend to contrast their current experiences with those of their previous education in mainstream schools, sometimes citing this as the most significant factor that facilitated their choice to enter the vocational

education path. The interviews demonstrated the ways a range of negative school experiences influence young people's perceptions of education, and also undermine their confidence in their abilities to achieve in academic studies. Moreover, academic education is perceived as something that is not relevant to real life and therefore not useful. Amanda, a student undertaking a training course in beauty therapy notes that her school education seemed irrelevant and unnecessary.

*Because I'm enjoying what I do, and at school I didn't want to sit there and do history and stuff like that, that's not what I wanted to do. [...] If I want to do something I'll do it, but I'm the sort of person if I don't like what I do then I find it hard to have the enthusiasm to do it. Because I just thought 'I don't want to do this, I don't understand why I have to go to school for all these years to learn something I'm not going to use'.*

Marion, doing a vocational course in childcare, makes a similar point, emphasising that her school education seemed to her too difficult, not significant and unrelated to real life:

*I have always known that I did not want to go to high school because I knew it was too demanding. With homework and stuff. And I have never been the type who liked to do homework. I have never been the type who could sit down and read a physics book or something [...] I knew that I would ruin it for myself and everyone else if I started in high school. I would not have gained anything from it.*

The interviews have indicated that in such cases, students' recognition of the value of education is generally low. Another interview has stressed similar issues. Kelly, who is undertaking a vocational course at an FE college in carpentry and joinery, believes that her secondary school education has not been useful as it was not responding to pupils' individual choices, abilities and attitudes. In contrast, vocational courses are associated with education that is perceived as relevant and related to students' individual choices.

*I don't think school's important. I think when you go to college that's when you get all your qualifications. So I think they should start you off on college. [...] you can actually choose what you want to do. Although in college they can give you Maths and English classes as well, so you can get like your core subjects because it's classed under Key Skills, and then you can choose to do what you want to do. And I think that would be better for a lot of students, because some ... we just get put in lessons that we don't like. Like you get forced to study French and things like that and ... I don't think that's right. [Extract from interview with Kelly]*

Lack of teachers' support and patience and especially being labelled as 'not able' and 'underperforming pupils', have been noted as the significant factors that contribute to the negative perceptions of education. Kelly, reflecting on her past experiences, makes a point that she was considered to be 'an underachieving pupil' mostly on account of her bad behaviour rather than on her academic performance:

*I just found French a bit boring, and because I couldn't pronounce the words, like, my teacher used to have a go at me, so I really didn't get on with him, he used to send me out every lesson. [...] in Maths I was put from set 3 to set 2, and then I got put up to set 1, I got dropped back down to set 2, and then I've got dropped to set 4 because I was naughty. So I've been up and down. And throughout Year 10 I didn't have a Maths class, my teacher refused to teach me so I didn't have a Maths class. I didn't have a Science class either, they refused to teach me. [Extract from interview with Kelly]*

Emma, an FE college student undertaking a course in administration, reflected on her previous school experiences, specifically noting that now, in the vocational education setting, the teachers treated her differently:

*You get ... I find that the tutors here are more helpful and they have more time, whereas teachers in secondary school have obviously more than one class and more than one year group, so they have all different abilities with time in certain different ways. They're more helpful [...] my tutor says she's always there, and all the tutors are the same, they all have their classes but are always there to help.*

Another vocational education student, Marion, also noted that the lack of teachers' support in lower secondary school negatively affected her perceptions of education and fairness in society:

*The teachers were really bad, like some of the things they said were ... teachers can't say that to students. There was like ... the support woman, who you go to talk about things if you're upset about anything, personal problems, well I don't open up and I had a lot of problems from my secondary school years and I went to her, and it took me a while but I did open up in the end. And she turned round, in front of other students and other members of staff on a different day and said 'oh, I've had enough of this, you whingeing at me about your problems' and proper took the Mickey in front of other people. 'I don't care if your dad's an alcoholic, there's a girl in the year above you whose father has just died.' I got that. So I thought about taking it to the newspapers – [...] And then from there I suffered school phobia from the first school. Then my dad passed away. And then I had to leave that second school and I went to an integrated support school where I came out and took GCSEs, but they were great, I wouldn't be in college if it weren't for them. So yeah, [that school] ruined my life as it is now. So my school experience isn't great.*

The interview data have indicated that negative school experiences as well as contrasting them with vocational education settings, in many cases have resulted in developing the students' motivation towards their occupational choices.

### **Denmark**

Inga, a student attending a hairdressing academy, reflected on her previous school experiences, stressing that some negative incidents influenced her perceptions of educational environments. Relationships with teachers have been perceived as one of the key factors. The student cited some incidents of 'not being taken seriously' by the teachers, which affected her perception of the lower secondary school environment.

*We were a really rebellious year. Exactly because we did not get any attention from the teachers. I am convinced that is the reason. It has been that much cooler if the teachers had been more involved. They always told us that we all had to put ourselves in each other's shoes. But as long as they did not step into our shoes we did not want to step into their shoes. Come on, we were young people. I mean [...] we were invited to join the teachers' meetings. But we never managed to provide any inputs that were welcomed. It was always received with negativity. [...] They really needed to be able to listen to the students, which is why we were rebellious.*

Conversely, relationships with the teachers in the hairdressing academy are perceived as positive:

*Q Have you ever experienced being discriminated against?*

*A I do not know if I have been discriminated against. We have a teacher [...] who is pretty tough. But she is still a great teacher. She is my favourite. If she gets nasty you have to be nasty to her – you are only human. As I told you. To me everyone are equal. If she can talk like that to me, I can speak like that to her. It is not meant in any negative way, because I never patronise people who are older than me. You still have to respect older people. Hmm, it is not that she is old, but she is an adult and knows more than I do. But still, we have to respect each other.*

*Q Do you then think she has respect for you – and treats you with respect?*

*A I was actually surprised. She actually came back and apologised. I think some people just has to be told they are wrong.*

*Q The teachers respect you, then?*

*A Completely. I think so.*

Another student, Britta, also comments on her negative experiences in lower secondary school. She claimed that in her previous secondary school the teachers could not support pupils who were less able and academically challenged, thus undermining their confidence and self-assurance:

*... especially in English and Math. I mean, in English, all we had was a compendium with assignments we could complete. The teacher did not go through the grammar on the blackboard or anything. All we could do was just the assignments in the compendium. [...] And in math, you know – if you did not understand, there was not enough time to [go] through it again. You could ask – and then the teacher would run quickly through it again. But that was it. [...] Perhaps, if they had some more time and structured the teaching different – in a way that recognised the needs of both the strong and the poor students.*

In contrast, her experiences in the hairdressing academy have been described as different:

*I think it has been really great. Also because, in the salon you do not really do any real work. I have mostly done the 'easy' things. But here, you learn the trade. You really got to do stuff. But also because you are together with people at the same level – so you do not have to feel all stupid and bad at it. I really think that is a nice thing.*

The interviews have indicated that positive experiences in vocational education and training facilitate and change young people's motivation and positive perceptions of value of education:

*It [education] means everything. [...] I do not want under any circumstances to end up without any kind of education. I only live once and I want to do something with my life. It means everything. Even if it is sometimes difficult, I believe everyone should have an education. [...] I have pretty great dreams. While I am here at the hairdressing academy I want to do a course in nails and one about doing extensions. It is both things that I have to pay for myself. Therefore I try to save for it. After that I want to be a stylist and make-up artist. Both things cost money, and you can do it here in Copenhagen. [Extract from interview with Britta]*

## **Motivation towards a profession as a factor facilitating the students' choices**

### ***Denmark***

The interviews have indicated that positive perceptions of vocational education have been associated with students' motivation towards their occupational choice. Being motivated towards their chosen occupational area has been cited as an important factor that enables young people to make their career choices:

*I did not care about it. My father has always told me that you had to follow your dreams. I wanted to become a hairdresser and could not see the point with attending high school. Now I will be finished when I am 26. If I had to finish high school I would be 28 before I was done. [Extract from interview with Inga]*

In the end, her parents supported her decision, and Inga has emphasised that family support has played a significant role in her case, as although her parents tried to encourage her to pursue an academic route, nevertheless they respected her decision to follow a vocational path, which helped her to make her career choice.

*They [parents] said that I had to go through with high school, and then become a hairdresser afterwards. But I could not see the point of going in high school for three years if I knew after half a year that I wanted to become a hairdresser. They told me that I had to stay in high school. I then told them that they could choose to sign the permission themselves – I was not eighteen at the time – or I can simply just skip classes until I get expelled, because I really do not want to do it. Then my mother signed the slip and I got a contract with a salon two weeks after. I was really lucky.*

Apart from her parents' support, that of her friends has also played an important role in facilitating her confidence in making the right occupational choice:

*I really did not talk to that many people in high school. I talked to a few, but they were only those who accepted that you did not have to be like everyone else. They just thought it was great. Great that I chose to pursue a dream. The rest did ask why I was dropping out, and I told them it was because I did not want to go to high school, and they just said: 'OK'.*

Inga notes that pursuing a career route based on her own occupational choice helped her to develop as a person, stimulating her confidence, motivation and interest in the affairs of society.

*I feel a lot more independent. I care much more about my own opinions and how I perceive the world. It is kind of funny, actually. Hmm, I am 18 and turn 19 in half a year. And I have begun to care about how people are doing – here and in other parts of the world. I never used to do that – not before I began here.*

The positive effect on her self-image has been facilitated by her interest and involvement in political affairs, such as sponsoring Amnesty International, for example. Inga argues that aspiring to her own career dream has made her a more independent and self-determining person.

*I guess it is after I have started to earn money and getting an education. I think: 'when I have the means, why not do something'. I mean, I can help to make the world a better [place]. If you do not help, nobody does. Someone has to be the first to do it. Hmmm, it started when I was approached [...] and I thought that since it was only 50 DKK, why not sign up. I can help people if I vote and donate 50 DKK, so why not do it. Therefore, it is completely new. And I feel really good that I know that I am not being passive when people and animals are suffering.*

Another respondent, Britta, has similarly commented on her motivation towards her chosen profession:

*I have always known that I wanted to become a hairdresser. I have always hoped I could get a traineeship somewhere. But it is rather difficult, but I was lucky to find one while I was still at boarding school. Actually, I found one just two weeks before I stopped at the boarding school. That was lucky. I have just started here after the basic preliminary course. I started the course last year. I started in the salon first of June. [...] I think it is exciting to be, you know, sort of creative. I like to work with hair. The ways it can be cut and stuff – you can create a totally different face to what they had before. Therefore, it is not routine work. You meet new people each day. [Extract from interview with Britta]*

### **England**

English interviews have indicated that the students develop their motivation towards VET routes mainly because they consider vocational education to be more useful and accessible, specifically in terms of getting relevant qualifications that would enable them to enter the labour market both in Britain and internationally. Amanda, who is undertaking a beauty therapy course in an FE college, has demonstrated a motivation towards this occupational area:

*Q Had you always wanted to do a course like this or was it something you happened upon?*

*A No, I always wanted to do something like this.*

*Q Always wanted to do makeup?*

*A Mmm. I've always wanted to travel as well, so I wanted to do Beauty Therapy and Makeup and travel around doing it. And that's why I weren't really bothered about my school because I knew that I wanted to travel, I knew I wouldn't want to just stay here and have like a normal 9 to 5 job where I'd need my GCSEs.*

Talking about their motivations towards their VET courses, the students generally commented on the usefulness of the relevant qualifications.

### **Other factors affecting young peoples' perceptions**

The issue of family and social background has received recognition in our interview data in both countries. The discussion of these issues in Denmark emphasised such aspects as family support or lack of support in helping the students to make their occupational choices. The English interview data indicated the significance of social background and associated financial opportunities for young people, which strongly relate to their parents' income and social status.

Within the Danish context, our respondents emphasised the role of family support in helping them to make their occupational choices. For example, Agnes, a student of the hairdressing academy, stressed that her parents' support was really valuable:

*They have always supported me, also because I have talked about it for such a long time. Actually I began to doubt that it was what I wanted when I stopped at the boarding school. [...] But my parents told me that I should do it because it was something I had wanted my whole life. In that sense they have always supported me. Something that I am really happy about.*

Other Danish interviews underlined the importance of family support. However, in Denmark the issue of family background has not been cited as important in terms of making a choice between vocational and academic education. On the contrary, the question of social background has been cited as significant in English interviews. The issue of class/social class has been referred to in the interviews. The interviews indicated that the students have an awareness of inequalities related to social class that exist within their educational establishments. The differences may indicate that England is in fact a country with deeper class divisions than Denmark but it may also indicate that class division is not something that forms part of common understanding. The perception of equal opportunities is in general strong in the Scandinavian welfare states although the reality is that social reproduction in the education sector is relatively strong and has not changed significantly the last 20 years. Among young people aged 25 whose parents are unskilled 40 percent have neither fulfilled or are engaged in further education after leaving secondary school. In comparison the percentage is 6.5 among young people whose parents have fulfilled further education. (AER rådet, 2012)

*I don't know, she's just a snob, she's posh. Her mum and dad own their own business. They're not posh, they're still down to earth and as common as us but ... yeah she can stick her nose up at you, at people. [...] So it's likely it causes rows between us if she tells me and I don't like what she says then I'll tell her I don't like what she says and it will cause a massive row. [Extract from an interview with FE student, Kelly]*

English students from less privileged backgrounds tend to compare their own situations with those students who come from more privileged backgrounds:

*She's [another student] come from a better background, her mum and dad are still together, they've got their own business, they've saved up from when she was a kid – like putting money away in a savings account for her to do her driving lessons and things like that. So her mum and dad have sort of ... where I was growing up my mum and dad ... it's really complicated. So like my mum never really done anything like that, she was a single mum trying to bring up four kids. [...] So it's sort of she'll do better than me because she's got the financial support to do it, whereas I haven't. I'd love to go and start driving but I can't because I haven't got the money. [Extract from an interview with FE student, Kelly]*

According to the interview data, the students feel that their social background and financial situation may enhance or undermine their educational and life chances:

*Q Do you think your social background affects it as well, like whether you come from a poor family or a rich family?*

*A Obviously rich families probably have more priority, seeing your background. Like if I was to go into a good university they will see ... maybe if ... this isn't to do with poor, rich, but if they see I'm from [less privileged school] and someone else is from [more privileged school]. [Extract from an interview with sixth-form student]*

## **Conclusions**

Comparing two different contexts, England and Denmark, enabled the researchers to reflect on the issues of perceptions and motivations of young people towards VET, specifically focusing on factors that contribute to their either positive or negative attitudes. The data does not qualify for generalisations concerning similarities and differences in the motivations guiding choice of upper secondary education among English and Danish students. However, the analysis of the data has demonstrated that individual attitudes and perceptions need to be considered in the context of the policy debate and government policies in the area of VET.

The English context has indicated that government policy used vocational or vocationally related educational programmes to initiate a range of schemes for disadvantaged young people. This has contributed to some extent to the public perception of VET programmes as being suitable specifically for unemployed young people or those who did not succeed at school or had some problems of being

socially disengaged. The result is that young people tend to consider undertaking vocational qualification as their second choice. The crucial factors facilitating student engagement with vocational programmes include those of having negative experiences with their previous academic education, and opting for the vocational route as an opposite.

The low levels of take-up of vocational qualifications is also related to a growing awareness among young people of the issue of the intense competition for jobs in the UK. It has been observed that factors such as rapid technological development and job mobility as well as unemployment have had a profound impact on the skills required by the contemporary workplace (Mulholland et al, 2005). Debate on work-related competences underpins the issue of the importance of developing transferable skills and abilities that people can use in a variety of settings, including workplace settings (Evans, 2002). This implies that skills which are transferable across jobs and industries are required and therefore students may prefer courses that provide them with a range of transferrable skills rather than with occupationally or vocationally specific qualifications. This issue also related to employers' and other stakeholders' concerns about the relevance, quality and transferability of vocational qualifications.

Although the Danish context differs from the English in several important ways the two countries have in common the problem of lack of parity between the academic and the vocational track. Young people, their parents and society as such tend to attribute more prestige and status to general upper secondary education than to VET. This is in spite of the favourable job opportunities too which a Danish VET certificate gives access. The economic crisis has not affected this fundamentally. However, the crises did have an effect on the number of internships available and this again has affected the attractiveness of the VET system negatively, as students entering the VET system have no guarantee that they will be able to obtain an apprenticeship contract and thus be able to complete their training.

The interviews show that the Danish VET students are well aware of the general conception of VET as being seen as inferior to the academic track. But compared to the English VET system, the Danish VET system has the advantage that it is highly recognised by employers as wage levels and employment rates indicate. The deep involvement of the social partners in the decision-making and daily running of the VET system further underlines the engagement and support of employers in the system.

Another difference that is apparent when the respective interviews with the English and the Danish VET students are compared is the very favourable economic situation of the Danish students. Not only is education free, but students are also entitled to grants of a considerable size. This explains

why the economy is not referred to as an important issue when choice of education is to be explained, as is the case in the interviews with the English VET students.

Nonetheless, both English and Danish VET students seem to share the same feeling that their choice of education and career is only the second best and that the normal and accepted choice would be the academic track. In the interviews this is apparent in the explanations given. The students do not only argue for the choice made, but they seem to feel obliged also to argue for the choice not made. The arguments put forward concerning the latter are more or less the same for both English and Danish students, namely bad school experiences, lack of interest in academic subjects, etc.

On the basis of our comparative study we can conclude that the problem of esteem of the VET system exists in both countries in spite of the different national contexts the two VET systems are embedded in. The conclusion seems to be that the issue of esteem is a problem that is not easy to solve. If one is to draw a lesson from the history of the Danish VET system it seems that the esteem of a VET system is closely related to the importance attributed to industry. The term industrial society has from the 1970s been displaced by the term 'service society' and later 'the knowledge society' making the term industrial society a term referring to backwardness and resistance to change. But there are some signs that terms like industry and production are beginning to be attributed with more positive connotations and this might also affect the reputation of VET in a positive way. A sign the changes may be under way in Denmark is the latest reform of the Danish VET system from February 2014 and the fact that the reform has been launched under the slogan that Denmark in the future is to be both a production and a knowledge society.

## Notes

1 In Denmark the number includes the vocationally oriented upper secondary education which gives access to university level, but does not include a journeyman's test as the ordinary VET.

2 The grants for students are 5662 Danish kroner (DKK) / 654 English pounds (GBP) per month before tax. For 18–19-year-old students the size of the grant will depend on the income of the parents, and the grants will vary between 1254 DKK / 145 GBP and 2815 DKK / 328 GBP before tax.

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For more information, please contact  
[llakescentre@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:llakescentre@ioe.ac.uk)  
LLAKES Centre  
UCL Institute of Education  
University College London  
20 Bedford Way  
London WC1H 0AL  
U.K.



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