

Tønder, Anna Hagen; Aspøy, Tove Mogstad

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International journal for research in vocational education and training 4 (2017) 3, S. 270-288



Empfohlene Zitierung/ Suggested Citation:

Tønder, Anna Hagen; Aspøy, Tove Mogstad: When work comes first: young adults in vocational education and training in Norway - In: *International journal for research in vocational education and training* 4 (2017) 3, S. 270-288 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-151403 - DOI: 10.13152/IJRJET.4.3.5
<http://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-151403>
<http://dx.doi.org/10.13152/IJRJET.4.3.5>

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When Work Comes First: Young Adults in Vocational Education and Training in Norway

Anna Hagen Tønder* and Tove Mogstad Aspøy

*Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, Borggata 2B, P.O. Box 2947 Tøyen NO-0608
Oslo, Norway*

Received: 08.03.2017; Accepted: 04.07.2017; Published: 22.11.2017

Abstract: Since reforms implemented in 1994, vocational education and training (VET) in Norway has been integrated and standardized as part of upper-secondary education. When young people enter upper-secondary education at the age of 15 or 16, they can choose either a vocational programme or a general academic programme. The standard model in vocational programmes is 2 years of school-based education, followed by 2 years of apprenticeship training. However, in practice, only a minority follow the standard route and acquire a trade certificate within 4 years. The average age upon completion of a vocational programme in Norway is 28 years, which is among the highest in the OECD. The purpose of this study was to explore personal trajectories within the Norwegian context to gain a better understanding of why people choose to obtain a trade certificate as young adults, instead of following the standardized route, drawn up by policy makers. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 34 people who obtained a trade certificate when they were aged between 25 and 35 years. The study showed that the opportunity to acquire formal VET qualifications through workplace learning provides an important second chance for many young adults in Norway. Based on the findings, we argue that policy makers need to see educational achievement in a long-term perspective and to design institutional structures that support learning opportunities at work, as well as in formal educational settings.

Keywords: VET, Vocational Education and Training, Young Adults, School-to-Work Transitions, Dropout, Norway

*Corresponding author: anh@fafo.no



1 Introduction

School-to-work transitions have been described by many scholars as less standardised and more individualised due to the restructuring of work and deregulation of the labour market during the last decades (Furlong, 2009; Heinz, 2002; Müller & Gangl, 2003; Walther, 2006). Young people are exposed to a wide range of educational options. At the same time, they have to handle risk and uncertainty related to rapid changes in the labour market. As a consequence, young people often change direction within the education system, or they move back and forth between school and work (Jørgensen, 2013b). Several studies have shown that policy measures aimed at more efficient school-to-work transitions in vocational education and training (VET) often do not consider these more complex and prolonged trajectories (Christodoulou, 2016; Graaf & Zenderen, 2013; Molgat, Deschenaux, & LeBlanc, 2011). There is a significant body of research on individual experiences within adult learning and within VET. However, few researchers have conducted qualitative studies on the personal trajectories of people who acquire formal VET qualifications as young adults. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to analyse trajectories of people who follow non-standardised pathways and obtain formal VET qualifications as adults within the Norwegian transition system¹. In addition, we discuss how institutional structures in the education system and the labour market can support completion of a VET programme as adults.

The article is structured as follows. In section 2, we outline the analytical framework by focusing on transition systems and personal trajectories from school to work. Section 3 provides a brief overview of the Norwegian transition system, focusing on vocational education. Then, Section 4 describes the data and method. In Section 5, we present and analyse individual trajectories towards a trade certificate in carpentry and in child care and youth work. In the final section, we discuss the main findings and policy implications from the study².

2 Theoretical Framework

Until the 1970s, it was not uncommon to leave school and enter the workplace at the age of 15 or 16. But with the deindustrialisation and rising youth unemployment of the 1970s, young people tended to stay longer in the education system (Furlong, 2009; Lundahl, 2012). Today, compulsory education in most European countries lasts 9–10 years, until the age of 15 or 16 (European Commission, 2014). However, most young people continue their education beyond compulsory school. In effect, upper-secondary education is perceived as more or less mandatory in most countries. General education levels have increased, and an increasing number of people move on to tertiary education. Employment opportunities for young people have changed, with fewer jobs in manu-

¹This article is based on the project "Adult education, vocational skills and labour market outcomes".

The project is funded by the Research Council of Norway through the FINNUT programme.

²We would like to thank our colleague Kaja Reegård and two anonymous reviewers for valuable comments and suggestions. We would also like to thank our colleagues Torgeir Nyen and Jon Rogstad who participated in some of the interviews.

facturing and more jobs in the service sector, which demand different types of skills (Reegård, 2015). A rapidly changing labour market in combination with changes in the education system have contributed to more complex and extended transitions from school to work and from youth to adulthood (Heinz, 2002, 2009; Müller & Gangl, 2003; Walther & Plug, 2006). When studying educational trajectories, we need to understand how different options are being considered and valued by youth and young adults in various life phases and within different institutional structures. Thus, by analysing personal trajectories towards formal VET qualifications, the paper aims to increase our understanding of how young people navigate within different institutional contexts.

In many cases, political measures and reforms seem to be based on assumptions of young people's rational and goal-oriented choices. These assumptions often diverge from the actual transition patterns described by researchers (Jørgensen, 2013b; Stokes & Wyn, 2007). In addition, most policy measures and reforms focus primarily on changes within the education system. However, actual transition patterns are also shaped by broader institutional and structural factors related to labour market organisation, welfare systems and family structures. This broader concept of institutional factors shaping school-to-work transitions can be referred to as a "transition system" or "transition regime" (Raffe, 2008; Walther, 2006). Most research on transition systems has been based on comparative analyses of survey data. One of the challenges of this research is moving beyond the nation-state as a unit of analysis to explain variations within countries (Raffe, 2008). In our study, we focus on individual trajectories in two selected trades to understand how people navigate within the Norwegian transition system. Our focus is on the interplay between individual and institutional factors in Norwegian VET.

The transition regime in the Nordic countries is often referred to as *universalistic*. Universalistic transition regimes are characterised by a comprehensive school system with national standards for education and training. In addition, there are welfare systems that provide young people with social assistance regardless of socio-economic background. Universalistic regimes are also characterised by an extended public sector and high female labour market participation (Walther, 2006). However, there are also important differences between the Nordic countries. Researchers within the comparative VET literature have developed typologies related to different ways of connecting education and work. Sweden and Finland have strong traditions for state regulated and school based VET, whereas Denmark and Norway are based on a dual system, where school based education is combined with apprenticeship training provided by employers. Skill regimes based on the dual system are generally associated with low levels of youth unemployment. This is often seen as an indication of an efficient system that provides smooth transitions from school to work (Jørgensen, 2013b; Steedman, 2012). The development of specific occupational skills and a gradual socialisation to working life through apprenticeship are important mechanisms that contribute to smooth transitions. While transitions to work may be one of the strengths of the dual system, transitions from vocational training to tertiary education tend to be one of the major weaknesses (Cedefop, 2012; Jørgensen, 2013a; Powell & Solga, 2011). If access to higher education is blocked or restrained, the choice of a vocational education might be considered a blind alley or associated with high risk by adolescents and their parents. In countries with dual

systems, improved access to higher education, therefore, is important in order to raise the esteem of vocational education and training in apprenticeship-based systems (Graf, 2016; Jørgensen, 2015; Virolainen & Persson Thunqvist, 2016).

3 A Brief Overview of the Norwegian VET System

Rising youth unemployment at the end of the 1980s was an important backdrop for the introduction of a statutory right to upper-secondary education for young people in Norway via the 1994 reform (Nyen, Skålholt, & Tønder, 2015). Today, almost all 16-year-olds (98 percent) start directly in upper-secondary after completing lower-secondary education (Statistics Norway, 2017). In upper-secondary education, students can choose between eight vocational and five general studies programmes (in 2017). Norway has a unitary school system at the upper-secondary level, with vocational and general academic programmes offered within the same schools and with opportunities to switch from a vocational programme to an academic programme through a third supplementary year (Nyen & Tønder, 2015; Skule, Stuart, & Nyen, 2002). About half the students who start in upper-secondary education enter a vocational programme. However, dropout rates among vocational students are high, and a large number of students switch from vocational programmes to the third supplementary year in order to gain access to higher education (Bunting, Halvorsen, & Moshuus, 2017; Markussen, Frøseth, Sandberg, Lødding, & Borgen, 2011). Most higher education institutions in Norway are state financed and free of charge for the students. The share of the population aged 19-24 in higher education has increased significantly in the last decades, rising from around 10 per cent in 1980 to 35 per cent in 2016 (Statistics Norway, 2017).

A stated aim when introducing the Reform of 1994 was that 90 percent of students should complete upper secondary education within five years. Those who do not meet this aim are defined as dropouts and are a matter of great political concern. Since 1994, completion rates in upper secondary education have stabilised at around 70 percent, measured after five years. Completion rates in upper-secondary education are given high political priority in Norway and are monitored closely by education authorities (Hiim, 2017). A number of policy initiatives have been implemented in order to reduce dropouts, with a particular focus on students in vocational programmes. One example is the Ny GIV (“new possibilities”) initiative that was launched in 2010. The aim was to improve completion rates with specific measures targeted at low-performing students and to motivate participation in education for students ages 16–21 who were neither in education or in employment (OECD, 2015). With a strong policy emphasis on dropout and educational attainment among youth at risk in a short time perspective, less attention has so far been paid to the personal trajectories of students who obtain their trade certificates as young adults (Nyen et al., 2015).

Adults in Norway can acquire formal VET qualifications either as adult apprentices or through the experience-based trade certificate programme as so-called practice candidates. The practice candidate scheme provides an opportunity to register for a theoretical and practical trade examination based on occupational skills that have been

developed through work experience. Normally, a minimum of five years of relevant and documented work experience is required. Those who pass the trade examination receive the same formal qualifications and the same documentation as those who follow the standard route. The practice based route was introduced in the 1950s and has played an important role in the labour market due to collective agreements that give skilled workers with a trade certificate a higher wage (Skule et al., 2002).

About 1500–2000 people receive a trade certificate as adult apprentices every year. Analysis of register data shows that the adult apprentices have a background similar to those who complete their vocational training by following the standard model. The practice candidates, however, have a social background similar to people who never complete upper-secondary education, meaning that this institutional arrangement has the potential to reduce social inequalities. As many as about 6000–7000 persons receive their trade certificates as practice candidates every year. Two out of three practice candidates complete upper-secondary education for the first time when they pass the test and receive the trade certificate (Bratsberg, Nyen, & Raam, 2017).

4 Data and Method

The data used in this article build on findings from qualitative interviews conducted between 2014 and 2015. The aim of the interviews was to investigate the personal trajectories of people who obtain formal VET qualifications as young adults. Two vocational trades were selected for the comparison: 1) carpentry, a male-dominated occupation mainly in the private sector, and 2) child care and youth work, a female-dominated occupation in which most workers are employed by municipalities and work in kindergartens, schools or supervised after-school activities. By concentrating on only two occupations, we could investigate individual trajectories within similar institutional contexts. The trades were chosen because they are big in terms of number of trade certificates completed annually, and because the occupations in themselves are characterised by a demand on the labour market. In order to capture the influence of regional variations, we interviewed people living in two different geographical regions in Norway: 1) the East (big city), characterised by both a relatively large share of immigrants and, on the average, a high educational level, and 2) the West (medium-sized city and surrounding rural areas), where vocational studies (especially technical studies) are in relatively high regard.

Contact information was gathered from county administration registers. We interviewed 34 people who were 25–35 years old when they acquired their formal VET qualifications (a trade or journeyman's certificate), approximately two years after formalisation. This was to secure that enough time had passed for them to reflect on their choices and the possible consequences. At the same time, their decision-making processes would still be relatively fresh in their memory. The interviews were semi-structured, with 29 face-to-face and five telephone interviews. The length of the face-to-face interviews varied from about one hour to one and a half hours. The telephone interviews were somewhat shorter.

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Each individual was treated as a specific case, and each transcription was read thoroughly before being organised according to the interview guide's main categories: family background, educational experience, transitions from school to work and decision making processes related to attaining the trade certificate. The case material, then, was comprised and systemised within each of these categories. The names used in the article are fictitious. All the participants freely agreed to participate, and no incentives were given. The interviewees gave their consent to be contacted by the researchers to the county administration. All interviews were recorded with consent of the interviewees.

Mapping trajectories and decision-making processes is about finding reasons: Why did they get their trade certificates as adults and not as young students? We were, however, careful with "why" questions, as they have two important disadvantages. First, they may cause respondents to feel defensive, which may inhibit their responses. Second, they infer a cause-effect relationship that may not exist (McNamara, 2009). Thus, such questions may push the interviewee to construct an explanation "on the spot". The interviewees were asked to talk about their educational experiences, their family's education and influence on their choices, their work experience and the story behind entering carpentry or child care and youth work and acquiring the trade certificate. The interview guide contained several questions within each category, but the interviewees were encouraged to speak freely. The interviewer structured the order of the topics according to the flow of the conversation, asking frequent follow-up questions and pursuing topics introduced by the interviewee. The interviews, thus, played out as biographical interviews used by several researchers within the field of adult education (Merrill, 2009) in the sense that they generated vivid descriptions and in-depth insights into lived experiences (Barabasch & Merrill, 2014)

Barabasch and Merrill underline that narratives are a co-construction between the researcher and the researched. They state, however, that narratives are always only partial, as an individual selects what he or she wants to tell about their past and present lives. They are also located in a specific moment of time (Barabasch & Merrill, 2014, p. 288). We cannot eliminate any possibility of post-hoc rationalisation of personal choices or the construction of causalities, or the omission of details in their stories that they simply did not want to share with us.

5 Empirical Findings

This chapter gives a brief overview of the participants in the study before presenting the findings from the interviews with carpenters and child care and youth workers.

5.1 Participants

As Table 1 demonstrates, most of the interviewees completed upper-secondary school for the first time before entering the trade and not as they obtained their trade certificate in carpentry or child care and youth work as adults. All but one of the eight immigrants in our material moved to Norway as an adult, and most immigrants had completed upper-

secondary school in their home country. All eight immigrants lived in the East region in Norway. Two of the carpenters had migrated from Eastern Europe, and one from Sweden. Among the child care and youth workers, the immigrants were from Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia.

Table 1: Descriptive characteristics of participants

		Carpenters	Child care and youth workers
Region	East region (big city)	9	8
	West region (medium city/rural area)	10	8
Gender	Men	19	5
	Women	0	11
Formal learning category	Adult apprentices	8	3
	Practice candidates	11	13
Completed upper-secondary school before	Yes	16	11
	No	3	5
Immigrant	Yes	3	5
	No	16	11

Some of the interviewees had one or two parents with a higher education, but the majority came from working-class backgrounds. Many of the interviewees first embarked on, and completed, general studies in upper-secondary school. (The general track prepares the student for higher education, but not for a specific occupation.) Most of them explained that either their parents had encouraged them to make this choice, that they had followed their friends or just that they were not ready to choose an occupation at the age of 15 or 16. At the same time, most of the interviewees stated that their parents generally were supportive of their educational choices when they were young or that they did not express strong opinions about their choice. A couple of the carpenters chose the general track due to initial ambitions to become engineers. Only one of the carpenters explained that his highly educated parents had discouraged him from embarking on vocational studies when he started upper-secondary school.

A common statement among the child care and youth workers who completed upper-secondary school in the general track was that they were tired of school and not motivated for further studies at the time of their graduation. The carpenters, in contrast, generally chose a different wording and explained how they were drawn to work rather than studies, especially after completing military service. Only a minority of them expressed that school was somewhat of a struggle when they were young.

5.2 Carpenters

In this section, we will show how reasons for entering carpentry as a trade can be distinct from the reasons behind the decision to obtain a trade certificate. Two main paths

towards the trade were detected in the material. Some of the men had been introduced to carpentry by chance. Others had entered the occupation intentionally. Independently of the path, they describe their interest in the trade in very similar ways: the value of varied work and the joy of learning new things. A common theme in the men's stories was about gradually gaining an interest in a new trade. Their trajectories towards carpentry were shaped as they went along—by curiosity, testing and an eagerness to learn new things. Two main routes were revealed: through the try-out of different jobs, and by intention. In the following section, we analyse the interviewees' subjective accounts of their trajectories, before describing the process towards formalisation of skills, i.e., obtaining the trade certificate.

5.2.1 Finding a job, Trying it out

The first category is characterised by testing different jobs. The carpenters' social networks played an important role in their entry into the occupation. Bjørn explained how, after 12 years working as a welder, he was ready for a change. When a good friend encouraged him to apply for work with his employer, he decided to go for it. His good impression of the company was a crucial factor in this decision. An obvious attraction to carpentry over welding was the social aspect of not having to work "inside a mask", Bjørn stated. Even more, a carpenter can enjoy fresh air.

The following quote from Jon illustrates the element of coincidence in trying out different occupations. After failing to enter art school, he decided to get a job and called a previous employer in order to list them as a reference. This company had since merged with a carpentry firm:

So, I called to hear whether I could list my previous manager as a reference for potential employers. And when I called, he said "Oh, Jon? You're that artist? Why don't you just come work with us?" And I figured, "Why not?"
(Jon)

The aspect of chance and the importance of the network are also illustrated by Thomas. After completing military service, he started working at a grocery store in his village. "I told myself, 'I need a year, just to save some money and do some thinking, whether I shall pursue more education or not,'" Thomas stated. After a year, his cousin asked him to help him at his one-man carpentry business. He found the job interesting, and when the cousin moved to another part of the country, he followed.

In this category, we also find the only one who participated in adult education in the more conventional sense. Having dropped out of upper-secondary school, Peter received an offer from the municipality to participate in a carpentry training class for adults. As he did not have a steady job at the time, he decided to try it, although he had no knowledge about the occupation. "Back then, I didn't even have any idea what a carpenter was," Peter stated. "So, when I got there ... the first day it was like, 'Oh, it's the same as being a joiner!'"

5.2.2 By Intention

The other 12 men entered carpentry intentionally. Two of them pursued carpentry after first having had steady jobs in another field of work. Christian obtained a trade certificate within chemical processing and worked at an aluminium plant for 12 years. Although the job was steady, it was also monotonous, and the shift hours were demanding. His eventual change to carpentry was due to a wish to do more varied work and have a regular day job. Roger completed his nursing education and worked at different hospital departments for nearly a year before realising that he had made the wrong choice—being responsible for vulnerable people was not for him. Having tried carpentry work on a hobby basis with his father and brother, he was not unfamiliar with the work, and the decision to change seemed like a safe one. Ove explained that, although he considered carpentry as a 16-year-old, he chose the general upper-secondary track because carpentry had a somewhat dubious reputation:

The people who chose that track, most of them didn't care about school, and when you're ... 14, 15? ... and you don't know, and the school advisor looks at your grades and sees that they look fine, they will always recommend the general track. (Ove)

With friends going for the general track to become “doctors and engineers”, it was easy for him to make the same choice. After military service, however, he did not want to embark on higher education. While working temporarily at an orphanage, he gazed at the carpenters working on the orphanage rooftop and decided that their job looked easier than the shift work in the health sector.

Trond and Leif, who share a background from a general upper-secondary track, both described how they felt an urge to learn *a craft*. Leif explained his lack of practical skills: “*It suddenly hit me that I didn't know how to do any practical work, and I wanted to learn how to build my own things.*” Unlike Trond, Leif did not have much experience with manual labour beforehand; his work experience was in retailing. Trond had different manual jobs during summer vacations.

The carpenters describe the appeal of carpentry in remarkably similar ways. For all of them, the fact that they *like* the craft played a significant role in their decision-making. The joy of learning new things was generally an important factor in the carpenters' stories. Variation and a notion of creating something were crucial elements. Christian, who worked for a manufacturer before, described the almost “Taylorist” way of working in his first construction company. He decided to change to a different company, where every carpenter is involved in the whole house-building process. “*You kind of feel more ownership to a house that way,*” Christian stated. This was also illustrated by Nils: “*Everybody works with everything. It's not like in other companies; that is, one team raises the building and another team isolates it. We go through the whole process.*” Jon compared the repetitiveness related to working on large constructions to the monotony of working in manufacturing: “*It's like being a manufacturer working at the assembly line.*”

5.2.3 Towards Formalisation

The interviews revealed two main explanations of actually formalising their skills. First, eight of the 19 men explained that they had a plan to obtain the trade certificate right from the day they decided to enter carpentry—they had a desire to work as skilled carpenters. The second category comprises those who obtained the trade certificate after a few years of working because it appeared to be a good opportunity, and it made little sense to turn it down. Only one of them considered carpentry as a 16-year-old. Many of the carpenters were exposed to some kind of practical work growing up, for example, by growing up on a farm (primarily, in the West) or by having fathers who were either carpenters or “hobby carpenters”. Still, only one had considered carpentry as an alternative when applying for upper-secondary school.

Most of the carpenters obtained a trade certificate after four or five years in the trade. Two different modes of reasoning can be detected. The first category includes those whose plans were to obtain a trade certificate as they entered carpentry work (eight of the 19 men). For Ove, Gunnar and Fredrik, the goal of getting an education was an important driver. Ove had already completed general upper-secondary school. Nevertheless, he explained, *“I felt that I needed an education, and getting the trade certificate was a convenient way. You get paid, and I also figured that it could be a base for further education.”*

This was also illustrated by Fredrik, who completed forestry studies with university preparatory courses. *“I felt as if I wasn’t good enough, and I was looking to get more education,”* he stated. *“To get the title of a skilled carpenter, that meant a lot to me.”*

For Peter, who took part in a class for adult learners, the apprenticeship was the laid-out course towards becoming a carpenter. Three of the adult apprentices commenced as apprentices from the beginning because this was the pathway they had heard of through their network. Thus, the apprenticeship was their path towards the trade, and earning the trade certificate was an obvious goal.

Other carpenters in our material obtained their trade certificate as practice candidates in the same company. They make up the second category: those who obtained the trade certificate because it appeared to be a good opportunity that it made little sense to turn down. Among them, only three can be said to have actively pushed for this opportunity. Lukas, who is a migrant worker, explained how he wanted the trade certificate to prove his skills and motivation to his Norwegian colleagues. In addition to securing mobility towards other employers, a certificate would allow him to stand out from the other migrant workers in construction. *“Skilled workers are more appreciated on the construction site,”* he stated.

Two carpenters explained that the certificate was highly encouraged and even considered a necessity by the employer. For the others, getting a formal certificate appeared more to be a nice offer than an absolute necessity. This was illustrated by Nils: *“I didn’t need the trade certificate. But someone asked me if I wanted to do it, so... fair enough. I figured that a trade certificate would probably come in handy.”*

5.3 Child Care and Youth Workers

Most of the 16 child care and youth workers in our material had no plans to work with children or youth when they were young. As young adults, they were primarily motivated for work. Some described themselves as tired of school, while others had established families of their own and needed a secure income. Many ended up working with children after trying out different jobs, indicating that their initial identification with child care and youth work was not very strong. Their professional interest and occupational identities as child care and youth workers developed gradually through work experience, often through positive feedback from employers, colleagues and parents of children in the kindergarten.

Assistant work in kindergartens and schools are some of the job opportunities that are still available to young people without formal education or prior work experience. A few of the women started out aiming for other occupations but changed directions when they had children of their own. One example is Anne, who wanted to become a hairdresser after graduating from high school. She found that, as a hairdresser, she had to work evenings and weekends. When she had her first child, she was offered a job in a kindergarten with more regular work hours. After that, she just continued to work in the kindergarten.

Becoming a parent is an event that often has an impact on the personal trajectories, for young mothers in particular. This was expressed by Lene: *“I became a mother quite early. I was only 20. It was not what I had envisioned, but it happened. And there are certain things in life that are more important, and then other things are put on hold.”*

Most of the child care and youth workers that were interviewed tried out different jobs along the way. Some had cleaning jobs, others worked at filling stations, in different sales jobs, at restaurants and hotels, or as security guards. The men who were interviewed attempted many different jobs before they started working with children. Four of seven male child care and youth workers were immigrants. Two of these had higher education from other countries. Their main concern was to find work and a secure income as soon as possible. Adam worked as a teacher before he came to Norway, but knew that he would not be able to get a teaching position in Norway. His plan was to find a job in a kindergarten where he could learn the language and at the same time train to become a child care and youth worker and get a trade certificate.

Even if working with children was not a long-term plan, most of the child care and youth workers gradually developed positive attitudes towards their present occupation. In upper-secondary school, Maria never thought she would work with children. Today she says she enjoys her work very much:

What I like so much about my work is how the kids just love you, almost unconditionally. You just come in the morning, if you have a bad day, a bad start at home, but the kids meet you and smile and want to sit on your lap. They love you, and you mean so much to them. That is the important thing. You get so much in return in this job. (Maria)

Anders is another person who began working in a kindergarten more or less by chance.

He now says that he enjoys the freedom and variation in his work:

The freedom you have, that is perhaps what I enjoy most of all. You don't have to sit at an office desk for eight hours, or do the same thing over and over. I can put on some music with the kids; we can dance. Or we can make a painting. It's a great occupation. (Anders)

5.3.1 Getting an Education

Those who receive a trade certificate in child care and youth work will usually receive a wage increase, regulated in collective agreements. According to the interviewees, this was only one motivating factor, and maybe not the most important. The child care and youth workers often emphasised the need to show that they were skilled workers with a relevant education. Based on their accounts, the motivation to get an education can be related to increased social status and to have a stronger position in the labour market, in addition to higher wages. Also, the child care and youth workers often expressed a need to show that they did not “just work with children”; they had made a conscious effort to obtain the necessary qualifications.

Most of the child care and youth workers began working with children without having a long-term plan. After a while, it became important to them to obtain a trade certificate. The wages for child care and youth workers are regulated by collective agreements in the municipal sector. It is reasonable to assume that higher wages were a motivating factor, even if this is not always explicitly mentioned by the interviewees. What seemed to be maybe more important to the child care and youth workers than to be carpenters was the formal recognition of skills. The interviewees talked about the importance of “having an education”. This became even more important when faced with the general opinion that “anyone” can work with children.

Anne said she wanted the trade certificate to show, for herself and for her own children, that she had an education. She did not “just work in a kindergarten”; she had made an effort and acquired the necessary qualifications to do a good job. She also felt that it was important to her personally to have a trade certificate. Remembering how much she had struggled when she was in school, she stated, *“To me it really matters to know that I have an education. I had such a hard time in lower secondary and in high school. But I actually succeeded in getting the trade certificate.”*

Others said the trade certificate was something to “fall back on”. The general impression conveyed by the child care and youth workers was that a person with a trade certificate has a stronger position in the labour market.

Kristine stated that formal qualifications are becoming increasingly important in order to get a job: *“You need to have a paper, a trade certificate, something to show. And you can also build on it later on if you wish. And these days, you need an education to get in.”*

5.3.2 Learning through Work

When describing the learning process, many of the child care and youth workers compared their work-based learning with their learning experiences in school. Studying became much easier when they could relate what they read to their personal work experiences. When studying for the exam, they developed new knowledge, but they also became aware of how much they already had learned through work. One example is Hilde, who had concentration problems and dropped out of upper-secondary school. She said that, when she prepared for the child care and youth worker examination, she became aware of how much she already had learned through her work:

There is so much there in the theory that you don't really think about, but you do it every day. This is something I noticed when I was reading. Everything that you read about is what you do in everyday life. And I remember with the examination too, that I just merged everything, little things that we do, that's what we read about in theory. (Hilde)

The increased awareness of what they already knew was a shared experience by many of the child care and youth workers. Maria explained that, when she read the books, she could always relate the theory to the kids she knew from her work, and that made the reading more inspiring:

When I read the books, everything was so understandable. So, I thought it was a really nice way to get an education. Because you have all the experience, you are not completely green and new to it, and it becomes more inspiring and you can understand more. It is not just black and white in a book, because I have never been one of those who enjoyed reading. (Maria)

6 Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this article was to gain a better understanding of school to work transitions in Norwegian VET. We were primarily interested in why many people in Norway obtain their formal vocational qualifications as young adults instead of following the standard educational route designed by policy makers. The analysis has been guided by earlier research on school-to-work transitions and personal trajectories, where a number of scholars have identified changes in school-to-work transitions in the last decades. In our study, we are interested in personal trajectories for young adults within the Norwegian context, which can be characterised as a universalistic transition regime (Walther, 2006).

In our material, eight of 34 persons had not completed upper secondary education before they earned a trade certificate as adults. They would all be counted as early school leavers or dropouts in the official statistics. However, none of them described themselves as dropouts. They had different reasons for leaving school, but at the time, they were all more motivated to work than to continue their education. A second group had completed upper secondary education earlier, with a general certificate. Some of these people initially entered a vocational programme, but opted for a third supplementary

year to obtain a general diploma of upper secondary education. However, when they graduated, they were not motivated to continue to higher education. Instead, they entered the labour market, but without formal vocational qualifications. A third group had completed upper secondary education earlier in another trade, but they found it was not the right occupation for them. Some experiences were related to working hours that were incompatible with starting a family and having small children. Others found that work in their chosen occupation became monotonous after a while and they needed change. In all cases, career decisions were based on information they did not have when they were 15 or 16 years old. A fourth group in our study consists of immigrants, most of whom had completed upper secondary education in another country before migrating to Norway and some of whom had completed higher education. They were all primarily motivated to work, but they found that their education was not recognised in the Norwegian labour market.

A common characteristic among all four groups is that the opportunity to obtain a trade certificate as adults was important, and a number of motives were identified. For child care and youth workers working in the public sector, a trade certificate in most if not all cases meant higher wages and increased job security. In addition, passing the trade examination often had positive effects in terms of higher self-esteem. Many discovered that they had learned much through work and became motivated for further education. For carpenters, the trade certificate did not necessarily lead to higher wages because they already earned wages at the same level as skilled workers. Nevertheless, they reported that the trade certificate was valued by employers and was important in terms of increased job security and more opportunities in the labour market. To both groups, the trade certificate also opened new prospects for further education.

The opportunity to formalise skills and knowledge from work-based learning was important in the adults' decision to obtain a trade certificate. This was directly, through the conscious use of an arrangement that offered a trade certificate outside of the regular school system, which, for many, made it easier to combine formal education with domestic obligations. This was also important indirectly, through the benefits of learning through work and experience. This is in accordance with earlier research on adult learners, e.g. (Knowles, 1978). Many of the participants in our study had low motivation to attend school when they were young. Thus, the chance to earn a trade certificate as a practice candidate played a crucial role in their careers. In the Norwegian transition system, the practice candidate scheme is a "second chance" measure that provides access to formal qualifications that are recognised and valued in the labour market. Such measures may be of particular importance in a universalistic regime where the general level of education is high, there is strong cultural expectation to complete a formal education, and the opportunities in the labour market for persons without a formal education are limited.

Finally, we argue that the standardised VET model in upper secondary education in Norway is based on unrealistic assumptions about school to work transitions. A significant reduction in dropout rates in a short term perspective may not be achievable and perhaps not even desirable. At the age of 15, people not only have limited information about different occupations and labour market opportunities, but they also have

vague notions about their own preferences and capabilities. The policy implication that can be drawn from our study is that policy makers need to adopt a more long-term perspective on educational attainment and school-to-work transitions. In addition, our study shows the importance of institutional structures and second chance measures that support informal learning in the workplace.

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Bibliographical Notes

Anna Hagen Tønder is a researcher at Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research in Oslo. Her research interests include vocational education and training, school to work transition, workplace learning and adult education.

Tove Mogstad Aspøy is a researcher at Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research in Oslo and a PhD candidate at the department of Sociology and Human Geography at the University of Oslo. Her research interests focus on vocational education and training, workplace learning, skills, competencies, adult education and job quality.