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To cite this article: Anna Cecilia Rapp & Agneta Knutas (2023) Organising opportunities for all: building equity in vocational education and training, Educational Research, 65:2, 267-283, DOI: 10.1080/00131881.2023.2203145

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2023.2203145>



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Published online: 02 May 2023.



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# Organising opportunities for all: building equity in vocational education and training

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Educational opportunities and access vary according to location. In rural areas, the cultural, social and material consequences for local communities depend on the nature and degree of support for rural schools. There is a need to understand more about how the organisation of vocational education and training (VET), and the activities within it, relate to equity.

**Purpose:** The research sought to explore how the organisation of VET in a rural area of Norway, involving collaboration between school, training agency and local businesses/institutions, constructed notions of equity in VET.

**Methods:** A case study methodology was utilised. In-depth interviews were undertaken with personnel within a rural community (staff representing the school, training agency and businesses/institutions) who were supporting a VET education programme. Data were analysed qualitatively, using a narrative synthesis procedure.

**Findings:** Detailed analysis of rich interview data indicated that strong institutional and pedagogical approaches were employed to support students throughout their VET education. According to the participants' perceptions, the school, training agency and businesses/institutions focused on stabilising each other in the process of supporting equity in VET. Continuing ongoing work and reconstruction of traditions and routines appeared to contribute to the integration of the different actors' work in organising equity in VET.

**Conclusions:** Our study highlights how, in a rural community, opportunities for all in VET may be constructed and reconstructed through ongoing work which is connected to the foundations of the local context. The reconstruction needs to be maintained through networks and connections within and between the school, training agency and the businesses/institutions. This, in turn, can contribute to support for culture and welfare in the community to thrive.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 September 2022  
Accepted 12 April 2023

## KEYWORDS

Vocational education and training (VET); equity in education; rural education; educational organisation; access to education; education to employment

## Introduction

Across the globe, vocational education and training (VET) plays a vital role in connecting together the worlds of education and employment (OECD 2022). This article explores, through an equity lens, the organisation of vocational education and training (VET) in

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a rural district of Norway. In Norway, VET is overseen by the state. At a local level, in line with national policy, VET consists of a regulated collaboration between education, training agencies and the labour market (Simonsson 2022). Hence, within this context, the institutional environment and VET can be described as interlinked in their ongoing organisation (Czarniawska 2014) of equity matters. In our research, we were particularly interested in investigating the ways in which a school and the other collaborating parties in a rural community (e.g. the companies receiving apprentices) constructed ideas of equity within the VET system.

In many countries and jurisdictions, education policies notwithstanding (Blossing, Imsen, and Moos 2014), the choice to pursue a VET pathway can represent a social marker which differentiates some students from routes to higher education and more prestigious jobs. In general terms, equity in VET may receive more attention when there is greater recognition of the significance of relationships between the social institutions of education and society (Angus et al. 2011; Nylund 2012). Studies have suggested that in order to understand how best to foster equity in VET, research should not only examine barriers at the individual level but also look at how institutions may cooperate and participate to create opportunities for young people (Angus et al. 2011; Milmeister, Rastoder, and Houssemand 2022).

Nordic countries tend to be regarded as having a relatively positive outlook on VET (Cedefop [European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training] 2017; Milmeister, Rastoder, and Houssemand 2022). In Norway, more than half the student population enters VET (Statistics Norway 2022). However, urban–rural comparisons suggest that rural locations may be disadvantaged (Cedefop [European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training] 2017; Milmeister, Rastoder, and Houssemand 2022). In Norway, ‘rural’ indicates peripheral areas consisting of at least one municipality that is eligible for national aid in terms of transport, investment and adjusted payroll taxes.<sup>1</sup> Rural areas are often regarded as being treated as a lower priority, including in terms of the organisation of local schools (Kvalsund 2019; Knutas 2017; Kvalsund and Hargreaves 2009; Telhaug and Mediås 2003).

International research on rural schools draws attention to locally situated education as central for the community and its development process. As such, rural VET can contribute to the local culture and welfare (Gristy and Hargreaves 2020). A rural school can, therefore, have a crucial role to play in economic and social development; equally, VET in a rural area has the potential to develop mutually beneficial partnerships between schools, local businesses and regional industries (Beach et al. 2019; Corbett 2015; Hovdhaugen and Skålholt 2019). However, more needs to be understood about how the organisation of activity between the school, training agency and businesses/institutions can support equity within VET in rural areas. The case study reported in this paper offers a contribution to this endeavour. Before presenting our research in detail, we situate our work more fully in the context of rural education, VET and the conceptual framework underpinning our study.

## Background

International studies find that educational opportunity and access vary according to location (OECD 2013). Rural education can be disadvantaged due to higher

infrastructure costs and national budgetary decisions, resulting in families in rural areas having a more limited choice of schools and educational programmes compared with those in urban areas (Weiss and Heinz-Fischer 2022). In rural areas, if no school is available nearby, transfer to a post-compulsory school can have cultural, social and material impacts on young people's life chances and choice of course (Corbett and Forsey 2017; Rosvall 2022; Theobald and Nachtigal 1995; Thissen et al. 2010). It is not only the young people who are affected: differences in equity in VET are also linked to the maintenance of economic stability and the reconstruction of a community (Beach et al. 2019).

Globally, completion of VET tends to be low; in most European countries, it is connected to socio-economic status (SES) (Krötz and Deutscher 2022). The link between social background and educational outcome is well known (Milmeister, Rastoder, and Houssemand 2022). VET in Norway is delivered via a combined state-run and commercial model that has an apprenticeship system integrated into the formal education system (Nyen and Hagen Tønder 2014). The main model comprises two years in school and two years of an apprenticeship in a company or public institution. Counselling and feedback from the school, training agency and businesses/institutions are used to direct students throughout their learning process (Johansson-Wyszynska 2018). This combined effort to teach students about the practical aspects of work during the first two years of VET programmes can increase students' opportunities to find apprenticeships (Olsen and Reegård 2013).

VET is regarded as important for Norwegian society: the government predicts that by 2035, Norway will lack around 90,000 skilled workers (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2022; Statistics Norway 2022). Therefore, the government has called for more young people to choose and complete VET. However, in 2021, about 30,000 students applied for an apprenticeship and 7,000 did not gain an apprenticeship, and one out of five students did not complete their VET education (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2022). Students with lower socio-economic status (SES) more often chose VET and were less prone to complete the programme than students with higher SES,<sup>2</sup> which is regarded as a challenge to the goal of equity in Norwegian education (Statistics Norway 2022). VET is important to equity in local communities, since experiences and insights in the local context are acted upon through the ongoing processes of the organisation of VET (Balfour, Mitchell, and Moletsane 2008; Czarniawska 2014). Research on VET has called for additional studies on the significance of context to explain how differences in VET participation and organisation emerge, and how students may be best supported (Milmeister, Rastoder, and Houssemand 2022).

### *Conceptual framework*

In this paper, we associate equity with justice, in the sense of fairness. Within this conceptualisation, individual circumstances and differences are considered with reference to individual needs and requirements. Equity involves the making of moral judgements about opportunities (as in educational practice) and/or material and social circumstances. Within the context of VET, the concept of equity, thus, involves concern about students' differences in a variety of dimensions, which, in turn, has consequences for learning,

follow-up actions, the maintenance and reconstruction of community (Milmeister, Rastoder, and Houssemand 2022; Buchholtz, Stuart, and Frønes 2020; Corbett 2015).

To understand the complexity of the ways in which a rural school and private and public organisations may work together towards equity, we found it helpful to approach our research through organisation theories (Czarniawska 2005b; Hatch 2011; Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005). In our study, we define the term 'organising' as the intertwined work that the school, training agency and companies and institutions conduct with the aim of achieving equity. Organisation, in this sense, is an ongoing process connected to the past, present and future (Czarniawska 2005b, 2008; Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005). To study organisation in VET, we utilised the concept of an 'action net' (Czarniawska 2004, 780) and acknowledge that it is the *connections* between actions that create actors. Action, then, is an activity, or happening, to which an intention can be ascribed by relating an event to the social order in which it occurs (Harré 1982). For example, in the context of our study, arranging vocational practice in a local community is regarded as an ongoing process of connections between actions. A leader of a training agency in VET would not exist as a social actor in the VET process if there was no need for guidance between students and businesses. Moreover, the action of the leader of the training agency is also created by the action net; thus, the local actors may interact and engage in stabilising each other's position and/or their circumstances (Czarniawska 2014).

When studying an action net, the researcher needs to pay close attention to the connections, since the action net transcends any given organisation. Actions that connect in VET are, in most cases, related to the various organisations' rationales; thus, they require 'translation' (Czarniawska 2004, 782), which takes place at the point of connection. For example, in the training agency, the actants reconstruct, and recurrently form, new connections through translation, such as reaching goals of equity (Czarniawska 2004). As action nets involve actants in action, the term 'enactment' (Czarniawska 2005b, 271) is defined as the process of making ideas, structures and visions real by acting upon them. In this sense, enactment constructs the environment. In our case, the reconstruction of VET in a rural community (Beach et al. 2019) indicates the dynamics of collective undertakings and ongoing corrections to existing processes (Czarniawska 2014). Therefore, at each point in time and place, it is possible to speak of an institutional order in the local VET, which refers to sets of institutions that are not necessarily compatible with each other. These institutions (the school, training agency and businesses/institutions) shape each other's organising to the extent that they direct which actions should be related. Organisations are characterised by interconnected cycles and can be understood as 'causal loops' (Czarniawska 2005a, 269) rather than linear chains of cause and effect. In practice, the organising of VET moves from one place to another and happens in several places simultaneously. As loosely coupled elements, the different actors who carry out the organising have various rationales for engaging in the process, and this provides the flexibility that is vital for survival; thus, it is necessary to acknowledge the existence of both rationality and indeterminacy when examining the organising (Czarniawska 2004).

Past, present and future sense-making of organising creates frames for interpretation. Hence, sense-making also concerns sense-giving and sense-taking and indicates how some things become evident for organisational members. When sense-giving and sense-taking occur, a frame of meaning is already in place, constructed in the past through ongoing history, causal loops and themes (Czarniawska 2014). When no frame is in place,

sense-making relates to the following question: 'What does an event mean?' (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005, 410) When people confront things that are hard to comprehend, they might ask, 'What's the story here?' (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005, 410). The question will generate the answer. During the next step, people might ask, 'Now what should I do?' (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005, 410). This question can suggest a meaning that one could act on in the future. Establishing the answers to these questions requires one to remain in touch with a continuing flow of experience (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005, 410). We recognise that action nets in differentiated and loosely coupled VET organisations have differently institutionalised notions of equity. Thus, equity may come to the fore in the stabilising process of interaction between actants in VET and the process of modification between individual needs and collective requirements of rural communities (Czarniawska 2004).

### **Purpose**

Against this backdrop, our case study sought to explore how the organisation and activity of VET in a rural community – involving collaboration between school, training agency and local businesses/institutions – constructed notions of equity in VET.

### **Method**

#### ***Ethical considerations***

This study was approved by the Research Council of Norway (NSD, reference 929562) due to its conformity with principles of consent (General Data Protection Regulation art. 6 nr. 1 a), tasks in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority (General Data Protection Regulation art. 6 nr. 1 e) and archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes, or statistical purposes (General Data Protection Regulation art. 9 nr. 2 j). In line with ethical guidelines, we provided the participants with oral and written information before the interviews. We asked for permission to record the interviews on a secure unit and informed the interviewees that the recorded material would be deleted as soon as the anonymised transcriptions were completed. All participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point. All participants then granted informed consent prior to the interviews taking place. The interviews were fully transcribed, and participants were anonymised. In the analysis, we ensured the de-identification of location and data by, for example, not using any names of persons, places or organisations.

#### ***Context***

As the focus of our research investigation into notions of equity in VET in a rural area involved analysis of collaboration between school, training agency and local businesses/institutions, it is necessary to describe, in broad terms, the features of the rural location that constituted the case study site. The village in our study had under 5,000 inhabitants. The local labour market consisted of one large construction company and several small ones, small electrical businesses and two large industries. Additionally, the public sector

and the municipality were important employers in healthcare, education, childcare and other public and welfare sectors. The upper secondary school had between 100 and 120 students, of which between 60 and 70 students were enrolled in the vocational track. Despite its small size, the school offered both first- and second-year programmes on childcare, healthcare, construction and electronics. The area had an interdisciplinary training agency that assisted students in the navigation of their respective sectors after (usually) the second year. The labour market in the rural area overlapped with the vocational education offered by the school. The inter-disciplinary training agency was situated at the school. The administration consisted of the head of the school and two other leaders, with one of the leaders having responsibility for the vocational education staff.

### *Data collection*

In total, we conducted 11 single interviews and one group interview with three participants. They were drawn from the relevant school, training agency and companies/public institutions. In order to recruit participants, we contacted local officials from each field of employment, who assisted us with identifying potential interviewees. Interviewees included a retired principal, who had worked at the school over several decades and had been involved with the establishment of VET in the community; the school's serving principal, who had worked in various school roles for more than two decades and was deeply involved in the ongoing development of VET; the head of vocational education, who had a background in organisational administration and a qualification in vocational teacher education; the childcare teacher, who had been at the school for over a decade; and the vocational teacher of electrics, who had been working as an electrician at a company and was completing vocational teacher education.

In addition, four teachers in childhood and youth healthcare participated. Their backgrounds were in nursing, physiotherapy, social work and healthcare, respectively. They had all completed their vocational teacher education. Whilst three of the teachers had worked at the school for at least two decades, the fourth had joined the school more recently. Other participants included a school counsellor who had worked at the school for more than two decades, and the head of the interdisciplinary training agency, both of whom had backgrounds in teaching. There was also a childcare supervisor who had worked at a kindergarten in the village for several decades and had supervised students in apprenticeships during that time, and a healthcare supervisor who had worked as a nurse over several decades. They had been responsible for developing the guidelines for apprenticeship, in collaboration with the municipality. Finally, there was a construction supervisor who had a background in carpentry, owned a construction company, and had received apprentices for over a decade.

Our development of interview guides was informed by Norwegian policy documents on equity in vocational education (Norwegian Ministry of Education). The content of each interview guide had a focus on equity and was adapted to be relevant to personnel in a specific field (e.g. healthcare professional, workplace supervisor, training agency professional, school counsellor or teacher at an upper secondary school). Overall, the interview guide was designed to provide coverage of six themes: experience regarding marginalisation; VET organisations that consider

contradictions in expectations; policies and goals; challenges and opportunities that are encountered when addressing diversity in student groups; assessments for upholding student equity between the school, training agency and businesses/institutions. For example, interview questions (translated from Norwegian) included: *Can you describe the system you have here to assist students at risk, and what roles are connected to it? In practice, does it work? How do you experience the relationship between students' needs and available resources? From your point of view, if needed, do you find that there is a system of support to ensure students are able to reach their goals?* In addition to the 11 single interviews, one group interview was undertaken with three participants in healthcare. Both researchers carried out the interviews, and the language of the interviews was Norwegian. The interviews were recorded; each lasted between one and two hours, and took place at the interviewees' workplaces in a quiet environment.

### **Data analysis**

The recorded interview data were transcribed. Data were then analysed using an approach based on narrative analysis methodology (Polkinghorne 2007). Using this procedure, actions and events contribute to producing stories through 'emplotment' (Ricoeur 1984, 53) and narrative configuration, which, in turn, create an organised whole. Broadly, within this process of interpreting the text, the interpreters' horizons of understanding are challenged when interpreters (i.e. the researchers) hold their own prejudices up to scrutiny – for example, by examining relevant literature and engaging in discussions with colleagues concerning reasonable outcomes. This also assists with the process that underpins validity (Flyvbjerg 2001).

Working collaboratively, we (the researchers) read and discussed the transcribed interviews several times with a focus on equity in VET, which led to the creation of a mind map clustering the material. As narrative analysis builds a series of anecdotal pictures of certain incidents, this map contributed to the next step of 'synthesising' (Ricoeur 1984, 192). Inspired by the synthesised clusters, we then went back to a closer reading of the transcripts. During this process, certain themes came to the fore. These themes included the value of equity from the people's high school<sup>3</sup>; 'flat structure'; trust-based leadership; coordination; and the importance of school and community. The identified themes were set up as temporary suggestions supporting a narrative analysis. As a next step, we worked with plots which could feasibly draw together the anecdotal pictures of the themes synthesised from the mapping process. Through a process of discussion, some plots were discarded, whilst others were deemed to be workable and able to contribute insights into relationships between the organisation of VET and equity. In total, three major narratives were identified; these are presented in the findings.

As Polkinghorne (2007) suggests, narrative interpretation needs to be considered in the context of the research literature (Polkinghorne 2007). Inspired by our conceptual approach described previously (Czarniawska 2014), we then tested a back-and-forth theorising process on action nets, sense-making and casual loops to extend the explanatory value. We found that the concepts contributed explanatory value to our findings and enhanced our understanding of the ways in which equity in VET,



consisting of several organisations, came to the fore through the ways in which VET was organised.

## Findings

Our in-depth analysis and synthesis of the transcribed interview data, based on the valuable perceptions of the participants, allowed us to address the study's research question. Hence, we were able to explore how, within a rural community, the organisation and activity of VET – involving collaboration between school, training agency and businesses/institutions – constructed notions of equity. The three major narratives identified by our analysis comprised (1) *'Bildung' as being: institutional traditions*; (2) *Open-door policy*; and (3) *Routines, socialising and the glue that binds*. In this section, each narrative is presented in detail. Where relevant, anonymised and translated quotations from the interview data are included to further illuminate and illustrate specific points.

### *Narrative (1): 'bildung' as being: institutional traditions*

This narrative focused on the reconstructed and institutionalised values from the people's high school *'bildung'* tradition, which, according to the analysis, was identified as crucial for VET's equity and equal opportunities promotion in education. Whilst *bildung* refers to 'education', it also means 'formation', 'growth', 'shaping', 'cultivation', 'civilisation' and 'refinement' (Koorsgaard 2004, 220). In the rural community that was the focus of our case study, it was evident from the analysis that the VET had strong connections to its history. Several decades ago, the retired principal had transferred from a teaching position at a people's high school to the newly-opened local upper secondary school. One important task at that time was to oversee the integration of students with special needs into the school, which was required by a new reform. Early on, other staff who had worked at the people's high school and also transferred to the upper secondary school had transformed their routines (documentation, written reports, open dialogue, etc.) to suit the organisation at the upper secondary school. Significantly, these routines laid the foundation for taking care of any student needs that might arise. The school also imported a life orientation course from the people's high school, which allowed the students to examine the personal, professional and economical challenges of becoming adults. The retired principal acknowledged the influence that the people's high school pedagogy had had on their organising process at that time, reflecting that 'It was a democratic thought as much as a pedagogical idea... if we had not had these opinions – but we were preoccupied with the idea that it should be a *good school*'. In alignment with the pedagogical influence from the people's high school, the current principal emphasised the importance of supporting *all* students to pursue their future dreams and goals:

For me, it is important to facilitate those who dream of becoming an engineer or doctor in the same way as those who dream of working in the local construction businesses. So, here there should be room for everyone. It is heart-warming for me to talk about students who come here and who are struggling with their lives, and then after a year or two they have actually developed personally. So, we have the whole spectrum here. It pleases me.

Equally, the head of vocational education at the school observed that it was easier to work towards equity with the school being small and, thus, allowing for close contact with students:

It is a strong culture here, which enables us to help students through VET through the flexible use of all available resources. [. . .]. We care about the whole situation; we focus on how they are performing at school, as well as their home situation and activities going on in the local community.

The counsellor, too, noted that the previous people's high school pedagogy was important, as it valued equal opportunities for every student: 'Members of today's staff emphasise the importance of creating a good school that focuses on justice, equality, and respect'. As the teacher of childcare remarked, students were treated with respect, irrespective of whether they took regular subjects, pursued a vocational pathway, or had special needs: 'It is a signum of the school that personnel help each other to adapt to the students' needs and meet them in a respectful way'. According to the analysis, the perceptions of interviewees reflected the idea that good relations and respectful attitudes between teachers and students were central at the upper secondary school, with the former principal remarking 'This is the spirit here'.

### *Narrative (2): open-door policy*

This second narrative, identified as 'open-door policy', relates to what was depicted as the 'flat structure' in the governance of VET. In such a structure, employees felt supported by their leaders to take responsibility in their work to strive for equal opportunities for all. It was evident from the analysis that the current principal was substantially engaged in the community and was focused on nurturing interpersonal professional relationships. For example, the principal sought to support the staff in acquiring additional knowledge, explaining a belief that 'It is important that the employees here are given the opportunity to prosper and expand their horizons'. According to the principal, if employees are allowed to prosper, their attitudes and ideas can influence the students. The principal perceived the current staff as tightly bound together, irrespective of their different positions at the school.

Another factor that was consistently brought up throughout our interviews concerned the consistency of the staff relations, which, the analysis indicated, appeared key when it came to developing routines in interdisciplinary work. The head of vocational education commented that the teachers of different programmes had close relationships and that it was easy for teachers to contact each other. An apt example of this was the daily staff-room gathering of the principal, teachers, advisers and the leader of the interdisciplinary training agency: as the head of vocational education put it, 'So that you pull on the threads that you need, and we have a culture here, you know. We want our students to reach their goals, and thus we use the resources that we have available'.

One of the teachers who worked for the child and youth healthcare programme also praised their colleagues and mentioned the cultural aspect of fellowship in supporting students, noting:

When we have teachers' team meetings, everybody talks positively about students, thus giving the students respect. There is an openness in the system, and the paths between different teams and system levels at the school are short.

When asked about situations where students were at risk of being marginalised, the head of vocational education observed that there were no standard solutions. Instead, it was the case that staff worked to find tailored solutions. For example, as the head of vocational education explained:

They might use other tasks for a while to get the student motivated, cooperate with teachers on a common subject, extend the time limit for reaching goals, and find flexible solutions with students who complete praxis periods.

Similarly, when students needed extra support, it was evident from the analysis that the staff worked closely and systematically with special pedagogic services to follow up and write reports so that the school could receive economic resources from the government. A teacher in the child and youth healthcare programme noted that advisers and contact teachers followed up with students, and that all personnel were involved in creating and maintaining a positive atmosphere for students:

All functions – not just the teachers but also the janitor and the staff in the canteen or, for that matter, the [cleaning personnel] – [do] a wonderful job of making sure the environment is friendly. If the janitor notices something, [janitor] sends out a warning signal, and the same goes for the personnel in the canteen, which brings me back to the fact that the whole staff at the upper secondary school strive to do their best for the students.

Another significant detail mentioned by the teacher working in the childhood and youth healthcare programme was that the structure of the school was perceived as 'flat', as evidenced by the close connections between teachers, staff members and the school's leadership team. As this teacher remarked:

There is an open atmosphere, and we have an open-door policy. We have leadership here, and they always take time to answer or help you out whenever you stick your head into their office.

As mentioned earlier, the interdisciplinary training agency was situated on the school premises, which is not always the case. The head of the training agency's chief task was to act as an intermediary when students needed to find workplaces during their education. The head of the training agency was, thus, effectively the 'the conductor of the orchestra', which was composed of vocational educational students, companies, and the municipality and county. The services were used by the students and also the companies who were seeking students. Part of the training agency's service included visits to the companies supervising students' work placements. The training agency was the reference point for the county, as the county oversaw upper secondary education. As the head of the interdisciplinary training agency explained:

I cooperate with the upper secondary school where I have my office. I would say it is a success, as all students receive their diplomas. One reason [is that] I am close by in the everyday flow of school life, and the school staff and I follow up [with] students. It is important that I am situated here at the school, especially in reference to the total picture – the whole staff works towards the same goal.

### *Narrative (3): routines, socialising and the glue that binds*

The third and final narrative has a focus on the close collaboration between the school, the training agency and the businesses/institutions working towards equity and strengthening students' choices to ensure they conduct work-based practice at an early stage. According to the analysis, key to this was the cooperation between the vocational educational personnel at the upper secondary school, and local businesses and public service institutions. The custom of sending students to work-based practice during the first year was regarded as important for all the parties involved in the local upper secondary school, as was made clear by the teacher of electrical vocational education:

The point is [that] we manage to allow them to practice . . . during their first school year. . . we work the other way around. They meet reality and they find out – “What did I learn?” It is an inductive way of learning, and the learning from the field is combined with [the] goals of their curriculum . . . this way, they learn early on to ask their business supervisors about goals, thus supporting, incorporating, and strengthening their interest [in] their field of choice.

Discussing the matter of strengthening students' interest in their chosen fields during the practical training, a representative from one of the local carpentry businesses highlighted the importance of making sure the student became part of the daily routines. In this way, they would be better able to learn the trade, build, do carpentry work and learn about construction. Socialising during coffee breaks was also mentioned as an essential factor during the training, as the student would potentially be representing the company in the long run. A representative from the local childcare institution commented, too, on the importance of making sure the student became part of the team and was therefore recognised as a colleague during the training:

In a way, the student becomes a colleague . . . we talk about the subject of childcare, and we try to build them up and get them to reflect on their daily tasks every day during their practice [. . .] at the same time, I need to be there for them whenever I find out it is not that easy for them – then I am sure to give them extra support.

Equally, it was evident from the interviews that students had access to the interdisciplinary agency at the upper secondary school. The agency helped work out adjusted preferences for each student; for example, support could be given to extending a student's work-based practice or arrange follow-up with students. Further, the head of the interdisciplinary agency might offer guidance to the supervisors overseeing work-based practices on matters relating to individual students. The interdisciplinary agency stayed in contact with the students during their work-based practice. The head of the interdisciplinary office conducted regular follow-ups and visits the students when they were engaging in their work-based practice:

I visit the companies and institutions at least every six months – more often when called for. If there are any problems with a student in practice, I am the person [who is] contacted. During practice, if some students need extra support with, for example, documentation, I can help out.

In this way, the head of the interdisciplinary agency can be described as functioning as the 'glue', binding together the companies/institutions and apprentices/students, also sustaining contact with the county and municipality. The location of the office in the school itself was of great significance, as this allowed the head to get to know the

teaching and counselling staff – for example, through informal conversations, thus contributing to building a network through fellowship. The head of the training office believed that cooperation with all of the staff (i.e. in school *and* in the companies/institutions) was of considerable value, as continuous follow-up would help ensure that each student could reach their goal.

## Discussion

As commented earlier, VET tends to be a heterogeneous sector internationally, particularly as it is connected to national policy and may be valued differently between various countries and jurisdictions. In our study, we were especially interested in the context of VET and the construction of equity within a rural community. According to our analysis, it appeared that the process of working together dynamically and collaboratively in the local VET system was key to re-shaping connections through casual loops between action nets in the school, the training agency and the businesses or institutions – in turn, contributing to culture and welfare (Czarniawska 2004). The social construction of equity seemed to come to the fore at connection points through a stabilising process of interaction between the actants of action nets (Buchholtz, Stuart, and Frønes 2020; Czarniawska 2004). In the discussion below, we consider how, through the lens of the study's conceptual framework, the organisation of equity in VET was evident in the case study.

### *Casual loops: actants in the action net*

In our study, it was evident that 'action nets' appeared in the 'causal loops' (i.e. the everyday work) that took place between the school, training agency, and businesses/institutions that collaborated to support the students. Participants perceived that the long-standing, historical connection to the people's high school tradition was essential to understanding how the current VET system supported equity. Several of the teachers in the upper secondary school had had previous experience of working at a people's high school. During the early democratic movements in Scandinavia, the 'people's high school' was considered an emancipative instrument where education, *bildung* and freedom were closely related. Existing research on these people's high schools (e.g. Koorsgaard 2004) has suggested that teachers focused on communication and dialogue to awaken potential in students, an approach also known as 'human beings first' (Bugge 2001, 116). Our findings indicate that, in order to support equity in education, teachers supported students in clarifying their values, taking a supportive interest in their lives and identifying the directions they may want to pursue in life. In turn, students were more likely to feel that they were respected, which, accordingly, can enhance their sense of responsibility towards society and promote responsibility in the reconstruction of democracy. From our perspective, in broad terms, the *bildung* notion, stemming from the concept of 'human beings first', has been 'translated' (Czarniawska 2004, 780) from a centred, homogeneous conceptualisation of education and formation to a horizontal and heterogeneous approach.

With this in mind, it is possible to see that, from a historical perspective, the pedagogic approaches from the people's high school had a deep and lasting influence on the

organisation of the upper secondary institution, through the actants' representation and accounts of actions, objects and events, leading to concrete actions of equity (Czarniawska 2014). The organisation of equity can, thus, be regarded as occurring as interconnected cycles and casual loops between actants in their everyday work. From this point of view, ideas of equity in education are brought about by human beings, who translate them in relation to their own frames of reference (Czarniawska 2004).

### *Social construction of equity*

In this section, we consider how the concept of 'sense-making' was helpful in highlighting within the analysis how contradictions and interruptions can be part of continuous sense-giving and sense-taking processes, connected to the work of supporting equity. The process of constructing equity stretches over time – past, present and future – where some events are made meaningful by identifying certain points of connection (Czarniawska 2004; Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005). In our study, this was evident, for instance, when VET students' educational setting and apprenticeships were integrated into the very first term of their studies, thus propelling their engagement with the daily life of their community. Embarking on apprenticeships at this initial stage can provide students with an opportunity to be a part of society from the beginning of this period of their lives, rather than at some distant point in the future. It can, too, give students supported opportunities to deal with complex and possibly contradictory issues at an early stage, enhancing their curiosity about education and workplace learning.

Respecting the diversity of fellow workers supports the ongoing construction of equity and the dynamics of socially collective undertakings (Czarniawska 2004). In theoretical terms, 'loosely coupled' elements can provide the staff and members with the flexibility needed to enact ideas of equity in VET. As no standard solution is at hand, colleagues must work to find relevant solutions. In our study, in order to reach their goals, the students had to find an apprenticeship with support from the interdisciplinary training agency. The analysis made clear how the head of the agency functioned as 'the conductor of the orchestra': thereby, reflecting how enactment and the sharing of meaning resulted from the acknowledgement of diversity at the upper secondary school, as well as in the workplaces that received the students. According to the participants' perceptions, the VET programme's structure and its recognition of a 'human beings first' approach enabled the students to progress, as they were able to conceptualise the knowledge of their work 'horizontally', across different contexts and concretise their actions, embedded in their everyday understanding (Johansson-Wyszynska 2018).

### *Trust network: a collective endeavour of 'action nets'*

It was evident in our study that the structure of VET was able to provide stability and order, which enabled it to support a collective of common good, which was based on diversity. As mentioned, we can understand the stabilisation of processes in VET and the construction of equity when paying attention to the connection points (Czarniawska 2004). In the study, it was evident that, through their actions, the staff of the VET system were able to create opportunities for understanding and shared meaning. The process of sharing can lead to transformation, since sharing, as a form of critical practice, can create

an upgraded reality (Langenberg and Wesseling 2016). According to our analysis, the various 'action nets' and actants involved in the VET were engaged with equity when they were taking both the individual students *and* the local environment into account (Buchholtz, Stuart, and Frønes 2020). Therefore, we found that organisation was an ongoing process in which different sets of institutions that are not necessarily coherent shape their organisation around the concept of 'human beings first'. Crucially, even if they do not necessarily agree on all matters, they are all focused on helping *all* students work towards their diplomas and, thus, are contributing to building equity in VET.

### Limitations

Our case study examined how a VET system in a rural community organised itself to support equity in VET. The findings are based on rich, qualitative data relating to participants' perceptions of one context. Generalisation, therefore, is not intended. The study's value is in providing a contribution to insights into the complexity of a VET system, and the challenges, therein, to supporting the globally important goal of equity in education. It is hoped that the case study findings will be of interest to educators worldwide who are involved in VET in many different settings and contexts.

### Conclusion

It is clear, internationally, that educational opportunities and access vary greatly according to location. In rural areas, the cultural, social and material consequences for local communities may depend on the nature and degree of support for rural schools. Our small, in-depth case study sought to better understand how the organisation of VET in a rural area of Norway, involving collaboration between school, training agency and local businesses/institutions, constructed notions of equity in VET. It highlights how, in a rural community, opportunities for *all* students in VET may be constructed and reconstructed through ongoing collaborative work. Our analysis suggests that this needs to be maintained through 'casual loops' between 'actions nets' in the school, the training agency and the businesses/institutions. This can contribute to a culture that supports the whole community, with the aim of helping all students to thrive and flourish. Further, the organisation of local VET can also contribute to the continuation and development of *rural* communities through casual loops between action nets, which, in turn, contributes to culture, welfare and equity (Gristy and Hargreaves 2020; Czarniawska 2004).

### Notes

1. <https://archive.nordregio.se/en/Metameny/About-Nordregio/Journal-of-Nordregio/Journal-of-Nordregio-2010/Journal-of-Nordregio-no-2-2010/Official-defini/index.html>.
2. <https://www.ssb.no/utdanning/utdanningsniva/artikler/slik-henger-utdanning-sammen-med-foreldrenes-utdanningsniva>.
3. It should be noted that the *people's high school* is a different form of education from regular high school. It most commonly caters for students from 18 years old onwards. References to high school in this paper are references to the form of education known as the *people's high school*.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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