



## EDITORIAL

### The engine room of educational change - perspectives from Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Further Education (FE)

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## **The engine room of educational change - perspectives from Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Further Education (FE)**

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### **Editorial**

The contributions to this special issue of *Education in the North - The Engine Room of Educational Change - Perspectives from Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Further Education (FE)* are as diverse as the field itself. They cover many important and general aspects of VET and FE with examples from Denmark, Finland and Scotland. This special issue provides new and illuminating insights for those familiar with the field, as well as providing an overview for those who have only recently become interested in the field. The complexity of the pedagogies and contexts that define VET and FE is reflected in the creative and fresh approaches to research in the field represented in this issue. As you read the issue, you could imagine yourself walking around a diverse set of learning spaces. You can glance into the kitchen of a fine Danish restaurant; see a model of hands-on teaching and learning evolve from an askew wall; find out how dogs can help young people sniff out their educational self-confidence; see where colleges sit on the socio-economic maps of Scotland; and let a poem about learning English as a second language in an FE setting inspire your thinking.

Vocational education and training (VET) is characterised by the variety of places where learning takes place and, therefore, the ways in which it is organised. VET is often associated with different in situ learning environments, such as apprenticeship, "probably the oldest and least formalised form of learning that exists" (Frostholm, this issue). Today, a variety of institutions and organisations are involved in VET, with great differences between trades and countries (Koudahl & Hersom, this issue).

A recurring theme is the interplay of practical and theoretical knowledge, and the question of who the training serves first, the labour market/trade, society or the student. There are traces of all of these in the contributions to this issue. In the article by Koudahl and Hersom, the clash between school education and the logics of the future labour market and the relationship between craftsman and customer literally clashes over an askew wall in the construction hall of a vocational school. Frostholm illustrates how a restaurant kitchen and the communication between master and apprentice chef become a place where stirring in a pot, licking a spoon and thinking about chemical reactions are intertwined. The aim of practical learning is therefore as much to achieve a result as it is to analyse how that result was achieved and what its consequences are. The practical nature of VET is reflected on the one hand in the 'hands on' methodology that appears in contributions such as autoethnography and

action research (Frostholm, Koudahl and Hersom, Norvapalo *et al.*). However, there is always the question of how the practical and physical aspects can be adequately captured in written form.

However complex and exciting the field may be from an academic point of view, it should not be forgotten that VET and FE professions still suffer from a subordinate status in society and are often (wrongly) perceived as simpler and less valuable than academic professions. It is certainly debatable whether it is right for education and young people that those who, for one reason or another, do not fit into an academically oriented school are sent down a vocational route. This certainly says more about the existing misconceptions about the demands and needs for highly qualified and differentiated knowledge that are associated with modern professions. Nevertheless, it is a fact that VET and FE institutions have to deal with a large number of students who are tired of school, need special help or have otherwise underachieved in their previous schooling. As Gardiner shows, colleges offering VET and FE programmes in Scotland are more likely to be located in or near deprived areas, which reflects the compensatory power attributed to these institutions, but also reinforces prejudices. VET and FE institutions therefore need to find strategies to best deal with this situation. One unorthodox method of engaging students who, for a variety of reasons, find it difficult to engage with school work is described by Norvapalo *et al.* They describe how dog-assisted activities, as part of a year-long preparatory educational programme, can help students to explore their strengths and aspirations in order to find their way into their educational future. This is just one example of the inventive and creative ways that VET practitioners find every day to reach those often deemed hardest to reach.

These are just some of the common threads that link the articles in this issue. Each reader will find individual paths and connections in this seemingly eclectic collection. We are sure they will lead to valuable insights and, more importantly, curiosity about the broad field of VET and FE.