

Vague orientations and weak institutions

A study of students and apprentices in vocational
education and training for retail and office work in
Norway

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Dissertation for the degree philosophiae doctor (PhD)
at the University of Bergen

2016

Acknowledgements

Over the course of the PhD, I have been so fortunate as to have two sets of colleagues – at the Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research in Oslo and at the Department of Sociology at the University of Bergen. Thus, I owe great thanks to many people who have made this journey as pleasurable as it can be.

Professor Ole Johnny Olsen at the University of Bergen has been my principal supervisor. It is a true privilege to work with Ole Johnny. I highly appreciate the talks we have about sociology and about life in general. He always reads my drafts quickly and eagerly and provides constructive criticism. Thank you for your generosity in sharing your knowledge, network, and time – all of which I have been so lucky to enjoy. I am looking forward to continuing to work closely together.

For many years the environment at Fafo has been, and it still is, one major fixed point of my life. Particularly the department of MIK, which is comprised of my dear friends and colleagues, is the main reason I have not felt particularly lonely during these years. Rather, I have been part of a larger research community. I have presented paper drafts, and received valuable comments and critiques. In particular, Jon Rogstad, my boss and friend, has provided useful comments throughout. It is highly rewarding, stimulating and fun to work within this environment.

The PhD project was part of a larger national research project, financed by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. The project, *Quality in Vocational Education and Training*, which spanned 2012–2015, was a collaboration between NIFU (project manager Håkon Høst, Asgeir Skålholt, and Idunn Seland), Fafo (Anna Hagen Tønder and Torgeir Nyen), University of Bergen (Ole Johnny Olsen and Svein Michelsen), and Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences (Hæge Nore and Leif Christian Lahn). This fantastic group included researchers from different disciplines, sharing a passion for research on vocational education and training. I am very grateful to have been a part of this group. The diverse yet integrated topics of the project provided insight into issues of quality and

governance, assessment and transitions to employment within the Norwegian VET system. I greatly appreciated collecting data in various far-flung parts of Norway together and our fruitful discussions of findings and challenges.

Thank you to my co-supervisor Lars Gjelstad at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences for valuable comments and insights. He has contributed with an anthropological perspective, enriching and sharpening my arguments. My dear colleagues at Fafo, Anna Hagen Tønder and Torgeir Nyen, have read parts of this thesis, and very helpfully provided statistics. Also, a great thanks to colleague at the University of Bergen/IRIS, Lars Lyby, who has commented on parts of the thesis. A special thanks to Håkon Høst at NIFU for inspiring conversations and for letting me rob your book shelf.

At the Department of Sociology at the University of Bergen, the PhD students are fortunate to participate in the PhD seminars. Presenting paper drafts and receiving constructive critique from peers (and a Professor) has been highly valuable. Additionally, I have been a part of the AKUØ group at the institute, which also has provided highly useful comments and critiques of my paper drafts. It has been a true joy each time travelling to Bergen for rewarding sociological discussions, for all of the friends I have made, and Friday rice porridge. Thank you for welcoming me so warmly.

In spring 2013, I stayed for three months at ITB (Institut Technik und Bildung) at the University of Bremen, Germany. Thanks to Professor Michael Gessler and the nice people I got to know there. This was an extraordinary experience for me. It was highly satisfying and learning-intensive to be welcomed into such a large research community consisting of people studying various aspects of vocational education and training.

My gratitude goes to all the interviewees who have shared their time, knowledge, and life stories. The extensive longitudinal data collection phase, spanning several years, provided me with the opportunity to meet some more frequently than others. Thank

you for answering the questions patiently. Without their effort, there would be no thesis.

Last, but certainly not least – I would like to thank my friends, and particularly my family, Marit, Stein, and Kine. Thank you for always being there and supporting me. Eddi, my brother-in-law, has excellently helped with the graphics. But my deepest gratitude goes to my beloved husband, Aksel. He has patiently and with forbearance listened to me obsessing over vocational education and training, never complained when I stayed at the office into the wee hours, and put on an interested face when I suggested paper titles. He has always supported me and provided the space so that I can be me.

It has been a true privilege and a great journey. Thank you for your encouragement.

Oslo, March 2016

Kaja Reegård

Abstract

About two decades ago, Norway expanded its well-functioning system for vocational education and training (VET) to also cover the retail sector and office work, which have no tradition of apprenticeship training. The Sales and the Office and Administration trades lack skilled role models and transparent, fixed occupational end points reserved for the skilled service worker. VET for these parts of the labour market is thus at odds with the prime intention and function of apprenticeship, which is to induct newcomers into the skills, knowledge and dispositional approaches of a trade, and to structure access to certain segments of the labour market.

The topic of the thesis is the interlacing of students' subjective experiences of the VET journey and the weakly institutionalised Sales trade and Office and Administration trade in Norway. The study is designed a qualitative longitudinal study. Data was collected in four waves of interviews with students across the duration of their education. Their subjective orientations are located within a qualitative, interpretive narrative methodological framework. The design enables the examination of process, change, and continuity, and of how the students applied hindsight and foresight to their narratives. The thesis takes the micro-level of interaction as the location of articulation, yet aims to continually include its interconnection with macro-level processes. Hence, I consulted historical documents and interviewed a wide range of relevant actors surrounding the students in different learning arenas of the course of VET, including teachers, workplace trainers, and union and employer organisation representatives. The analytical framework guiding the analysis is made up of three interlinked dimensions: (1) students' self-understanding of their process of becoming, (2) mediated by group-level interaction in the school and workplace, and (3) structured by the trades and their capacity to socialise newcomers.

Theoretically informed by concepts that underscore the dual character of action as being simultaneously bounded and broadened by institutions and social structures, the thesis finds that students' orientations are interlaced with loosely structured

institutions in the following way: When the Sales and the Office and Administration trades provide poor navigational tools to help students orientate their learning experiences, the room for individual manoeuvring becomes greater. The students' orientations are vague, unsettled and they lack a clear conception of a career path. In the meeting between indecisive students and trades not structured by traditional vocational trade logics, few traces of vocational orientations are developed. Instead, the thesis shows how students find ways of making meaning and constructing a coherent narrative of their VET journey and the occupation they are heading towards by drawing on a range of social resources from domains outside the VET system in the dynamic process of becoming. Despite the fact that few students landed a job as a skilled retail or office worker upon training completion, their subjectively constructed narratives tell of positive outcomes such as having emotionally matured or become more self-secure, having got a break from school, obtained an education of general utility, and acquired work experience.

The thesis points to different reasons to why the Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade struggle to become institutionalised. One is to be found by looking to the historical development of commerce education in Norway as a largely school-based initiative. This means that employers have developed and come to prefer training and recruitment practices disconnected the VET system. A second reason is to be found in the characteristics of the labour markets which the VET programmes are directed towards. The rapidly expanding retail sector employs mostly young people with little formal education; administrative office jobs are increasingly rationalised due to technological development, and skilled office workers are outmatched by those with higher education. These structural differences influence the learning environments of the group-level occupational communities, which again influence the learning opportunities available to students. The analysis shows how the learning environment the retail apprentices find themselves in supports their process of becoming as they receive and assume responsibility for work tasks. Being surrounded by young co-workers working part time with temporal orientations to retail work, the apprentices quickly rise to the core of the work team.

The office apprentices, on the other hand, remain in the periphery of the occupational community. This marginalisation is rooted in the separation of companies' motivation to hire apprentices from their recruitment needs. Instead of making longer-term training investments, employers within office jobs describe providing apprenticeships simply as a way of taking social responsibility.

The thesis concludes that institutionalising conditions look brighter for the Sales trade because it is directed towards an expanding and more receptive labour market, where the trade certificate provides access to relevant jobs. Yet currently, the trade certificate is not required or valued in either of these occupational fields. Taken together, the findings shed light on the ways in which action is bounded, yet creative, by loosely structured, yet constraining institutions. In doing so, they illustrate the dialectical relationship between students' vague vocational orientations and trades that are weakly anchored in the VET system.

List of publications

Article I

Reegård, K. (2015). Diversity of occupational orientations in Sales vocational education and training. *Journal of Education and Work*, Published online.

Article II

Reegård, K. (2016). Creating coherence: A longitudinal study of students traversing vocational education for office work in Norway. *Young*, forthcoming.

Article III

Reegård, K. (2015). Sales assistants in the making: Learning through responsibility. *Vocations and Learning*, 8(2), 117–133.

Article IV

Reegård, K. Contrasting prospects: Institutionalisation of VET for retail and office work in Norway, submitted to *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*.

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1. Introduction

In this thesis, I investigate how indecisive students meet loosely structured service trades within the Norwegian vocational education and training (VET) system. As a system of training and recruitment, VET has long been used within industry and crafts in Norway. Traditionally, the prime function of apprenticeship has been to induct newcomers into the skills, knowledge and dispositional approaches of a trade. This system has long provided youth with transparent occupational paths, structuring access to distinct segments of the labour market. About two decades ago, the VET system was expanded to include new labour market sectors, among them retail and office jobs. However, these ‘new’ trades do not seem to lend themselves easily to the apprenticeship model of training. When VET systems originally geared towards manufacturing are transferred to the service sectors, which have little or no tradition of apprenticeship, new issues of policy and theory emerge.

The goal of this thesis is twofold: first, to understand students’ subjective orientations and narratives of progressing through the vocational education in the fields of Sales and Office and Administration; and second, to grasp the potential and conditions for institutionalisation of VET for retail and office jobs by embedding these narratives within the social landscape. Institutionalisation is taken to be the process through which conventions become socially accepted and embedded into society (Meyer and Rowan 1977). This means for the trades to acquire sufficient regularity and stability to be recognized as institutions. This process implies both the implementation and the internalisation of new practices to achieve collective meaning; a process considered mediated by concrete social actors (Thornton et al. 2012).

The study concentrates on the students’ journeys through, and the institutionalisation of two trades within the Norwegian VET system – Sales and Office and Administration. This dual focus provides an illuminating contrast, which strengthens our understanding of the degree to which vocational orientations are emerging through the divergent labour market structures of the fields of retail and office work.

Neither of these occupational fields has a tradition of apprenticeship training, and both VET programmes suffer from low completion rates and weak labour market currency of the trade certificate. However, because of the different labour market structures, organisation, and education-employment links, this weak position manifests differently within the retail and office sectors (Olsen et al. 2015). Retail work centres on providing customer service and completing sales transactions and thus requires students to develop mainly soft skills. This rapidly expanding labour market sector is characterised by high turnover and young workers with temporal orientations to retail work. In contrast, the Office and Administration programme qualifies students for diverse types of administrative work; however, it is directed towards a labour market that is shrinking due to technological development. Moreover, recruitment to office and administrative positions is increasingly structured by higher education as an entrance criterion (Høst and Reegård 2015).

Whether or not a trade becomes institutionalised depends upon equal commitment from employers and students, who see the long-term benefits of investing in vocational training and completing the qualification (Drexel 1989). This kind of commitment appears to be weak in both Sales and Office and Administration; at the same time, non-transparent labour market destinations, a lack of skilled role models and reserved slots in the companies' division of labour provide few 'navigational tools' students can use to orientate their learning experiences. The weak institutional foothold of these two trades has profound and contrasting implications for the students' learning opportunities and conditions for action provided.

Students' subjective accounts stand in a dialectical relationship to the weakly institutionalised trades. When the trades are incapable of providing tools, resources and structures, which students can use to orientate their learning experiences, the room for individual manoeuvring becomes greater. The students' orientations are open, seeking and they lack a clear conception of a career path. They enter the vocational education uncommittedly with poor pre-entry knowledge of service work, and drifted through the VET programme. Nevertheless, they make sense of their VET journey and the occupation they are heading towards by drawing on a range of social

resources from domains outside the VET system in a dynamic process of becoming. By illustrating the interlacing of vague orientations and weak institutions, characterised by bounded, yet creative action, and loosely structured, yet constraining institutions, the thesis embeds student narratives in the context in which they are created.

The first article of the thesis elaborates how the retail students creatively draw on resources familiar from other life spheres as a basis of motivation when identifying with becoming a salesman, rather than developing vocational orientations rooted in the Sales trade. Similarly, as shown in article II, when faced with lack of employment opportunities post apprenticeship completion, the office students take part in their own process of becoming in creative and reflexive ways by actively renegotiating their vocational journeys into experiences that are of general utility. Article III addresses features of the organisation of retail work that enable the shaping of a learning-intensive environment, rooted in the great responsibility given to and taken on by the apprentices. The overall potential and challenges to institutionalise VET for retail and office work in Norway are analysed in article IV, which concludes that the prospects are brighter for Sales than for Office and Administration because retail apprentices often rise to core positions in the work team among young unskilled co-workers, while lower-level office tasks are rationalised and increasingly transferred to employees with higher education.

Two interrelated research questions are discussed in the pursuit of the overall analysis, the first with a descriptive aim, and the latter with an explanatory aim:

- What characterises the conditions for institutionalisation of the Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade in Norway?
- How are the students' subjective experiences of the VET journey and the institutional structuring of the two trades interrelated?

The study is empirically driven, yet theoretically informed. This means that while my preconceived knowledge guides the selection of research questions and choice of design, sociological theories provide analytical tools to identify patterns of the data

material. However, the overall aim of the study is of empirical character. A qualitative longitudinal study comprised of interviews with the same students at several points in time over the course of their education was undertaken in order to explore the students' subjective narration of their VET journey. This design enables the investigation of change in the making. By examining the ways in which students make meaning of their educational journeys and how they perceive the changing social arenas they find themselves in, my thesis adds to our understanding of how the service trades are developing. I aim to grasp students' multiple ways of becoming using narrative interview analysis, emphasising how they subjectively tell the story of their lives. In this way, the longitudinal design becomes a method to study the articulation of the institutionalising dynamics of the Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade.

1.1 The contribution of the thesis

The aim of the thesis is to nuance and fill in gaps in the existing body of research. My research is situated within a larger national research field that studies the structure of vocational trades and the social construction of the skilled worker in between the institutions of education and the labour market.¹ The properties of the workplace as an arena for socialisation of youth have long been acknowledged, largely through claims that work settings provide opportunities for developing and exercising personal responsibility and for establishing more extensive relations with non-familial adults. According to this line of thought, enactment of apprenticeship is considered more than the development of a set of occupational skills. Instead, apprenticeship constitutes a rite of passage, an induction into working life and adult responsibilities (Lehmann 2007; Kirpal 2004). Traversing apprenticeship and

¹ Particularly, the scientific community of the University of Bergen has been prominent in the development of this research field. Please see Olsen (2011, 2013 for an orientation), Korsnes (1990) on the social construction of the skilled industrial worker, Michelsen et al. (2014) and Sakslind (1998) on a historic shaping of the Norwegian VET system, Høst and Michelsen (2001) on the expansion of the Norwegian apprenticeship system to the new field of care work, Byrkjeflot and Halvorsen (1996) on institutionalisation of industrial administration in Norway from 1950 to 1990 and Olsen (1994) on the institutional crafting of the chemical processing trade in Norway.

gradually mastering work tasks and responsibilities, the students in the study matured emotionally and displayed increased self-confidence.

The thesis was part of a national research project² covering a broad range of topics on the quality of the Norwegian VET system. More specifically, it was integrated in a project module investigating the relation of learning environment to completion of training. Within this larger scope, the thesis has three distinct aims: first, it contributes to the body of research on structuration of trades by emphasising students' subjective accounts, embedded in different types of learning environments affecting the likelihood of completing the education. Second, it contributes to an overall debate on quality of vocational training anchored in the sociology of education and policy-relevance. Third, the thesis generates in-depth knowledge on the Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade within the Norwegian VET system. Little to no previous research has been conducted on these trades, their institutional foundation, their functioning, development, employment linkages or the experiences of the people involved, including teachers, trainers, employers, collective actors – or of the students themselves. By broadly studying both the 'objective' structural composition of the trades and the actors' subjective accounts of them, the thesis ventures into a largely unknown territory. The majority of the national research on VET to date has focused on the trades of industry and crafts. These are characterised by a stronger tradition of apprenticeship training, stronger education-employment linkages, and more clearly defined communities of skilled workers for the students to be socialised by and into, compared to the service trades. The thesis extends our understanding of development of vocational orientations in labour markets where there is neither a slot in the companies' division of labour reserved for the skilled employment category, nor a clear occupational end-point.

² The project comprised researchers from four national institutes: NIFU, Fafo, University of Bergen and Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences. The project period spanned from 2012-2015, and was financed by The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training.

The majority of national research on students' general VET trajectories is based on registry data and survey data. These studies, e.g., Grøgaard et al. (2007), Markussen et al. (2008) and Støren et al. (2007), investigate educational choice, learning outcomes and completion rates, emphasising individual and biographical traits (Olsen et al. 2012). My work complements this strand of research by studying students' pathways through the VET programme from their subjective frame of reference, sensitive to the social environments of which they are a part. The study's longitudinal design allows us to understand change and process in a way that 'snap shot' studies cannot. Conducting multiple interviews with students across several years provides a comprehensive picture of their complex and diverse paths through the VET system. While a great deal of the research on VET in Norway is rooted in a 'problem-oriented' policy perspective focused on improving low completion rates and exclusionary factors, the present study reveals aspects of the social organisation of VET that increase students' prospects for staying on rather than dropping out.

My research is situated at the intersection of three grand strands of sociology: youth sociology, sociology of education and the sociology of (service) work. First, the study captures the students in the life phase of youth. Within the youth sociological literature this phase is commonly characterised by unpredictable, prolonged, and postponed transitions (Côté and Bynner 2008). The literature discusses the importance of constructing coherent narratives and managing the project of the self in terms of either the growing impossibility or the ever-greater need to do so, in the face of unstable futures and complex school-to-work transitions (Walther 2006; Woodman 2011). By investigating the micro-level 'grammar' of the ways in which young people actively and resourcefully shape and negotiate their biographies, my research contributes to the field of youth studies by elucidating how young people who face great uncertainty construct coherent narratives and the strategies they draw on to do so.

Second, because VET is provided for and by the labour market, the interdependence of education and work is built into the field of VET research. Issues of education and social reproduction have lately come to dominate the field of sociology of education,

while public educational institutions as an arena for secondary socialisation have been de-emphasised. The thesis seeks to contribute to the sociology of education by investigating the relevance of the social organisation of particular educational tracks to students' learning experiences. Rather than understanding the students' gradual disaffection as the result of a lack of aspiration, I argue that we should examine the level of labour market demand for the learning content. The thesis addresses how the vocational, practice-based tradition and the academic tradition imply ambivalence about knowledge-sociological issues, including what knowledge is, its relevance, and how the broader society should value the knowledge that is created (Halvorsen 1994a; Mjelde 2006; Olsen 2011).

Finally, my investigation of the vocational education in Sales and Office and Administration relates to the changing nature of work in contemporary society. By emphasising the significance of the labour market structures in which these vocational educations are embedded, I demonstrate VET's relevance as a field of inquiry to the sociological debates around work and employment in which the question of how we become professionals remains of enduring relevance. Service work, in particular, might possess features that distinguish it from other types of work experiences (e.g., Hochschild 1983). Already in 1951, C. W. Mills described the working conditions of salesgirls and secretaries in a dismal undertone in terms of alienation. He depicted how the 'tang and feel of salesmanship' (Mills [1951] 2002, 161) had pervaded all spheres of social life. My thesis contributes to the sociology of service work by linking the organisation of work to learning processes; it shows how learning opportunities are embedded in and constituted by institutionalised work roles and trust relations in the workplace. The findings of the thesis shed light on how the composition of the inter-professional hierarchy of the companies is crucial to understanding the employment opportunities for the skilled service worker as a condition for institutionalisation of the two service trades.

1.2 Organisation of the thesis

The next chapter outlines the history of commerce education in Norway. This context is necessary to understand why vocational training for retail and office work struggles to gain an institutional foothold. Chapter 3 presents the analytical framework guiding the investigation and analysis. The thesis draws on different theoretical strands and concepts from sociology, intersecting macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis. Chapter 4 discusses the study's methodology and the data material underpinning the thesis. The longitudinal research design is introduced in detail, as are discussions of challenges and dilemmas encountered in the research process. Subsequently, Chapter 5 provides a summary of the four articles that are the basis of this thesis. In Chapter 6, I sum up the findings and discuss their policy implications. Suggestions for a renewed research agenda are proposed and final conclusions are drawn. The findings of the study are compiled in four scholarly articles, which appear at the end of this document.

2. Context and historical backdrop

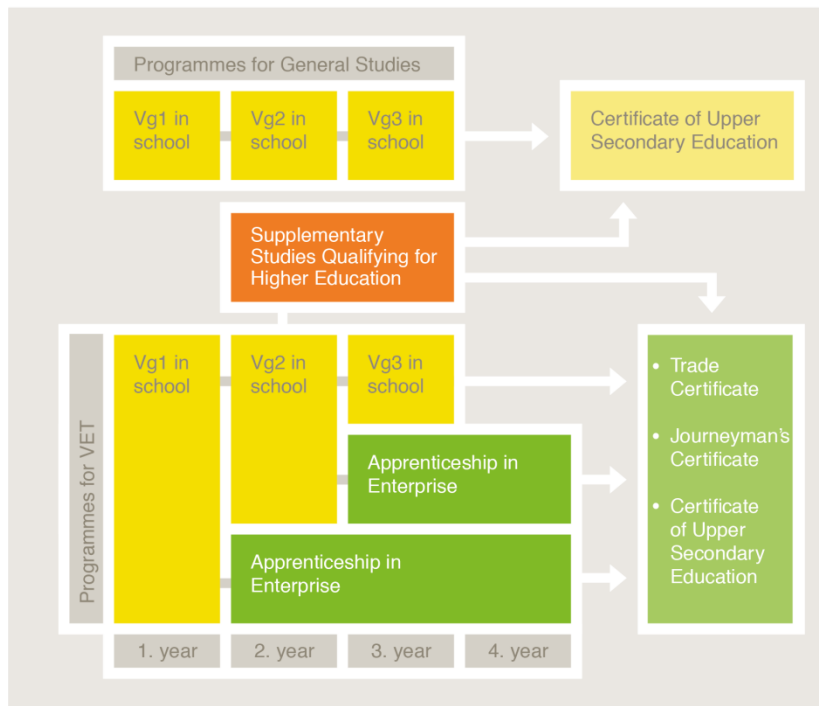
This chapter provides a background to better understand why the VET programmes of Sales and Office and Administration in Norway struggle to gain a foothold. The chapter starts with a brief presentation of the Norwegian VET system in general, and of service VET in particular, before presenting the historical backdrop. Thereafter, I describe the two trades and their current weak position. Finally, the chapter concludes with a section on vocational training for retail work and office jobs in an international perspective (the UK, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland). This is to illustrate that the Norwegian situation is a result of previous decisions, and not necessarily ‘inherent’ aspects of the nature of service work, given that these educational programmes are popular and largely institutionalised elsewhere in Europe. The chapter is based on previous research, public policy documents, historical statistics, and interviews with relevant actors holding central positions in national educational reform processes.

2.1 The Norwegian VET system

The initial VET system in Norway is integrated in the overall upper secondary education system (16-19 year olds). The system is designed according to a 2 + 2 model, referring to the division of the 4-year programme into 2 years of preparatory school-based learning followed by 2 years of apprenticeship.³

³ Please see http://www.udir.no/globalassets/upload/fagopplaring/vet_ineurope_web.pdf for more information.

Figure 2.1. Overview of the VET system in Norway



Source: The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training

Vocational education for retail and office jobs is part of the general VET system. The Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade are both included in the Service and Transport VET programme, which is one of nine broadly composed vocational programmes.⁴ In the first upper secondary year (Vg1), Sales and Office and Administration are grouped together with a range of other service-related trades.⁵ The second year (Vg2) comes with further specialisation, with the programme called Sales, Service and Security, qualifying for apprenticeship in three trades, i.e. Sales, Office and Administration, and Security Services.

⁴ The nine vocational programmes are: Building and Construction, Design, Arts and Crafts, Electricity and Electronics, Media and Communication, Agriculture, Fishing and Forestry, Technical and Industrial Production, Health and Social Care, Restaurant and Food Processing, and Service and Transport. Additionally, there are three programmes which qualify directly for access to higher education: Programme for General Studies, Program for Sports and Physical Education, and Programme for Music, Dance and Drama

⁵ Reception desk services, Security services, Travel industry, Logistics operator, and Transport driver

Figure 2.2. Overview of the Norwegian service sector VET system



Source: vilbli.no

The learning content of Vg1 and Vg2 is divided into three categories. First, there are common core subjects, such as Norwegian language, mathematics and social studies. Second, there are programme-specific subjects divided into three clusters: Planning, Maintenance, and Communication & Service in the first year, and Economy & Administration, Marketing & Sales and Security in the second year. Third, during both these years, there are shorter placement periods in companies, called the In-Depth Study Project. These placements are intended to provide students with an opportunity to try out and become familiar with relevant trades, as well as to offer vocational students instances of ‘practical learning’ and to strengthen the relationship between schools and companies (Høst 2012; Nyen and Tønder 2013).

Towards the end of Vg2, the intention is that the students are to commence apprenticeship within one specific trade. In Norway, students have no formal right to an apprenticeship, and a significant number of the students are not able to secure one. In the Sales trade, as many as 49 per cent of the applicants did not obtain an apprenticeship (or they changed their mind after applying for one). The equivalent number for Office and Administration is significantly lower, i.e. 25 per cent.⁶

⁶ The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2015: <http://www.udir.no/Tilstand/Analyser-og-statistikk/Fag--og-yrkesopplaring/Sokere-og-godkjente-kontrakter/Sokere-til-lareplass-og-godkjente-kontrakter-2014/>

The two-year apprenticeship period takes place in companies approved by the county and comprises an equal mix of training and value creation. The apprentices are to attain certain learning goals set by the national educational authorities. At the end of their training they complete the apprenticeship by passing the trade or journeyman's examination. The examination committee is trade-specific and tripartite. The authorities at the county level are responsible for upper secondary school.⁷ Regarding VET, that responsibility entails providing apprenticeships, dimensioning, dispensing VET financing provided by the state budget (including for apprenticeships), and supervision.

In Norway, as in several other European countries, the VET system was originally designed for the crafts and industry sectors. The difficulties of institutionalising VET for retail and office jobs have come to light over time. It was far from self-evident that policy-makers and social partners should agree upon a model where the vocational education was organised as apprenticeship training with trades rooted in the labour market. From a historical-institutional perspective,⁸ political actors could potentially choose between different directions and solutions (Høst and Reegård 2015). According to Drexel (1989), several key factors must be present for trades and vocational programmes to successfully become institutionalised. First, key stakeholders need to act jointly and agree on the demand for a new education. Second, a stable basis of recruitment from certain segments of society must be established. Third, vocational education needs to appear as a viable and attractive career path. Fourth, employers need to prefer the skilled employment category over other relevant educational categories. Finally, the trade must achieve a distinct position in the division of labour in the inter-professional hierarchy and be accepted by adjacent professional categories. The subsequent section outlines the historical development of education for retail and office jobs.

⁷ The county is one of Norway's three administrative levels: state, county and municipality. There are 19 counties and 428 municipalities. Each of these units has a locally elected decision-making body and an executive body appointed by the relevant assembly.

⁸ This theoretical perspective is elaborated in Chapter 3.

2.2 The historical development of retail and office education in Norway

Norway has a longstanding and proud tradition of commerce and office education, dating back hundreds of years. For a long time, this was a private enterprise, but it was eventually regularised by the state. One significant milestone for the field of commerce was the establishment of the private *Handelsgymnas* (Commerce gymnasium) around the beginning of the 20th century. The two-year programmes offered by the new school quickly gained a central position in educating a great share of salesmen aiming to qualify for segments above the lower-level labour market positions. The act requiring a *handelsbrev* (commerce certificate) in order to start and own a business was in part responsible for the popularity of this education. However, for decades, these schools remained inferior to the academic certification of *examen artium*, which qualified students for university studies, even though the curriculum included substantial elements of general education.

The first attempt to establish vocational training for the occupational fields of retail and office work, and subsume them to the Apprenticeship Act aligned with the public VET system for industry and crafts was made in 1961. The number of students rapidly increased and reached as much as 7 000 in 1966. The programme's success was, however, short-lived. The vocational education for retail and office work was dissolved after a short period because the apprenticeship system did not manage to gain a foothold among either students or employers. Meanwhile, the private commerce schools attracted the majority of the student mass within these fields (Grove and Michelsen 2005).

From the mid-1970s to the 1980s, the *Handel og kontor* (Commerce and Office) study programme, which was integrated in the general upper secondary education, blossomed. This was a three-year education, offering subjects within business administration, economics, accounting, and marketing and providing access to both general higher education (the study competence certificate), and vocational skills (Høst et al. 2013; Olsen and Reegård 2013). This developed into the third-largest

upper secondary study program in Norway. Its prime proponents were commerce education teachers, who had established their professional organisation, *Handelslærerlaget* (Grove and Michelsen 2005). However, towards the beginning of the 1990s, the number of students decreased significantly (Høst and Reegård 2015). The elimination of the *Handelsbrev* as a prerequisite to establish a business in 1980 probably contributed to this. Recruitment to the labour market changed accordingly during this period. Entry routes to office jobs were via private commerce schools or other types of backgrounds, but in-house training also played a significant role. As far as retail was concerned, the establishment of large retail chains led to the decline of the traditional salesman (Grove and Michelsen 2005). The dramatic decline in applications to the upper secondary commerce and office programme led to arguments to integrate it into the upper secondary general studies towards the mid-1990s. The decision to shut down the commerce and office programme despite its success involved heated debate. The teachers' argument against was that ending the program would weaken these subjects, and particularly the economy-related subjects and the traditions they represent. Additionally, they lost their jobs and needed re-schooling (Olsen and Reegård 2013).

2.2.1 Expansion of VET with Reform 94

The second attempt to establish vocational education within the fields of retail and office work came with the significant educational reform in 1994, Reform 94 (R-94). One ambition of the reform was to expand the well-functioning apprenticeship system within industry and crafts to all sectors of the labour market, within both the public and private sectors (Meld. St. nr. 20, 2012-2013). This expansion resulted in the birth of a series of new trades directed towards the vast service sectors, partly intended to create a pathway for young people into these parts of the labour market (Michelsen et al. 2014; Olsen et al. 2015). The current 'streamlined' and standardised 2 + 2 model of the VET system is shaped by this reform. The idea was for the whole youth cohort to move from lower to upper secondary education following one of two main paths: either by qualifying for higher education through general studies or through vocational training directed directly towards the labour market. In addition,

the opportunity to move from a vocational track over to general studies with a supplementary year of academic subjects was introduced.

In the years after the changes were implemented, it was still possible to opt for a vocational education in office, retail and reception services. However, the recruitment to this programme was poor. Policy makers blamed the theoretical turn of the content, at the expense of practical oriented learning, that came with the programme's integration into the general academic education system (Skarpenes 1997; Vibe 1995). In the same period, there was a rapid increase in economic administrative studies at the higher education level (community colleges) (Høst and Reegård 2015).

In 2000, the Sales and Service vocational programme was established (exclusively vocationally oriented). It qualified students for trade certificates within retail and office work. Policy makers gave two reasons for establishing this VET programme: First, they dreaded that the share of 'theoretical' learning content would be too great for students who planned a track towards vocational competence within reception services, retail or office trades. Second, they cited increased employment opportunities within the labour market sectors of service occupations (Innst. S. nr. 200, 1995-1996).

With the comprehensive curriculum reform, known as the Knowledge Promotion Reform, in 2006, the trades of transport, logistics, security and ICT services were integrated in the Sales and Service VET programme, and the name changed to Service and Transport. With this reform came further structure rationalisation and even more broadly composed VET programmes. As an alternative to the broadly structured school-based years, shorter placement periods in companies were introduced. These periods are called the In-Depth Study Project. Recent research shows that the content and learning provided in these placement periods is rather arbitrary and non-standardised, owing to decentralised school responsibility and a lack of training experience among retail companies. The students, not yet 18 years of age, are not allowed to handle the cash register. Hence, they might be given such spurious tasks as 'keeping the storage room tidy'. These short periods of work

experience are critical weeks, during which students often make an important decision; is this something for me? Negative experiences might push the students over to other programmes. Regarding placement periods in office jobs, schools struggle to find companies willing to take in students for these shorter periods. Thus, the students have little opportunity to become familiarised with office work prior to their apprenticeships (Olsen et al. 2015).

With the Knowledge Promotion Reform also came changes in the balance of power and division of labour between the educational authorities and social partners. Historically, social partners have enjoyed great influence and control of VET; however, they were now reduced to policy-making and an advisory role. Moreover, the number of tripartite Vocational Training Councils was reduced (Grove and Michelsen 2005). Even though the relevant social partners agreed on the creation of vocational education for retail and office work, reform has been largely state-driven (Nyen and Tønder 2014). The initiatives to establish VET for these occupational fields over the years have largely originated from within the educational system, whereas employer and industry organisations have been less active (Høst and Reegård 2015). This partly explains the current reluctance among employers to embrace VET as their main training and recruitment strategy – they never requested it in the first place.

Currently, about 52 per cent of all students who started Level Vg1 in the autumn of 2013 enrolled on a vocational study programme.⁹ However, there are great geographical variations in the popularity of VET. Typical VET regions are the west coast and mid-Norway, which still have significant industrial production, whereas the intake rates are low in Oslo, a city with a high concentration of companies and government agencies demanding higher education as entrance criterion.

In broad historical terms, one can say that the Norwegian VET system made a successful transition from crafts to industrial production with the industrial

⁹ http://www.udir.no/globalassets/upload/rapporter/educationmirror/the-educationmirror_english.pdf, page 26.

revolution. However, the second transition to the service economy has proven less successful. The current weak position of the Sales and the Office and Administration programmes might be considered an example of historical continuity rather than discontinuity. The history of commerce education has been an on-going tug of war between modernising and conservative forces. The ‘modernists’ advocate strengthening the commerce and office education in the direction of general studies, so that the certificate will not be of inferior value compared to other study programs, with the goal of preparing students for higher-level and managerial labour market positions. The ‘traditionalists’, however, prefer to keep the education at a practical-oriented and vocational level (Grove and Michelsen 2005). Access to higher education has continued to be a debated topic within commerce education, and there is evidence of an academic drive, particularly within the field of office work (Høst and Reegård 2015).

By integrating the Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade into the general VET system, attempts were made to construct vocational trades based on the same principle for those within the sectors of industry and craft. However, in Norway, a range of factors distinguish service trades from the more traditional trades, including the lack of a tradition of apprenticeship, as just pointed out, and additional factors regarding labour market characteristics, employer-preferred training, and employer receptiveness to VET as a type of training and recruitment practice. These factors are to be elaborated in the following sections, but first I provide some background on the Sales and Office and Administration trades.

2.3 The Sales trade

The Sales vocational programme is intended to lay the foundation for work in the diverse retail sector, foremost on the shop floor. According to the apprenticeship curriculum, the learning goals are twofold. First, in the area of ‘sales preparation’, the apprentice learns about the retail industry and the apprenticeship company/chain, how to plan and document work tasks, how to assess and use suited marketing tools, and how to use digital tools. Second, within ‘sales and follow-up’, central learning goals

are to use appropriate sales methods, inform the customer of his/her rights when purchasing goods, perform customer service, and to consider appropriate measures to increase the economic revenue of sales transactions.¹⁰

In 2015, 809 people applied for apprenticeships in Sales.¹¹ This number has increased over the last years, whereas the relative share of young people entering the VET system compared to general upper secondary studies has decreased. Nevertheless, there is a significant negative discrepancy between the number of apprenticeship applicants and the number of approved apprenticeship contracts in Sales. The majority of the training companies are to be found within retailing in the private sector. The training companies do, however, span a wide range of retail sub-sectors, e.g., supermarkets, fashion, electronics, and leisure.

2.4 The Office and Administration trade

The Office and Administration vocational programme is foremost directed towards work dealing with a diverse range of administrative office tasks in the public and private sectors. The education is intended to develop competences in the use of ICT tools, personnel management, information processing, knowledge of the training company's organisation and use of its economy system. More specifically, the curriculum is divided into three main subject areas. 'Office services' is the main subject area covering customer service and basic administrative procedures in addition to quality assurance of office services and rules regulating employment, health and safety issues. 'IT services' aims to enable the apprentice to use IT services to communicate with clients in accordance with current regulations for protecting personal information. Finally, the subject area of 'economy' covers the economy systems to prepare and present information, and basic budgeting, bookkeeping, wage

¹⁰ Translated curriculum for apprenticeship in the Sales trade, <http://www.udir.no/kl06/SSSLG3--->

¹¹ The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2015: <http://www.udir.no/Tilstand/Analyser-og-statistikk/Fag--og-yrkesopplaring/Sokere-og-godkjente-kontrakter/Sokere-til-lareplass-og-godkjente-kontrakter-2014/>

and salary work.¹² Research shows that employers may find the curriculum broad and too generically formulated, and accordingly difficult to ‘translate’ and adapt to the specific company or agency. Apprenticeship companies find the training in ‘economy’ particularly difficult to fulfil given that wage systems are often covered by personal security regulations not accessible to apprentices and work tasks within this area are largely allocated to professionals with a relevant educational background (Høst and Reegård 2015).

In contrast to the Sales trade, the Office and Administration trade makes up approximately half the volume of apprenticeship applicants.¹³ In the wake of the Social Contract for VET intake of at least one apprentice in the ministries, directorates and sub-agencies has become mandatory¹⁴ (Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, and Ministry of Education and Research 2015). This means there are potentially between 350 and 400 new apprenticeship slots.

2.5 Weak labour market positions

Based on national research results, these educational programmes have not been successful in attracting the student mass or in engaging employers, nor have *skilled* retail and office work become embedded in the society as powerful social and occupational categories (Høst et al. 2015; Olsen et al. 2015). There are several indicators to support this claim, yet operationalising a weakly institutionalised programme is not easy. I consider the relative significance of vocational education, i.e. the share of apprentices among the total of the youth employee mass to reflect the degree to which VET is embedded as a dominant training and recruitment practice within the occupational field in question. The share of employees with vocational

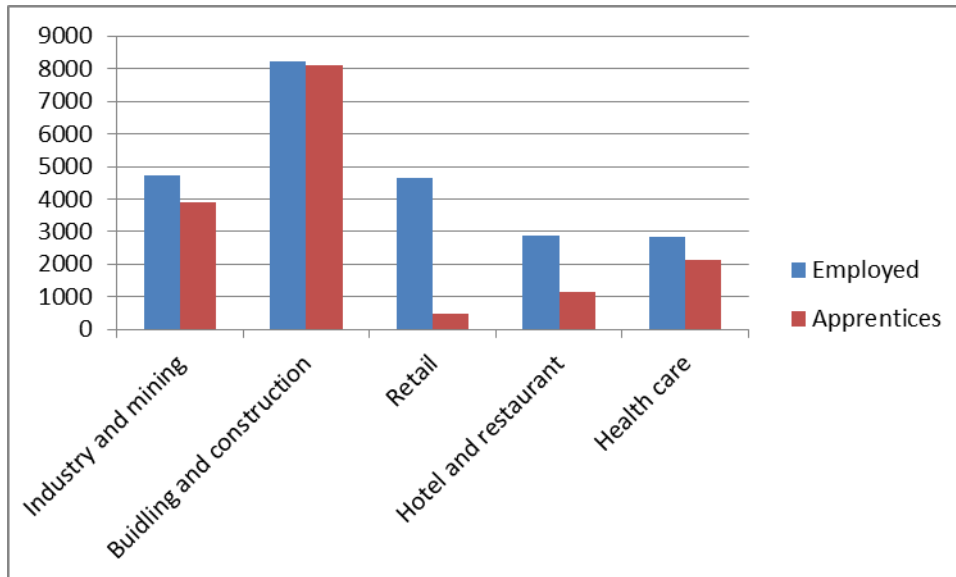
¹² <http://www.udir.no/Stottemeny/English/Curriculum-in-English/Upper-secondary-education-/>

¹³ The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2015: <http://www.udir.no/Tilstand/Analyser-og-statistikk/Fag--og-yrkesopplaring/Sokere-og-godkjente-kontrakter/Sokere-til-lareplass-og-godkjente-kontrakter-2014/>

¹⁴ Please see http://www.udir.no/globalassets/upload/fagopplaring/vet_ineurope_web.pdf, page 38 for more information.

education in retail and public administration is far lower compared to the traditional VET occupations, e.g., building and construction and electrical work (Nyen et al. 2015).

Figure 2.3. Share of apprentices among employed youth (15-19 years).2008.



Source: Høst et al. (2008)

As shown in Figure 2.3, the share of apprentices compared to young employees with other types of qualifications differs significantly between the labour market sectors. In contrast to the sector of building and construction, where nearly all young people employed are apprentices (99 per cent), the retail sector has the biggest discrepancy, meaning the lowest share of apprentices (10 per cent) compared to the overall youth workforce (Høst et al. 2008). In total, there are roughly 320 000 positions categorised as ‘sales worker’, while only 546 new apprenticeship contracts were signed in 2015.¹⁵ This means that only a small minority of the young people employed in the retail sector have completed vocational education. Nevertheless, the retail sector (still) represents a substantial youth labour market, absorbing young people with little formal education.

¹⁵ Utdanning.no and Udir.no

Regarding the field of office jobs, the relative significance of vocational education is more difficult to measure due to the spread of office jobs across several labour market sectors. However, one estimate is approximately 70 000 employed in the category of ‘office and administration worker’. In 2015, 374 apprenticeship contracts in Office and Administration were signed.¹⁶ Within the demarcated occupational category of ‘public administration’ the share of skilled workers (all age groups) is far below the average for all the main industries (Nyen et al. 2015, 188). Only 13 per cent of the workers from the trades in the Service and Transport VET programme reporting that they could not have done their job without the trade certificate (Nyen et al. 2015). Compared to the other VET programmes, this is the lowest share, implying that the skilled worker level does not constitute a significant employment category with a set of distinct responsibilities in these parts of the labour market.

First, both of the trade certificates suffer from low labour market currency and provide a poor basis for career progression (Olsen et al. 2015). Skilled service workers have a higher probability of being neither in education nor employment two or three years after apprenticeship completion (Nyen et al. 2015). Eighty-four per cent of all skilled workers are averagely employed (as main activity) within a short time after completing the trade certificate. For Sales this share is 83 per cent, whereas slightly fewer, 71 per cent, of the newly skilled Office and Administration workers are employed. However, approximately half of the employed people with an Office and Administration certificate have work relevant to the office education (Høst and Reegård 2015, 54), while 69 per cent of the skilled sales assistants have relevant work (Nyen et al. 2015). However, nearly half (46 per cent) of all skilled sales workers employed hold a part-time position.

¹⁶ The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2015: <http://www.udir.no/Tilstand/Analyser-og-statistikk/Fag--og-yrkesopplaring/Sokere-og-godkjente-kontrakter/Sokere-til-lareplass-og-godkjente-kontrakter-2014/>

Table 2.1. Employment and education status in November 2012. Trade exams completed October 2011-September 2012 (as apprentices). Per cent.

	Employed	Education	Neither employed nor in education	Total	N
Office and Adm.	70.9	18.8	10.3	100	223
Sales	83.2	11.4	5.4	100	202
All trades	83.8	9.8	6.4	100	13097

Source: Statistics Norway

As shown in the table, the percentage of people in education post trade exam completion is above the average compared to all other VET programmes both for Sales and for Office and Administration trade, yet more pronounced within Office and Administration. Here, the share of people who are neither employed nor in education is also above the average. However, a lower share of people with the Sales trade certificate is found within this category. This is probably related to the ability of the retail sector to absorb young people.

Second, students in the Service and Transport VET programme are highly undecided in their educational choices due to vague occupational end-points and lack of transparency in labour market destinations (Olsen and Reegård 2013). Approximately half of the students aim towards apprenticeship in a service trade in the first year of their education. The most popular trades are the ICT services, Sales and Office and Administration. In Vg2, students' indeterminacy increases compared to the first year. Four out of ten students in the second year give accounts of taking the education because they did not know what else to choose (Høst et al. 2013). As Olsen and Reegård (2013) show, one implication of the weak institutionalisation of service sector VET is that the classroom teaching is largely disconnected from the labour market towards which it is directed, and the teachers have little relevant education or work experience from service-related work.

Third, there is a substantial ‘leak’ of students from the VET programme between the school-based years and apprenticeship. Since the 1990s the Norwegian VET system has contained an opportunity to switch from the vocational tracks, which do not qualify for access to higher education, to general studies in order to obtain the certificate of ‘general study competence’. What was originally intended as an emergency exit has now become the main route, particularly to students in the VET programmes for Service and Transport, and Health Care, Childhood and Youth Development. Based on average numbers from 2008 and 2009, more than half (52 per cent) of the students opt for this year of supplementary studies (Høst and Reegård 2015). Recently, the educational authorities implemented the right to start on the supplementary year following the completion of an apprenticeship. Nyen et al. (2015) show that 15 per cent of those completing the Office and Administration apprenticeship had embarked on supplementary studies within the first year after their apprenticeship. The equivalent number for Sales apprentices is 8 per cent. The ‘bridge’ or outlet over to general studies represents both a strength and weakness of the Norwegian VET system. On the one hand, the substantial attrition from vocational education indicates that apprenticeship is not considered attractive among the student mass. Approximately 50 per cent of the students fail to complete this supplementary year because there are a great number of academic subjects to catch up on. On the other hand, it provides flexibility to the VET system, and permeability between vocational and academic tracks, which might make the system robust in meeting with increased demands for higher education. This way, the choice of a vocational track does not become a blind alley (Nyen and Tønder 2014). Skule et al. (2002) describe a historical divide between general studies and vocational education in Norway, where the history of upper secondary education has seen many attempts to bridge the divide between general and vocational education, and particularly the gap between the vocational schools and the apprenticeship system. In addition to looking to the historical development of commerce education in order to get an understanding of why these trades struggle to institutionalise, it is crucial to examine characteristics of the labour markets they are directed towards.

2.6 Directed towards different labour markets

The vocational programmes in Sales and Office and Administration are both directed towards big labour market sectors. However, while retail jobs are increasing, the number of office jobs is decreasing. In any case, only a very low share of new entrants to either of these types of jobs is coming from the VET system (Olsen et al. 2008). Entry routes via higher education or in-house training schemes are more common, and offer seemingly more efficient career paths (Høst 2012). The apparent lack of interest for undertaking an apprenticeship might be a result of the fact that students do not want to pursue a career based on the trade certificate, because the trades do not constitute well-established employment categories with a distinct position in the division of labour. Hence, contextualising the trades within the labour markets towards which they are directed is crucial in order to grasp the reasons for their apparent lack of ‘institutional stickiness’ (Boetkke et al. 2008). As suggested in article IV, characteristics of the segments of the labour market towards which the two trades are directed have implications for the learning affordances provided to students, the nature of the occupational socialisation process, and the available career paths. The two trades are, however, directed towards highly diverse and heterogeneous occupational fields in terms of company structure and skills requirements. These external factors affect the conditions for the students’ process of becoming. In office work, lower-level tasks are increasingly rationalised and transferred to employees with higher academic education, whereas in sales, skilled sales assistants are given great responsibility compared to their young unskilled co-workers.

2.6.1 Retail work in Norway

The retail sector¹⁷ is becoming increasingly important for national economic performance. According to the Norwegian labour force survey, the retail sector

¹⁷ The majority, yet not all are employed in the retail sector (face-to-face sales and customer service). Other parts of the retail chain can too be of relevance.

employed 367 000 people in 2014 (Jordfald and Mühlbradt 2015). This makes it the second largest employment sector after the public sector, and there has been an increase in the revenues generated by the retail sector over the last decades. This diverse sector has been subject to significant restructuring the last decades in the wake of constantly changing consumer preferences and growth in online shopping (NHO Handel 2012). More advanced logistics systems, centralisation and the growth of larger retail chains has been accompanied by fierce market competition, smaller margins and great fluctuations in sales revenues and employment (Olberg and Jordfald 2000).

There is an ongoing debate about skills within the retail sector. On the one hand, there are discourses on deskilling tendencies. Because the retail sector is commonly characterised by low-status, low-pay work, employees may be considered as easily replaceable. This implies downward pressures on the skills expectations that employers have of their staff. This, in turn, affects the willingness of employers to invest in training, not to mention the perceived attractiveness of this career path among youth. On the other hand, there are also debates about upskilling in the face of increasingly knowledgeable customers and increased availability of product information. Knowledge and education may come to work as a market advantage.

Retail companies recruit employees from a broad recruitment base comprised of people with a range of different backgrounds. Thus, the retail sector plays a unique role in introducing young people into general labour market roles, organisations, institutions and responsibilities. A main feature of the sector is that the average sales assistant is young. Retail work involves strong elements of so-called life phase work. This means that young people work in the retail sector, frequently for a limited period, perhaps on their way to other graduate destinations (Nyen and Tønder 2014). In particular, larger chains and cooperatives have developed comprehensive in-house training schemes as a way to upgrade existing staff and disseminate organisational cultures and values (Bore et al. 2012).

In a general labour market increasingly demanding higher education credentials, the retail sector still represents a youth labour market and is able to absorb unskilled youth.¹⁸ In the Norwegian labour market in total, approximately 162 000 people report that they have another main activity besides traditional wage labour (foremost young people still in education). One third of these respondents work in the retail sector, which is by far the largest employer of this type of youth labour (Jordfald and Mühlbradt 2015). Moreover, the retail sector is characterised by high turnover rates and extensive use of part-time positions. The sector has a tendency to provide low wages, and unsocial working hours are common (Høst et al. 2013; Olsen and Reegård 2013). The large share of employees with short-term prospects of retail work is likely to partly explain the sector's low union density; accordingly, vocational education and tripartite cooperation struggle to consolidate (Høst et al. 2015; Jordfald and Mühlbradt 2015).

Retail work is diverse; both in horizontal and vertical terms (cf. Baum 2002). Horizontal diversity reflects the breadth of sub-sectors and types of retail employers, ranging from small boutique establishments to global corporate giants. Accordingly, product knowledge requirements and soft skill requirements vary. First, product knowledge requirements might be more pertinent to specialised shops, e.g., within electronics products or automotive sales, compared to generic supermarkets. As analysed in article I, product knowledge enables students to engage actively and with passion in learning and training. Second, front-line interactive service work revolves around interaction with customers. Soft skills include communication skills, 'having a good nose for selling', politeness and friendliness, all traits that pertain to personality and attitude rather than formal or technical knowledge (Gatta 2011; Nickson et al. 2011). These skills are probably important to all types of retail sub-sectors; however, issues of personal appearance might be more pronounced within the fashion and

¹⁸ Currently, shop keepers receiving a record high number of applicants to sales assistant positions make media headlines. Supermarkets report of 500 applications for one vacant position. The director for the Welfare and Work Administration in Norway, grounds this in increased unemployment rates, where people with little or no formal education struggle to find work (NRK 2016: <http://www.nrk.no/telemark/tusenvis-slass-om-butikkjobber-1.12810192>).

beauty segments. So-called ‘personality recruitment’, i.e. when personal traits play a significant role in hiring decisions, might be juxtaposed with formal education. Because soft skills are less easy to acquire and signal through a formal education certificate, the relative importance of the trade certificate might decrease (Nyen and Tønder 2014).

Vertical diversity is reflected the inter-professional hierarchy, ranging from unskilled to skilled to supervisory and management positions. As discussed in article III, shops may have varying hierarchical structures; however, the work teams on the shop floors in this study were characterised by flat organisational hierarchies. There were few or no middle managers between the sales assistants and managers. The environments were largely characterised by task equality in the sense that all employees, the manager included, completed the same types of tasks. This means that there is no established set of tasks or responsibilities reserved for the apprentice or the skilled sales assistant.

2.6.2 Office jobs in Norway

Office jobs are pertinent to all sectors of the labour market. This makes it difficult to estimate the total number of people employed in this line of work or future labour market needs. However, a decrease in office jobs is evident.¹⁹ Generally, the nature of office and administrative jobs has changed over the last decades. The traditional secretary belongs to a bygone age. Today, lower level office tasks, such as entering data into spreadsheets, word processing, document sorting, filing, archiving, and appointment scheduling are increasingly rationalised. These types of tasks have, in part, been transferred from administrative staff to core staff; remaining tasks have been replaced by ICT tools or outsourced and professionalised. Companies that specialise in accounting services, salary services, invoicing, human resource

¹⁹ Statistics Norway 2015:

<https://www.ssb.no/statistikkbanken/selectvarval/Define.asp?subjectcode=&ProductId=&MainTable=Sys selsatteYrk&nvl=&PLanguage=0&nyTmpVar=true&CMSSubjectArea=arbeid-og-lonn&KortNavnWeb=aku&StatVariant=&checked=true>

management (HRM), archiving, ICT support and customer relationship management (CRM) are emerging (Aspøy et al. 2013; Høst and Reegård 2015).

Within office jobs, an ‘academic drift’ is evident. Employers increasingly prefer employees holding higher education degrees to fill office and administrative positions. The reason for this shift might be twofold. First, the nature of office tasks has become more complex and advanced, and accordingly, higher education credentials are demanded. Second, the supply of job applicants for office jobs with higher education has increased. Thus, employers can, and do, choose those applicants with higher education (Høst and Reegård 2015). Consequently, a diminishing part of the vacancies suited for VET graduates remains open to entrants, being superseded by higher education. Accompanied by mass expansion of the tertiary education system, the general education level in Norway has risen steadily over the last decades.²⁰ Within public administration, one third of office employees have a higher education, whereas vocational education makes up 14 per cent (Høst and Reegård 2015, 52). Office and administrative jobs in Norway are largely structured by job titles and occupations such as consultant, HR-advisor, project coordinator, executive assistant, or finance controller. These job positions are created out of, and intimately connected to the higher education system. Automation of services following the transition to new ‘knowledge-based’ economies transforms the skills required. The changes involve a shift away from narrow job-specific skills towards broader, more analytical general skills (Mayer and Solga 2008; Thelen 2014). This might contribute to preclude institutionalisation VET for these sectors.

The work environments the office apprentice is induced into seem to be comprised of two main groups; adult women (with little formal education) who had been working in the company for decades, or younger people holding higher education credentials. Contrasted to the retail apprentice, whose co-workers largely consisted of young(er)

²⁰ Statistics Norway 2014: <https://www.ssb.no/utniv/>

people with little or no educational background and short-term prospects of retail work.

These structural developments taken together affect the employers' willingness to invest in apprenticeship training, and recruit the skilled office and administration worker. Article IV argues for the more brighter-looking institutionalising prospects of the Sales trade compared to the Office and Administration trade, because it seems more feasible to create a slot for the skilled sales assistant in a loosely structured internal labour market (cf. Marsden 1990). In opposite case, it appears far more difficult to institutionalise a distinct space for the skilled office worker in an occupationally structured labour market strongly drifting towards higher education as a criterion for entrance. Within the better-established VET systems of other European countries, vocational training blossoms best in the occupational/professional labour market where there is a reserved position in the division of labour for the skilled worker, who enjoys autonomy and is clearly distinguished from adjacent educational groups 'upwards' and 'downwards'.

2.7 Service sector VET in an international perspective

As discussed above, certain aspects of service work, such as the importance of soft skills, might contribute to explain the weak position of vocationally trained sales workers on the labour market. In other European countries, however, the volume and standing of VET for work in the service sector is much higher than in Norway.

The comparative literature offers different typologies of national VET systems according to a set of key dimensions. Busemeyer and Trampusch (2012) distinguish two dimensions along which training regimes vary: degree of public commitment to VET (as a viable alternative to general studies), and degree of firm involvement. Greinert (2002) differentiates between three types of European training models: 1) the liberal market economy model, 2) the bureaucratic, state-regulated model, and 3) the dual corporatist model. The first model is typically exemplified by the UK, where the relationship between training supply and training demand is regulated by the

market with minimal state control and low firm involvement. France and Sweden serve as examples of the bureaucratic, state-regulated model. Here, training demand is determined by state bodies or bureaucrats, and VET largely follows the logic of the general education system, financed by the state budget. Last, the dual corporatist model, which we find in Germany and Switzerland, has a twofold market and bureaucratic regulation pattern; companies are the primary learning location, but young people also attend vocational schools subject to the rules of the general education system. The Norwegian model is commonly referred to as a combination of the bureaucratic, state-regulated model and the dual corporatist model, comprised of a well-developed system of tripartite cooperation between social partners and the government (Nyen and Tønder 2014). The relevance and applicability of these classification schemes has been criticised due to the great extent of within-country variations. However, they appear frequently in the literature and seem to provide a useful point of departure for cross-national comparison.

Contrasted to the vocational education directed towards the retail sector and office jobs of the UK, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland, the Norwegian education differs starkly in terms of organisational structure, degree of specialisation and popularity.

In the market-oriented training model of the UK, the recent expansion in apprenticeships has been most pronounced in the non-traditional apprenticeship sectors, with Business, Administration and Law, and Retail and Commercial Enterprise being the most popular among students. However, the quality of these programmes, particularly of the retail apprenticeship, is low (Brockmann 2012). Implemented in 2008, the Retail Apprenticeship Framework was a government initiative designed to increase the volume of apprenticeships in the retail sector. In spite of this initiative, employers have been conspicuously absent (Lewis et al. 2008; Spielhofer and Sims 2004). Not unlike the Norwegian context, the UK Retail Apprenticeship suffers from low status and low completion rates (Roberts 2013). The framework is highly flexible, and market/employer-directed. It can be entirely work-based, at the expense of national standardisation (Brockmann 2012). Apprenticeship

within Business Administration enjoys high take-up rates, yet struggles, partly due to its detachment from specific occupations. Rather, generic skills are promoted over the acquisition of job-specific occupational skills (Fuller and Unwin 2002).

Denmark, whose training model resembles the dual corporatist model, is comparable to Norway with respect to size and political and welfare state institutions. In Denmark, however, vocational education within Sales and Office and Administration holds a far stronger position than in Norway (Nyen and Tønder 2014). In fact, VET for retail and office jobs is among one of the most popular vocational educations. Each year, about ten times as many office apprentices are enrolled in Denmark compared to Norway²¹ (Høst and Reegård 2015). Nevertheless, one fifth of the people employed in office jobs are unskilled (New Insight 2009). Whereas the Norwegian Office and Administration VET programme is criticised for being too broadly composed, the Danish vocational education for office jobs is specialised into different occupational sub-fields like administration, public administration, revision, and finance.²² Statistics from 2000 show that the employment frequency of students completing training in the various sub-fields differs: finance education scores the highest (94 per cent employed), while office administration is lowest (78 per cent) (Jørgensen and Smistrup 2007, 81). VET for the retail sector ('Detailhandel') is differentiated into 'flower decorator', 'decorator' and 'sales assistant'.²³ Retail VET has become institutionalised in Danish society to a far larger extent than in Norway, yet one third of all skilled sales assistants leave the retail sector in order to work in other industries (Jørgensen and Smistrup 2007, 100). As in Norway, vocational education programmes for office jobs and retail jobs are combined in the first year (grundforløb), which consists of a combination of school-based and company-based training. Studies show that this first year, common to both the retail and office

²¹ <https://www.uddannelsesnaevnet.dk/statistik/eudmaanedligpraktikpladsstatus/>

²² <https://www.ug.dk/uddannelser/erhvervsuddannelser/kontoruddannelsen>

²³ <https://www.ug.dk/uddannelser/erhvervsuddannelser/detailhandel>

education, largely serves as a time for young people to figure out what they want to do, more than it provides a useful education (Hjort-Madsen 2012).

In Germany, which has a well-functioning dual VET system, the service sector has yet to embrace the dual system on the same scale as manufacturing (Hippach-Schneider et al. 2007; Thelen 2014). Vocational training for the banking sector, however, has been institutionalised successfully (Høst et al. 2008). This contrasts starkly to Norway, where the banking sector is far from establishing apprenticeship as a form of training and recruitment. Despite high take-up rates for the two- or three-year Retail Services education (Kaufmann/-frau im Einzelhandel), VET for the retail sector has decreased in popularity over the last few years.²⁴ Studies reveal that retail apprenticeship is often students' second choice; two-thirds of students view the apprenticeship as a stopgap in the face of a lack of opportunities (Brockmann 2012; Deuer 2007). Substantially reformed in 2004, these occupational training programmes opened for increased diversification and destandardisation. Retail apprenticeship is available in two sub-sectors, clothing and food, with the former being more popular among youth (Brockmann 2012). Regarding the field of office education, Germany has differentiated between various levels. There is the Kaufmann/Kauffrau für Büromanagement²⁵ (Office Manager) education, which largely qualifies people for medium- and higher-level office work, i.e. organising, coordinating and carrying out office management and project processes, documenting human resources related tasks, and using accounting instruments. Office managers are employed by companies in the private economy and in the public sector with sub-specialist qualifications in the areas of: order management and coordination; commercial management and control; procurement and logistics; human resources management, and administration and law. The Office Manager education is far more

²⁴

<https://www2.bibb.de/bibbtools/de/ssl/1871.php?fulltextSbmt=anzeigen&src=berufesuche&keyword=Einzelhandel>

²⁵ <https://www.bibb.de/de/berufeinfo.php/profile/apprenticeship/239212>

popular among youth than the Retail Services education. But here, too, statistics show an overall decrease in take-up rates from the mid-1990s.²⁶

Sharing similarities with the German system, the Swiss VET system holds a strong position, being the preferred choice for students and companies. This goes also for trades within the service sector. Generally, however, Switzerland is witnessing a rising risk of unemployment for people who have completed basic vocational education (Salvisberg and Sacchi 2014). The three-year vocational education Kaufmann/-frau (Salesman) is among the most popular vocational educations among youth. The second most popular education is the two-year Detailhandelsfachmann/-frau (Retail Assistant). The Swiss system distinguishes between two levels of competence: basic level (two years) and extended level (three years). These educations are integrated in the Swiss overall VET system. This implies that companies have the main responsibility to help young people acquire the prescribed competences, but courses provided by the government programmes contribute to this aim (Clematide 2015). The system provides access to higher education to the same extent as to the technical VET programmes, and there are well-developed further education opportunities. Importantly, more than half of the employees in the retail sector have completed a vocational degree as their highest level of education. This is above the average of all other industries. The two largest retail chains in Switzerland have embraced the VET system as a way of recruiting and training new staff. However, similar to Norway, research from Switzerland reveals that VET for retail and office jobs is often chosen by young people who do not know what they want to do (Clematide 2015).

²⁶

<https://www2.bibb.de/bibbtools/de/ssl/1871.php?fulltextSbmt=anzeigen&src=berufesuche&keyword=B%C3%BCromangement>

2.8 Conclusion

The Norwegian VET tracks in Sales and Office and Administration both struggle to gain an institutional foothold among the student mass and employers. The two programmes are directed towards very different types of labour market. Alternative entry routes to fields served by the VET system, such as higher education or on-the-job training for unskilled youth, have become the main way to access both of these occupational fields. To understand why these trades struggle to become institutionalised, the chapter has presented the historical development of education for these occupational fields, illustrating the lack of an apprenticeship tradition. In broad terms, the historical development of the Norwegian VET system originating from the guild-based apprenticeship system, made a successful transition from crafts to industry in the wake of the industrial revolution. However, the VET system has not been able to adapt as smoothly in the transition to the service industry. Labour market characteristics and developing trends affect the institutionalising prospects for the two trades in different ways. The rapidly expanding retail sector largely employs young people with little formal education and temporary prospects of retail work, whereas lower-level office jobs are increasingly rationalised due to technological development, and skilled workers are outmatched by people with higher education.

The brief international review of the standing and organisation of VET/apprenticeships for retail and office work reveals that they appear popular and quite well-institutionalised in the countries that have dual corporatist models. This illustrates that there are no reasons inherent in the nature of retail/office work that preclude the institutionalisation of VET in these parts of the labour market. Rather, it is a result of the weight of previous policy decisions and political debates, where VET and recruitment of skilled labour have come to gain a foothold, though to varying degrees. In the UK, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland, both retail and office apprenticeships are among the most popular of all vocational programmes. There seem to be factors rooted in both historical traditions and in the function and standing of VET in the society that partly explain this. However, the quality of vocational education differs from country to country, and the systems still do not

seem to embrace the 'new' service trades on the scale of the traditional trades within industry and craft. Retail apprenticeship in the UK appears the most problematic, given the weak national apprenticeship framework. The vocational office education in particular is more differentiated compared to the generic and broadly composed Norwegian VET in Office and Administration offering the opportunity to specialise within areas of office work.

Traditionally, the essence of VET is training within a specific trade, i.e. a distinct and demarcated set of vocational skills that lay the foundation for performance of an occupation. A trade is constituted by established occupational categories, a more or less standardised set of work tasks and responsibilities cutting across company-specific skills (Nyen and Tønder 2014). The Norwegian vocational education in Office and Administration is not grounded in clearly defined occupational knowledge and skills, such as typing and shorthand, which were once useful to, and demanded, by employers. Rather, the curriculum is broadly composed, and educational goals of the programme appear vague to both the students and employers. Apprenticeship without a fixed occupational end point finds itself at odds with traditional and conventional understandings about the purpose and nature of apprenticeship (Fuller and Unwin 2003). This makes it difficult to identify the jobs for which office apprentices are being prepared.

3. Analytical framework

The aim of this chapter is to present the theoretical perspectives and sociological concepts deployed to guide the analysis. With the goal of investigating the dialectical relationship between the institutional foundation for VET in the service sectors and students' experiences, the thesis draws on various theoretical strands, involving the nested-ness of agentic and structural elements of analysis. The analytical framework is constituted by three interlinked dimensions: (1) students' self-understanding of their process of becoming, (2) mediated by group-level interaction in the school and workplace and (3) structured by the trades and their capacity to socialise newcomers. In terms of explanatory theory, the thesis adopts a standpoint that believes to arrive at more satisfying answers to the question of why we observe the social phenomena we do, by specifying the micro-level of agentic action (cf. Coleman 1990; Hedström 2005; Turner 1983). This chapter starts by providing an overview of different ways of conceptualising students' educational journey, followed by the structurally embedded, yet agentic process of becoming. Subsequently, theories on the meso-level of analysis are presented, before the chapter describes macro-level theories on institutionalisation processes, influencing the individual's process of becoming.

3.1 Conceptualising students' educational journey

The literature on youth sociology offers a range of possible ways to conceptualise young people's educational journeys and transitions. Evans and Furlong (1997) use the metaphors of 'niches', 'pathways', 'trajectories' and ' navigations' to sum up the changing historical perspectives on youth transitions and social integration over the past decades in a UK context. They argue that the first metaphor of niches in the 60s was shaped by clear routes leading young people to distinct occupational 'niches' of the labour market, whereas the rise of unemployment in the 70s favoured metaphors of 'pathways'. By the 80s, transitions were viewed as becoming increasingly complex and protracted, and the metaphor of 'trajectory' prevailed. Up to this point, structural factors had been emphasised, implying that transitional outcomes were strongly

conditioned by social class and institutional circumstances, and therefore beyond individual control. It was not until the rise of postmodernism in the 90s that an emphasis on subjective orientations in shaping transitions came to the fore with the term ‘navigations’ (Furlong 2009).

Thus, considering youth as an inherently transitional life stage, a great deal of the youth sociological literature is concerned with different types of ‘transitions’, particularly the school-to-work transition. Currently, the significance of de-standardised, prolonged and postponed transitions remains among the least contested issues within the field of youth research (Côté and Bynner 2008; Furlong et al. 2011). Walther (2006) has coined the phrase ‘yo-yo’ transitions – as opposed to linear transitions – in order to capture the messiness of transitions, comprised of the two volatile components of choice and risk. Although they have proved highly useful, traditional conceptualisations of transitions have been criticised for insufficiently taking into account the complexity of lived lives (Aaltonen 2012), and thus risking an oversimplification of young people’s ambiguities into a single status change. Scholars such as Wyn and Woodman (2006) even suggest moving beyond the concept of transition. However, recent re-interpretations of the concept do recognise the processual character of transitions to a greater extent (e.g., Gordon et al. 2008; Stokes and Wyn 2007). By seeking to understand students’ subjective orientations, this thesis aims to challenge ideas of linearity in youth transitions, and to provide a nuanced account of navigations throughout the vocational education span as constituting a continuous extended process.

The thesis inclines towards the agentic notion of navigations, in which agency allows for the individual pursuit of self-interests, but is not reduced to self-interests; here agency is considered as students’ efforts and capacities to control the course of events of their lives (cf. Aaltonen 2013). I am concerned with students’ meaning-making processes as premises of action, understood as the process by which people turn circumstances into comprehensible situations, which serve as a springboard for action. Furthermore, meaning-making is conceived as an on-going retrospective process, in which we rationalise behaviour, yet also as prospective through the

narratives we tell of ourselves, therein materialising self-perceptions (Thornton et al. 2012). The wealth of literature on the ‘choice biography’ (see e.g., the debate between Roberts 2010 and Woodman 2009, 2010), reflects such an emphasis on agency and reflexivity within youth sociology.

However, this thesis is simultaneously concerned with the ways action is structured by the social contexts in which it occurs, where social structures, institutions and circumstances influence students’ subjective accounts. The thesis sympathises with the prevailing perception of national sociological research undertaken on the social construction of the skilled worker in Norway,²⁷ in that an analysis of the process of becoming cannot be conceived in isolation from a wider analysis of the company, the industry and the society within which the skilled worker is situated, socialised and acts. Hence, the thesis emphasises the relevance of locating the VET programme and students’ educational journeys within the institutions of education and labour market structures. Social structures in this sense involve the segmented patterns of employer demand and engagement in vocational training, which in turn are anchored in the structuration of the specific occupational field, i.e. recruitment patterns, the prevailing ways of upskilling existing staff and the composition of the inter-professional hierarchy. Furthermore, the thesis seeks to understand how the structures of the vocational education influence action, i.e. the tensions between considerations of breadth or depth, specialisation or the promotion of generic skills (Olsen 2013). The level of structuration of vocational education programmes forms part of the overall ‘opportunity structures’ in which the students are embedded, and which influence the condition for the exercise of agency. Roberts (2009, 355) defines opportunity structures in the context of school-to-work transitions as constituted by, and maintained in, the “inter-relationships between family origins, education and employer’s recruitment practices.” He argues that their relative structuring forces

²⁷ These studies are primarily conducted by the multidisciplinary AHS (Arbeidsliv-Historie-Samfunn [Work-History-Society]) scientific community at the University of Bergen. Please see e.g., Michelsen (1990) Olsen (1990), Korsnes (1990), Sakslind (1993), Halvorsen (1994b) for elaboration. These studies largely emphasise structural aspects, i.e. the labour market, industrial relations and the educational system within the industrial sector, for understanding the conditions for constructing a skilled employment category.

have been altered over the decades, but that neither the strength of their inter-relationship, nor their combined significance for transition outcomes, has diminished. These types of social structures are conceptualised as culturally, normative patterned expectations called social institutions, which guide and predefine conduct. When objectified, they appear as stable, rigid and as having an objective reality outside themselves (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Lopez and Scott 2000).

In the effort to conceptualise the interplay between institutional arrangements and subjective accounts in order to study its micro and macro-level implications, this thesis adopts the notion of ‘bounded agency’²⁸ (Evans 2007). Bounded agency is considered as socially situated, embodied²⁹ and influenced but not determined by social structures. Neither under- nor over socialised, it denotes individual agency, albeit subject to constraints (Thornton et al. 2012). Thus, bounded agency denotes the dual character of action – how it is simultaneously constrained and bounded yet also enabled and broadened by social structures (cf. Giddens 1984).

In the thesis, the concept of bounded agency serves as an interpretive framework for the process of becoming, which is presented in the subsequent section. The thesis accentuates the structuring effects of institutions, and the ways in which students construct coherent narratives, the meaning-making strategies they draw on, and the structural resources available to do so. The findings illustrate how action is bounded and restricted within the loosely structured environments of service sector VET;³⁰ yet

²⁸ This concept draws on Williamson’s (1975) notion of bounded rationality and Granovetter’s (1985) notion of embeddedness.

²⁹ Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’ refers to embodied social structures, incorporating both personal dispositions for action and the collective, structural pre-dispositions shaped by class, gender and ethnicity (Colley et al. 2003).

³⁰ The findings on the highly structured VET environments of plumbers elaborated in Olsen et al. (2015), show stark contrasts with the students’ processes of becoming skilled workers within the Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade. Aspiring plumbers are smoothly socialised by and into an established community of experienced plumbers, and learn quickly how to ‘be’ plumbers. Here, opportunities are open for those following clearly defined routes.

the very same loose structures enable creativity,³¹ innovation and active participation. Uncertainty and openness require that students develop agency and adaptive competence in order to manage meaningful decisions between alternative pathways to employment (Heinz 2009).

3.1.1 The process of becoming

The concept of ‘the process of becoming’ is derived from socialisation theory (Brezinka 1994). It encompasses the incremental journey from novice to expert (Chan 2013; Dall’Alba 2009). In short, occupational socialisation has traditionally been considered a process through which a new initiate is transformed into a regular, and in which necessary skills and techniques are learned and internalised. This process is considered complete when the initiate is fully accepted into the fraternity of regulars, as a regular (Hughes 1971; Riemer 1977).

There are two reasons why traditional occupational socialisation theory does not suffice to capture students’ journey through the Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade in Norway, as framed within the present study. Firstly, I find the location of the traditional occupational socialisation approach within a normative functionalist perspective as problematic (Lopez and Scott 2000). This entails conformity as an inevitable consequence of the novice’s socialisation into a community of cultural consensus, i.e. one constituted by the skilled practitioners of the trade. The majority of research undertaken on occupational socialisation processes considers this as being a smooth and straightforward process. Here, the process of becoming and eventually being a professional is guided by the clarity of the occupational role in sight. This process is conceptualised in the widely cited work of Lave and Wenger (1991) on the students’ gradual transition from a marginal position to a core position in the work team, conceptualised as one from legitimate

³¹ Joas (1996) suggests the creative character of human action to be distinguished from the prevailing action theoretical notions of rational action and normatively oriented action. He convincingly advocates by defining human actions as creative, one avoids the residual category that rational and normatively oriented action generates.

peripheral participation into full participation in the work community.³² The skill acquisition model of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980), with a similar vocabulary, conceptualises this as a passage from detached observer to involved performer, gradually moving from novice to expert. These conceptual frameworks are too commonly developed on the background of, and applied to, socialisation processes into established professions or semi-professions encompassing a standardised job slot which aspiring practitioners and employees fit into, within designated and even sheltered parts of the labour market (Larson 1977).

By contrast, the two cases explored in this thesis, the Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade are characterised by the opposite, i.e. the absence of trade-specific socialisation structures and skilled socialisation agents. This implies that the occupational socialisation process is far from straight forward. Fuller and Unwin (2004) argue that the dichotomous concepts of ‘novice’ and ‘expert’ in Lave and Wenger’s (1991) vocabulary are neither stable nor uniform. Moreover, the journey cannot be conceptualised as a simple one-way transmission (Fuller 2007). Rather, the novices as well as the experts vary greatly, as do the ways in which learning environments enable or pose barriers to learning.

Second, traditional socialisation theory is frequently criticised for privileging structure over agency. This is rooted in its emphasis on system-integrating processes (Michelsen 1995), and the role of socialisation to maintain the status quo. This understanding assumes that the occupational environments in which novices are steeped by default transform those who enter them. Accordingly, the novice begins to identify with the occupation-to-be and internalises such a role to the extent that it becomes central to her self-understanding (Sandiford and Seymour 2007). Within such an over-socialised perspective, students unquestioningly accept and adopt pre-

³² In more recent works, Wenger (1998) identifies five trajectories of participation in order to accommodate the critique of one-sidedly focusing on the kind of participation experienced by legitimate peripheral participants who are engaged in the transformation from newcomer to old-timer. In addition to such a straightforward ‘inbound’ trajectory, there are peripheral trajectories which never lead to full participation, insider trajectories, identity formation not leading to full membership, boundary trajectories which span boundaries and link communities of practice, and last, outbound trajectories which lead out of a community (Fuller 2007).

defined occupational roles. By using the process of becoming instead of the traditional accounts of occupational socialisation theory, this thesis accommodates the recent shift in the literature from understanding this process as one where individuals passively absorb pre-defined occupational roles with corresponding ready-to-wear identities, to understanding it as an agentic and possibly contested process involving creativity and reflexivity (Brown et al. 2007; Kirpal 2004). Moreover, the concept of the process of becoming is deployed in order to place emphasis on the subjective dimension, and students' diverse orientations, ambiguous and problematic aspects of their ways through the VET system. Given the loosely structured trades of Sales and Office and Administration, a framework which allows for the investigation of more open-ended and non-linear socialisation processes was considered necessary.

The conceptualisation of the process of becoming concerns the individual's evolving sense of self (Allport 1955). This entails one's sense of who one is, how one regards one's place in society and one's abilities and aspirations for oneself (Worth 2009). The sense of self is considered central to our understanding of (non-instrumental modes of) action and agency, serving as a mechanism of reasoning to ourselves. We understand ourselves in terms of possibilities, which provide direction to actions. Whether or how the students picture themselves as future practitioners affects their learning motivation and interest for the occupation-to-be. This directedness means that individuals are continually in a process of becoming (Thomson 2001). Moreover, who one is, and who one imagines oneself to be, depends on those who surround one and those social arenas in which one participates (Tajfel 1982). Thus, the process of becoming is shaped in ongoing social interaction, by past experiences, present chances and perceptions of possible and anticipated futures (Mead [1932]1959).

The process of becoming is intimately connected to the notion of learning. Colley et al. (2003) underscore the mutual constitutive elements with the concept of 'learning as becoming'. The environments in which the apprentice is immersed, i.e. the social, cultural and emotional aspects of work, are not merely factors which influence learning, but are also central to it, and 'becoming' is a crucial part of this process. As

individuals learn, they construct and reconstruct knowledge and skills as well as themselves (Hager and Hodkinson 2009). Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that the novice's learning motivation is triggered and sustained by the relationship between 'newcomer' and 'old-timer', where the novice is interested in bridging the gap between themselves and their more knowledgeable co-workers (Fuller and Unwin 1999). The thesis is located within a strand of literature emphasising a broad concept of learning beyond the acquisition of narrow occupation-specific skills.³³ Instead, learning is considered socially situated (cf. Lave and Wenger 1991), i.e. a social process of participation in activity that is mediated by context.

A proportion of the prevailing perspectives within this field of research is rooted in British-dominated literature and a discourse characterised by the field of educational research and pedagogical insights on learning processes. This is worth pointing out in order to make the reader aware of the literature's local contextual basis, which is not necessarily universally applicable. The historical shaping and structuring of educational and occupational systems, the links between education and employment, governmental control and degree of unionisation are among the relevant factors which differ between countries and educational/employment/transition 'regimes'. In this way, the thesis considers that general, structural aspects have no universal effects on the construction of skilled workers or on the shaping of the process of becoming. Rather, these processes are interrelated with a wide range of other structural elements that vary across times and countries.

Instead, the thesis is located within a broader national and historical context. The perspectives deployed in the thesis resonate with theoretical frameworks and empirical findings on occupational socialisation and identity-formation growing out of Norwegian research, albeit not applying the notion of 'becoming' explicitly. Michelsen (1995) provides a comprehensive account of the company as an arena for

³³ Five traits might characterise a 'narrow' perspective on learning: first, learning only recognised in formal educational settings, second, learning only dependent on a teacher, third, always involving a process of knowledge transmission from teacher to student, fourth, learning perceived as a product to be acquired, and fifth, learning understood as essentially an individual cognitive matter (Fuller 2007).

socialisation through the interlacing of biography and the organisational context within Norwegian industrial production. Based on the evaluation of the major national educational reform, R-94, studies show the significance of ‘practical’ work, authentic and meaningful work tasks, and the transition to the labour market’s binding norm structures for the shaping of student motivation and self-perceptions (e.g., Mjelde 2006; Olsen 2004). These insights are developed by Gjelstad (2015), who using ethnographic methods focusses on the significance of youth cultures for students’ participatory experiences in the workshop.

The intention in adopting the concept of ‘becoming’, rather than traditional conceptions of occupational socialisation theory, was to emphasise agentic navigations towards vague labour market end-points, but without ignoring the social context in which this process is situated. Hence, one crucial point is that the shaping of the self and basis of action is intrinsically connected to the social environment, while the actions of individuals cannot be understood unless they are related to the actions of others (cf. Hedström 2005). The next section addresses theoretical perspectives on the ‘meso-level’ of analysis. By this I mean the significance of local, group-level sociology when investigating the process of becoming.

3.2 The group-level learning context

I consider the students’ processes of becoming as being significantly influenced by the local groups they encounter, within the learning arenas of school and workplace. By explicitly addressing the context of social interaction on a group level, this thesis aims to construct a vocabulary which bridges the self and the institution (Hallett and Ventresca 2006). A local context where shared understandings arise from continuing interaction provides a basis for action and stability, while social structures depend on groups with shared pasts and imagined futures that create identifications (Fine 2012).

The thesis applies the concept of ‘learning environment’ in order to capture how local groups and organisational environments constitute the contextual factors conditioning

the process of becoming. In this way, the learning environment framework³⁴ is sensitive to the mutual relationship between structure and agency. The literature offers dichotomous ideal types of learning environments. In order to grasp the conditions for learning within apprenticeships, Fuller and Unwin (2003) identify features of ‘expansive’ and ‘restrictive’ participation. They suggest that the three components of participation, personal development and institutional arrangements underpin two different approaches to categorising apprenticeship. The ‘enabling’ and ‘constraining’ types of learning environment developed by Ellström et al. (2008) focus on organisational learning. These conceptual pairs represent ends on a continuum, illustrating factors simultaneously promoting and limiting the learning opportunities (affordances) provided (Billett 2004).

The concept of learning environment involves a dual basis in two respects, which the thesis aims to grasp. Firstly, one can distinguish between the technical-organisational/trade-organisational and the socio-cultural dimension of the learning environment. The former denotes how the workplace and the school are organised professionally, technically, architectonically and organisationally with production objectives/teaching objectives, quality requirements and evaluation procedures, etc. The socio-cultural dimension emphasises the ways in which the students as learners act and interact in different kinds of groups and communities with distinct interests, values and identities. The social dimension is constituted by three dimensions, i.e. productive (work or study practices), political (power struggles) and cultural (shared values and norms) (Jørgensen 2004, 2006; Jørgensen and Warring 2003).

Secondly, the study of learning environments can be approached in two ways: on the one hand, the researcher may approach the study of the learning environment as an objective social ‘reality’. This means focussing on the objectification of knowledge, the organisation of skills, the division of labour, task characteristics and curricular

³⁴ The concept of learning environment shares similarities with that of ‘learning cultures’. According to Brockmann (2012, 40), learning cultures “constitute distinct systems of meanings, which are simultaneously structuring and are being structured by the dispositions, beliefs and values of social actors within them.”

content, observed by the researcher as distinct systems independent of the students (Jørgensen 2006). On the other hand, one can study learning environments as a subjective social ‘reality’. This implies focussing on the students’ subjective experiences of learning and becoming, and on the degree to which they engage in the learning affordances provided (Billett 2001). Irrespective of the researcher’s ‘objective’ study of the learning environment, it is ultimately the students’ perception of and active relation to it that determines its impact on learning (Olesen 2001).

Even though the students and the learning environment can be analytically distinguished, they constitute and transform each other in the learning process (Jørgensen 2006). In the literature, this is conceptualised as the ‘co-construction’ of learning environment (e.g., Bloomer and Hodkinson 1997; Evans et al. 2006). This entails seeing the students as active participants and co-creators of the learning environment, and simultaneously as agents of the transformation of it. This mutual interconnection results in the transformation of students and their environment. Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) demonstrate the intimate intertwining of learning and the transformative process of becoming by studying how students’ orientations to learning changed over time within different types of learning environments. The students’ experiences were accompanied by a rise in self-confidence and they reported becoming ‘different’ people (Brockmann 2012).

The next section elaborates on the concept of ‘occupational community’ as an arena for learning, a model of learning and reflecting a particular learning environment. Thus, the context of the learning situation, the collective group and the social relations it comprises, becomes the unit of analysis. I consider this as a fruitful approach to study the collective character constituting vocational trades, and students’ processes of becoming (cf. Olsen et al. 2012).

3.2.1 Occupational community

The notion of ‘community’ has a long history in sociological analysis. Yet its use and popularity has varied greatly, from Ferdinand Tönnies’ ‘loss of community’³⁵ to its application to studies on occupations and work behaviour, assuming that the relationships formed in the workplace replace the wider communities in providing a sense of belonging and commitment. One question is whether the concept of community can be adapted to the study of face-to-face and interactive service work, where work demands differ from those in either traditional industries or professional occupations (Sandiford and Seymour 2007).

Returning to the aforementioned distinction between learning environments as ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ realities, the concept of occupational community shares a similar duality. Salaman (1974) identifies two key features of occupational communities: the first refers to readily observable phenomena such as the concrete group and the tendency to associate with, and make friends with, members of one’s own occupation. The second refers to the process whereby practitioners subjectively perceive themselves in terms of their work role and internalise such a role, and the norms and values associated with it, to the extent that it becomes central to their self-understanding. The literature commonly presupposes a sense of subjective emotional engagement with work as a necessary condition for the development of occupational community (Sandiford and Seymour 2007; Van Maanen and Barley 1984).

Fuller and Unwin (1999) explore the extent to which community can still be considered relevant when studying contemporary forms of apprenticeship,

³⁵ The classical sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies developed the ideal types of *Gemeinschaft* (communal society) and *Gesellschaft* (associational society) in his seminal work of 1887, *Community and Society*. The former refers to the face-to-face relationships arising out of emotions characterising traditional societies. *Gesellschaft* is typified by modern, cosmopolitan societies with their bureaucracies and large industrial organisations, governed by rational will. This calculating and self-interested behaviour weakens the traditional bonds of family, kinship and religion which were relevant to the *Gemeinschaft* structure. However, the breakdown of traditional *Gemeinschaft* values in the wake of industrialisation caused many nostalgic scholars to romanticise the *Gemeinschaft* structure. This misuse of Tönnies’ dichotomy represents a failure to acknowledge that *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* are ideal types and not classificatory categories (<http://www.britannica.com/topic/Gemeinschaft-and-Gesellschaft>).

characterised by the increasingly fractured nature of social and occupational relationships. When organising modern apprenticeship systems on the basis of traditional values – i.e. immersing the apprentice in communities of more experienced workers that the apprentice interacts with and learns from – policy makers, employers and VET actors face great challenges. Fuller and Unwin (1999) display a somewhat nostalgic attitude by advocating for the re-creation of the positive aspects of past communal structures built around substantial learning and support infrastructures. Importantly for service sector occupations, Korczynski (2003) extends this work by linking it to the practice of providing young people with the creation of a motivational sense of belonging, while highlighting the ways a sense of community (i.e. communities of coping) can contribute to informal support systems among frontline service workers. She frames her analysis within a sociological understanding of the customer as a key source of both pleasure and pain for service workers, which is relevant to, and complicates the question of, occupational community.

However, it is perhaps Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of 'communities of practice' which has been most influential within the field of vocational learning. This is a contested, yet highly influential concept, which has recently been associated with organisational development and used as a managerial tool (Hughes et al. 2007; Wenger et al. 2002). The main rationale of this literature is that students learn and become by participation in a community of practice. Hence, it is important to scrutinise the concept of community of practice in order to grasp the character of the process of becoming for students traversing VET for retail and office work in Norway.

The structural characteristics of a community of practice, in Lave and Wenger's (1991) vocabulary, are comprised of three aspects. Firstly, a domain of knowledge creating common ground, secondly a notion of community and thirdly a practice around which the community develops. Moreover, it is distinguished from other social networks by mutual engagement (common norms and collaborative relationships), a joint enterprise (a shared understanding of what binds the members

together) and a shared repertoire (a set of communal resources) (Wenger 1998). In this way, and accentuated by the notion of ‘community’, the community of practice is constituted by a distinct culture, i.e. beliefs, sentiments and symbols as collective representations that people share. This includes the stock of knowledge, skills, ‘how-tos’ and values that occupational practitioners hold in common, providing them with general principles for action and legitimating beliefs (cf. Lopez and Scott 2000). All of this is considered as being transmitted between the community’s members and acquired by the novice through the process of socialisation. Here, the novice internalises the shared culture, and in doing so ensures the continuity and uniformity of the specific community of practice. The development of sentiments of belonging, commitment and social affiliation is considered to be intertwined with this process; cf. the aforementioned discussion on the use of socialisation theory.

The relevance of the community of practice for learning and becoming is widely recognised; however the ‘quality’ and characteristics of the kind of learning environment the community of practice provides is rarely the object of investigation. The analytical framework of Lave and Wenger and situated learning theory includes a range of problematic aspects, and has been criticised accordingly.³⁶ Firstly, the concept implies unity and harmony, e.g., in the terms of ‘mutual engagement’ and ‘shared repertoires’, assuming that the apprentice, employees and manager share common interests (Fuller 2007). Secondly, despite Lave and Wenger stressing the general utility of the framework to encompass all types of learning arenas, the framework is primarily developed based on, and intended for, the analysis of workplace learning. Thus, it is less suited for the very different learning environments of ‘formal’ learning in school and ‘informal’ and naturally occurring learning in the workplace (Brockmann 2012), a combination which constitutes the Norwegian VET system.

³⁶ Please see Fuller (2007) for an elaborate critique of this framework.

One crucial point of discussion regarding the use of ‘community’ in sociological analysis revolves around whether the concept is to be understood as physical, immediate, face-to-face relations located in the classroom or workplace, or as also including abstract, distant and imagined communities (cf. Anderson 1991), which provide discursive resources, grand narratives, myths and stereotypes for the students to identify or de-identify with. This translates to the distinction between occupational and organisational types of commitment. Gouldner (1957) illustrates this by developing two ideal types of employee’s role orientation and according reference group orientation: ‘Locals’ are employees foremost committed to the concrete organisation in which they work, and their ties to the employer are stronger than identification with their profession. ‘Cosmopolitans’ are employees primarily committed to maintaining the skills, knowledge, norms and values of the profession in large. Actors have multiple social identifications, i.e. openness to a category or person, such as the work team, the organisation, political party, gender, ethnicity or age group. Ashforth and Mael (1989) emphasise how agency is derived from social identifications.

Hitherto, I have addressed the local, physical group level, but in order to grasp the process of becoming it is crucial to address the types of abstract communities and resources that students draw on when forming (or not forming) sentiments of belonging. The next section elaborates on the ways the composition and structure of the immediate group is affected by macro-level structures, because actors not only interact with each other in groups, they also ‘interact’ with, and are influenced by broader social structures³⁷ (Hedström 2005).

³⁷ Thomas Schelling (1998, 33) provides a clarifying everyday example of this distinction: “I interact with an individual if I change lanes when his front bumper approaches within five feet of my rear bumper; I interact with a social aggregate when I adjust my speed to the average speed on the highway” (cited in Hedström 2005, 70).

3.3 Institutions and institutionalisation

The socialisation capacity of the two vocational trades in question conditions and is conditioned by the character and course of the process of becoming. As shown in the previous chapter, the Norwegian Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade struggle to gain a foothold. This implies seeing them as weakly institutionalised, understood in terms of the degree to which conventions acquire the status of being socially accepted in, and embedded into society (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Currently, these trades are struggling to acquire regularity, stability, legitimacy and support, and are thus characterised by a limited ability to coordinate, structure and discipline action. Put differently, it is only to a small degree that the two trades in question produce cultural symbols, material practices, values and beliefs, by which the students or employers can provide meaning.

The literature offers a wide range of ways to define institution. Broadly speaking, it is defined as the more enduring features of social life (Giddens 1984). More specifically, Turner (1997, 6) suggests defining institutions as:

“A complex of positions, roles, norms and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organising relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing life-sustaining resources, in reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment.”

Informed by Aakvaag (2012), institutional theory in general can be classified into four main strands.³⁸ Firstly, the functionalist strand explains the emergence of institutions and their form with their societal utility and the functional role they play, e.g., the state, family etc. Secondly, there are institutional theories of rational choice, where institutions coordinate and regulate collective action problems by providing rules and sanctions, such as language and traffic rules. The third strand refers to

³⁸ Please see Lopez and Scott (2000, 27–29) for an overview of the historical development of institutional theory, from structural functionalism in the 50s and 60s, periods of abandoning the concept and favouring micro-perspectives, grounded in the critique of structural functionalism, followed by neo-institutional theory in the 80s, and the proliferation to organisational studies. Recently, Thornton et al. (2012) claim to set out a new course for institutional theory through ‘the institutional logics perspective’.

historical institutionalism, which emphasises the impact of political actors, power struggles, coalitions and compromises. Here, path dependent mechanisms are prevalent, in which historical ‘locking-in’ of particular institutional arrangements leads to stability and inertia. Fourthly, the strand in which Turner’s (1997) definition is located is that of sociological institutionalism. The social and cognitive features of institutions are emphasised over constraining features. Here, it is foremost internalised norms as rules of appropriateness and culturally produced ‘action scripts’ that regulate and reproduce action.

Within the research field of VET, the notion of institution perhaps translates more easily when applied to the German notion of ‘Beruf’ (‘profession’). A Beruf is founded upon a distinct scope of activities and a code of conduct, and constitutes a strong social identity with a recognised social status. The notion is equated with the occupational socialisation process in which the Beruf becomes part of an individual’s self-identity (Brockmann 2012; Heinz 1995). Here, young people’s choice of a vocational education provides access to a specific occupation, recognised as a viable alternative to higher education. Moreover, it provides guidelines for the education curriculum, it constitutes the basis for the division of labour, and it is a basis for unionisation (Jørgensen 2009, 2013). This picture differs starkly from the standing of the Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade in Norway, yet there are various dispersed and fragile efforts at institutionalising. As described in the beginning of this chapter, the socialisation capacity of an institution influences the subject positions available for individuals to step into and make their own. Put differently, I conceive of the institution as constituting the structural factors that contribute significantly to making available, yet without fully determining, the resources for the construction of the self. This includes establishing a common history, training tradition, shared occupational ethos, values, practices, professional standards, socialising role models and subjective commitment, in the sense of practitioners’ identification with the trade. Olsen et al. (2015) show that a trade and a skilled employment category cannot prosper unless it is accompanied by a basis for autonomous skilled work, collective orientation and collective identities.

At the same time, wider societal forces impact on the making and shaping of trades as institutions. Traditional trades growing out of the craft tradition, where practical skilled work is primarily learnt through experience, represent a unity of specialised work, skills and training, and a basis for the social organisation of the members of the specific trade. Related to the increasing historical separation of work and education, the learning of the trade has similarly been gradually separated from the practice and performance of the specific type of skilled work. This entails that a significant proportion of the vocational learning is school-based (Jørgensen 2013).

3.3.1 The process of institutionalisation

The vast body of literature on institutional theory and institutional change provides elaborate theoretical accounts of the diffusion and reproduction of successfully institutionalised practices. Yet it commonly lacks explanatory power when it comes to the origin, emergence and disappearance of institutions (DiMaggio 1988). This ‘weak spot’ is rooted in insufficient conceptualisations of agency within prevailing institutional theory. Hence, in order to understand the process of institutionalisation, concepts of active agents become prominent. This is crucial in order for the process of institutionalisation to include both the implementation and the internalisation of new practices, i.e. to achieve collective meaning (Thornton et al. 2012). Currently, the Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade in Norway appear as ‘uninhabited institutions’, i.e. lacking sufficient internalisation of practices where students, employers and collective actors consider the vocational education as valuable and have become committed to the practice. Thus a social institution, like a vocational trade, cannot prevail only by virtue of its functions; it must also be perceived as meaningful by the social actors who make up the institution (Jørgensen 2013).

In order to accommodate the critique of an absent concept of agency, DiMaggio (1988) underscores the potential impact on institutionalisation of political actors. He argues that “new institutions arise when organised actors with sufficient resources see in them an opportunity to realise interests that they value highly” (DiMaggio 1988,

14). Political actors might have the capacity to reproduce existing institutional arrangements by socialising new participants, and to create new institutions by organising the efforts of ‘institutional entrepreneurs’. The concept of institutional entrepreneurs has attracted considerable attention in recent years, and seeks to link actors as engaging in competition for the ability to own and frame an idea with actors as expressing their self-interests in shaping how this idea is institutionalised (Thornton et al. 2012). However, this perspective reduces motives for action to self-interest rooted in a rational choice approach. Instead, entrepreneurs might act on the basis of moral motives. Institutional theory commonly emphasises processes of continuity and conformity. By contrast, the literature on institutional entrepreneurship emphasises how organisational processes and institutions are shaped by agentic entrepreneurial forces that bring about change – despite the path dependent mechanisms involved (Garud et al. 2007).

There are a number of potential analytical approaches available when investigating the social dynamics, the shaping and structuration of trades. Their historical evolution is particularly represented by the historical institutionalist strand, which emphasises the weight of previous decisions. Here, agency, interests and power, the developments that have made the institutions what they are today, why some countries have been more successful in institutionalising VET than others and the issue of institutional change are reintroduced to the analysis of institutions (Thelen 2004). Hence, trades can be understood as inherited institutions, where their form, function, content and borders are shaped by traditions and historical struggles. The specific historical development of the relationship between the labour market and the educational system socially constructs and produces ‘qualifications’ and employment categories, embedded within the constellations of the company, the industry and the society in which the skilled worker is situated. Continuous changes in the structuration of this constellation leads to the reshaping and modernising of trades. New trades emerge, and formerly unskilled jobs become ‘professionalised’ requiring formal (higher) education as an entrance criterion (Jørgensen 2013).

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has prepared the ground for investigations into the interlacing of students' subjective experiences of their VET journey, and the institutional structuring of the Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade. The body of literature on which the thesis builds is partly rooted in the field of 'educational research', yet it draws on broader sociological insights in order to provide crucial contextualisation of the process of becoming. In doing so, I locate the thesis within a Norwegian research tradition, which has in different historical and largely structure-dominated ways investigated the issues of occupational socialisation, structuration of qualification domains, but also student motivation and learning within VET. The thesis nuances and extends these strands of research in three, interrelated ways: firstly by providing a conception of the subjective experiences of the people inhabiting the institutions under scrutiny, secondly, a developmental, processual perspective, accommodated by the concept of 'the process of becoming', and thirdly by investigations into the 'qualification domain' (cf. Korsnes 1990) of service work, which is characterised by differing conditions for occupational socialisation and institutionalisation. Crucial questions emerging revolve around what kind of participation is opening up to the students, and in what kind of occupational communities.

Several 'dualities' have been pointed out. Firstly, the interrelated nature of agency and structure, as partially autonomous levels of analysis, yet intimately constituting each other; secondly, loose institutional structure which simultaneously enables and constrains action. Thirdly, the chapter addressed the meso-level of analysis, and the dual nature of learning environment, which one may approach as an objective and subjective reality – both being crucial in order to understand the process of becoming. Finally, another duality is related to the 'mechanism' through which the students' narratives can be used to say something about the wider institution and institutionalising processes, and how the structures of the institution influence the student narratives. This dialectical relation is rooted in the mutually reinforcing 'cyclic' or 'holistic' 'functioning' of VET. This is formulated by Drexel's (1989)

proposition of the dependence on equal employer and student engagement in order for trades to institutionalise. Running the risk of tautological argumentation, this means that when unmotivated students enter the VET system, the employers do not become particularly interested in investing in training. When employers do not demand their skills, and there are no other collective actors who do, the most motivated students move on to other activities. Furthermore, within weakly institutionalised trades, when there is no reserved slot in the labour market or in the companies' division of labour, students have a hard time picturing the trade as a viable career path. Lessons learned over the course of history show that there is limited government leeway around the rather fragile and 'holistic' functioning of the institution that is VET.

4. Methodology and data

The aim of this chapter is to make visible and discuss the methodological foundations underpinning the thesis. The chapter starts by outlining the general methodological framework, i.e. a qualitative narrative approach, which theoretically frames the application of methods and analysis. This is followed by an account of the longitudinal research design, which is comprised of four waves of data collection on the same students across the duration of their education. Contextual information on the study is then provided, before substantial attention is devoted to each of the data collection waves, sampling and interpretive strategy. Lastly, the chapter discusses the challenges, trade-offs and ethical dilemmas of the research.

4.1 A qualitative narrative methodology

The thesis takes the micro-level of interaction as the location of articulation, yet aims to continually include its interconnection with macro-level processes. It is located within interpretive sociology in a Weberian sense, which means taking human individuals, their ideas and their actions, as the starting point for sociological analysis (Hughes et al. 2003). Locating the thesis within the general methodological paradigm of qualitative inquiry was considered appropriate, given its sensitivity to understanding people's shared meanings of lived experiences, and the ways in which we reflect on, and ascribe meaning to, social practices (Limb and Dwyer 2001). The epistemological stance taken is one where the relationship between me as a researcher and the students I interview is considered as interdependent. Both are embedded in the same social world, where meaning comes into existence in, and arising from, our engagement with it (Crotty 1998). This view implies that scientific knowledge will always be shaped by the interaction between the researcher and the people or topic being researched, an assumption frequently associated with a social constructionist perspective. This contrasts with approaches that see research as producing some objective 'truth' which is waiting to be discovered (Guba 1990; Weber 2004; Yates 2003).

More specifically, the thesis engages in narrative methodology. The relevance of narrative to the sociology of the self, and the ‘storied-ness’ of social life is well established (e.g., Ezzy 1998; Maines 1993; Stanley and Temple 2008). The methodological framework constructed here rests upon two assertions interconnecting interpretivism and narrativity: (a) students’ knowledge of the self is an interpretation, and (b) the interpretation of the self is mediated through narratives (Ricoeur 1991). On that account, the thesis attempts to understand how processes of becoming are constituted by, and manifested through, the narratives which students construct according to their own subjective frame of reference (Williams 2000). Following Cunliffe (2011), when perceiving knowledge as personal and experiential, the methodological approach needs to focus on how people give meaning to, interact with and construct their world.

The thesis draws largely on the insights of scholars who represent perspectives which emphasise the shaping of selves, these always being selves-in-relation-to-others through the concept of narrative (e.g., Ricoeur 1992). Here, one aim is to avoid the pitfalls of ‘essentialist’ and pre-constructed conceptions of identity, such as race, sex or gender (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Somers 1994). Rather, by interpreting the ways the students make sense of their worlds, accessed and mediated through narratives, the aim is to openly investigate their diverse processes of becoming, and the relational embeddedness of these processes. Traditional accounts of the use of narrative in the social sciences have been limited to narratives as merely a representational form. The newer approaches that I adopt take a stronger epistemological and ontological stance. This means that “it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, (...), and constitute our social identities” (Somers 1994, 606). This furthermore implies that it is through the narratives the students tell of themselves, and their navigations through the vocational education, that I as a researcher can access knowledge about the interconnectedness of their senses of self and motivations for action. The hermeneutic ‘circle’ of the narrative methodological framework revolves around the interpretations in which ‘objective’ events, e.g., the transition from school to apprenticeship, are constructed within ‘subjective’ narratives that in turn shape

action, and that are again re-constructed in narratives (Rosenwald 1992). Thus, narratives are not only relevant to understand the interviewees' past, but this approach also enables us to make sense of the present (Watson 2008). The literature emphasises the 'need' for individuals to construct coherent narratives (Linde 1993). According to Ricoeur (1981, 170), when retrospectively rationalising previous action, "looking back from the conclusion to the episodes leading up to it, we have to be able to say that this ending required these sorts of events and this chain of actions" (cited in Watson 2008, 334).

Narrative methodologies entail the investigation of interlinked analytical levels. Firstly, narratives are produced as an 'internal dialogue' or 'internal conversation', continually on-going (Archer 2003). Secondly, they are constructed intersubjectively in interaction with others. Thirdly, narratives are sustained and transformed through the influence of social structures (Ezzy 1998). The thesis strives to understand the ways through which students' narratives are constrained and enabled by the macro-processes and labour market contexts in which they are embedded, and the institutional resources they draw on in the creation of coherent narratives. In his study of mental asylums, Goffman ([1961] 1976) underscores the 'politics of storytelling', i.e. how narratives are grounded in social networks and institutions. He directs attention to the influence of institutionally located power in the construction and maintenance of narratives. Instead of focussing on the narrative content as unmediated records per se, the thesis seeks to identify the ways in which the narratives reflect and shape macro-level structures (cf. De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008).

One relevant dimension of narrative methodology is that of its incorporated temporal and processual character, as an unfolding or becoming in social life (Stanley and Temple 2008). Here, both retrospective justifications of past events and anticipations of the future are organised to provide a coherent self-concept which directs action, and provides individuals with a sense of personal continuity through time (Leccardi 2008; Mead [1932] 1959). Sequencing is a central aspect within narrative research. Here, narratives should be understood as "organizing a sequence of events into a

whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole” (Tamboukou 2008, 284). In the attempt to understand how the students construct, and are constructed by the narratives they tell, the study is designed as a qualitative, longitudinal design, in which interviews constitute the main method of the thesis.

The longitudinal student interviews were the central focus of research, but a wide range of relevant actors surrounding the students in different learning arenas of the course of VET were interviewed. One main focus of the student interviews was their present, prospective and retrospective sense of self, and their reflections on becoming skilled. Thus, the questions and probing deployed encouraged them to apply hindsight to their narratives. The interviews were semi-structured in character. This entails that, assisted by an interview guide, there was a predefined set of topics that I wanted to cover. However the order of the topics and the relative time devoted to each topic was determined by the dynamics of the particular interview (cf. Nadim 2014). Moreover, it was important that the interviews gave room for interviewees to bring up additional topics that were important and relevant to them.

The qualitative longitudinal design enables the study of process, change and continuity, and of the students’ subjective narratives of the education they traverse. The longitudinal design is sequenced according to the structure of vocational education, running from school-based education via apprenticeship to post-apprenticeship completion.

4.2 The longitudinal research design

The rationale for designing the study as qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) was to explore the students’ processes of becoming and navigations situated in the contrasting settings of retail and office apprenticeship. Therefore, a research design which enabled the study of process and change was deemed necessary. Change can be distinguished into change over time, i.e. underscoring differences between 'then'

and 'now', and change through time, i.e. the process of change and aspects of the journey (Saldaña 2003). This thesis emphasises the latter.

Longitudinal research is traditionally seen as much more associated with quantitative studies. However, there is a growing interest in this form of panel design within qualitative research too, particularly within social policy studies (Corden and Millar 2007; Lewis 2007). This emerging interest is also evident within educational and youth studies, e.g., through the study of transitions, the constitution of pathways and how change and adaptations take place (McLeod and Thomson 2009). According to Holland et al. (2006), QLR enables access to the understandings that mediate the ways in which people deal with and respond to social change. Contrasted with studies of a single point 'snapshot' approach, the QLR method is simultaneously sensitive to the changing environments the students find themselves within, and to the ways in which they subjectively negotiate the changes that occur in their lives (O'Reilly 2012).

The dominant contemporary model for QLR, and the one adopted in the present study, is that of prospective repeat interviews. This entails re-interviews with the same individuals over a certain time period. The backbone of the data collected is comprised of individually conducted interviews with students conducted through four 'waves' across a period of three years:

- t1: School-based education
- t2: School-apprenticeship transition
- t3: Apprenticeship
- t4: Apprenticeship-employment transition

QLR brings great potential advantages and strengths; however, the design also includes a series of challenges that call for interpretive caution. Informed by Lewis (2007), change can be expected in how the students' narratives unfold, and in how they reinterpret and retell their stories as the series of interviews progresses. When asked to reflect back on previous events and to recall their reasons for educational choices, they may have forgotten their initial motivations, or certain aspects are only perceived as relevant in the context of later events. This might involve

inconsistencies in how the same event is reported and interpreted in different ways. Alternatively, this might have involved students' wish to represent themselves to the researcher with a coherent narrative. Either way, the students displayed different degrees of awareness of how their views had changed. Mostly, inconsistencies were left unmentioned. However, asking the students to apply hindsight to their narratives is one of the strengths of QLR, and can produce important insights. Yet changing interpretations present a challenge to drawing clear conclusions about the meanings and interpretations of the research findings. Furthermore, there might have been changes in how I as a researcher interpreted the temporal character of the data over time, partly due to the lack of analytical closure until the last wave of data collection was completed. As the longitudinal study progressed, I got the chance to know each of the students better, and became likely to see them more clearly in relation to each other. This might have altered my interpretations in light of more information gained through the maturation of the data set.

Finally, organising, analysing and presenting such temporal and multi-layered data were challenging. There are several potential analytical directions. Most importantly, data can be read in two ways, depending on whether privilege is to be given to the individual biography over time (diachronic) or spatial and social aspects (synchronic) (McLeod and Thomson 2009). Thomson (2007) soundly argues for the need to integrate these two analytical directions, making out one of the strengths of QLR, yet also one of its most challenging aspects. Though combining diachronic (longitudinal) and synchronic (cross-cutting) analyses, I made the choice to sequence the analysis in a synchronic/cross-sectional way for the presentation of the findings. This was partly due to the difficulty of maintaining a stable sample of the same retail students over time. The strategy chosen is reflected in the articles comprising the thesis: the first article is based on the first wave of interviews, whereas the second is based on the second and third wave, and the third includes the whole longitudinal study of office students. However, it would have been useful to present each participant and his/her 'career' in greater depth. Before describing the different waves of data collection and sample in detail, the context of the study is elaborated.

4.3 Time and place

This thesis is part of a larger national research project, involving researchers from Oslo (NIFU, Fafo and Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences), and Bergen (University of Bergen). The team of nine researchers and sporadic research assistants were involved, albeit to different extents, in the stages of planning, execution, analysis and dissemination. This means that the research sites, data collection periods (spanning from spring 2012 to autumn 2015) and timing of interview intervals of the PhD study were more or less fixed. It was particularly during the first intensive round of data collection that several members of the research team travelled together to the various schools. Thus, a proportion of the data collection process was conducted with, but also by, other participants of the project team. However, efforts were made so that I conducted nearly all of the interviews with students on the Sales, Service and Security VET programme, and I conducted all of these re-interviews. I also contributed to collecting data from other VET programmes than that of Sales and Office and Administration, partly to assist, and partly before the scope of the thesis was determined. I conducted interviews with students/apprentices/teachers/department managers/workplace trainers within the VET programmes in industry and crafts, i.e. the programmes of Technical and Industrial Production (Vg2), Climate, Energy, and Environmental Work (Vg2), and Industrial Machine Operation and Maintenance trade (Vg3). These provided me with comparative insights which proved useful when analysing the institutional dimensions of the Sales and the Office and Administration trades.

Research was conducted in three (out of 19) counties in Norway, reflecting geographical diversity. These counties are characterised by distinct local labour market structures, a varying popularity of VET among youth, and urban/rural composition. However, all three counties chosen represent relatively strong VET traditions, i.e. in an industrial and crafts sense (Høst ed. 2013). First, Rogaland is positioned on the west coast. Here, the country's highest proportion of the youth cohort enters the vocational system. The industrial profile of Rogaland is primarily characterised by the all-pervasive oil industry. Good pay and high status make this

industry appear attractive to young people. Second, the county of Telemark is located in the southeast of Norway. It is relatively small in population terms, yet heterogeneous in respect of landscape and industry. Telemark also has longstanding industrial traditions, largely within the mining and hydropower industries. Today, they have become a hub for producing, among other things, advanced technological products for the oil industry. Thus, the dream of working offshore was relevant to young people in Telemark. The third county was Nord-Trøndelag. This is the smallest of the three and is positioned in mid Norway. The third largest city of Norway is in Nord-Trøndelag, but the research sites chosen here were of more rural character. This county relies to a lesser extent on industrial production than do Rogaland and Telemark; agriculture is more significant. Overall, the analysis did not find any great variation regarding the geographic dimension. This could be considered a relevant finding in its own right, however, was not sufficiently analysed in the thesis.

Data were collected in the participants' own setting. This means that I, together with the research team, visited a range of locations within the three counties, primarily various upper secondary schools and various training companies. The schools ranged from relatively small (450 students) to large (up to 1100 students) and from long-established to new and modern, either exclusively offering vocational programmes, or where these were combined with general study programmes. In terms of the data collection on the apprenticeship period, the training sites represented a vast variety of public/private sector companies within different industries.

Limited observation onsite in the wake of the interviews proved highly valuable. Being able to get a sense of the learning site atmosphere provided important contextual information and richness to the data. The school visits often involved a guided tour of the building, and sometimes even lunch with the teachers in the common room. At several occasions, I was in the class room in order to inform the students about the project, and the interview procedure. The teaching was largely organised as blackboard teaching, where the students completed textbook tasks. Occasionally, there were group-based tasks or oral student presentations. Efforts to capture the 'school cultures' proved difficult. However, from interviews with

department managers and teachers, one significant impression was of teachers complaining about the unmotivated student mass in the Sales, service and security VET programme. In the combined VET and general study schools, several of the teachers reported preferring teaching students on the general study programmes. However, it was also evident that the few enthusiasts made great positive impacts. The students largely gave accounts of good class environments, but there were a very few instances of bullying and very negative stories of the teachers from the students. However, even those students who described themselves as school-wary seemed to enjoy school as a place to hang out with friends. The context of company-based apprenticeship was obviously quite different. The apprentices were introduced to work environments which were used to taking responsibility for apprenticeship training to varying degrees. During the company visits, however, the impression was of employers taking their responsibility with the utmost seriousness. The managers were largely satisfied with the apprentices, and the apprentices mostly thrived in the training companies.

4.4 Four waves of data collection

The main longitudinal design was comprised of one baseline interview and three rounds of re-interviews, here called ‘waves’ of data collection. This design was most closely adhered to within the Office and administrative educational course. Within retail, it was deemed necessary to recruit new apprentices after the second wave due to student attrition. Importantly, data were collected from actors surrounding the students throughout the education span. Department managers and teachers in the schools were interviewed during the first wave, whereas workplace trainers/managers were interviewed at two points in time during the third and four waves.

Supplementary data were collected from Training Offices. These are small private enterprises, owned by the apprenticeship companies, which link schools and training companies. In general, about 80 per cent of all apprenticeship companies are members of a Training Office, and they are typically either geographically or industry-specialised (Høst et al. 2014). Training Offices follow up with the apprentice

and support the apprenticeship company in their training efforts. A detailed overview of the research sample in each data collection wave is outlined in table 4.1.

Table 4.1. Overview of data collection and research sample.

Wave	Phase/learning arena	Participant		Other actors
		Retail	Office	
t1	School-based learning	12	8	Middle managers in schools, teachers
t2	Initial stage of apprenticeship	3	7	
t3	Mid-point of apprenticeship	11	7	Managers, Training Offices
t4	Completed apprenticeship	9	7	Managers

In the baseline data collection wave, the students were at the end of their second (and last) year of school-based education. At this stage of spring/early summer, they were about to commence apprenticeship or move on to other activities. The second wave was conducted the following autumn, and centred on the students' transition from school to apprenticeship. The third wave was conducted approximately 10 months later. Now the students were about mid-apprenticeship. The last wave was carried out approximately 12 to 15 months after the previous wave. This was either immediately before or shortly after the students had finished their final trade exam and their vocational education was completed. They were now about to make the transition to paid employment or further education. This frequency of interview intervals constitutes a dense data set. The regular engagement made it possible to study change in a 'close-up' way.

All of the interviews were conducted individually, audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Research assistants were used for transcribing. In order to strengthen data on the 'institutional level', policy documents and historical data were analysed, and I conducted two interviews with people who had great knowledge of, and a key position in, the making of education reform, and the establishment of VET for retail and office work at the end of the 1990s. In what follows, the data collection waves and the sampling strategies are presented.

4.4.1 The first wave

The baseline interviews constituted the most comprehensive data collection wave. At this point, the students were at the end of the second year of the school-based part of their vocational education, i.e. the programme in Sales, Service and Security. Those intending to follow the 'main' VET route were then about to progress to apprenticeship (either within the Sales trade, the Office and Administration trade or the Security trade) the following autumn (cf. figure 2.2).

This first wave comprised visits to six upper secondary schools, two in each of the three counties; Rogaland, Telemark and Nord-Trøndelag. Within each class, six to eight students were interviewed. The students were more or less recruited by the teacher. We requested a sample which would ideally cover variations regarding gender, diversity of school motivation, and diversity regarding retail or office apprenticeship intentions. One potential danger was that the teachers selected the best students to participate. However, in the smaller schools, a sample of eight meant that the whole class (or all of those who were present that day) were interviewed. The interviews were conducted during ordinary school hours, usually in a separate classroom, lasting between 30 to 40 minutes. The first wave of student interviews mainly covered topics such as the reasons for commencing a service sector-directed vocational education, their past and current school experiences, and immediate and longer term plans for the future.³⁹

A total of 43 students were interviewed in this wave. Although the end of school was rapidly approaching, several did not know what to do next. However, the majority had applied for apprenticeships, but would not get the confirmation from the county administration until midsummer. Eight of the 43 students wanted to pursue apprenticeships within Office and Administration, whereas 20 wanted to enter retail. The preference for finding an apprenticeship slot varied, however. The remaining students either did not know what to do next, planned to take a gap year (consisting

³⁹ Please see appendix 1 for the student interview guide.

of work or travel), or change to another vocational track. In order to be able to return to the students for re-interviews, they were asked to provide their telephone number and email address. All of the students were willing to do this.

The teacher and department manager interviews were conducted prior to the student interviews, in order to obtain knowledge of the student population and any problematic aspects of the class that the researchers should be aware of. The department managers were typically responsible for the learning content and organisation of the teaching staff. I conducted all of the six department manager interviews, one in each school. There were two relevant teacher categories; those teaching general subjects, and those teaching vocational-specific subjects (frequently the main class teacher). Both types were interviewed at each school, amounting to a total of 12 teachers. The department manager and teacher interviews covered topics such as levels of student motivation, development across years, labour market dialogue and reflections on the VET programme as a whole.⁴⁰ These interviews lasted approximately 1 hour.

4.4.2 The second wave

In the second wave of data collection, limited re-interviews were conducted with those students who intended to pursue retail or office apprenticeship based on the first wave of interviews. I was able to reach seven out of the eight students intending to embark on apprenticeship within the Office and Administration trade, but only three out of the 20 who were planning a retail apprenticeship. We also reached several young people who had changed their plans, or did not obtain an apprenticeship slot, and were thus in other activities than apprenticeship training. However, the study focusses on those who commenced an apprenticeship.

The office training companies represented a variety of organisations/agencies in the private and public sector, ranging from a county-level financial department via the

⁴⁰ Please see appendix 2 for the teacher interview guide.

administrative department in an upper secondary school, personnel management departments in large oil service companies to a shopping centre administrative office. The retail apprenticeship companies were an automotive retailer, an electronics store and a hardware store. These interviews covered topics such as initial apprenticeship experiences, how they had obtained the training slot, whether they intended to stay on in the apprenticeship company and whether they intended to pursue the trade certificate.⁴¹ Given highly resource-demanding and time-consuming data collecting, involving travelling to three counties and visiting the students in a range of scattered apprenticeship companies, these brief follow-up interviews were conducted by telephone, lasting approximately 15 minutes each. One crucial aim of this wave was to maintain communication with the students, keep track of their pathways, and to strengthen the interviewee-researcher relationship.

During this wave, I conducted additional interviews with those who did not commence apprenticeships, but instead entered the supplementary year of general studies, which has become a 'normal' route for students on the Sales, Service and Security VET programme. However, these data did not constitute a significant part of the thesis.

4.4.3 The third wave

At the time of the third wave, the students were halfway through the apprenticeship period. I was able to make contact with all of the seven office apprentices and the three retail apprentices from the previous wave. However, in order to ensure a more robust empirical foundation within the Sales trade, I recruited additional participants. Thus, there was a two-stage sampling of retail students. The sampling strategy for this second stage was to recruit apprentices who were similarly mid-apprenticeship, and within the same three counties, as the original participant sample (of three retail apprentices). I contacted the county municipal administration and various Training Offices, and received lists of apprenticeship companies. This proved to be time-

⁴¹ Please see appendix 3 for the interview guide.

consuming and difficult, yet additional eight retail apprentices were interviewed. The selection criteria were to obtain gender balance and retail subsector variation. The additional retail apprenticeship companies represented a broad variety of retail subsectors, ranging from an electronics store via a supermarket, a beauty products retailer, a combined sweetshop and video rental, a kitchen supplies and home decor shop to a sports and leisure equipment retailer. The total apprenticeship research sample now comprised eleven apprentices (six men and five women). These interviews largely covered topics such as concrete work tasks, workload, work and learning environment, perceptions of becoming skilled, how the apprenticeship period had changed since the beginning and reflections on plans upon apprenticeship completion.⁴²

For both the three original and the additional apprentices, the students' workplace trainer or manager was interviewed. This provided useful contextual information and illuminated the significance of the skilled employment category to the company. Typically, the manager working closest with the student was interviewed. The total manager sample for office and retail apprentices was 14. There were two managers who did not want to participate, and on two occasions one manager had the responsibility for two apprentices each. The manager interview was conducted prior to the student interview, and covered topics such as perceptions of the apprentice and his/her development, work progression, organisation of work and learning, motivations to recruit an apprentice and employment prospects post-trade exam completion.⁴³

4.4.4 The fourth wave

At the time of the fourth and final wave, the vocational education was about to be or had recently been completed. Students had finished the trade exam, and were now on their way to a range of activities. The interviews were mostly conducted while the

⁴² Please see appendix 4 for the interview guide.

⁴³ Please see appendix 5 for the interview guide.

students were still in the apprenticeship company. I was able to return to all seven of the office students, and the three retail students who had been participating throughout the whole longitudinal study. I reached six of the eight additional retail students recruited in the previous wave. Either the others did not pick up the phone or they had finished the apprenticeship period. This last set of interviews revolved around what they planned to do next: start working, returning to school or something else. In hindsight, how did they see the vocational education they had recently finished, and what were their plans and hopes for the future?⁴⁴ Additionally, the managers/workplace trainers were re-interviewed. The topics covered were largely similar to the ones given in the last wave, but centred on issues of the trade exam, and the overall development of the apprentices.

Parallel to this last wave, efforts were made to reach previously ‘lost’ participants, missing from the longitudinal design. From the Sales, Service and Security programme, we managed to interview an additional two – one who had commenced office apprenticeship, and one within the Sales trade. These interviews were brief, and conducted by telephone. They largely covered a status update and future plans.⁴⁵

4.5 Interpretive strategy

Making the interpretation process explicit involves displaying aspects of the research process and the way the data were treated post-collection. The interpretive analysis was built inductively from particular to general themes, whereas theory and knowledge of the research field worked as ‘sensitising’ tools, suggesting directions of where to look (cf. Blumer’s (1969, 148) sensitising concepts), guiding the questions asked, and enabling discovery and understanding of patterns in the data.

⁴⁴ Please see appendix 6 for the interview guide

⁴⁵ These follow-up interviews, and the ‘detective work’ it implied, were conducted by research assistant Sigrid Hernes MA at the University of Bergen.

Firstly, immediately after the school and company visits (waves 1 and 2), I wrote down my immediate reflections as field notes (approximately 1 page). The main intention was to capture and remember the atmosphere of the learning site, to better remember the context of the interviews, and thus to better understand the interviewees' responses. One important tool for conducting the diachronic analysis, following each participant over time, was what the research team termed 'meso-level analysis document'. This document grew cumulative and 'organically' as the number of re-interviews progressed. Shortly after each interview was completed, I gathered brief notes and initial reflections in this document, organised as a 'case profile' of each participant (cf. Thomson 2007). This document then provided condensed accounts of changes in the participants' circumstances (school, apprenticeship, employment, gap year status). It also proved particularly useful as summaries of the ways the students' narratives and ways of becoming developed over time.

Second, the data were subjected to interpretive analysis. This entails systematically searching for the meanings that are expressed, and the meanings which are implicit or taken for granted (Haavind 2000; Little 1990). In so doing, I pose concrete questions about what actors do, and the meaning they put into it. In this process, I bring the data material into dialogue with the broader theoretical and empirical field. The narrative interview method implies that the participants were constantly engaged in so-called 'emplotment'. This means locating themselves in narratives, whereas I was looking for markers of social affiliation and particular ways of identifying or de-identifying. The term emplotment builds on Somers (1994), and denotes "plots constructing and conveying the self without explicitly existential language" (Foster 2012, 940). This process is taken as the narrative manifestation of identification, made 'visible' through statements of categorisation (e.g., "I am/ I was"). Alternatively identification with the 'in-group' was strengthened by definition of 'out-groups' (e.g., "they are").

The phase of interpretation and analysis involved a massive condensation of the data, reading the data both in a diachronic and a synchronic way. More specifically, the data were analysed by thematic text-close coding (Tjora 2012). Subsequently, these were clustered in terms of key topics. These operations entailed dividing the text (i.e.

the transcripts) into bits, ranging from two to three words to a few paragraphs. Then, the data bits were re-organised according to overarching themes (cf. Mello 2002). When dividing data into discrete fragments, one runs the potential danger of diminishing, misinterpreting and thus over- or under-reading the nature of the narrative as a whole. However, I strived for a context-sensitive analysis by carefully bringing back the context of the interview situation and the context of the school or workplace in which the interviewee was situated. This way, efforts were made to take the whole of the interview accounts into consideration.

A combination of within-case analysis and cross-case comparison methods was deployed (George and Bennett 2005). This means that for the analysis of the student interviews, each individual was treated as a specific case, subjected to in-depth analysis. One of the specific strengths of longitudinal interviews is precisely the accumulation of responses to be read in light of each other (McLeod 2003). Thus, subsequently, each individual story was compared with the other individual cases in search of patterns of similarities and differences.

4.6 Challenges and trade-offs

During the research process I encountered several challenges. I will outline four of them in what follows. Firstly, one major challenge with QLR is student attrition, to which this type of research is particularly vulnerable. This means withdrawal of participants along the way. It is well established that the ones who cease participating in a longitudinal study are usually specific groups. One unfortunate implication of attrition is that the data material is characterised by the most motivated students. Those who did not succeed in obtaining an apprenticeship slot, or who had no plans for the future, may have been less inclined to accept the interview situation. This was evident for the three 'original' retail students who participated throughout the entire longitudinal study. Two of them in particular were very motivated, giving accounts of wanting to work within retail for a long time, and both wanted to pursue a retail career once they had completed their apprenticeships. However, the supplementary student sample, interviewed at two points of time, represented greater diversity as to

motivations and ambitions. Yet, importantly, the PhD study was concerned with those who followed the main vocational track, i.e. two years of apprenticeship progressing directly from school. This is solidly reflected in the sample.

Secondly, intimately connected to the issue of attrition is that of the trade-off between breadth and depth (relevant to all types of qualitative research). This was a challenge particularly encountered in the first data collection wave. Ideally, I would have liked if the interviews could have gone more in-depth into the students' experiences, encouraging them to tell their story freely and uninterrupted. However, there are two main reasons why this was difficult to implement. Firstly, a comprehensive pool of baseline participants interviewed in the first wave was deemed necessary given the high probability of students dropping out of the vocational education, and/or withdrawing from the study. Put simply, I knew I would lose participants along the way. Hence the interviews needed to be of limited scope and duration in order to manage to interview the high number considered necessary. One potential danger is that this impeded the establishing of a trustful relationship between researcher and interviewee and secures the individuals' contact information for the follow-up interviews to come. The second reason for opting for a semi-structured interview guide is rooted in the fact that the PhD study was part of a larger research project. This implied that there were several researchers conducting the interviews, and the interviews needed to cover several topics to be analysed within different thematic parts of the overall study. This meant that the data material primarily contained narratives of education and employment, and did perhaps not qualify as 'real' biographical interviews (cf. Wengraf 1998), although there were openings for the interviewees to bring up topics which they found relevant. However, issues of family background and the leisure sphere were still maintained. Even though the interview situation did not enable telling of life stories based on free association, my experience was partly that 17 year olds (particularly boys) were not always that talkative, even within the limited framework of the semi-structured interview.

The third challenge I want to attend to involves the lack of analytical closure in longitudinal research, which is particularly evident when presenting the analysis the

way I do, i.e. largely cross-cutting. One major advantage of QLR is the potential to study the development of orientations ‘in formation’. Yet, the “open-ended nature of longitudinal research challenges the authority and stability of our interpretations” (Thomson and Holland 2003, 237). Subsequent waves of data collection could potentially challenge and alter the initial interpretation. This was partly handled by the ‘meso-level analysis document’ in which I recorded my in situ interpretations, and which thus enabled me to reflexively relate to any interpretive revisions in an explicit way. A decision made in the research process with significant consequences, was that of either a ‘monograph’ or an article-based dissertation. As I decided for the latter, the possibilities to investigate each single student’s development process in-depth, was more limited.

Lastly, challenges arose related to the transferability of findings and the validity of claims based on a relatively limited research sample. Yet, the data set of the thesis is intense, and gathers a lot of information on each participant. As such, this requires care in generalising the findings across to other contexts, i.e. to “claim that what is the case in one place or time, will be so elsewhere or in another time (Payne and Williams 2005, 296). Mostly, qualitative researchers strive for generalisation in some way or another,⁴⁶ yet this is frequently addressed in opaque ways (Tjora 2012). The thesis strives for what Williams (2000) terms ‘moderatum generalisations’, which he considers both unavoidable and desirable. Here, aspects of the specific case can be seen as instances of a broader set of features recognisable from everyday life, based on the presence of shared culture (Fairweather and Rinne 2012). One way of generalising within qualitative research is so-called conceptual generalisation by the construction of concepts, categories, models, typologies or theories with relevance to other cases or study objects (Tjora 2012). In the thesis, this is exemplified in article 1, employed to present comprehensive patterns in the empirical material.⁴⁷ Typology-

⁴⁶ Scholars such as Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, on the contrary, argue that generalisation in qualitative research is neither relevant nor the intent, or even possible (Payne and Williams 2005).

⁴⁷ Even though Max Weber is considered the founder of ideal types, several scholars have been concerned with ideal types; e.g., Alfred Schütz has made substantial contributions to our understanding of typology-making, not only as a method, but meta-theoretically on how individuals constantly perceive and make sense of

making is both a form of conceptual generalisation, yet also a strategy of analysis (Doty and Glick 1994). The procedure was to condense the clustered data patterns into a limited number of descriptions, and then labelled. These ‘types’, then, one-sidedly underline particular characteristics at the expense of others (Halkier 2011).

4.7 Ethical concerns

Conducting qualitative research in general and QLR in particular is associated with a range of ethical dilemmas. Here, I intend to address four ethical considerations I found particularly relevant to the study; the protection of participants, the issue of informed consent, respecting the participants’ privacy, and lastly objectification of the participants and the use of categories.

Firstly, the schools, department managers, teachers, companies, workplace trainers and students were anonymised in order to maintain confidentiality. In the presentation of the analysis, the students were given fictitious names. The total amount of data and transcripts was gathered in a secure password-protected web domain, so that all of the project members, but only them, had access to the material. The research project is approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Service (NSD).⁴⁸ Yet dilemmas nonetheless arose. Because one cannot always anticipate all the relevant questions in the interview guide, at the end of the student interviews, I asked whether there was anything they would like to tell me about which I haven’t thought of (cf. Woliver 2002). At a very few occasions, the students opened up about instances of bullying or very negative teacher experiences. Concerns revolved around whether to break the promise of anonymity, and report the severe episodes, for example to the school management.

everyday life (Schmidt-Hertha and Tippelt 2011). Weber’s use of the term is however considered more theoretically driven, compared to the empirically founded types constructed in article 1.

⁴⁸ See appendix 7, and <http://www.nsd.uib.no/nsd/english/index.html> for further information.

Secondly, two ethical concerns arise related to the principle of informed consent, which constitutes an ‘ethical cornerstone’ of the conduct of qualitative research (Homan 1992). Firstly, conducting QLR involves the issue of ongoing negotiation of informed consent. Participants may agree to take part in each interview. However, it is unlikely that they are able to grasp the cumulative power of the data set, and the potential long-term consequences of how they are portrayed (McLeod and Thomson 2009). Given the solution of presenting the analysis largely in a cross-sectional way, the intensifying focus on each individual as the data material matured is reduced. Secondly, given that the teachers selected the students (data collection wave one), it is difficult for me to judge the degree of ‘informed’ and ‘consent’. I was not present when this selection process took place. Did the students volunteer, or did the teachers order them? Moreover, the teachers knew little of the project beyond the letter of information sent to the school principle in advance of our visit. Thus, it was of crucial importance to thoroughly inform the students about the project before we started the interview, and to allow them the opportunity to withdraw without consequences.

Thirdly and intimately connected to the aforementioned dilemma, is the ethical consideration of respecting the participants’ privacy and close relationships. In order to reduce (the risk of) student attrition, it was crucial to get in touch with the participants ahead of each wave of data collection. Hence, creating a trustful relationship between the researcher and the students was of outmost importance. When should I accept that they no longer wanted to participate, or when was I calling at a time they were busy? It was not so easy to find the balance between eagerly wanting to get in contact with the students, and at the same time show respect and not to exert pressure. It is my responsibility to consider whether the participants were comfortable in the interview situation. The interaction arising from the qualitative interview situation, and the knowledge produced affects the participants and their situation (Kvale 1997).

Fourthly, concerns and dilemmas emerged related to the fundamental ethical dilemma in qualitative research, i.e. objectification of the participants. This relates to the somewhat problematic idea that I as a researcher ‘know best’ or at least ‘better than’

the participants, meaning that I assume interpretive authority beyond the participants' self-understandings. I am concerned with interpreting the students' meaning-making processes on the basis of their subjective frame of reference. This comes with an ontological difficulty. Thus, I as a researcher must be able to find a way of seeing 'through' the world as it appears to the students in order to grasp how they experience it. However, each student has an individual and unique experience of the social world. This implies some kind of essentialism, where I attempt to go beyond how things appear to me in order to capture the students' 'reality'. First, I assume that there exists such a different reality, and second, that I can access this reality through some kind of method. Thus, qualitative researchers have had concerns or hesitated to employ abstractions, simplifications and reductions, grounded in nervousness about using theoretical terms that differ from the ones used by the interviewees (Hammersley 2008). Hagen and Gudmundsen (2011) rather argue that a scientific interpretation *must* go beyond the actors' own concepts and understandings. It is difficult to 'solve' this dilemma other than by showing consideration to the participants, yet we cannot guarantee that they will recognise themselves in the analyses (Nadim 2014). Furthermore, the emphasis on agency bears with it two problematic aspects: firstly, one runs the risk of idealisation and of romanticising the actors, and secondly, there is the epistemological fallacy rooted in the fact that actors will always say they are in control of their lives (Aaltonen 2013).

The categorising activity employed by qualitative researchers is termed by Hacking (1995) a 'looping effect of humankind'. The term refers to when the participants become aware of the classifications used to describe them. Then they can choose to adapt to, or escape these classifications that are applied to them which might open up new ways to think of themselves and new ways to behave (Hacking 1999). In the thematic research field I operate within, this is of key importance. Students opting for a vocational education have been suffering from a disparity of esteem, where vocational skills are assigned lower status in a hierarchy of knowledge and value when compared to academic tracks (Stevenson 2005). In a policy-perspective, VET students frequently appear related to terms connoting problems: unmotivated, dropout, school-wary, not 'suited' for academic studies. It is therefore crucial to

avoid assumptions and categorisation which simplistically reinforce negative images of students in vocational education.

4.8 Conclusion

In efforts to understand how processes of becoming are constituted by, and manifested through the students' subjective narratives of the vocational education they traverse, I locate this thesis within a qualitative, interpretive narrative methodological framework. The total research sample and data material underpinning the thesis is comprehensive. The four waves of data collection of the students of the Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade constitute the 'backbone' of the design. The qualitative longitudinal research design holds great potential, yet simultaneously comes with a range of challenges. These have been discussed together with ethical considerations and dilemmas following the conduct of qualitative research.

5. Summary of the articles

The thesis is comprised of four articles. All of them are based on the qualitative longitudinal study. The last article, however, emphasises the institutional level of the trades, and is to a larger extent based on stakeholder interviews and public documents. The first article concentrates on the students' diverse orientations to retail work based on data from the school. In the second article, I shift focus from the Sales trade to the Office and Administration trade. This article explores the students' journey through the office vocational programme, spanning from school, apprenticeship, to post-apprenticeship completion. The third article investigates the retail apprentices' learning environments and conditions for the process of becoming, based on their apprenticeship experiences.

5.1 Article I

Diversity of occupational orientations in Sales vocational education and training

Reegård, K. (2015). Diversity of occupational orientations in Sales vocational education and training. Journal of Education and Work, Published online.

Submitted: 27 February 2014

Accepted: 29 January 2015

Published online: 24 March 2015

The topic of this article is the stage wherein students begin to orientate themselves towards different occupations in the context of VET for the service sector in Norway. The aim is to extend understandings of the initial process of becoming by analysing students' subjective accounts of their diverse paths into retail work within the weakly established Sales education. In doing so, the article elucidates conditions for successful transitions into service employment by investigating how young people become prepared to enter retail work, motivational factors, or how they are diverted away. The analysis is based on qualitative interviews with 43 students in upper-

secondary Sales VET in Norway. Twenty of these students wanted to pursue retail apprenticeship and constituted the 'baseline' for the longitudinal research design.

A fourfold empirically grounded typology of the students' diverse orientations is developed. The types as analytical constructs represent an accentuation of specific traits at the expense of others in order to convey what is essential about a phenomenon. First, the disoriented Drifter represents a typical trait of the student mass; drifters enter the programme by happenstance, illustrating the open, ambivalent, uncertain and temporal character of the students' educational choice-making. These students are eager to move on to other activities; they often drift on to retail apprenticeship without developing any substantial interest for retail work. They want to start working and become more independent. Second, the product-oriented Consumer is driven by a strong personal interest in the line of products, e.g., fashion, music, cars or electronics, and the sense of lifestyle they convey. The combination of education, work and hobby, functions as a powerful motivational factor. Drawing on 'coolness' and style, the apprenticeship provides them with a sense of being in charge of their own life projects. Third, the service-oriented Professional reasons based on satisfaction deriving from the act of providing service to customers. These students identify with being a service-minded person and develop a sense of belonging to core aspects of the sales occupation and the Sales VET programme. They display occupational pride and distance themselves from stereotypical images of annoying sales assistants. Fourth, the career-oriented Aspirer is motivated by advancement opportunities within the retail sector, either a management position or establishing their own company. Here, career and money prospects are driving forces. The retail sector may provide opportunities for young people who are able and willing to quickly progress up the work hierarchy, although not everybody can become a manager.

The article interprets the plurality of student orientations to retail work in relation to the weakly institutionalised Sales vocational education. The education does not introduce students to a strong community of experienced skilled sales workers by which and into which they can be socialised. Instead, students develop diverse types

of self-understanding and orientations towards retail work, based on what they already know of a world of work familiar to them. This comes to act as motivational force.

5.2 Article II

Creating coherence: A longitudinal study of students traversing vocational education for office work in Norway

Submitted: 3 August 2015, YOUNG

Accepted for publication: 23 February 2015, in press

This article examines young people's active participation in their own socialisation process, by following students' journeys through the weakly institutionalised vocational education for office work in Norway. The analytical point of departure is that of youth sociology, and the increased difficulty of creating coherent narratives in times of uncertainty and discontinuity of transitions, as portrayed by the prevailing literature. The article explores the subjective meaning-making strategies students draw on when constructing coherent narratives. The empirical context of the article is the weakly institutionalised vocational education for office work in Norway, which struggles to engage students and employers. The transition to relevant employment post apprenticeship is weak, and the trade certificate is of low labour market currency.

The study is based on qualitative longitudinal prospective repeat interviews. This method entail following the same students over a three-year period, including four points of data collection 'waves'. The students were interviewed at the end of the school-based part of the education, at the very beginning of the apprenticeship period, mid-apprenticeship, and shortly after apprenticeship completion. Additionally, the students' teachers and workplace trainers were interviewed. The apprenticeship companies sampled in the study represent a variety of different private and public sector companies.

The students were uncommitted when they entered the school-based office vocational education and had little knowledge of what to expect or of what (skilled) office work entailed. Thus, they began the apprenticeship period without any fixed preconceptions or expectations. They were all welcomed warmly; they thrived, and began to consider skilled office work a potentially viable career path. However, by mid-apprenticeship their enthusiasm had dampened. The students learned that employment in their company upon apprenticeship completion was unlikely. Moreover, due to the low currency of the trade certificate in a labour market for office jobs that favours higher education credentials, this implied that it was accordingly difficult to obtain an office and administrative position in another company. This situation was the cause of great uncertainty in student's school-to-work transitions.

These circumstances affect the resources available for constructing coherent narratives. However, the students were not considerably disappointed. By reinterpreting their vocational education as being of general utility, in line with general studies, they do not appear regretful. This attitude has possible roots in three aspects of the students' experience: first, because of their lack of a fixed trajectory upon entering the program, there was no significant deviation from a main plot of planned events. Second, the students interpreted their difficulty in finding employment post-apprenticeship within a general discourse in which extended transitions have become normal. Their peers commonly postponed the transition to paid employment through education, part-time work or a gap year. Third, the students' seemingly trustful attitudes might be explained by the current Norwegian economic climate, high levels of social capital, a generous welfare state, and generally low youth unemployment rates.

The students' renegotiations of the meaning of their education were a significant part of their construction of coherent narratives, and thus a way for them to take part in their own socialisation process. Interpreted within the framework of the process of becoming, the students did not become skilled office workers, yet they developed self-esteem, matured, and acquired important work experience.

5.3 Article III

Sales assistants in the making: Learning through responsibility

Reegård, K. (2015). Sales assistants in the making: Learning through responsibility. Vocations and Learning, 8(2), 117–133.

Submitted: 18 April 2014

Accepted: 5 January 2015

Published online: 18 February 2015

By investigating how retail apprentices take on added responsibility in the workplace, the article addresses the importance of becoming competent to the socialisation process and the feeling of pleasure that derives from doing something well and being recognised by others. Those apprentices who performed well in roles of responsibility were granted further autonomy, leading to a positive feedback cycle and affirming their occupational ‘sense of self’. The article analyses how able apprentices move from dependent learners to competent sales assistants. In doing so, the article nuances prevailing accounts of lack of guidance as purely detrimental to workplace learning by underscoring the positive impact responsibility and autonomy may have on the development of self-esteem, and the process of learning as becoming. The article argues that the level of trust the apprentices are given, and the responsibility they assume, are conducive to the process of becoming because they subjectively engage the apprentices. Through this, they strengthen their position in the work team and become responsible participants in the work community. The apprentices themselves reported enjoying the degree of responsibility they had. Some progressed rapidly up the hierarchical ladder.

Detailed data were collected in nine shops that provided apprenticeships, representing a variety of retail sub-sectors in Norway. The analysis is based on interviews with managers (7) and apprentices (11). The empirical findings reveal managers who, more or less deliberately, make apprentices responsible for tasks from day one. Some managers reported not having the time to ‘micro-manage’ apprentices around the clock, while others believed the responsibility the apprentices were given made them

better. Either way, the apprentices had to handle tasks with limited instruction and guidance. The article argues that ‘being responsible’ is less an ‘inherent’ personality trait than it is conditioned by and embedded in the trust relations and the learning environment of the workplace. The study demonstrates how the shops’ organisation of work, institutionalised work roles, and task allocation affect the degree of responsibility delegated to the apprentices.

The weakness of vocational training in the Norwegian retail sector necessitates a discussion of problematic issues. Do apprentices learn to become skilled retail assistants, or do they represent cheap labour to the shop keepers? The data do not indicate apprentice identification with a trade community of skilled sales assistants, which is a weakly established category in the Norwegian retail sector. Certainly, early release of responsibility, and excessive lack of guidance may pose limitations on learning, running the risk of leading to learning stagnation, lack of initiative and isolation. The retail sector is conventionally perceived as a learning-impooverished environment. However, the article concludes that the transfer of responsibility to apprentices at comparatively early stages of training fosters processes of becoming. The findings reveal rich learning opportunities in expansive learning environments, creating a foundation for institutionalisation of the Sales trade in Norway.

5.4 Article IV

Contrasting prospects: Institutionalisation of VET for retail and office work in Norway

Submitted: 17 February 2016, Journal of Vocational Education and Training

The article investigates the institutional foundation for developing VET for retail and office work in Norway. Currently, the trades of Sales and Office and Administration are struggling to gain a foothold. Neither the skilled retail nor office worker is embedded as a well-established social or employment category. The article draws on theories of institutionalisation processes and key factors for trades to successfully institutionalise, within the general framework of institutional theory. The analysis is

based on a comprehensive data material: qualitative interviews with apprentices, employers, stakeholders, training offices, representatives of trade unions and employer organisations.

The article emphasises the relevance of looking to the historical context of commerce and office education and the labour market characteristics of the two fields in Norway in order to understand the struggle to institutionalise them. First, the occupational fields of retail and office lack traditions of apprenticeship as a training and recruitment practice. Instead, school-based education has been the main model for several decades. Office and administrative education has had strong links to the higher education system, whereas the retail sector largely has relied on in-house training schemes. Second the two trades share a great many similarities, yet they are directed towards very different parts of the labour market.

The Sales trade is a rapidly expanding sector of the labour market, characterised by companies with loosely structured recruitment practices. This vast sector employs a great share of young people with short-term prospects of retail work. This implies that the skilled sales assistant largely competes with unskilled youth for the same positions. The apprentices were given a great deal of task responsibility from early on, and consequently, the skilled sales assistants could quickly achieve a core position in the work team. However, the Sales trade still struggles to consolidate and strengthen its position in this respect. The occupational field lacks an employment category reserved for the skilled worker; the use of part-time contracts is widespread.

The skilled office worker is outmatched by the mass supply of employees with higher education. Lower-level office and administrative tasks are increasingly rationalised due to the use of ICT tools, or transferred from administrative staff to core staff. The intake of office apprentices is disconnected from companies' recruitment needs, and, to a great extent, rooted in companies taking social responsibility for providing an apprenticeship slot. As a consequence, the office apprentice remains on the periphery of the work team. The differing features of these institutional environments have profound implications for the learning affordances provided and the institutionalising

prospects of the two trades. If the Sales trade and the Office and administration trade are to strengthen their position, there needs to be a slot created in the division of labour which is reserved the skilled employment category.

The article concludes that the Sales trade seems to be directed towards a more VET-receptive labour market, and that a trade certificate in sales provides access to relevant jobs to a larger extent than does an office and administration certificate. Within retail, employer and industry organisations have made initial efforts to develop the trade, whereas commitments from collective actors are largely absent within office work.

6. Concluding discussion

In this final chapter, I give an account of the main findings of the thesis and discuss the implications for policy and sociology. The first section presents the main findings concisely, as responses to the two overarching research questions presented in the introduction. The findings are elaborated according to three topics relevant to the overall analysis: orientations, participation and confidence. This discussion is based on the thesis articles, and reflects how the interlacing of students' search for meaning-making 'navigation tools' within educational and labour market institutions that do not provide such tools is characterised by bounded, yet creative action, and loosely, yet constraining institutions. The second section discusses the policy implications of the findings, before suggesting avenues for further research.

6.1 Main findings

In order to investigate the first research question of what characterises the conditions for institutionalisation of the two service trades, this thesis has addressed conditions rooted in the occupational fields' lack of apprenticeship traditions, in conditions linked to labour market characteristics, and in the character of the students undertaking these educations. The Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade have a common vantage point: they are struggling to establish an institutional foothold. Firstly, one crucial reason for the struggle to institutionalise is to be found by looking at the historical development of commerce education in Norway, as largely a school-based initiative. This means that training and recruitment practices disconnected from the VET system have been consolidated, and thus have become difficult to change. Secondly, there are great variations between the conditions for institutionalising the Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade, due to different labour market characteristics largely rooted in inter-professional competition. The thesis concludes by identifying brighter-looking conditions for

institutionalisation of the Sales trade compared to the Office and Administration trade, because the Sales trade is directed towards a more receptive labour market and the trade certificate provides access to relevant jobs to a larger extent than for the Office and Administration trade. The final condition for institutionalisation, common to both trades, includes unsettled, open-minded students drifting along, who basically stumbled into VET for retail and office jobs by happenstance.

In the encounter between indecisive students and trades which are not structured by the logics of traditional vocational trades, poor vocational orientations are developed. Instead, students' orientations bear witness to identification with a broader set of factors. When the trades are incapable of providing 'navigation tools' that the student can orientate their learning experiences by, i.e. skilled role models or transparent occupational end-points reserved for the skilled worker, the 'leeway' for individual manoeuvring becomes greater. Students draw on a range of social and cultural resources from domains outside the VET system in the dynamic process of becoming. In spite of the fact that few land a job as a skilled retail or office worker upon completion of their training, their subjectively constructed narratives tell of positive outcomes such as having matured emotionally, become more secure, got a break from school, obtained a generally useful education, and a self-perception of having become someone. The findings illustrate the holistic dynamics of VET, rooted in the intimate dialectical relationship between employer and student engagement – the one is difficult to achieve without the other.

Firstly, the findings of the thesis provide a stark contrast to the picture, painted in national research, of occupational socialisation processes into and institutionalisation of the traditional trades in crafts and industry (e.g., Høst et al. 2013; Olsen 1990; Olsen et al. 2015). When students enter such VET programmes, which have a clear vocational profile with corresponding job options as skilled workers, their vocational orientations are developed and gradually strengthened. While these latter programmes are characterised by longstanding apprenticeship traditions and structures which firmly induce young entrants into the trade, the relatively new service trades offer no such supports. Secondly, the processual perspective deployed in the thesis, enabled

by its longitudinal design, has shown how young people's orientations towards the future and their self-perceptions develop and change over time, and how they adjust to, and act upon, the social structures surrounding them. Thirdly, the findings have contributed to our understanding by significantly nuancing the prevailing picture, painted in international research, of retail work as one-sidedly low-skilled and monotonous (Grugulis and Bozkurt 2011; Roberts 2013). Rather, retail apprentices in Norway appear to receive and assume a great deal of task responsibility. The main findings are elaborated in the subsequent sections through the topics of orientations, participation and trust.

6.1.1 Orientations

One prominent finding was that students largely stumbled into vocational education for retail and office jobs by happenstance. They had little knowledge of what to expect or of why they wanted to pursue a retail or office career. For some, this VET programme was not their preferred choice; however, insufficient grades in lower secondary school meant that other educational options became unattainable.

Consequently, the students were open, searching, unsettled and ambiguous, and they were characterised by a great diversity of orientations and motivations. In this thesis, the notion of orientations has been used in as a heuristic tool to broadly capture the students' subjectively perceived futures, hopes, and plans for work, education and becoming adult, i.e. orientations relevant for, and guiding concrete action.⁴⁹

The analysis of the retail students indicated that attaining the trade certificate did not have any significant influence on how they identified with becoming a sales assistant, i.e. as an attestation of the skills and qualifications they held. Nor did they believe strongly in the certificate's signalling capacity on the labour market in terms of employability. Instead, students orientated themselves towards retail work and

⁴⁹ Within the sociology of work, Baethge (1994) investigates the concept of work/job orientations. Baethge studied the significance of work to young people's life perspectives. He used the concept of work orientations, emphasising the subjective dimensions, showing that young people are less concerned with material goods and career goals. Rather, satisfying, meaningful work, with room for self-realisation and recognition and social integration is valued (Hernes 2014).

towards becoming a sales assistant by drawing on resources from worlds already known to them, based on an immediate understanding of sales work from a world in which they inhabit as consumers. The analysis in the first article showed that the students located themselves in relation to various aspects of the act of selling, to perceived opportunities for career progression in the retail sector or to being able to work with their personal interests, in either fashion or computers.

The office students' VET journey, elaborated in article II, showed that students' initial openness and indeterminacy gradually turned into an interest for office work, albeit a vague one. Despite holding little knowledge of the tasks a skilled office worker performs, they orientated themselves towards the desire to start working as opposed to sitting in the classroom, to become independent and start to make money. Initially, they believed that their education was in demand in the labour market. However, after learning that there was no employment opportunities post apprenticeship, their orientations became once more characterised by openness. Thus, this article addresses students' cognitive adjustment to labour market restrictions. Most began to direct their attention towards higher education, because it was what they experienced as being deemed necessary in order to obtain an office job.

The thesis argues that this heterogeneous mobilisation of resources in order to create meaning and coherence attests to loosely structured trades. By this, I mean that the VET journey within the Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade provides the students with weak 'navigation tools'. Neither the occupation as skilled service work, nor teachers or skilled workers they encounter along the way, function as a powerful 'signpost' to guide students. The skill set and expertise distinguishing the skilled sales assistant or skilled office worker from a layperson are vague. Due to the weakly institutionalised categories of the skilled sales assistant and the skilled office worker, the available communities of experienced skilled service workers which the novice can be socialised by and into are poor ones. Consequently, traditional conceptualisations of the socialisation process, as denoting the process through which individuals learn and internalise the values, attitudes and beliefs of their chosen profession and thereby develop sentiments of commitment, do not suffice. Traditional

perspectives on learning privilege continuity and conformity, where the novice is to acquire hegemonic knowledge. However, within the Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade, the socialisation agents are unknown, or at best blurred. Hence there are no ready-made roles, identities or positions for the novice to step into. Only to a limited degree do students develop vocational or trade-specific orientations.

The thesis has illustrated how students experience structural factors by making meaning of the VET journey they undertake in active and creative ways, bringing to the fore what they already know from their peers and aspects from other life domains. This emphasises purposeful, reflexive agents above over-deterministic structural aspects. Rather than being passively socialised (or non-socialised), students call on diverse narrative resources to construct coherence, and interpret these narratives based on their experiences. However, this does not mean that the crafting of ‘alternative’ orientations does not pose difficulties. As shown in article II, the students dealt with being deprived of job options in many different ways, frustration amongst others. Yet their orientations and aspirations tended to lie within a ‘zone of acceptable alternatives’ constituted by subjective interpretations of the relationship between opportunities and personal ability (Gottfredson 1981).

6.1.2 Participation

The process of becoming is located and played out within concrete settings of working and learning. The topic of participation refers to the occupational community in which the students are embedded. These immediate communities are governed by different sets of norms, power relations and learning opportunities which enable participatory practices of different kinds, and whose structures promote or undermine ‘legitimate participation’ (cf. Lave and Wenger 1991). Such communities can be positive or negative, alienating or frustrating, empowering or constraining.

The significance of the nature of the occupational community of retail apprenticeship is analysed in article III. This analysis highlights the ways in which the learning environment of the occupational community enables and supports the process of becoming through the notion of responsibility, and how this is embedded in receiving

and assuming responsibility over work tasks. Retail managers more or less deliberately throw apprentices into tasks such as customer service and completing sales transactions from day one, and thus apprentices have to handle tasks with limited guidance. I argue that the level of trust that apprentices are shown and the responsibility they assume foster emotional engagement, which is conducive to learning. In doing so, I demonstrate the connection between responsibility for engagement, learning and motivation on the one hand and the opportunities for autonomy on the other hand. The empowering capacity of the occupational community is twofold. Firstly, this practice made the apprentices feel needed through immersion in the company's daily work, which increased self-esteem. Secondly, by receiving and assuming responsibility over tasks of great organisational value, the apprentices grow into the occupational community, and thereby strengthen their position in the work team.

The occupational communities into which the office apprentice was introduced differed starkly from those in retail. As elaborated in article II, these apprentices were located in occupational communities of a hierarchical nature. The job titles of their co-workers included secretary, advisor, HR-consultant and recruiter, depending on the employer and the department. The apprentices performed a wide range of office and administrative tasks, e.g., arranging seminars, writing the minutes from meetings, sorting the daily mail, archiving, answering the phone and dispatching bills. However, the tasks they were given involved different degrees of authenticity. This means that the apprentices were occasionally given fictitious work tasks. This was rooted in a decoupling between companies' hiring of apprentices and their recruitment needs. Instead, the employers provided motivations rooted in the social responsibility to provide apprenticeships. Thus the companies made training investments which they did not intend to capitalise on.

In much of the prevailing literature on communities of practice, they are depicted as 'atomistic' free-floating entities (Hughes et al. 2007). The perspective advocated in this thesis, however, is concerned with locating the occupational community within broader social structures. In article IV, I demonstrate how the contrasting

structuration of the occupational fields of retail and office jobs influences the quality and functioning of the respective occupational communities in different ways, which lead to different forms of participatory practices, learning opportunities and processes of becoming. The weak institutionalisation of the Sales and Office and Administration VET programmes implies that the apprentices entered pre-structured organisational hierarchies and occupational fields lacking a designated job slot for the skilled sales assistant or office worker. This means that VET does not constitute the dominant training and recruitment practice in either of the occupational fields, yet the nature of the two fields' occupational communities provide very different learning opportunities. In one case, the occupational community of the retail sector is primarily characterised by young people with little formal education who consider retail work a transitory experience. Consequently, retail apprentices stand out among young unskilled part-time staff, receive a great deal of task responsibility, and achieve a core position in the work team. In the other case, employees with higher education outmatch the office apprentices. Because employers do not intend to recruit the apprentice upon completion of their training, the office apprentice remains on the periphery of the work team, with accordingly limited opportunities for learning. This contrast also reflects key differences in how the skilled worker in the two labour market sectors competes with other professional and educational groups. By simultaneously examining the meanings that students ascribe to their occupational community and the societal context of that community, these findings illustrate the nested-ness of analytical levels, and the ways occupational communities mediate micro- and macro levels of analysis.

6.1.3 Confidence

Despite facing great uncertainty in their school-to-work transitions, the students displayed a trustful and confident attitude towards the future. Few were in a rush to land the job (for life). As analysed in article II, when the office apprentices were deprived of employment opportunities after completing apprenticeships, they were rarely fatalistic, feeling neither deceived nor regretful. Rather, their subjective accounts suggested faith in the value of the education on the labour market, and they

were confident that they would ultimately find work, although there was evidence of ‘frustrated agency’ (cf. Evans 2007), where uncertainty about the future still made for a general background anxiety which was experienced to varying degrees. Yet, retrospectively ‘remaking the past’, they actively re-interpreted and re-defined the office-specific vocational education they had undertaken as being of general utility, in order to create coherent narratives out of discontinuity. In doing so, these young people actively shaped their process of becoming.

The issue of confidence connotes a somewhat different relationship between subjectivity and institutions than addressed hitherto, moving beyond the individual-level and educations poorly structured according to vocational trades. The issue of confidence also refers to the interrelatedness of the individual and the broader social structures in which their processes of becoming are embedded. Students’ apparently confident and trusting attitude toward the uncertain future is interpreted within a discourse where extended transition phases have become the new normality. Consequently, their accounts of ‘try-out-to-find-out’ appear as both common and accepted.

Firstly, the students’ indeterminacy and desire to ‘keep all options open’ is to be understood within the life phase of adolescence, which is perceived as being a formative, seeking and unsettled phase of life. Hernes (2014) illustrates this point by analysing Norwegian vocational students’ unsettledness and the uncertain character of their future orientations towards higher education and work. Among her findings was an ‘urge’ to take higher education in search for recognition, and the desire to become ‘someone proper’. Despite being uncertain in their orientations, Hernes finds, as I do, that students approach the future in a confident and trusting way, with the attitude that “we make the road by walking” (Hernes 2014, 69). Second, contemporary ‘diagnoses’ depict today’s society as characterised by Beck’s (1992) notion of the ‘risk society’. Here, the presumed dissolution of traditional socialisation agents such as the nuclear family, religion or class consciousness mean that these no longer have the capacity to effectively channel people into predetermined niches and levels in society. Rather, a seemingly infinite range of courses of action has opened

up to young people, resulting in increased levels of risk, uncertainty and unpredictability of the individual's life course (Evans and Furlong 1997). Giddens (1991) among others claims that these new risks lead individuals to understand themselves as a reflexive project. Instead of passively inheriting a sense of who we should be, we actively shape, reflect on, and monitor ourselves, crafting our narratives, which we are ultimately responsible for.⁵⁰ The students' overriding perspective was that even though educational choices were uncertain, they were nevertheless their own. The future was in their own hands, and it was down to them to cope with setbacks and to overcome them. This was evident in the analysis in this thesis. In this way, both traces of individualisation and confidence in collective systems and institutions were present.

Furthermore, the process and phase of youth is highly differentiated as between social classes, generations and welfare state regimes. Thus diversified patterns emerge. In order to understand the students' apparent attitude of confidence and their creating of coherent narratives when vocational education does not serve as a route to employment, it is relevant to locate their narratives within the broader economic climate and the relatively bright youth employment prospects in Norway. As suggested in article II, the narratives of young people of post-economic crisis countries might contrast starkly to those given by the Norwegian students. In analysing the interpretations, emotions and meanings that students attach to their educational journey, and the labour market's failure to recognise and value vocational skills, the study revealed attitudes of confidence and self-efficacy in the construction of narratives.

The thesis has demonstrated how the retail and office vocational education is loosely structured by comparison with trades in a traditional sense. This constrains action, the development of occupational selves and sentiments of commitment and belonging to the vocational trade in question. Due to the weakly institutionalised nature of the

⁵⁰ <http://routledgesoc.com/category/profile-tags/reflexivity>

Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade, actions are bounded by limiting social structures, and students are largely excluded from becoming skilled service workers. However, the diversity of orientations also illustrates the ways in which loosely structured VET programmes provide room for creative agency, even considered as a necessary 'tool' for survival in contemporary working life, i.e. the ability to be flexible and entrepreneurial, to negotiate uncertain career pathways and generally manage unpredictable situations (Littleton et al. 2012).

6.2 Policy implications

The findings revealed within the scope of this thesis are significant for VET policy. First and foremost, they stress the sensitive relationship between the educational supply side and the labour market demand side, constituting the institution of VET. However, what complicates a discussion on policy implications is the multiple and partly incompatible objectives 'inherent' in VET. The VET system is intended to simultaneously provide the labour market with needed skills, to contribute to economic development and provide qualifications for competent skilled workers, *and* to promote social inclusion within the Norwegian educational system, characterised by universalism (Hegna et al. 2012). Furthermore, the prevailing debates on VET in Norway centre on the traditional sectors, i.e. crafts and industry. VET for retail and office jobs is organised according to the logic of the original crafts tradition, where practical skilled work is primarily learnt through experience, and where the novice takes part in authentic occupational practice alongside more experienced co-workers and is thereby socialised by and into the occupational community. However, the Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade are at odds with the main intention of VET. From this, several problematic aspects follow.

Firstly, the thesis is critical of the role and function of VET for office and retail jobs in misdirecting young people into these programmes on the premise of a conception of traditional job-oriented education. This is particularly applicable to the broadly composed Office and Administration trade, which is not directed towards any specific job position in the labour market. Thus, the main problematic aspects of VET for

these parts of the labour market relate to the lack of demand for the training among employers, and thus a limited transferability of skills. However, the findings of the thesis show that the students do mature emotionally, become more self-secure, get some work experience, and that they are largely satisfied with the education they have traversed: despite not becoming skilled, they become someone.

Nonetheless, the thesis is inclined to conclude by emphasising the problematic aspects of the vocational programmes, primarily for two reasons. Firstly, in Norway everybody has a legally-enforced right to upper secondary education. However, once students have commenced an upper secondary programme, this right is terminated, and one might have to wait several years in order to restart on another programme (Sterri et al. 2015). This complicates the possibility of moving smoothly between educational programmes and levels if one should change one's mind. Secondly, the year of supplementary studies, which a significant proportion of students commence either before or after apprenticeship, particularly students in the Office training, has proven difficult to complete successfully. According to Statistics Norway, 38 per cent fail to achieve the qualification involved.⁵¹ Consequently, either they are left with a trade certificate of limited labour market currency – or, if the year of supplementary studies is commenced prior to apprenticeship, and one fails, no upper secondary certificate at all.

However, there are crucial differences between the problematic aspects and institutionalising prospects of the Sales trade and those of the Office and Administration trade, despite sharing several commonalities. Both VET programmes face significant challenges in institutionalising the skilled retail or office worker as a viable occupational category. These programmes are currently in an institutionalising phase, where traditions, practices and norms are to be consolidated, manifested and established (Olsen and Reegård 2013). As discussed in detail in article IV, the two occupational fields are structured in fundamentally different ways: office work is

⁵¹ Statistics Norway 2016: <https://www.ssb.no/utdanning/artikler-og-publikasjoner/yrkesfag-lengre-vei-til-maalet>

structured according to job titles which are increasingly accessible through higher education, whereas a more pertinent distinction within retail work is between full-time and part-time workers. The skilled sales assistant competes with young school students and unskilled labour, whereas the skilled office worker loses against employees holding higher education credentials. Here, the slot is already taken.

The thesis concludes by identifying brighter-looking institutionalising prospects for the Sales trade, primarily for three reasons. Firstly, the vast and expanding retail sector is a sector of great economic significance, whereas the number of office jobs is declining. The Sales trade is bigger in terms of number of apprentices, and the number of potential training companies looks more promising, compared to the Office and Administration trade, where lower-level office tasks are being rationalised and transferred to employees with higher academic education (Høst et al. 2015). Secondly, the thesis finds that retail apprentices are immersed in occupational communities which are not comprised of skilled workers, but which still provide rich opportunities for learning, progression and career advancement. Thirdly, initial efforts by collective actors to take ownership of the trade can be identified: one employer organisation has recently started looking into the possibility of combining vocational education with the already-established learning arenas of shops' in-house training arrangements.⁵² Lastly, occasional efforts are made by retail employers engaging with the Sales trade, and seeing the advantages of apprenticeship training (Jensen 2013). These moderate institutionalising efforts are not included in the data covered in the thesis.

6.2.1 Policy for lived lives

The findings have ramifications in terms of the relation between government policy and the reality and complexity of young people's lived lives, which are characterised by two different 'logics'. On the one hand, Norwegian policy-makers are concerned

⁵² Virke 2016: <http://www.ccnorway.no/fagopplaering/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2015/03/Skjerve-Lervik-og-Antonsen-D1.pdf>

with drop-out rates, currently increasing youth unemployment,⁵³ and the group of so-called NEETs (persons not in education, employment or training). Research firmly establishes that people who do not complete upper secondary education face greater challenges on the labour market; hence the rationale for the government's striving for educational effectiveness in order to promote social inclusion and to provide qualifications for skilled workers who can contribute to financing the comprehensive Norwegian welfare state. This rationale commonly assumes rational and goal-oriented young people. On the other hand, and potentially in direct opposition to this policy logic, are the students' unsettledness, their lived lives, their meaning-making projects, narratives and subjectivities (Reegård and Rogstad 2016). Jørgensen (2011) discussing the Danish context suggests that students who have discontinued their vocational education later re-enter the educational system, now more mature and experienced. This makes them more determined in terms of future plans. This reflects the wider international trend where youth transitions have become de-standardised, non-linear and more complex (e.g., Côté and Bynner 2008; Walther 2006).

The line of argumentation in this thesis largely follows a logic where trades which are characterised by 'tight' structures (as for example within traditional VET fields) provide youth with clear occupational destinations and powerful socialising agents who provide meaning and direction to students' navigations, and are more conducive to the occupational socialisation and integration of youth by comparison with loosely VET structured service trades. An alternative hypothesis would be that the loose structures of the Sales trade and the Office and Administration trade are in fact necessary so that these students can figure out which direction to take and try themselves out in relation to different service occupations, and that within tightly structured programmes they would drop out (to an even larger extent than now).

More generally, the findings contribute with knowledge that can better inform policies on integrating factors which have the potential capacity to improve the

⁵³ Statistics Norway 2016: <https://www.ssb.no/arbeid-og-lonn/statistikker/aku/kvartal/2016-02-03>

prospects for staying on, as opposed to dropping out: what makes the stayers stay? Firstly, the different ways of identifying with retail work, as analysed in article I, might enable the students to engage with pride in the Sales vocational programme and contribute to establish a close emotional association with the occupation-to-be. The policy implications derived from the findings might be to qualify and prepare students for a broader set of aspects of retail work through fostering the ways the students draw on interests from other social domains in their process of becoming skilled. Secondly, regarding office apprenticeship, the trade offers opportunities for identification with office work, albeit to a very limited extent. This thesis has pointed to several problematic aspects of enrolling students in a VET programme where there is no labour market demand for the training. This goes both for the students and the public funding involved. Thirdly, the findings challenge existing conceptualisations of ‘inherently’ school-wary and unmotivated students in vocational education by locating their narratives within broader social structures and the lack of labour market demand for the specific training. Lastly, the findings support previous research which underscores the relevance of the motivational force of authentic work tasks, of teacher-student relations characterised by trust and care but where the teacher or employer poses reasonable demands and the importance of the transition from school to apprenticeship for motivation and personal development (e.g., Mjelde 2006; Olsen 2004; Olsen and Seljestad 1999). Finally, I suggest avenues for further research in order to take these debates forward.

6.3 Avenues for further research

A wide range of potential suggestions for a future research agenda emerge from the thesis. One crucial issue to be further developed is conceptualising how wider social structures, affiliations and memberships shape the process of becoming and the occupational communities in which students are intertwined, in light of the increased use of technology, the changing nature of work, and shifting patterns in the employment market that influence both the apprenticeship journey and its destination. In the following, I intend to particularly address a research avenue of great interest in

order to better grasp the role of apprenticeship for the process of becoming, located within discourses of ‘late modernity’.

The thesis has addressed the interrelation between vague orientations and weak institutions through the lens of VET for retail and office jobs in Norway. Being directed towards non-traditional VET sectors of the labour market, I have depicted students’ narratives of traversing the Sales and the Office and Administration programmes as peculiar and unconventional by comparison with the better-institutionalised trades of crafts and industry. However, one counter-intuitive suggestion for further research would be to investigate whether it might rather be the other way around – that unstable and loosely structured trades with correspondingly unsettled students will become the new normality, given the increasing popularity of the ‘end of work’ thesis. This strand of research is contested, but draws disparate studies of work and learning into dialogues with one another around theories of late modernity (Foster 2012).

The key debate is over the relative importance of work as a source of social affiliation, community and personal identity. On the one hand, these might be considered ‘needs’ which are increasingly fulfilled in other realms (e.g., Bauman 1995; Giddens 1991). The increasing, reflexive distancing from education and career choices entails that they are considered as provisional and temporary. This implies a loss of stability and certainty, but simultaneously an increase of independence and autonomy (Jørgensen 2013). On the other hand, scholars claim that work has become increasingly relevant for contemporary senses of belonging, to provide purpose and meaning to life (e.g., Brown et al. 2007). In this latter line of research, there are efforts to reclaim the craft worker, and encouragement to re-establish occupational communities in order to build substantial learning and support infrastructures (Fuller and Unwin 1999; Holmes 2015). In Sennett’s (1998) seminal *The Corrosion of Character*, he argues that the personal consequences of work in contemporary society has led to a disorientation of the individual because of the use of concepts like ‘flexibility’, and the ever-present need to constantly re-invent ourselves.

The prevailing literature considers apprenticeship as central to the young people's overall formation of identity and their transition to adulthood, contributing to the development of persons. But what does the end-of-work thesis entail for the institutionalisation of trades and students' subjectivities? This debate over the convergence or divergence between personal and vocational identity sheds light on issues of affiliation, belonging, commitment and senses of an occupational self in new ways than those the thesis has provided. Suggestions for further research, then, might include proposing an agenda which incorporates these perspectives in order to further investigate the dialectical relation between subjectivity and institutions, avoiding the pitfalls of voluntarism and determinism but rather holding structure and agency in play simultaneously.

Lastly, several potentially relevant dimensions of the PhD study could have been pursued further. I will outline three in particular. Firstly, the thesis did not devote particular attention to aspects concerning students' socio-economic background, and the potential differences this may have implied for their aspirations and educational attainment. Secondly, another emerging topic within the international field of VET research is that of inequalities rooted in ethnic diversity, i.e. students from minority backgrounds. Thirdly, the research did not interview students who had dropped out or address issues of drop-out in a direct manner. Instead, the study concentrated on students who completed the vocational education, and thus, indirectly, investigated factors conducive to student integration. Overall, the thesis has focussed rather on the interrelation between the conditions for institutionalising Norwegian service trades and students' subjective orientations and experiences.

In conclusion, this thesis has contributed to illustrating the dialectical and interrelated relationship between indecisive students and the loosely structured trades of Sales and Office and Administration, by deploying the concept of the process of becoming as a lens for understanding the relation between orientations and institutions. The challenges of institutionalising VET for retail and office jobs in Norway are considerable. In order for these trades to perform on a par with VET within crafts and industry, there is significant ground to be made up, if this is the objective. The

conditions for institutionalisation relate to the potential for inter-institutional support sufficient to embed the 'skilled service worker' as a social and occupational category into society and within the companies' division of labour - the foundations of successful apprenticeship programmes. This might contribute to creating more transparent school-to-work paths for young people, and potentially develop a basis for subjective identification with the occupation. However, the service sector's receptiveness to the skilled worker as an employment category remains highly uncertain.

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Article I

Diversity of Occupational Orientations in Sales Vocational Education and Training

The article examines the ways students in the school-based part of the vocational education and training (VET) in Sales begin to make sense of the world of work they are about to enter. Drawing on a qualitative study of upper-secondary Sales VET students in Norway, a four-fold typology of orientations to retail work is analysed: first, the disoriented *Drifter* who is restless and eager to move on to other activities or drifts on to retail apprenticeship without developing any substantial interest, second, the product-oriented *Consumer* is driven by a strong personal interest in the line of products, e.g. fashion, music, cars or electronics, and the sense of life-style they convey; third, the service-oriented *Professional* reasons on the basis of satisfaction deriving from the act of providing service to customers; and fourth, the career-oriented *Aspirer* who is motivated by career advancement opportunities within the retail sector. The article aims to extend understandings of the initial process of becoming by elucidating the students' subjective accounts of their diverse paths into retail work within the weakly established Sales education, approaching a labour market sector depicted in terms of low-skill and high turnover.

Keywords: occupational orientation; retail sector; vocational education and training

Choice of occupation is not merely an instrumental matter undertaken in order to make ends meet. Rather, studies exploring the ways in which students orientate themselves to specific occupations show that they engage with the world of work involving their subjective frame of reference (Tomlinson 2007). This implies locating and understanding oneself vis-à-vis an occupational category, which might provide navigational resources in what is described as increasingly complex and fragmented school-to-work transitions (Jørgensen 2013). In the literature on occupational socialisation, there has been a shift from understanding this process as individuals smoothly adopting pre-defined occupational roles with corresponding ready-to-wear identities, to an agentic and possibly contested process involving creativity and reflexivity (Brown, Kirpal, and Rauner 2007).

The topic of this article is the initial stage of the occupational socialisation process, where students begin to orientate themselves towards different occupations and lines of work in the context of vocational education and training (VET). The focus is on Norwegian Sales students' diverse perceptions of and orientations to retail work – a sector in which employment is largely characterised by temporality and perceived as a transitory experience.

The Sales vocational education is integrated in the Norwegian upper-secondary VET system, providing a qualification for work in the retail sector. The Norwegian apprenticeship system has during the past twenty years expanded within the service sectors; however the Sales VET programme is struggling to establish its trade identity enough to gain a foothold. Compared to the better-established apprenticeship systems within industry and crafts, employer engagement in education and training and the standing of the trade certificate are weak in the retail sector. The current situation is that of a VET programme in which only one-third of the students complete apprenticeship (Høst, Seland, and Skålholt 2013). In the Norwegian context, *skilled* sales assistants holding the trade certificates do not constitute a well-established social or occupational category. The employers do to a small degree value or demand the trade certificate. These aspects may provide few 'navigation tools' according to which the students can orientate their learning experiences.

The article draws on the notion of occupational socialisation as the process of becoming. The rationale is that of individuals gradually being socialised by and into work communities, where learning and becoming is viewed as mutually constitutive, and as a process unfolding in the context of work (Hager and Hodkinson 2009; Colley et al. 2003). Rather, by examining students' diversity of orientations to retail employment shaped pre labour-market entry; the aim is to shed light on the interplay between the shaping of occupational selves, work values and job roles, and to elucidate conditions for successful transitions into service employment by addressing issues of how students become prepared to enter occupations, or are diverted away from them. The article examines how Norwegian students in Sales VET, situated in a school-based vocational context, construct and negotiate a sense of occupational self. The various forms of occupational interests are grouped into a four-fold typology in order to display the diversity of orientations towards sales employment suggesting different bases for motivation and learning. The article asks how orientations to retail employment are shaped and the initial process of becoming a skilled sales assistant is played out within such an ill-defined VET-institutionalised framework.

The article is structured as follows: First, a theoretical framework for analysing the initial process of becoming and subjective sense-making dimensions is outlined. The

complexity of the formation of occupational orientations is understood as on-going negotiating processes in-between structural, institutional, relational and individual factors. Second, some contextual information on the Norwegian VET system and the Sales programme is provided, before describing the data and methods. The empirical material is presented and analysed as a four-fold typology, intended to display the diversity of young students' approaches and orientation to retail work. Last, the findings and policy implications are discussed.

Theoretical framing

Originating from socialisation theory is notions of the process of becoming (Brezinka 1994). In the context of vocational education it encompasses the incremental identity-transformative journey from novice to expert (Dall'Alba 2009; Chan 2013). The process is conceptualised by the widely cited work of Lave and Wenger (1991), on the gradual transition from legitimate peripheral participation into full participation in the community of practice. Internalisation is considered constitutive of such a process, where the individual interprets the objective world and finds personal meaning (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Here the interrelationship between self-identification and the collective identity of the occupation is accentuated. Identification is considered the active and agentic act of locating oneself as part of a larger group or category (Foster 2012), which is expressed and constituted through narratives (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Somers 1994). The shaping of occupation-specific orientations is then perceived as a subjective process, reflecting the ways in which the individuals come to view themselves in relation to work and occupations, and how they make sense of who they are as individuals. This process is considered mediated by social arrangements, class, gender and exposure to and experience with occupational practice (Tomlinson 2007).

The process of becoming involves the ways aspiring professionals develop interests and begin to picture themselves in various occupational roles, involving motivations and interests directed to the occupation-to-be-assumed (Bess 1978). The seminal reference group theory developed by Merton (1957) denotes the groups to which individuals compare themselves, needlessly a group to which those individuals belong. This lends itself easily to the analysis of the process of becoming, involving the construction of (stereotypical) images of occupational roles (Collinson 2006), which the students may identify with, aspire, or distance themselves to. The meaning content of the collective category of the 'skilled sales assistant' is understood as socially situated, locally interpreted and shaped in interaction, which may be contested and negotiated in the process of the students' ongoing formation of orientations towards the occupation at hand. This perspective challenges essentialist assumptions that certain people are inherently suitable for certain jobs (Colley et al 2003).

How the students interpret, and to which extent they internalise the occupational values and ways of 'being' a professional, may change over time, vary in intensity and vary according to their biographies, situational and contextual factors. Theories of occupational socialisation, which commonly separate biographical and interactional aspects, divert focus from the active inter-relation of these two. Suggested middle ground emphasises processual elements of occupational socialisation (e.g.

Hurrelmann 2009), locating and situating the individuals and their (inter)actions. Thomson (2001) argues in line with Heidegger that we understand ourselves in terms of possibilities, which provide direction to actions. Whether or how the students picture themselves as future practitioners, affect their learning motivation and interest for the occupation in question. This directedness means that individuals are continually in a process of becoming. Sales student orientations to retail work, then, involve the learning environments in which the students are embedded, what and who they encounter, what they know and bring in, and where they see themselves going. This however is not necessarily a straightforward path.

Data and methods

In Norway, the vocational tracks are integrated into the upper-secondary education system, with a so-called two-plus-two model. This refers to the division of the standard four-year programme into two years of preparatory school-based learning followed by two years of apprenticeship, providing a qualification for the trade certificate. Approximately half of the cohort of 16-year-olds chooses a vocational track as opposed to the general academic track in Norway. The VET system is composed of nine broad vocational education programmes. Norway has long-standing traditions of education and certification in the field of Sales and service occupations but in the form of partly private schools not integrated into the general upper-secondary education. The Sales education was integrated into the general education system in 1994 but is still struggling to gain a foothold, both among the student mass and in the labour market.

The VET programme leading to the Sales trade certificate is named Service and Transport (first year of upper secondary). This VET programme is broadly composed with the intention of covering most of the private service sector, including transport and logistics. In the second year of the school-based VET programme, the students choose between several specialisations, covering Sales, Service and Security, qualifying for the trade certificates in Sales, Office & Administration and Security. The gender composition of the student mass is nearly even, and the completion rates are relatively low. Fifty per cent of the students leave the VET trajectory after the two years of school-based education to undertake one-year courses of supplementary studies in order to qualify for higher education.

The school-based part of this VET programme consists of both common core subjects, such as Norwegian language, mathematics and social studies, and programme-specific subjects divided into three subject clusters: Economics & Administration, Marketing & Sales and Security. The present article focuses on the Sales component, which primarily provides a qualification for sales assistant occupations in the retail sector. The VET programme's pedagogical practices make use of simulated professional practices, where students use their fantasy, creativity and imagination in 'fake-pretending' customer interaction situations or, for example, to establish a bakery or toy store or set up budgets, marketing and business plans. The school-based sales learning is confined to the class room for lack of a 'workshop' equivalent to other Norwegian VET programmes (such as those for the VET programmes within industry and craft). Consequently, the learning is characterised by extensive use of 'blackboard teaching' and text-books. Moreover, the teachers did not

have work experience, training or education in sales employment. Rather, they had general higher education and thereby likely constituting weak occupational role models.

During the two school-based years, there are shorter placement periods in companies, called the In-Depth Study Project. The content and learning provided in these placement periods is, however, rather arbitrary and non-standardised, owing to decentralised school responsibility and retail companies that lack training experience. However, this placement period is important for the students in terms of work experience, 'trying on the trade' and finding companies willing to take them on as apprentices. These experiences enable the students to gain an understanding of the tasks and occupational environments, and imagine themselves in that context.

This article is based on a larger Norwegian research project on different aspects of quality and completion rates in the Norwegian VET system. It is funded by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. The study's original starting point was to investigate students' experiences of the vocational school-based learning environment. The students were interviewed on educational and occupational choice making and approaches to sales employment and becoming skilled. The study comprised six upper-secondary schools distributed in three (out of 19) counties in Norway: Telemark, Nord-Trøndelag and Rogaland. Within each class, six to eight students were interviewed. The students were selected in order to ensure gender variation and diversity in educational and apprenticeship intentions, motivation and gender. The interviews took place during May and June 2012 and included individually conducted, semi-structured interviews with 43 students aged 17–20. This method was chosen to identify in-depth subjective accounts of how the students experienced their learning environments and their approaches to education and to the sales occupation. Assuming a subjectivist stance, the study emphasises how actors are autonomous, sense-making and capable of purposive action (Olsen and Reegård 2013). Because that knowledge is personal and experiential, the methodological approach needs to focus on how people give meaning to, interact with and construct their world (Cunliffe 2011).

The interviewees were situated in the second year of the VET programme called Sales, Service & Security. Students following the normal progression were then about to start apprenticeship in companies. Twenty of the 43 students wanted to undertake apprenticeship within Sales. The rest had planned to take a year off, switching VET programme or taking one-year courses of supplementary studies in order to qualify for higher education. These interviews constitute the 'base-line' in a longitudinal research design. It was thus of crucial importance to establish a trustful relationship between researcher and interviewee and secure the individuals' contact information for the follow-up interviews to come. The analyses undertaken in this article thereby represent an initial phase of the VET students' interpretation of becoming skilled and the formation of orientations to retail work. Shortly after the school visits, immediate impressions were written in 'field notes'. All interviews were then recorded, transcribed and analysed through the involvement of text-close coding and clustering data in terms of key topics.

A four-fold typology of orientations is constructed on the basis of the patterns of the students' motivations and reasoning; the disoriented Drifter, the product-oriented Consumer, the service-oriented Professional, and the career-oriented Aspirer. Following Halkier (2011)

the types were constructed by the process of condensing the coded data patterns into a limited number of categories which underline particular characteristics at the expense of others. Consequently, twists, turns, inconsistencies, multiplicities and grey zones are downplayed. The types as analytical constructs, then, represent an accentuation of essential traits in the ways the student orientate themselves towards retail work. When constructing such types one runs the risk of so-called reification relating to the labelling of the types, i.e. treating the abstractions as if they were 'real' empirical entities (Bailey 1994). Hacking's (1999) concept of 'looping effects' refers to when people become aware of the classification used to describe them. They can choose to adapt to, or escape these classifications that are applied to them which might open up new ways to think of themselves and new ways to behave. The types will not be discovered in their pure and specific form in 'reality'. Rather, the interviewees overlap, shift and glide between the constructed categories.

A typology of student orientations to retail work

The types display the diverse forms of student orientations to sales work. The plurality of orientations might be interpreted in two interrelated ways. First, since the category of 'skilled sales assistant' is weakly institutionalised and vaguely defined, the students encounter few role models as carriers of a tradition. Second, the students make out a diverse group, giving a range of different reasons for entering the Sales education, and deploying diverse means of identifying, or non-identifying with this category. The students encounter a range of different elements in the vocational school context, some that trigger occupational interest whereas others do not. The vaguely defined occupational category of a skilled sales assistant then provides few 'navigational resources' and 'grand narratives' that the students can relate to, develop a sense of belonging to or easily picture themselves as a part of. Yet, they form different self-understandings when locating themselves in relation to the occupational category, shaped by personal interests and values, and what they in different ways encounter in the context of school and placement periods. In the following, the four types are outlined and analysed: the disoriented Drifter, the product-oriented Consumer, the service-oriented Professional and the career-oriented Aspirer.

The disoriented Drifter

The students labelled Drifters had not (yet) developed any substantial kind of interests for the sales occupation at the time of the interview. These students stumbled into the Sales VET programme by happenstance, having little knowledge of what to expect or which other VET programmes to choose. When the students retrospectively reconstructed their educational choice making at this stage, the most striking finding was that they did not know. One common response is exemplified by this quotation:

Silje: I had no idea what to choose, so I chose this [Sales VET].

One may say that this type is driven by a general work motivation rather than an interest in retail work in particular. These students are characterised by ambiguity and ambivalence with regards to the vocational Sales education, finding themselves in a liminal, ‘neither-this-nor-that’ situation. Tina, who despite this wanted to commence sales apprenticeship, expressed this state of indeterminacy, “I didn’t know why I started on the Sales programme, and I still don’t know what I’d like to do.” These students drifted into occupations through a process of ‘non-choices’ or elimination rather than explicitly choosing them. This portrait of entries into Sales education as unsure and hesitant is echoed in Norwegian research (e.g. Olsen and Reegård 2013). Such views advocate understandings of occupational choice as being less structured and less purposive.

Few students gave accounts of friends, teachers in lower-secondary, student counsellors, parents or siblings who had inspired or persuaded them to enter into this education. However, some had parents running shops or employed in the retail sector. The students emphasised that though the choice of Sales VET was an uncertain one, it was nonetheless *their own*. The choice of Sales VET seemed to be a choice between a rock and a hard place. Students seemed short of other upper educational options. This could be either due to not having sufficient grades to be enrolled in other educational programmes or because the students were not willing to move far away from home in order to start at schools that offered VET programmes other than those provided at the local school. Other students perceived the Sales programme as a safe education relating to a great array of job options. However, few students considered the trade certificate necessary or important in order to work in sales.

There was nothing during the two school-based years that caught the interest of the Drifters. An initial curiosity and interest for the occupation did for some get ‘crushed’ by demotivating teachers or bad experiences in the placement period, where they were set to do irrelevant or tedious tasks, and were not integrated in the work community, as expressed by Jon: “It wasn’t all like I had pictured it [the placement period]. I was stuck in the storage facility, and I didn’t get much training”. These students quickly conclude that retail work is not for them. As Susanne put it, “I’m not exactly the natural born seller”. Her self-understanding was one that did not fit the sales occupation. Thus this type is either drifting onwards and away from the rapidly approaching apprenticeship period over to other activities – which may be a year of supplementary studies to qualify for higher education, another VET programme, ordinary work or some time off to figure out what the next step should be – or proceeding to retail apprenticeship but without being guided by any kind of identification with the sales occupation. These students are motivated by doing something other than studying at school, like wanting to work, earn money and become more independent.

The product-oriented Consumer

The product-oriented students are motivated by a specific range of products offered in the store. Here, distinctions between ‘student’ and ‘consumer’ are blurred. The empirical material illustrates how students’ interest and passion for a particular product segment, e.g. cars, makes them want to become (car) sellers. The subsequent interview

extract illuminates how product orientation acts as a strong means of creating occupational interest:

Robert: You see, my dream is actually to become a car salesman. First, I started on the motor vehicle mechanics course. Then I got in touch with other car salespeople and I told them what I wanted to become. They told me I first had to undertake the Sales and Service [VET] programme – so then I applied and got enrolled here. I took the first year on the motor vehicle mechanics course because I thought I needed that kind of knowledge in order to become a car salesman, to know more about cars and stuff.

The interview with Robert shows how his orientation towards the sales occupation was driven by motivations linked to a particular product, in this case cars. Robert had a strong passion for cars and was very firm in his belief in becoming a car salesman, as opposed to being ‘just’ a salesperson. His strong interest in cars developed prior to acquaintance with occupational practice. As opposed to the majority of the Sales students, who were uncertain in their choice of education, Robert was rather determined. On his own initiative, he got himself a placement period with a car retailer. During this placement period, his passion and engagement both for cars and sales work were reinforced. The same mechanisms were evident in interviews with female students such as Lena, who noted that she ‘always wanted to become a stylist or something like that, doing make up and clothes’. These girls were motivated to take on placement period and apprenticeship within retail sub-sectors of fashion and clothing. Tina named an interest in fashion as the reason that she had chosen the Sales VET programme:

Tina: I’m really into fashion and things like that. I chose this in order to work with clothes and that kind of thing.

Furthermore, Lisa perceives product knowledge as a central aspect of the sales occupation, alongside service and communication skills:

Researcher: What characterises a good sales assistant?

Lisa: One must be able to speak up for oneself – not interrupt the customers – be pleasant and welcoming and be able to sell what one is to sell – knowing *what* one is selling, in a way. For instance, if I’m to sell you a Coca-Cola then I must be able to sell it to you. I cannot simply say, ‘Yes, this is really good,’ without knowing *why* it is good. (Emphasis added)

Drawing on ‘coolness’, style, being trendy *and* being able to work with what they have interest in empowers the students, providing them with a sense of being in charge of their own life projects, as a way of self-expression and self-actualisation. Such product orientation

and knowledge of the goods are rooted in consumption practices and the particular life-style they convey. Consumption is viewed as critical to identity formation and reformation, and in signalling who we are (Warde 1994). The relevance of product knowledge in retail work and sales education has been investigated by e.g. Aarkrog (2005), who argues that knowledge of the goods takes apprentices deeper into the learning process in the workplace, and Roberts (2012), showing how employees take a certain degree of pride in their product knowledge. Product orientation and product knowledge are thereby working as powerful means in which occupational orientation is mediated, and enables the students to engage actively and with passion in learning and training.

Hall's (1971) classical work rooted in occupational psychology shows how job involvement, job performance, identity as a competent worker and (intrinsic) work motivation are interconnected. External recognition from significant others, self-efficacy and learning and mastering job tasks are perceived as crucial to the formation of occupational orientation and interest, but also trigger motivation and school and work performance. This comes to act as a kind of navigation tool and a motivational force in their sales education. This interconnectedness between personal interests and product segments is constitutive parts of the students' self-perception and formation of a sense of belonging to sales employment. The different retail sub-sectors are each embedded in different gendered consumption practices and types of youth cultures. The spheres of work and leisure have traditionally been analysed as distinct fields, where issues of consumption have been ascribed to the sphere of leisure. Retail work's blurring of traditional boundaries between the realms of work and consumption may lead to the emergence of complex and 'hybrid' work-based subjects (Urry 1990; Du Gay 1996).

The service-oriented Professional

These students are primarily oriented to what might represent a core aspect of being a sales assistant: providing service to customers. In such front-line interactive service work, the daily work tasks revolve around interaction with customers, emphasising communication skills, personal appearance, politeness and friendliness, traits that pertain to personality and attitude rather than formal or technical knowledge (Gatta 2011; Nickson et al. 2011). The Professionals form a kind of orientation to the act of both providing service and being a service-minded person. To these students the choice of occupation seemed 'naturalised' and appears as a continuation of a process that started a long time ago (Grytnes 2011). When asked what he liked the most, Ola replied: "To help the customer find what he wants, before he knows it himself". The students showed some difficulty putting into words what exactly they meant by being a service person, but they gave accounts of the importance of smiling, being polite and being able to see and foresee the customer's needs. Tina perceives herself as an outgoing person, so she feels at home in Sales education.

Tina: I'm a people person and I like good service, so it [the Sales VET programme] suits me well.

In a similar manner, there is Andreas, who also identified with the service aspects of sales

work. Both Tina and Andreas' self-understandings are that of being service-people:

Andreas: Well, it [the sales occupation] probably has a bad reputation with these sleazy telemarketers and car salespeople but we don't learn things like that. We actually emphasise service, so I myself am proud to be a sales assistant. I see myself as a service person.

Drawing on symbolic resources in order to demarcate in- and out-groups, and the social boundaries in-between, is considered an essential part of identity work (Lamont and Molnàr 2002). Andreas recognises the low status of sales work but distances himself from stereotypical telemarketers and car salespeople, who might symbolise annoyance and sleaziness, taken to be rock bottom in a status hierarchy of sales work. The extract shows how Andreas negotiates his relation to the content of the occupation by constructing demarcations to reference groups of what he is *not*. Furthermore, there is Thomas who, looking back reckons that his interest for sales started prior to his VET journey. :

Thomas: I've had interest for sales for a long time actually. Also before I started here [Sales VET program]. Such as buying and selling, and things and... to repair and sell onwards.

The service aspects of sales work have largely been analysed along the lines of Hochschild's (1983) seminal notions of 'emotion management' and 'emotion labour'. These concepts are commonly referring to the ability to regulate one's own feelings and emotions in a work situation. Traditionally, emotional labour has been perceived as the company's imposition of an external identity on the employees, which they may resist or manipulate. However, the findings in this study are in line with Brockmann (2013) on how emotion management can rather provide a positive image and be a part of the employee's identity construction. The service-oriented type finds personal satisfaction and joy in providing good service to the customers.

These students develop sentiments of belonging and identification with what can be said to be core aspects of the sales occupation and what the students are to learn in the Sales VET programme. The curriculum issued by the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training states that the subject shall contribute to competence development in sales processes and customer interaction, satisfying the customer's needs and expectations. Professional standards and the standing of the trade certificate in the retail sector may be weakly developed. However, based on experiences from part-time work or placement periods in shops, this student type had clear perceptions of what was good and poor quality of the work.

The career-oriented Aspirer

The career-oriented students do not intend to remain on the shop floor. Rather, the Aspirers are oriented towards advancement, either management position or

establishing their own company. The career-oriented type views the sales trade certificate as a stepping-stone on the way towards other goals.

One can distinguish between employees seeking jobs and those seeking careers in the retail sector (Grugulis and Bozkurt 2011). In the contrast between ‘career’ and ‘job’, the intention is to highlight differences between, on the one hand, subjective attitudes and personal investment in retail employment and, on the other hand, contractual, developmental and more objective aspects. Much of the retail sector is associated with employees with short-term commitment to the occupation and employing organisations and, accordingly, with high turn-over rates. Roberts (2013) shows that career options in the British retail sector are limited, whereas formal continuous training is first and foremost offered to employees already holding management positions. Everybody cannot become a manager. Yet, the Aspirer seemed to have the ‘American dream’. This means their fascination with, and desire to establish their own company. Some wanted to become entrepreneurs, perhaps inspired by ideas of (readily forthcoming) fame and fortune. Even though reality may differ, the idea appears alluring. On the one hand, accessible opportunities for advancement may be seen as ‘inventing a tradition’ by constructing common myths about the occupation (Brown, Kirpal, and Rauner 2007). On the other hand, the retail sector is characterised by so-called internal labour markets with vast use of in-house training schemes and possibilities for vertical and horizontal mobility within companies (Marsden 1990). The trade certificate was however not considered necessary in order to pursue this dream. The subsequent extract illustrates the ‘entrepreneurial spirit’:

Anja: In the subject of Marketing, we learn a lot about how to start a company. That is sort of my future plan, to start a company, so I like that subject in particular. There we learn everything about how to start a company, make goals and so on. I’m considering taking design school in order to learn more about it. It’s a clothing brand that I want to start.

Anja displayed a career orientation beyond the immediate sales occupation and the shop floor. She wanted to use her passion for clothes coupled with the sales education to establish her own clothing company. This instance elucidates the ambiguity inherent in the Norwegian sales VET programme; the curriculum covers, on the one hand, customer interaction skills meant for the shop floor and, on the other hand, how to be an entrepreneur establishing a company, learning skills in marketing, maintenance and economics. This was also echoed by Thomas, whose interest was music, as he played the drums in a band after school. However, the Sales VET programme was his second choice of educational programme. Thomas’ grades were insufficient for him to be enrolled in the Music, Dance & Drama VET programme, a fact which made him very disappointed – but quite quickly he felt comfortable in the Sales programme, crediting both classmates and teachers for this. When Thomas was asked about his future plans, he responded:

Thomas: I look forward to working – making money and moving out.
Researcher: What do you want to do after attaining the trade certificate?

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- Thomas: Get a steady job, I guess – somewhere – or I would eventually start my own company, because I would really like that.
- Researcher: In which industry, do you imagine?
- Thomas: The music industry. I want to start a music business specialising in selling musical instruments.

The extracts from both Anja and Thomas show how the goal of establishing one's own company coincides with product orientation. There is not only a horizontal dimension spanning from short- to long-term commitment to the occupation, as for Robert, the aspiring car salesman who stated that he 'would like to work as a car salesman for the rest of his life'. There is also a vertical dimension, involving mobility, as in climbing the career ladder – along either established or non-established paths. With regard to the vertical dimension, career and money prospects are driving forces. Martin, who was also interested in undertaking additional management training, expresses this:

- Researcher: What seemed attractive about it [the sales occupation]?
- Martin: It was management positions.

These students perceive the Sales VET education as a tool that worked as a spring-board to fulfil personal and work/career-related projects. The objective could be to establish a company, to land a management position or to work in one's area of personal interest. Young peoples' temporal orientations (the extent to which they are oriented towards the future as something to be planned versus present-centeredness) have become a major topic within youth studies (Woodman 2011). The students display a way of treating their future work trajectories as something to be planned as a personal project. This is perceived as a critical motivational resource. Contemporary theoretical assumptions about motivation, understood as a proactive attitude among young people, take a double stance as its point of departure; motivation comes, on the one hand, from subjective needs and interests and, on the other hand, from the individuals' perceived probability of achieving these subjectively relevant goals. Such understandings dissolve traditional dual understandings of motivation as either intrinsic or extrinsic. Students' 'motivational careers' are complex, in constant flux and influenced by the students' empowering – or frustrating – experiences, embedded in social and concrete pedagogical settings (Stauber 2007). Goals have been identified as important to motivation. However, goals can be conflicting. Nor do they need to be fully explicit, immediate or specific. Rather, goals are often guided by imagined future possibilities. Concepts of 'imagined selves' (Levinson 1978) and 'possible selves' (Markus and Nurius 1986) represent 'the Dream' as personally constructed, yet a socially shaped project. The terms refer to individuals' ideas of "what they might become, what they would like to become and what they are afraid of becoming" (Shamir 1991, 414).

Discussion

Most people in general have an immediate understanding of sales work. The field of expertise distinguishing the *skilled* sales assistant from a layperson are, however, vague. This article has elucidated the diversity of student orientations to the sales occupation, ranging

from the uncertain and ambivalent to the committed, and how they come to perceive the sales occupation as ‘a job which is right for me’. In this initial process of becoming, i.e. how they begin to orientate themselves towards (or away from) the sales occupation, their self-understandings, e.g. statements like “I am a service-minded person” or “I am not exactly the natural-born seller” are interrelated with their interpretations of what the sales occupation entails and which tasks or career options that are considered available. The findings show the relevance of the placement period or experience from part-time sales job in an otherwise school-based learning setting. This opportunity for exposure to retail work plays a crucial role in the shaping of the students’ interests, values and orientations.

The Consumer, the Professional and the Aspirer each identify with different types of ‘imagined communities’ and role models, implying different basis for occupational cohesion and collective orientation. The Consumers primarily orientate themselves to communities of peers, drawing on consumption cultures, pop cultures and images and idols transmitted by mass media. The symbolic resources they deploy constitute co-communities in developing occupational orientations. The ways the students draw on (latent) personal interests in developing sales orientations may be conceived as boundary-crossing objects which intersect different spheres (Akkerman and Bakker 2011), i.e. the leisure sphere, education and work and thereby blur traditional distinctions between worker and consumer. This shows the significance of broadening the scope in analysis of students developing various types of occupational orientations, expanding the prevailing analytical frameworks, which primarily emphasise the education-work nexus in understanding young people’s orientations to work. The students draw on social identities from other life domains in their formation of occupational orientations, and their approaches to the sales occupation are inextricably bound up with other aspects of their lives (Davis and Tedder 2003; Brockmann 2013). Moreover, the Professionals who develop orientation to the act of providing good customer service find personal satisfaction therein, *may* create senses of belonging to an abstract professional community of ‘service-workers’. Here the students identify with the values and ‘ethos’ of the sales occupation and maintaining the skills. It remains to be seen whether the service-oriented Professional institutionalises in the Norwegian Sales VET. Last, the Aspirers consider the Sales vocational education as a stepping-stone and are oriented towards career prospects. The Aspirers may be viewed as having less affective orientation to the occupation and rather an instrumental type of orientation – choosing the Sales VET programme in order to become manager or entrepreneur. These students did however foresee career advancement *within* the retail sector, either towards management positions or establishing one’s own shop, thereby identifying with abstract communities of entrepreneurs or managers. This type is then comprised of students with advancement ambitions, encompassing both orientations to gain of autonomy and self-employment (Heinz 2002; Raeder and Grote 2007).

The heterogenic mobilisation of ‘imagined communities’ and reference groups, may be witness of vague role models and lack of occupational categories reserved for the skilled sales assistant. The Norwegian Sales VET programme faces significant challenges in establishing the skilled sales assistant as a viable occupational category. The Norwegian context shares similarities with Lewis, Ryan, and Gospel’s (2008) analysis of the British retail apprenticeship system; that large companies in particular would rather acquire

intermediate skills through the upgrade training of existing employees through in-house training schemes and, to a lesser degree, via the recruitment of skilled workers. On the one hand, the data do not indicate that attaining the Sales trade certificate had any significant impact on the ways the students identified with becoming a sales assistant, as an attestation of the skills and qualifications they were holding. Nor did they believe strongly in the certificate's signalling effect on the labour market in terms of employability. Moreover, the students did not give any accounts of considering the trade certificate as an important aspect of 'professional' sales employment. On the other hand, some considered it as a good thing to have, but then in a more generic sense, as obtaining the qualification level. Rather, and perhaps as substitutes, they orientate themselves towards the sales occupation by bringing in and drawing on what they already know of retail work from a world in which they inhabit as consumers. They identify with various aspects of the occupation-specific tasks or perceived possibilities inherent in the retail sector, i.e. providing service, talk to customers, know the products, work with one's personal interest or make a career.

A great deal of the literature assumes that the quality of learning and the process of becoming is subjected to and conditioned by the quality of the particular community of practice (e.g., Lave and Wenger 1991). In this sense, the Norwegian Sales vocational education provides poor communities of experienced skilled sales workers to which the novice can be socialised by and into. In the school-based vocational education, the students do neither encounter vocational teachers with relevant occupational background, nor do they seem to identify with an abstract professional community of practice of skilled service-workers as a collective category. Investigating student diversity of sales orientations, the article argues for a need to broaden the scope beyond the (hardly existing) immediate physical or abstract professional communities of practice. Policy and practice implications derived from the findings may be to qualify and prepare the students in a broader set of aspects of retail work through fostering and encouraging the ways students draw on interests from other social spheres in becoming skilled. The aim of the article has been to display the diversity of student orientations to retail employment, and thereby nuance prevailing negative accounts of retail work (and sales assistants) as 'inherently' low-skill and low-paid. The different forms of occupational orientations enable the students to engage with pride in the Sales vocational education and contribute to establish a close emotional association with one's career, occupation-to-be and pursuit of learning. This may improve prospects for staying on, as opposed to dropping out.

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Article II

Creating Coherence: A Longitudinal Study of Students Traversing Vocational Education for Office Work in Norway

Abstract

This article considers how young people's actively participate in their own socialization process by following their journey through the weakly institutionalized vocational education and training (VET) programme for office work in Norway. The article explores the meaning-making strategies students use to construct coherent narratives when faced with uncertain school-to-work transitions. The study is based on qualitative longitudinal interviews, following the same students over a three-year period. They enter vocational education open-minded, yet confident in its future labour market advantages. Initially they thrive and consider office work a viable career path; however this enthusiasm is dampened gradually. Deprived of employment opportunities, they complete the apprenticeship and face poor job prospects in a labour market that favours higher education credentials. By reinterpreting vocational education as being of general utility within a discourse where extended transitions are considered normal, they neither appear regretful nor consider themselves deceived.

Keywords: coherent narratives; office apprenticeship; socialization; vocational education and training; youth sociology

The literature establishes that it has become increasingly difficult to manage the ‘project of the self’ in contemporary modernity (Giddens, 1991; Tomlinson, 2007). Today, less standardized, unpredictable, prolonged, and postponed transitions remain among the least contested issues within the field of youth research (Cote and Bynner, 2008), and the ‘life plan’ is less likely to constitute the structuring principle of youth biographies (Leccardi 2008). Thus, the importance of constructing coherent narratives is discussed in terms of either the growing impossibility or the ever-greater need to do so in the face of unstable futures and complex school-to-work transitions (Woodman, 2011). This article seeks to contribute to the field of youth studies by elucidating how young people who face great uncertainty construct coherent narratives, the meaning-making strategies they draw on, and the structural resources available to them. The conclusions are based on an analysis of students’ journey through vocational education and training (VET) for office work in Norway.

The Norwegian VET system is integrated in the general upper secondary education and designed according to a 2 + 2 model. This refers to the division of the standard 4-year model into 2 years of school-based learning followed by 2 years of apprenticeship. The apprenticeship period consists of workplace training guided by state-issued curricula in training-authorized companies. The Office and Administration programme is broadly composed and intended to lay the foundation for various kinds of office tasks, promoting skills in basic administrative procedures and secretarial tasks. Although Norway has a long tradition of office education, it was not established as an integral part of the VET system until 1994. Today, the Office and Administration programme is largely aimed at youth education and recruits people about the age of 16.

The literature reveals that vocational education for office work struggles to establish its trade identity among students and employers sufficiently to gain a foothold (Olsen et al., 2015). Students have difficulty transitioning to relevant employment post apprenticeship, and the trade certificate suffers from low labour market currency. Hence, the education provides a poor basis for career progression. Research shows that less than half of the newly educated skilled office workers find relevant work shortly after completing the apprenticeship period (Høst and Reegård, 2015). This is partly because a diminishing proportion of the vacancies suited for VET graduates remain open to new entrants due to increasing requirements for higher education credentials. This development is spurred by mass expansion of post-secondary education. Thus, the linkage between the office education and the labour market is weak. Conversely, in countries with vocational programmes characterized by strong linkages between the educational system and the labour market, VET is directed towards a specific labour market destination in the inter-professional hierarchy (Iannelli and Raffe, 2007). Here, the enactment of VET is presumably accompanied by the formation of occupational identities when young people are socialized by and into a community of more experienced workers (Heinz, 1995; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Therefore, VET systems are frequently praised by policymakers for their supposed ability to facilitate smooth youth transitions to employment.

Rather than emphasizing the problematic aspects of educational policy related to the Norwegian office education programme, or the lack of occupational socialization process these students face, the article places focus on the sociological issue of how young people

construct coherent narratives about, and actively take part in, their own socialization process: in other words, how they come to act as ‘productive processors of reality’ (Hurrelmann, 1998). The article positions itself within the field of youth research that challenges the view of transitions as linear, highlighting the ‘irrationality’ of choice, and the complexities of life as lived (Aaltonen 2012). In spite of – or because of – the urge to construct coherent narratives, both as an ‘internal dialogue’ and to tell others, has become increasingly important. The presentation of a ‘cohesive’ self is conceptualized as a social obligation to represent events as revealing plausible causal connections (Devadason, 2007; Linde, 1993). However, what is considered ‘adequate’ coherence in life narratives, i.e., a suitable balance between subjection to choice and determinism, differs over time and between cultures.

In order to explore the subjective dimension of meaning-making, the article follows a set of students through their vocational journey. The choice of a longitudinal prospective repeat interview study enables the exploration of process, change and continuity, i.e., how people change, how they respond to change, and how they apply foresight, insight and hindsight to their actions (Millar, 2007; Thomson, 2007). The students in the study entered the school-based office vocational education as uncommitted entrants with poor pre-entry knowledge of office work. After two years, drifting into the apprenticeship period, they began to thrive and considered skilled office work a potentially viable career path. However, as the apprenticeship period progressed, their enthusiasm waned. Eventually they realized that full-time employment in their company upon apprenticeship completion was not feasible. Hence, they faced great uncertainty in what appeared to be ‘transitions to nowhere’ (Walker, 2009). This kind of unforeseen outcome significantly affects and alters the structural resources available for constructing coherent narratives, yet the young people in the study felt neither disappointed nor deceived. This leads to my research question: How is coherence in narratives constructed when people are faced with uncertainty and discontinuity of transitions?

In order to understand the students’ seemingly relaxed and trustful attitude, despite facing great uncertainties, it is important to be aware of the current economic climate and the employment prospects in Norway. Generally, the unemployment rate in Norway is among the lowest in Europe (4.3 per cent according to Eurostat, 2015), whereas the youth unemployment rate in Norway is about the double of this. Compared to other European countries, this number is relatively low. This means that Norway still has quite a strong youth labour market, which employs young people with lower-level or no formal education. Nevertheless, young people tend to occupy poorer quality and less secure jobs compared to the adult population (Barth and Simson, 2012). Norway fits within what Walther (2006) classifies as the universalistic Nordic transition regime, characterized by a comprehensive school system, a generous welfare state and high levels of social capital (Christensen and Læg Reid, 2003; Wollebæk and Strømsnes, 2008). Within this regime, Walther (2006) states, young adults are encouraged and supported by individualized education and welfare options in experimenting with ‘yo-yo’ transitions, as long as they do this within the system’s framework. Norwegian students’ trusting accounts contrast starkly to those given by young people about to enter post-crisis labour markets in, for example, Spain and Greece. Boura (2015) shows how loss of jobs negatively impacts confidence and is often accompanied by sentiments of fear, anger, and restlessness. Young people struggling to find work and a sense

of self might lose sight of their own itineraries as they are confronted with structural factors beyond their control. Thus, confidence and self-efficacy emerge as crucial when constructing coherent narratives.

The analysis is threefold. The first section explores the students' unplanned entry to the initial school-based office education. The second section analyses their experiences of apprenticeship midway, emphasizing the structural factors which project the students into uncertain futures. The third section analyses their ways of interpreting and ascribing meaning to their educational trajectories. Next, implications of the findings for policy and further research are suggested. Finally, the empirical foundation underpinning the analysis is presented.

The study

A qualitative longitudinal study was undertaken in order to explore the students' subjective narration of their journey through the Norwegian Office and Administration vocational education programme. Four 'waves' of interviews with the same students were conducted over a three-year period, constituting a dense longitudinal data set. The research design allowed for exploration of the students' pathways and experiences, as well as of the ways they re-interpreted earlier events in light of new experiences. The use of such a prospective repeat interview design, furthermore, enables access to the understandings that mediate the ways in which people deal with and respond to social change (Holland et al., 2006). The design is simultaneously sensitive to the changing environments the young people find themselves in, and the ways they subjectively negotiate the changes that occur in their lives. The original research interests underlying the study were grounded in the desire to follow students over time in different situations and social arenas in order to investigate the interplay between personal development and learning, and how this changes over time. The intention was not to assess whether the students' narratives were 'true' or accurate, but rather to explore 'how individuals give coherence to their lives when they write or talk self-autobiographies' (Denzin, 1989: 62).

Data was collected from two main sources: the students themselves and the social arenas in which they were situated during the education span (i.e. school and workplace). Data were collected through interviews covering the end of the school-based part of the vocational education, the transition to apprenticeship/early stage of apprenticeship, midway through the apprenticeship period and, finally, the transition to employment or other activities. I did not interview young people from minority backgrounds. Furthermore, the study did not devote particular attention to the interviewees' socio-economic background.

The first wave of data collection included the students' trajectories into the programme, focusing on their school experiences and plans for the future. Here, detailed data was collected in four upper secondary schools in three counties in Norway. A total of 43 students were interviewed. At this point they were situated in the broadly-based second year of the upper secondary VET programme called 'Sales, Service and Security'. The programme consists of three trades: Office and Administration, Sales, and Security. Eight of the 43 students wanted to pursue apprenticeships within Office and Administration, constituting the basis for the longitudinal study. The rest planned to pursue apprenticeships

within the trades of Sales or Security, take a gap year, or change to another vocational track. Additionally, eight middle managers in the schools and three teachers were interviewed to provide contextual data. The interviews briefly addressed the students' family background and previous school experiences, indicating that their parents were largely employed in manual occupations. The sample did not include participants of minority backgrounds.

In the second wave of data collection, conducted four to five months after the first wave, limited re-interviews were conducted with those who commenced Office and Administration apprenticeship. These interviews addressed the students' initial apprenticeship experiences. We reached seven out of the eight students interviewed in the first wave. The third wave included interviews with the same seven apprentices and their respective workplace trainers. These interviews focused on the experiences of working and learning in the companies. The training companies represented a variety of organizations/agencies in the private and public sectors, ranging from a county-level financial department, the administrative department in an upper secondary school, personnel management departments in large oil service companies and an administrative office at a shopping centre. Statistics show that the majority, 70 per cent out of 675 apprentices in 2015, are within the public sector (Høst and Reegård, 2015). Additionally, the apprentices' trainers and staff from the training offices, which are private companies that link schools and training establishments, were interviewed. In the fourth and final wave, the students had completed the apprenticeship period and the apprentices' final exam. These interviews focussed on their future plans and their retrospective perceptions of the VET journey.

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts from all four data collection waves for each person were collated into individual stories. Each interviewee was treated as a specific case. Each case could then be examined in relation to the other trajectories. A combination of within-case analysis and cross-case comparison methods was used. In line with the method of structured, focused comparison, the study poses a set of standardized, general questions regarding each case in order to ensure comparable data (George and Bennett, 2005). Analytical topics and patterns in the data material were identified inductively by text-close coding.

The longitudinal design focusses on the unfolding of individual stories over time involving specific events, decisive moments, and participants' subjective feelings, reasoning, reactions, hopes, and plans. I seek to understand the ongoing manoeuvring that these students are doing by analysing the constraining factors rooted in the education's weak fit with the labour market and the social arenas in which these factors are produced and maintained. I attempt to grasp the students' multiple ways of becoming using narrative interview analysis, emphasizing how they subjectively tell the story of their lives. However, I encountered several challenges with analysing such multi-layered, temporal, and complex data. Informed by Thomson (2007), the greatest challenge I encountered was whether to privilege the individual case or the social and the spatial context. Despite first analysing the data privileging the individual biography, I have chosen to present the analysis organized in a chronological manner exploring the students' subjective experiences as they progressed through their VET journeys. Another challenge arose with regard to how the students reinterpreted and retold their stories as the number of interviews progressed. When asked to look back at previous events and to recall their reasons for educational choices, interviewees

might have forgotten their original reasons, their relationship with the researcher may not have been sufficiently established, or they might only have perceived certain aspects of their story as relevant in the context of later events. Finally, there might have been changes in how I as a researcher interpreted the temporal character of the data over time (Lewis, 2007).

The following analysis starts with the students' initial open-minded entry into the programme, followed by the mid-apprenticeship period, and finally, the open-ended exit involving redirected aspirations and reinterpretations of previous choices after completing the apprenticeship period.

Open-minded entry

The students seemed to stumble into the office VET programme by happenstance through a process of negative choices eliminating other upper secondary options rather than by explicitly choosing a career in office and administrative work. On the one hand, they displayed frustration over the abundance of possible options with which they were presented, while on the other hand they were confronted with a paucity of realistic choices, brought about by poor school performance resulting in a scarcity of upper secondary options. The open-minded nature of their entry into the programme was illustrated by little knowledge of what to expect from the office vocational education, or which other VET programmes to choose. This openness promotes understandings of occupational choice as being less structured and less purposive (Reegård, 2015a).

The teaching in school primarily consisted of blackboard teaching and textbook tasks. The students found it difficult to see the relevance of the school tasks to office work tasks. Furthermore, work placements within office-and-administrative-relevant companies were difficult to obtain. The teachers gave accounts of struggling to motivate the mass of students, who exhibited doubt and ambivalence concerning their choice of education. Despite diversity in motivation for study and hopes for the future, two main types of reasoning were identified: First, the students commonly described themselves as 'school-wary', followed by a self-understanding as being 'a practical person'. This entailed perceiving themselves as learning better from *doing* than from *reading*, and thus choosing vocational education over general academic education. One typical response is exemplified by Henrik, aged 17:

You know, I'm not really a school person. I'm tired of school, and want to do something else. Something proper.

By 'else' and 'proper', Henrik meant working, i.e., doing something he perceived to matter and to be meaningful, as opposed to sitting in a classroom all day. This finding is echoed in previous Norwegian research illustrating the significance of authentic, meaningful work tasks for promoting learning and motivation (e.g., Mjelde, 2006; Olsen, 2004). Second, the students firmly believed that the Office and Administration certificate would lead to a wide range of job options, considering, as Henrik put it, that 'every company needs to deal with office stuff'. However, what they all shared was a poor knowledge of what office work entailed, and they held weakly formulated conceptions of what becoming and being a 'skilled office worker' could mean. Questions regarding the tasks that skilled office workers

perform brought about vague responses and generalized ideas like ‘they sit in an office’, or sometimes even an admission that they did not know. Possible progression routes after obtaining the trade certificate remained obscure.

In line with previous Norwegian research on VET students, these young people were primarily concerned with obtaining the certificate and then getting a job (see Olsen, 2004 for a summary). They largely aspired to an ‘ordinary job’, as Tor (17) put it: ‘I just want a steady job which I like, and where I make decent money’. Subsequent plans could be worked out at a later point. This uncertainty and openness might be partly rooted in a lack of transparency, defined as ‘how well young people can see through the system to plot a course from where they are in the present to find a distant future goal’ (Hamilton and Hurrelmann, 1994: 331 in Lehmann, 2005: 114). Such transparency of employment possibilities and the necessary steps in order to get there is tied to the potential for successful transition from school to work (Lehmann, 2005).

However, a few participants gave accounts of deliberately choosing the Office and Administration programme, albeit *after* they embarked on the VET journey. To them, something in the course of their education had triggered learning interest, motivation, and the desire to pursue this career path. Other students, like Kia (18), who initially thought of office work as the least interesting option, were encouraged to opt for an office and administration apprenticeship by a teacher whose background was in office and administration. Teachers with relevant office education and work experience were, however, atypical of the data material. If the teachers had education relevant to office work, it was higher education above the intermediate skilled level (Olsen et al., 2015). Because the teachers did not represent the occupational field, they were not able to function as cultural carriers or occupational role models to the young students in search of such guidance. The office programme offered few resources in terms of sense-making navigational tools that the students could use to orientate their learning experiences accordingly. Compared to students undertaking vocational education within industry and crafts, who encounter skilled role models and become acquainted with authentic occupational practice during their school-based education, the office students only have vague conceptions of what skilled office work entails (Olsen et al., 2015). In the next section, the students stumbled into their upcoming apprenticeship period, impatient to do something *other* than school.

Waning enthusiasm

Moving on from their school-based education to apprenticeship, the students began a two-year apprenticeship period, each in different kinds of office and administrative departments in workplaces. The characteristics of the work groups the students were immersed in differed. Job titles of their co-workers included secretary, advisor, HR-consultant and recruiter. Depending on the company and the department, the apprentices were expected to perform a wide range of office and administrative tasks. These included arranging seminars and conferences, writing minutes from department meetings, sorting the daily mail, sitting at the front reception desk, archiving, answering the phone and dispatching bills or tracking orders in firm-specific computer programs.

At the very beginning of the apprenticeship period, the students, now with the formal status of apprentices, were all satisfied with the training they received and the way they had been welcomed in the company. Kia put it like this: ‘even the boss greets me in the morning’. They gave accounts of enjoying the satisfaction of mastering tasks, the work environment, and making money. However, midway through their apprenticeships their enthusiasm had been dampened. The transition from the classroom to the workplace was of great significance to the young people. It marked a discontinuity with the familiar school setting, which many of them were tired of. However, the *idea* of work seemed to differ from the *reality* of work when work too became normality. By mid-apprenticeship, few considered office work as their ultimate career destination. Yet they did not drop out of the programme. Rather, they engaged actively in work and learning activities during the apprenticeship period. A frequently-used response was illustrated by Henrik: ‘it’s ok for now, but not forever’.

In order to understand this lacklustre enthusiasm, their narratives have to be located within the broader institutional landscape. The weakly institutionalized Office and Administration VET-programme implies that the apprentices entered pre-structured organisational hierarchies and an occupational field lacking a designated job slot for the skilled office worker. The training companies did not recruit an apprentice with the intent to subsequently employ them. Instead, trainers gave accounts rooted in social responsibility of a self-imposed moral obligation to provide an apprenticeship slot, irrespective of demand. Thus, they made training investments which they did not intend to capitalize on. This was particularly evident in the public sector agencies. One workplace trainer stated:

We [public sector] are in particular responsible for taking in an apprentice. We should be a good example to others. We give something back. We help people onwards. That matters. And that’s the least we can do.

Despite providing training disconnected from recruitment needs, the training companies made great efforts. They carefully provided training ‘by the book’ according to the state-issued curricula. However, the apprentices did not receive any signals that their skill level mattered to the companies, which instead preferred employees with higher education degrees when it came to hiring. The trainers gave accounts of largely hiring people with a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree in business, administration, or marketing, and considered higher education a prerequisite for getting a job in the firm’s office and administrative department. ‘This is the way it has become; there are almost no jobs today for those without higher education’, a trainer in one of the oil service companies stated. However, she considered the trade certificate to be of value, symbolizing work experience and what a person had learned, and continued: ‘They know different aspects of the company, and they have learned to use the computer system. It’s a good thing to have on their CV’. This made the apprenticeship period resemble a work placement, rather than a genuine apprenticeship where young people gradually move from the periphery to full participation in the work team.

To some, like Tor (18), an apprentice in one of the oil service companies, the apprenticeship experience turned out to be rather unsatisfactory and mundane:

Lots of the tasks are really boring. Like copying, archiving, moving and stuff like that. Because I'm the apprentice, I have to do all these crappy tasks.

Finding himself to be at the bottom of the hierarchy, Tor was discouraged by the work tasks, and he was not given responsibility. The literature states that receiving and fulfilling responsibility over tasks has significance for the ways apprentices become members of the work team, and for being recognized as such by managers and co-workers (Reegård, 2015b). This process of becoming an 'insider' may in turn strengthen a sense of belonging and commitment, considered to be important to the socialisation process. Here, however, the apprentices seemed to occupy a peripheral position in the work team. The tasks they were given involved different degrees of authenticity. This means that the apprentices were occasionally given fictitious work tasks created by the trainer in order to keep them occupied, impeding access to learning resources rooted in full participation in the work community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). There were a few exceptions evident in the data material. The two girls in the oil service companies became integrated in the work community to a greater extent, completing tasks similar to those which other employees carried out. Their trainers told the apprentices in the oil service companies that it might be possible to return to the company after completing higher education. Nevertheless, they were not socialized into learning environments comprised of skilled office workers constituting a community of practice, and they did not receive any promise or guarantee of later employment.

The students encountered further exclusionary practices whereby other and more purposeful employment options became unattainable. Several had started applying for another job because they knew they would not be employed in the training company after apprenticeship completion. Some had applied for office and administration jobs but had so far not found any suitable job advertisements which were directed at skilled office workers. Hence, they became restricted in a double manner. First, they did not get a job in the workplace where they had received workplace-specific training as apprentices. Second, they did not get a job in another workplace because of the low labour market currency of the trade certificate. To these young people, their education had become something to fall back on even before it was completed. Forced to adapt to the constantly changing demands of their environment and the labour market, the young people revised their narratives, plans, future orientations, and evaluations.

Creating coherent narratives

After the two-year apprenticeship, all of the seven students had completed the Office and Administration vocational programme. Five had moved on to a year of supplementary academic studies in order to access higher education, while one of the interviewees took a year out, and one received a three-month contract after completion in a neighbouring department from where she had been an apprentice. Initially, they had all entered the programme impatient to start working, doing something other than school. However, most of them ended up returning to the classroom after their apprenticeships were completed. In the last wave of interviews, two main types of attitudes were identified. First, those who adopted the stance that higher education is necessary to access the labour market, and thus to realize

one's dreams. Guro (17) expressed it like this: 'One needs to have higher education today. Then you have many more job options'. Second, those who opted for the supplementary year of academic studies as an 'insurance' or postponement strategy. This means that they considered access to higher education as 'good to have', irrespective of what the future might bring. At the same time, difficult decisions are avoided, namely the choice of what to become. Thus, the students' anticipation of the future at this point largely resembled what it had been during the first wave of interviews, when they were still in school. The future remained open, and they were undecided what to do next, seemingly overwhelmed by the multitude and complexity of options. Kia, who was the one getting the three-month contract was still not sure what she wanted to do with her future:

I don't know. Perhaps I would like to start working in my mother's shop. She has a combined clothing store and coffee shop. I really like fashion and that kind of stuff. Or I want to travel to the US. I have an uncle there, and I like everything about the US.

When the students looked back on their school experience, a few were disappointed that it had not turned out the way they had hoped. However, interestingly, most of them were not. The above extract illustrates the openness, uncertainty, and perceived range of options found among some of the interviewees. For others, the perceived abundance of choices resulted in dilemmas and almost apathetic action strategies, suggesting the problems which young people experience in committing to a career path (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998). Their indecisiveness was evident in the difficulties they had with formulating their future. However, a few were definite about wanting to pursue a specific occupation; two girls wanted to return to the oil service company after completing higher education, which their employers had signalled was possible. The others were less articulate about their future plans and had not yet committed themselves to any career path.

Looking back, Tor, who also returned to the classroom after completing his apprenticeship, was dissatisfied with his current situation:

It kind of sucks. I'm not really very into school stuff. I have never been someone who loves school, but I don't get anything done if I don't try. I just look forward to being done with everything, to start working and making money.

Tor displayed dissonance, a mismatch between his self-understanding (as school-wary) and the situation he was in at the time (academic studies). He felt he was putting his life on hold during education until he could start living it. Emphasizing the dynamics of future orientation and valuation, Tor displayed an impatience to become fully adult and achieve some sort of stability. He considered becoming financially independent as a significant step towards adulthood. In order to create a coherent narrative, Tor looked forward. Despite de-identifying with the academic route, he was ready to keep at it, choosing to see his future in terms of a series of personal challenges to be overcome rather than recognize the imposing structural barriers he faced.

However, Tor's response was atypical of the data material. The students mostly expressed satisfaction with the VET journey they had just completed. Tanja (18) stated:

It was pretty all right, actually. After two years in school, I was really fed up. But then after working two years, I've become much more motivated. [...] You get a break from school. And you make a little bit of money. Well, yeah. I think this education is relevant to lots of kinds of work. It's good to have.

Tanja built a consistent narrative by convincing herself that the office education was the right choice for her, in the sense of rediscovering motivation for school by working two years as an apprentice. She reinterpreted the constraints she was faced with as having inspired and motivated her. Others referred to the work experience they had acquired when asked what they brought with them from this education. They trusted that potential employers would recognize the value of the education they had undertaken. In line with the responses given by the trainers, who believed the young people had learnt something valuable and now had something to put on their CV, the young people gave accounts of having learnt *something*. However, they did not refer to office-specific skills in terms of the VET curriculum but rather talked of broader skills with a more general utility. Henrik formulated it thus: 'I have grown'. He acknowledged that the education had contributed to personal development. Stine (18), the apprentice in the upper secondary school, recounted having overcome her 'phone anxiety'; in the beginning of the apprenticeship 'that was kind of my greatest barrier, what to do if I didn't know the answer?', but 'now it's no longer an issue'. When asked what had happened since the previous interview session, Guro said:

Not much. Or I have become more experienced in a way. I feel that I can be a little more independent. I'm kind of more responsible for what I do. Now, it's not like it's just to walk around and hand your tasks over to someone else. When I do things, I take the responsibility myself.

The degree of responsibility-taking displayed by Guro contributes to learning and increased self-confidence so long as the responsibility is mastered successfully (cf. Reegård, 2015b). The students drew on various resources in establishing their coherent narratives involving encounters with discontinuous factors beyond their control. Rather than attributing these events to uncontrollable causes, they applied meaning to their narratives by subjectively reinterpreting and negotiating the character of their educational journey, from a vocational education directed towards office work to the familiar ground of a general upper secondary education, interpreted as a suitable platform from which to progress. Their renegotiations of the meaning of their education with apparent pragmatic ease can be traced back to their non-committal attitude upon entry. If we recall their reasons for entering the office and administration programme, they were uncertain, explorative and open. Though the choice of the office VET was an uncertain one, it was nonetheless *their own*. None of the interviewees blamed the employers for not getting a job post apprenticeship or anybody else for starting on this education. The literature points to the attribution of events to uncontrollable causes as being linked to a weak sense of 'self-efficacy', which is thought to produce negative life outcomes (Bandura, 1997; Devadason, 2007). Rather, the fact that they did not get a job in the training workplace was not interpreted as a significant event in establishing causality for why they have not succeeded in pursuing their ambitions. Thus, there was really no deviation from a 'main plot' of the life story or career goals. 'I never intended to work in an office',

Guro put it. Another interpretation is that such narratives serve as a coping strategy employed to soften the blow of failure in what they cannot attain. The process of adaption in order to create coherent narratives consisted of reinterpreting their self-understanding, interpreting and internalizing their newfound situation; this process elucidates how aspirations and retrospective justifications are continuously shaped and reshaped by the institutional context (Michelsen, 1995). This means that the young people redefined their situations and their aspirations when a job as skilled office worker became unattainable.

Although they did not feel deceived after completing the education, which offered no job options as a skilled office worker, uncertainty about the future still made for a general background anxiety which was experienced to varying degrees; as Stine put it, 'it's quite scary really, not knowing'. However, in line with Woodman (2011), the findings show that the uncertainty they displayed did not lead to a sense of loss regarding the future. On the contrary, the young people revised their future plans in a trusting manner. They firmly placed their faith in the value of this education on the labour market and were confident that they would ultimately find work. In spite of mixed sentiments, they seemed to cope quite comfortably with the unpredictability of their school-to-work transitions, displaying tolerance of ambiguity (cf. Goffman, 1972) and trust in institutions. These students resemble Vaughan et al.'s (2006) 'confident explorers', who believe that there is a good range of work options available to them, yet retain some characteristics of 'anxious seekers', who are undecided about and unsettled in their post-school pathways. In times of late modernity, the conditions for creating coherent narratives might be more demanding compared to earlier times. When the students' lack of disappointment and apparently trusting attitude toward the uncertain future are interpreted within a discourse where extended transition phases are considered normal, their accounts of 'try-out-to-find-out' appear common and accepted. Their reflexive and flexible attitudes concur with adolescence, characterized by being a formative, seeking, temporary, and unsettled phase of life. The students interact with peers who commonly prolong the transition to paid employment through tertiary education, or who postpone transitions with a gap year before continuing to education or labour market activities. Through these interactions, they develop common understandings of how to act or of accepted ways of acting (Calhoun et al., 2002).

However, despite not developing a robust self-understanding as skilled office workers, the students displayed attitudes of pride and personal satisfaction over completing their education and obtaining the prescribed qualification, even though it failed to bring about employment opportunities. To them, while attaining the trade certificate symbolized a significant achievement in their lives, becoming a skilled office worker did not become an ingrained part of their self-understanding; as Henrik put it, 'I guess I would call myself skilled, but I don't think much about it, really'. The skilled office worker neither constitutes an established social category nor an employment category in Norway. Thus, the process of becoming skilled is not depicted as a straight-forward process integrated into the learning process and guided by a clear idea of the intended occupational role.

Conclusion

Although the students entered the office education programme without specific expectations, they gradually start to imagine themselves pursuing an office career. However, as they

progress through the apprenticeship period, they eventually learn that subsequent employment in the company is unfeasible. After completing the education, facing great labour market uncertainty, they re-negotiate and redefine their journey in order to create coherent narratives.

The weakly institutionalized office and administrative education in Norway implies a lack of societal recognition of the employment category of the skilled office worker. The students were not socialized by and into office occupational communities. This is manifested in several ways. First, the long-term implications of employers providing apprenticeship out of social responsibility, regardless of recruitment needs, might contribute to the training programme's weak position in the labour market. Employers are not encouraged to recruit skilled labour by anything other than a self-imposed educational mission. In the field of office and administrative work, the intermediate qualification level of the trade certificate struggles in a labour market that rewards higher education credentials above all else. These issues have left European countries debating strategies to raise the attractiveness of VET and structural permeability between education levels in order to smooth the VET-to-higher-education transition (Cedefop, 2012). Second, instead of acquiring marketable skills, the young people learned skills that were not in demand, which might risk cooling them out of the labour market. The educational programme aimed at smoothing transitions to employment; however, actively pushing students into unknown labour market destinations is highly problematic. They enter the vocational education, originally intended to be work-directed, with faith in forthcoming labour market advantages. However, they end up undertaking more education because of the low labour market currency of the vocational certificate.

The article shows how the students have, though to different extents, the capacity to create coherent narratives and the structural resources available to do so. These young people face great uncertainty, and their success in higher education remains unknown. In contrast to the findings of Aaltonen (2012), who shows how, when talking about their experiences, young people on the margins of school stress general uncertainties in life, criticism towards school and the structural barriers surrounding them, the present article emphasizes the ways students renegotiate their narratives from failure to feasible futures. In doing so, the article supports alternative conceptualisations of choice as non-choice or attempts to search for the least bad options, and thus less structured, conscious, and rational (Aaltonen, 2013; Grytnes, 2011). Furthermore, instead of understanding young people's education and employment decisions as being purely the outcome of independent aspirations or lack of thereof, the article argues for taking a critical look at the level of labour market demand for the education they undertake.

The literature underscores that young people seek to reconcile available education and employment opportunities with the 'project of the self' (Du Bois-Reymond and Blasco, 2003). Retrospective reasoning for maintaining a temporal continuity of the self provides them with a narrative 'red thread' through episodes of discontinuity. Reinterpreting the vocational education as a more generally useful one is one illustration of such reflexive activity. The article has elucidated the ways in which young people subjectively make meaning of the educational journeys they undertake. In doing so, the article has nuanced

prevailing accounts in the literature, which tend to depict transitions and educational choice-making in the oversimplified and structural terms of ‘individualization’ and ‘flexibility’.

The properties of the workplace as an arena for socialization of youth have long been acknowledged, largely through claims that work settings provide opportunities for developing and exercising personal responsibility and for establishing more extensive relations with non-familial adults. Traversing apprenticeship and gradually mastering work tasks and responsibilities, these young people were socialized to general labour market norms. They matured emotionally and displayed increased self-confidence, here understood through their subjective interpretations and reinterpretations of the educational journey and rendered visible through the observable changes in personal appearance as the longitudinal study progressed. In this way, the VET journey represented a transition to adulthood over the course of which the young people gradually became autonomous individuals. By drawing on their ability to renegotiate the vocational education in office and administration they had received into a general education, they constructed coherent narratives out of discontinuity, whether ‘in a justificatory way’ or ‘authentically’. Thus, they did not appear disappointed. The constant searching and temporal attitude, as well as the desire to keep options open that I observed are echoed in the literature (Hernes, 2014; Olsen et al., 2015).

Despite not becoming skilled office workers, these young people grew and matured over the course of the study, drawing on the resources they considered valuable, such as becoming independent and more self-secure. Structural elements set the conditions within which individuals construct meaning, but these elements do not determine action (Blumer, 1969). This implies that young people do not merely react and respond to constraining structures. Rather, these structures are mediated by subjective interpretations of social situations (Calhoun et al., 2002). By investigating the micro-level ‘grammar’ of the ways in which young people actively shape and negotiate their biographies, the article seeks to contribute to the field of youth studies by elucidating how young people who face great uncertainty construct coherent narratives and the meaning-making strategies they draw on. As students subjectively create coherent narratives out of discontinuity, they are able to redefine themselves and ascribe meaning to their biographies. In this way, these young people actively shape their own socialization processes.

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Article III

Sales assistants in the making. Learning through responsibility

Abstract

This paper examines how learning and processes of becoming are shaped and enacted in retail apprenticeship in Norway. The analysis draws upon a qualitative study of managers and apprentices in different retail sub-sectors. The concept of learning environment is applied to understand the relationship between affordances and engagement in apprenticeship learning. The empirical point of departure is managers who throw apprentices into tasks from day one. The apprentices have to handle tasks with limited instruction and guidance. The paper argues that the level of trust the apprentices are given, and the responsibility they assume, fosters emotional engagement and is conducive to the process of becoming. The paper aims to nuance existing accounts of lack of guidance as purely detrimental to workplace learning, emphasising the positive impact responsibility and autonomy may have on the process of learning as becoming. The weakly established tradition of vocational training in the Norwegian retail sector makes it necessary to address the kind of learning as becoming taking place in retail apprenticeship. Contentious issues of throwing apprentices into the deep end are discussed.

Keywords: apprenticeship; retail sector; learner responsibility; vocational education and training; learning as becoming

Integral to trade-based apprenticeships are personal development processes, which prepare young people for the world of work. The identity-transformative journey from novice to skilled worker is conceptualised as the process of becoming. The literature builds on the rationale of individuals gradually being socialised by and into work communities, where learning as becoming is viewed as mutually constitutive (Hager and Hodkinson 2009; Colley et al. 2003; Kirpal 2004). Chan (2013) has recently conceptualised this process by the metaphoric phases of *belonging*, *becoming* and *being*. Apprentices progress between these phases resulting from gradual shifts in the tasks and responsibilities they are allocated as their competencies grow. Becoming a skilled worker, then, involves transformation of the self through embodying the skills, routines, values and traditions of the occupation in question (Dall'Alba 2009). In developing professional ways of being, the literature points to the importance of guided learning, gradual release of responsibility, instruction and support from experienced co-workers as novices enter communities of practice (Illeris 2011; Billett 2001; Lave and Wenger 1991). Lack of such thereby characterises learning-impoverished or a 'restrictive' learning environment (Fuller and Unwin 2003).

This paper explores processes of learning as becoming among apprentices in Norwegian Sales Vocational Education and Training (VET). The empirical point of departure is apprentices who are thrown into work tasks from day one, rather than being gradually introduced. In their work and learning activities, they are provided limited instruction and guidance. This is echoed in the findings of Roberts (2013), where most of the training and development in retail employment is led by employees' own initiative and interaction with co-workers, beyond specific instruction. However, rather than underscoring the poorness of retail learning environments, the findings of this paper indicate that this more or less intended management strategy leads to apprentices from early on receiving a great deal of responsibility, fostering processes of learning as becoming. Apprentices may assume responsibility over specific tasks, e.g. customers and sales transactions or broader sections of the shop, e.g. the fruit and vegetable department in the supermarket. The concept of responsibility denotes feelings of personal and moral obligation, followed by the satisfaction that comes from fulfilling the responsibility and completing the relevant tasks (Hansen 2003). It is therefore perceived as personal risk-taking, with something being 'at stake'. Assuming responsibility involves emotional engagement in, and commitment to the tasks undertaken, crucial in order to make learning a deeper process than just acquisition of new knowledge, transforming both learning and identity through an active sense of belonging (Billett and Sommerville 2004; Felstead et al. 2007).

The role of vocational training in the retail sector differs starkly between VET-regimes⁵⁴. Brockmann (2013) contrasts the comprehensive German dual system, providing for competence development and identification with the occupations, with the minimalist apprenticeships of the English supermarket. The case of Norwegian Sales VET, comprised

⁵⁴ One widely used typology in the comparative literature on national skill formation systems distinguishes between a liberal market economy model (e.g., Britain), a state-regulated bureaucratic model (e.g., France) and a dual-corporatist model (e.g., Germany) (Greiner 2002). Norway is characterised as a combination of state-regulated and dual-corporatist model (Olsen et al. 2008).

of two years of school-based learning, followed by two years of apprenticeship, is struggling to establish its trade identity. The current situation is that of a VET programme in which only one-third of the students commence apprenticeship. Recruitment of skilled labour in the Norwegian retail sector makes out approximately less than 1 per cent of the total number recruited (Høst et al. 2013).

Despite being a sector of increasing social, economic and cultural significance, research into retail work represents an emerging empirical field. Retail work and conditions for learning are diverse. First, there is a wide array of sub-sectors and types of retail employers, ranging from small boutique establishments to global corporate giants, with immediate implications for the organisation of work and opportunities for learning. Second, the skills demand varies regarding product knowledge and soft skills, e.g. personal appearance, politeness and friendliness, traits that pertain to attitude and personality rather than technical skills (Grugulis and Bozkurt 2011; Nickson et al. 2011). The literature has, however, mainly been preoccupied with investigating low-road strategies (Andersson et al. 2011). Consequently, retail work is depicted in negative terms, as low-skilled, low-paid work.

The paper aims to emphasise the social, relational and organisational aspects of how the apprentices receive and assume responsibility in their daily work. Learning and development processes take place in concrete workplace settings. To investigate the learning opportunities available to the retail apprentices, the concept of learning environment is applied as analytical framework in order to elucidate its significance for processes of learning as becoming. The research question is: What is the relevance of being attributed, and assuming task responsibility for the process of becoming in Norwegian retail apprenticeship? The paper is organised as follows. In the next section, the theoretical framework is outlined, where the interdependent basis of the learning environment is conceptualised; the learning affordances provided on the one hand and subjective engagement in the affordances on the other hand. After describing the empirical study, the analysis is presented is twofold. First, the managers' accounts of delegating responsibility are analysed. Subsequently, the apprentices' subjective accounts of learning, responsibility-taking and professional development are analysed. To conclude, contentious aspects of the findings are discussed in relation to the weakly established tradition for vocational training in the Norwegian retail sector.

Learning environment as analytical framework

Qualities of the learning environment influence the kind of learning taking place, and processes of becoming. The concept of learning environment is commonly used to denote the "conditions and practices in an organisation that are likely to facilitate or hinder learning in and through work at a particular workplace" (Ellström et al. 2008, 86). Dichotomous ideal types of learning environments have been developed. Fuller and Unwin (2003) distinguish between 'expansive' and 'restrictive' apprenticeship learning environments, emphasising workforce development, whereas Ellström et al.'s (2008) 'enabling' and 'constraining' types, focus on organisational learning. Moreover, workplaces can be more or less learning 'ready'. Learning readiness denotes workplaces not only governed by a production rationale but also by an employee development rationale (Billett 2001). Factors such as stress, overly

routinized work, lack of social support and lack of meaning in work represent constraints on the workplace learning processes (Virtanen and Tynjälä 2008). Analysis of learning environments can be approached in two ways, rooted in Berger and Luckmann's (1966) distinction between objective and subjective realities. On the one hand, one may approach the study of the learning environment as an objective social 'reality'; this means focusing on the objectification of knowledge in the specific organisation of skills and division of labour, task characteristics and curricula content. Often referred to as 'learning context', this includes the material, physical, technical and organisational characteristics of the labour process, power relations, values and norms (Tynjälä 2013). When entering the shop, the apprentice meets a pre-structured set of established norms and shared meanings to which he or she needs to adapt in order to be accepted as a legitimate participant (Lave and Wenger 1991; Smistrup 2007). These 'external' conditions frame the learning process, impeding or providing resources conducive to learning. On the other hand, learning environments may be studied as a subjective social 'reality', i.e. to provide a framework for construction of meaning that people attach to them, and how the apprentices elect to engage in the learning affordances provided (Billett 2001; Jørgensen 2013).

The process of becoming is conceptualised by the widely cited work of Lave and Wenger (1991), on the gradual transition from legitimate peripheral participation into full participation in the community of practice. What is learnt through a socialisation process becomes part of the person, and in this process it is also modified (Hodkinson et al. 2008). Constitutive of such an identity-transformative journey is internalisation, where the individual interprets the objective world and finds personal meaning. Once understanding the world in which others already inhabit and making it one's own, this world may be creatively modified (Berger and Luckmann 1996). This sense of agency relates to how apprentices co-construct their horizon of action and learning opportunities (Brockmann 2012), shaped between apprentices' individual biographies, positions and dispositions to learning and the learning environment as an objective reality. Tasks and responsibility are considered subjectively redefined when taken on by the individual (Rausch 2013). The subjectively experienced importance and 'interestingness' of tasks is considered to foster workplace learning and enhance participatory practices. The concept of the learning environment provides a relevant analytical framework by being sensitive to the mutual relationship between structure and agency, which mutually constitutes the learning environment. In linking the organisation of work to the learning processes of individuals, emphasis is placed on how these processes and qualities such as 'being responsible' are not merely capacities residing within the individual, but are embedded in and constituted by the organisation of work and social structures.

There are distinct but interrelated aspects of the organisational context and learning environment, which determine the degree of responsibility delegated to the apprentices. First, the degree of responsibility may be affected by the organisation's institutionalised work roles and task allocation. Task allocation entails the way different work tasks are assigned and distributed among employees with different formal positions, statuses and levels of work experience. Work tasks might be assigned by the manager, self-assigned by the apprentice or emerge from social interaction with others such as co-workers or customers. Moreover, tasks may be more or less significant, and of varying organisational or

public relevance. Second, the degree of responsibility delegated and conditions for autonomy are embedded in the organisation's norms, values and control practices. Third, institutionalised trust relations in the workplace are considered crucial in making sense of how task responsibility is delegated by management and engaged in by apprentices. Drawing on Fox (1974), Fuller and Unwin (2010) identify the level of trust between manager and employee as a key indicator of the extent to which different groups have discretion over the conception and execution of their work tasks.

The study

The paper investigates the apprenticeship period of the Sales VET programme in Norway. The Norwegian VET system is integrated in the upper-secondary post-compulsory education system (16-19 year olds). The Sales programme is part of a broader vocational cluster including other service-related tracks, designed according to the 2+2 model. This refers to the division of the four-year programme into two years of preparatory school-based learning followed by two years of apprenticeship. The school-based part consists of both core subjects (e.g. Norwegian language, mathematics, natural science) and programme-specific vocational subjects (e.g. sales & marketing, business & economy). Additionally, there are workplace placement periods as part of the 'In-depth study project', which are aimed at increasing cooperation between schools and companies and provide the students with instances of occupational practice. The apprenticeship period consists of workplace training guided by state-issued curricula in apprenticeship-authorized companies.

The empirical foundation which underpins this paper is interviews with managers and apprentices in nine shops in Norway. A qualitative approach was chosen in order to gain insight into the learning environment and how apprentices are being involved and engage with work and learning, based on the managers' and apprentices' subjective frame of reference. Detailed data was collected in nine shops that provided apprenticeship. The shop selection criteria were two-fold. First, re-interviews were conducted with three of the apprentices, which is part of an ongoing qualitative longitudinal study on service sector VET in Norway. Three of the shops were thereby the ones in which these apprentices commenced apprenticeship. Additional apprentices and corresponding managers were interviewed in order to ensure a more robust empirical foundation. The selection criteria of the additional shops were based on variation regarding retail sub-sector and product knowledge requirement. Overview of the shops and corresponding apprentices and managers are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the shops apprentices and managers.

Shop	Apprentice	Manager
Automotive retailer	1	1
Electronics retailer A	1	1
Electronics retailer B	2	1
Hardware store	1	
Supermarket	1	
Beauty products retailer	1	1
Candy store and video rental	1	1
Kitchen supplies and home décor shop	1	1
Sports and leisure equipment retailer	2	1
Total	11	7

Recruitment of interviewees proved difficult. Two of the managers did not want to participate in the study. Context characteristics of the shops were collected through limited ethnographic observation. This provided valuable insight into the nature of the apprentices' work tasks, workload, and customer/work team interaction, and atmosphere of the shop. The shops represented a variety of retail sub-sectors but there were great similarities regarding the apprentices' task characteristics, the shops' organisational structures and the degree of guidance and responsibility made available to the apprentices. First, all shops were part of a larger regional or countrywide chain, most being franchise enterprises. This meant available career tracks and accessibility to in-house training schemes. Second, each of the shops employed between five and ten sales assistants. Third, all of the shops reported of tough market competition and small margins. Fourthly, most of the shops made a record of the apprentices' daily sales figures. These figures were transparently displayed in the company's computer system so that the department manager, general manager, other employees and the apprentices themselves could see everyone's sales figures. The automotive retailer and the supermarket each represented one end of a continuum of product knowledge requirements and organisation of work. The apprentice in the automotive retailer was given a personal office space and dealt with relatively few customers per day. This apprentice's work community consisted of four adult men. The automotive retailer sold old and new cars; besides customer interaction, work tasks consisted of handling sales contracts and preparing cars for sale. The value of sales was high, but the number of sales was low. The work demanded a great deal of product-specific knowledge of the cars and accessories. The apprenticeship in the supermarket was quite different. Work tasks consisted primarily of handling the cash register and restocking the shelves, and dealing with a large number of customers per day. Product knowledge requirements were low, meaning that the products largely sold themselves. In the two electronic retailers, the importance of product knowledge was emphasised. Here the apprentices also participated in the most extensive chain-specific in-house training schemes compared to the other shops. The rest of the shops involved medium product knowledge requirement, meaning that a certain level knowledge was preferred, but not necessarily decisive in order to sell the product.

The research sample comprised eleven apprentices (six men and five women) and seven managers (three men and four women). Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews

were conducted with each of the apprentices and managers during the fall 2013. In the interviews with the managers, attention was focused on motivations for taking on the responsibility for apprentices, how learning and work was organised and how they considered the development processes of the apprentice. The topics covered in the apprentice interviews were how they perceived and coped with demands at work, engagement in different types of tasks, accounts of learning, and self-perceptions of becoming and being sales assistants. The interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. After observation and interview sessions in each shop, immediate impressions were written down in the form of field notes. The data was analysed by thematic text-close coding and clustering of data in terms of key topics in identifying patterns within the data. All participants were given pseudonyms and the shops have been anonymised. The author has translated all quotations.

Managers delegating responsibility

To most of the managers, it was the first time they provided apprenticeship. Given the weakly institutionalised system for vocational training in the Norwegian retail sector, this is a typical trait. Despite a lack of experience with such, the managers had clear conceptions of what being 'good at the job' entailed. They emphasised that sales assistants should be service-minded, knowledgeable about the products and understand, foresee and satisfy the customer's needs. The work communities consisted mainly of young people in part-time positions with the apprentice in most cases being the only full-time employee besides the manager. Moreover, the shops were of flat organisational structure. This meant that there were few or no middle managers between the sales assistants and managers. For a large proportion of the day, the manager worked on the shop floor alongside the employees. The environment were largely characterised by task equality in the sense that all employees, the manager included, completed very much the same types of tasks. In this sense, one might speak of a non-hierarchical socialisation process. The tasks performed by the apprentices and regular employees appeared to be indistinguishable. The main tasks involved customer interaction and sales transactions. Furthermore, the apprentices were involved in ordering and unpacking goods and placing them on the shelves, designing sales campaigns and keeping the shop tidy. However, the managers handled administrative tasks. The managers attempted to assign tasks according to the apprentices' field of interest, whenever this was possible. For example, in electronics retailer A, the apprentice with a personal interest in computers was set to work in the store's computer department.

Within the wealth of literature on apprenticeship learning, one strand emphasises the importance of guidance, which is perceived as the support that workplace managers and members of the work community provide to apprentices (Virtanen and Tynjälä 2008). The manager role is divided between providing guided learning on the one hand, and supervision and control on the other (Billett 2000). The majority of the managers considered their manager mandate to involve support *if needed*. The prevailing practice was that apprentices were 'thrown in at the deep end', being immediately immersed in authentic tasks, i.e. customer interaction and completing sales transactions. Ann, manager of the kitchen supplies and home décor shop described the way the apprentice was introduced to the tasks and task progression.

Ann: She [the apprentice] does a little bit of everything. At first, she unpacked new products. Then Christmas comes, and then it's just like 'straight to it'.

The extract illustrates how the manager gradually, though quickly (the apprentice started in September), introduced the apprentice to the work. Furthermore, the manager of the automotive retailer, Roy, described how he throws the apprentice into the tasks, giving him a great deal of responsibility in this process.

Researcher: Do you have a specific plan for the training?

Roy: No, we haven't defined it like that. He [the apprentice] is thrown into it, with his own office and phone. Now, we are introducing a new car, and he is the one getting the responsibility.

Roy's trust in the apprentice is perceived as a deliberate strategy, implying that he considers this the most fruitful strategy for learning. Roy expressed an understanding of that throwing the apprentice into the tasks means to show him trust, give responsibility and to be treated with respect. Compared to the other shops in this paper, the automotive retailer was characterised by few customers and low levels of stress. This may have eased Roy's decision of delegating responsibility, considering he had the time to follow-up the apprentice. Each car sales transaction completed represented much needed money to the automotive retailer, and reversibly, each failed sales transaction had a great negative impact on the business. The apprentice's work task was thereby of utmost organisational significance. Consequently, the trust shown the apprentice was of corresponding significance. On the contrary, there is Per, the manager of electronics retailer A who attributes apprentice independence to lack of time available to guide and supervise: "It's really busy here, so we cannot stand over him [the apprentice] all the time". Gunnar, the manager of the sports and leisure equipment store also pointed to lack of time to guide, but at the same time, he considered the independence and responsibility this lead to as 'making them better'.

Gunnar: Nobody gets special treatment here. Not everybody can handle that. But I cannot constantly follow them around. They have to take responsibility themselves. That also makes them better. (...) Take Ole [apprentice] for instance, he is also an employee, and must do what everybody else does. (...). I wish for the apprentice to become an independent employee. One must be able to see and foresee the tasks to be done. It's not my job to boss them around holding a whip. It doesn't help and it doesn't work that way. One has to take responsibility for one's own job.

The apprentices were mostly treated as regular employees. The emphasis that managers placed on shaping the apprentices as independent employees is interpreted as a way of wanting to promote a self-directed orientation, as an instructional process⁵⁵ (Jossberger et al.

⁵⁵ Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) in particular have stressed the way self-regulated learning refers to two distinct but related dimensions: as an instructional process where the individual assumes primary responsibility for the learning processes, and as a personal characteristic as a preference for assuming responsibility for learning.

2010). This means that independence is conceived of as a self-regulatory practice, i.e. a way to regulate one's own learning, emotions and self-evaluation and to promote problem-solving skills, time-organisation and the ability to structure tasks. The manager of electronics retailer B gave the two apprentices management responsibility for the audio-visual department.

Hilde: I now have two apprentices who are responsible for the audio-visual department. They have been apprentices here for a long enough period. They've had lots of different tasks previously, and they handled them well. They both have audio-visual as their main task. But it's also a little bit exciting. It requires some guidance from me, of course, but it works well. (...).The apprentices come up with new ideas, and we see that it works. They have a great responsibility in ordering goods for a sales campaign that they get to organise. They shall be able to try it and see. (...). The apprentices learn early that they should be independent.

Similarly to Gunnar, also Hilde stressed the significance of promoting independent apprentices. However, Hilde also emphasised that she needed to guide, assist and supervise the apprentices on their path to becoming department managers. On the one hand, the managers' desire to promote independent apprentices is considered as a deliberate pedagogical strategy. On the other hand, independence is considered an unintended consequence of poor formal training-awareness, apprenticeship experience or available resources for guidance among the managers. Either way, the result is that apprentices are thrown into the tasks and expected to speak up if a need for guidance and instruction is felt. The desire the managers expressed to shape the apprentices into independent employees may be perceived as emphasising their interdependent role in the workplace, i.e., it is not their independence *from* the work team or management control, guidance and support but rather the interdependence *of* the work community which is stressed. The apprentices were expected to contribute to the daily work in line with the regular employees. Billett (2002) emphasises how the workplace as a learning environment is embedded in complex interdependencies between the staff and management, work practices, production goals and organisational rules. First, the apprentices in the present study were given responsibility *over* various work tasks. Second, they were given responsibility *through* their independence. The delegation of responsibility may either facilitate or hinder their ability for self-direction and potentially be conducive to processes of becoming.

Becoming through assuming responsibility

Emphasising the subjective dimension of the learning environment involves studying how the apprentices elect to engage in the work and learning framework in which they are situated. The same learning affordances can be interpreted and acted upon in different ways by different apprentices. The analysis of the apprentices' subjective engagement in work and learning relates to the two main aspects of sales work: responsibility over customers and knowledge of the products. Overall, both of these 'objects' were considered by the

apprentices to be resources conducive for learning⁵⁶. First, customer interaction constituted the apprentices' main work task, and they were exposed to customer interaction from day one. Customers could pose barriers to learning in the sense of being too many at once (stressful), or they could be dissatisfied or even angry (threatening). The challenges encountered in customer interaction proved to play a key role in prompting learning. The customers provided the apprentices with immediate feedback on their job execution. This may foster self-reflection leading the apprentice continually to improve how they deal with customers. Mastering difficult customers or being able to meet the customers' needs, triggers apprentices' sense of self-efficacy⁵⁷ and elucidates how learning and emotional engagement is interconnected. Andreas described what he found the most fun and rewarding at work:

Andreas: Satisfying a customer. Providing good service and selling a lot to one customer. I like to correct a dissatisfied customer's impression. That is difficult, but a lot of fun.

Second, product knowledge takes the apprentices deeper into the learning process (Aarkrog 2005). Being knowledgeable about the goods in the store enables the apprentices to deal with customers with confidence. At the same time, the apprentices may identify with being a seller by the products and product knowledge. Axel, apprentice in electronics retailer A, expressed this duality rooted in a personal interest in computers:

Axel: I have always been interested in computers. This interest started early and has developed over time. You feel a lot more secure when you are selling something that is familiar to you.

Like many of the apprentices, Hege in the candy store and video rental expressed that being able to meet the customer's needs and to be knowledgeable of the products were essential aspects of how a sales assistant should 'be':

Hege: Product knowledge is crucial. You got to know what you are selling. Like, is it of good quality? But when it comes to movies, you have to ask the customer and be a good judge of character. What kind of movie does the customer want to rent?

Describing the learning environment of retail apprenticeship, both the objective and subjective dimension is relevant to understand and conceptualise a sense of responsibility as a crucial precondition for learning and meaningful participation in work communities. The apprentices' subjective engagement in the freedom, trust and responsibility they were given provided rich learning-affordances. This is echoed in the interview with the apprentice in electronics retailer A, who felt that the manager considered him increasingly capable of

⁵⁶ The notion of 'learning resources', as opposed to barriers to learning, is based on Nielsen and Kvale (2003).

⁵⁷ This concept reflects a person's belief that they are able to attain their goals, even if impediments exist (Bandura 1997).

taking responsibility: “They [management] trust you more”. Assuming responsibility over tasks contributed to personal and professional development with the satisfaction of fulfilling the responsibility they were given.

In the following extract Andreas, one of the two apprentices in electronics retailer B, relates the transformation he has experienced. Through customer interaction, experience and increased product knowledge, Andreas described how his self-confidence has grown.

Andreas: My self-confidence has increased. That’s where I’ve become different. That gives me self-assurance. But it’s also something that I have to work on myself. It’s not something that my boss can tell me to do.

This extract points to the distinction between external and internal control. Here the former denotes the manager’s control and governance over the apprentices’ work tasks, whereas the latter involves the apprentices’ willingness to take responsibility (Hansen 2003). There need not be a contradiction between the two. Managers who told the apprentices what to do did not pose barriers to the apprentices’ readiness to take responsibility. The apprentices seemed to take responsibility beyond the immediate and concrete work task they were given. After a while, they were able to identify, foresee and complete work tasks without the manager standing over them, telling them what to do. This development implies a transformation from *reactive* to *proactive* autonomy (Littlewood 1999). Reactive autonomy does not create its own direction from a pre-set starting point. Rather, once the apprentice is given direction (by the manager), reactive autonomy enables the apprentice to organise their resources in order to complete the task given. Proactive autonomy on the other hand, is apprentices, who are able to take charge of their own learning, determine the objectives, select the appropriate procedure, and then self-evaluate the action undertaken.

The daily work consisted on the one hand of a set of repetitive and routinized tasks, e.g. restocking the shelves, and a great deal of freedom on the other. The apprentices gave accounts of routine work as providing predictable structure to the daily work. Customer interaction, which constituted the main task, was considered non-routinized work, “because no two customers are alike” (hardware store apprentice). Customer interaction, as an unpredictable learning situation, represents a process where the apprentices can apply knowledge and skills in a creative, improvised and self-directed way. Moreover, routine tasks may become interesting and learning-intensive if one feels responsible for what is undertaken.

Based on the apprentices’ accounts of school-based versus workplace learning, they all considered workplace learning as far more effective, “it wasn’t till I started working in the shop that I understood what I’ve read in the books” (electronics retailer B apprentice). Compared to school, where one only was responsible for oneself, the majority of the apprentices were aware that if they performed poorly in the workplace, this would affect the shop as a whole.

The managers emphasised that they did not differentiate between the regular sales assistants and the apprentices. However, it was crucial to the apprentices to establish a distinction between ‘us’ (apprentices) and ‘them’ (younger sales assistants in part-time

positions). In the following extract, Tina described the learning process and in doing so makes a distinction between the two groups:

Tina: I mostly try to learn from myself. In case I need assistance, then I can ask anybody who works here, not only the manager. (...). When I first started, I even asked the part-time staff, but they don't know very much, just a little bit. In the beginning, I felt that they knew a little bit more than I knew about the products and stuff, but now, it's more like me giving them assignments.

The above extract evokes the notion of 'boundary work' (e.g. Lamont and Molnár 2002), demarcating 'us' versus 'them'. In differentiating herself from the part-time staff, Tina constitutes a sense of self as becoming and being skilled. It is relevant to stress that the concepts of responsibility is not all-or-nothing concepts; rather there are different degrees of responsibility. Some of the apprentices like Ole in the sports and leisure equipment store felt responsible for customers entering the shop, whereas Tina in the hardware store was responsible for the department of kitchen supplies. Her responsibility entailed keeping the department tidy and ordering new products.

Learning, becoming and belonging are connected in complex ways, where prominence is given socialisation into beliefs, values and identity (Orr and Gao 2013). The empirical findings show that the apprentices' responsibility-taking is conducive to the process of becoming through creating emotional engagement and increased self-esteem when the tasks and responsibility are mastered successfully. Like most of the apprentices, Karina, in the beauty products retailer wanted to complete the apprenticeship period and keep on working in the shop. She said, "Yes, I think I feel like a proper sales assistant, perhaps even more with the trade certificate". Entering work communities which shows them trust and gives them responsibility, seems to enhance participatory practices and foster processes of becoming and being sales assistants.

Discussion: learning in spite of - or because of?

The Norwegian retail sector largely recruits unskilled labour, and to varying degrees provides in-house training. One pressing challenge for the Norwegian Sales VET programme is to create a social space and an occupational category for the *skilled* sales assistant - recognised and demanded by employers, and perceived as an attractive educational track and career choice among young people. The Norwegian VET programme is now in an institutionalising phase, where traditions, practices and norms are to consolidate, manifest and establish (Olsen and Reegård 2013). Consequently, the shop managers do what is familiar to them; introduce the novice to daily work activities. Considering the weak position of vocational training in the Norwegian retail sector, one would perhaps be inclined to expect learning-impoverished environments. The apprentices were introduced to shops holding little or no experience of apprenticeship training. They were largely surrounded by young unskilled employees, whereas the managers had no well thought through plan on how the training should be organised. Furthermore, learning goals in line with the national curricula were not of great concern to the managers. Consequently, emphasis was placed on work performance and outcome. However, due to the widely recognised mechanisms of informal learning that occurs as part of everyday work activity in general, i.e. being involved

in authentic work tasks integrated in a work community, the apprentices seemed to overcome apparently restrictive conditions. In many respects, they were socialised into and co-constructing expansive learning environments.

There are (at least) four scope conditions to be taken into consideration when interpreting the relevance of responsibility for the process of learning as becoming, and potential for moderate generalisation (e.g. Williams 2000). First, retail work mainly involves soft skills. Being thrown into the deep end with limited initial instruction, may have other implications in other types of work requiring training of advanced technical skills. Second, the retail apprentices worked closely with the manager, undertaking many of the same tasks. This implies non-hierarchical socialisation processes, which may foster work community integration. Moreover, working closely with the apprentices, the managers were able to observe the apprentices on a daily basis, and thereby delegating responsibility under the condition of control. Third, in many of the shops included in this study, the apprentice was the only one besides the manager working full-time. It is reasonable to believe that levels of commitment, and the more working hours put in, may have eased the management strategy of delegating responsibility, and for the apprentices to assume this responsibility. Last, individual dispositions and biographies are integral to grasp how apprentices experience and co-construct their learning opportunities. Considering the low completion rates of the Norwegian Sales VET programme, it is reasonable to believe that the apprentices actually commencing apprenticeship are the ones most motivated and thereby also more able to cope with the allocation of responsibility early in the apprenticeship. This selection bias is crucial to bear in mind when considering the degree of transferability of the findings to other contexts.

By analysing the dialectic relationship between agency and structure in retail apprenticeship learning environments, this paper argues that processes of learning as becoming are embedded in receiving and assuming responsibility over work and learning. The learning conditions involve managers, more or less intentionally, giving apprentices a great deal of responsibility from early on in the apprenticeship period. This implies apprentices who receive minimal instruction and guidance. This is echoed in the findings of Roberts (2013), where most of the training and development in retail employment is led by employees' own initiative and interaction with co-workers, beyond specific instruction. The apprentices who receive such responsibility may act upon it in different ways. Workplace learning and processes of becoming are perceived as apprentices' engagement in the learning affordances provided. The opportunity to assume responsibility over work provides an agency-enabling basis on which learning and becoming is played out and negotiated. This contrasts starkly to Taylorist management principles, exemplified by minimal employee discretion (Felstead et al. 2011). This paper shows that throwing apprentices into work tasks contributes to learning and increased self-confidence as far as the responsibility is mastered successfully. Although, the apprentices were thrown into tasks, they were situated in a learning-supportive and trustful environment. Being responsible is thereby not merely an innate trait of the individual, but a capacity the apprentices develop. Based on the analysis of empirical material, ability and willingness to assume responsibility is considered conducive to the identity-transformative journey from novice to skilled worker.

By receiving and assuming responsibility over tasks of great organisational value, the apprentices grow into the multifaceted work community as responsible participants. They take their share of responsibility for the shop's success. It is reasonable to believe that they thereby strengthen their position in the workplace (cf. Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation). Aspects of work community integration were however not explicitly stated in the empirical material. Although it was evident that they were situated in trustful learning environments in which they thrived. The managers stressed the importance of apprentices to be independent. On the one hand, there may be tension between apprentices' independence and work team integration, in the sense of promoting independence *from* the work team. On the other hand, the analysis rather supports notions of independence and work team integration as two sides of the same coin. One learns to become independent through the integrated process of participation. Furthermore, the paper argues that in promoting independent apprentices, the apprentices' interdependent role in the shop is strengthened. It is reasonable to assume that receiving and fulfilling the responsibility has significance for the ways apprentices become members of the work community, and being recognised as such by managers and co-workers. This becoming of 'insider' may in turn strengthen self-confidence, sense of belonging and commitment, relevant to the process of becoming.

It is crucial to address the kind of learning and becoming taking place in Norwegian retail apprenticeship based on the findings of this paper. Doing a good job, in the sense of selling a lot, does not necessarily mean that one is learning a lot. The apprentices were in a process of becoming *skilled* sales assistants. However, the findings do not indicate identification with a trade community of skilled sales assistant, considering this is a weakly established category in the Norwegian retail sector. Put in other words, work team integration was insufficient for developing a skilled sales assistant identity. There are contentious issues of throwing the apprentices into the deep end, and one may question whether this practice is borderline exploitative, because apprentices represent cheap labour to the managers. Instant release of responsibility is thereby like a two-edged sword. On the one hand, as this paper argues, it fosters processes of learning as becoming. On the other hand, excessive lack of guidance, and premature delegation of responsibility may pose limitations on learning. In cases when independence and responsibility leads to insufficient support and guidance, this may cause learning stagnation, lack of initiative and isolation. Furthermore, individuals experience different degrees of constraints on their capacity for action than other, and differing ability to mobilise resources in asymmetrical power relation to others, e.g. the manager or more experienced co-workers (Fuller et al. 2004).

This paper has highlighted some of the ways in which the learning environment and organisational structures can support learning in exploring the relevance of responsibility for processes of becoming in retail work. The responsibility they were given made the apprentices feel genuinely needed through immersion in the company's daily work. The responsibility the apprentices assumed fostered self-efficacy and increased self-esteem through fulfilling the responsibility they were given. When doing a good job, they received positive feedback from significant others, i.e. the manager or customers. However, the unequal power relationship between management and apprentice makes it problematic to state that apprentices should take more responsibility for their own learning and

development, which is a frequently repeated mantra (Fuller et al. 2004). Rather, this paper has shown how the process of taking responsibility is deeply embedded in the learning environment, in which apprentices receive and assume responsibility, calling for a more nuanced view on lack of guidance as purely detrimental to learning. Conditions for work and learning in the retail sector are conventionally perceived as learning-impooverished. To the contrary, the findings of this paper show retail apprenticeship learning environments as being learning-ready grounded in the cyclicity of responsibility the managers are giving and the apprentices assuming. Rather than apprentices learning *in-spite of* unguided learning, the apprentices learn *because of* their subjective engagement in the responsibility this implies.

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