



Norwegian Ministry  
of Education and Research

Summary

Meld. St. 9 (2016–2017) Report to the Storting (white paper)

# Skilled Workers for the Future

Vocational college education



**Meld. St. 9 (2016–2017) Report to the Storting (white paper)**

# **Skilled Workers for the Future**

## **Vocational college education<sup>1</sup>**

Policy background and summary

## **Vocational college education<sup>2</sup> – an important part of the knowledge society**

Our competitiveness will depend on a workforce with advanced and relevant skills, and good adaptability, and that we as a country are part of the technological development.

*NOU 2015: 1 Productivity - the basis for growth and prosperity*

Within the Norwegian population, new generations are gradually gaining longer and better education than those preceding them. This is partly the result of political decisions, partly by personal choice, social and professional needs. While higher education and upper secondary education and training have been the focus of major reforms and stated policy objectives of increased student numbers, higher vocational college education has emerged as a result of labour market needs and student demand.

Vocational college education constitutes a small part of the Norwegian education system, with approximately 15 000 students. In comparison, there are around 230 000 pupils and apprentices in upper secondary education (39 000 apprentices), and 250 000 students at universities and university colleges. Vocational college education is important, however, because it educates skilled workers with high expertise to many industries. With this White Paper, the Government presents measures that will enhance the quality of programmes and lead to growth in applications for vocational college education.

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<sup>1</sup> Norwegian title: Meld. St. 9 (2016–2017): *Fagfolk for fremtiden. Fagskoleutdanning*. It was submitted on 2 December 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Vocational college education consists of programmes of short duration – half a year to two years – at the post-secondary and tertiary levels, ISCED 2011 levels 4 and 5. Vocational college education programmes are at level 5 in the Norwegian qualifications framework, referenced to level 5 in EQF.

High quality at all levels in the education system is essential to ensure a highly qualified workforce, well-functioning welfare services, and a competitive business environment. Education of high quality is also important in order to develop a well-functioning democratic society with active citizens. The increasingly rapid technological changes require continuous changes in education and training to be relevant to students and working life. This is particularly important for vocational college education, which should be flexible, vocationally oriented, and adaptable to new technologies and new trends and needs in working life.

By being developed in close cooperation with social partners and working life to ensure the need for updated and specialized skills, while also being short and practical, vocational education programmes are perfectly suited to meet reorientation needs in a lifelong learning perspective.

Vocational college education is, together with the rest of the education system, an important condition for the productivity development in the economy, in that it provides working life with graduates with excellent knowledge and expertise in demand. Knowledge, skills, and new technology provide the foundation for innovation and new solutions essential to meet the challenges we are facing nationally and globally.

## **Skilled Workers for the Future**

Surveys show that there are currently not enough students in vocational college education to cover labour market requirements. In order to meet long-term needs, the Government wants to strengthen vocational college education through increased quality and recognition in order to attract more students. By providing students with relevant professional skills and practical knowledge, along with good conditions for studying, the government wants to ensure sufficient numbers of skilled workers for future needs.

All parts of the sector must be involved to support this ambition. The vocational colleges must provide relevant education for a changing working life. They must offer programmes with content and learning contexts adapted to the needs of the workplace locally and regionally. The planning and development of competence policy constitute an important contribution to strengthening vocational college education so that it can provide working life with excellent skilled workers for the future.

In order to ensure this, professionally robust vocational colleges are needed. The colleges need to be well managed, to have stable and predictable funding, and competent teachers. They should be attractive for education applicants who want to increase their skills, change career or get a basic education. Vocational colleges should be an attractive choice for those seeking further education at the post-secondary and tertiary levels.

Through a strengthening of student democracy at the vocational colleges, students will be better suited to influence their educational environment and the academic content of the education, and contribute to making vocational colleges even better. An attractive vocational college implies committed students who take part in the governance of their college and influence development.

The Government's vision is that the vocational college education in the future will be more attractive, have more students, and larger academic environments, and that the vocational college sector as a whole should be more visible and its graduates more in demand in the labour market. The measures proposed in the White Paper will largely help fulfil this vision. The Government will give priority to a promotion for the vocational college sector as regards quality, academic and professional environment, student welfare, funding and governance. In addition, the Government will prioritize developing the knowledge base for vocational college education, as there is little knowledge of the individual factors that affect the quality of these programmes.

There will be a need to be continuously attentive to the vocational college sector in the future. With this White Paper, the Government will promote high educational quality, more robust vocational colleges, and closer cooperation between vocational colleges and the social partners, while at the same time preparing the foundation for further promotion of the vocational college sector in the future.

### *The Government's ambitions and goals for vocational college education*

The Government wants more students in vocational education of high quality, which is relevant and adapted to the needs of working life. In order to achieve this, vocational college education must be recognized and become an attractive choice to education seekers and employers.

In addition to an active and participative cooperation between vocational colleges and working life, the following objectives must be reached:

- the students must engage in their field and succeed in their education
- the teaching staff must have updated and work-related vocational skills
- the vocational colleges must offer education programmes that meet working life needs and are attractive to students
- the vocational college sector must be well organized, with clear ownership and good governance

## **Summary of the White Paper**

In order to achieve the goals for the vocational college sector, the Government in this White Paper proposes a total of 48 measures for the sector. Below, the measures are grouped according to objective.

### *Students must engage in their field and succeed in their education*

To enable students to succeed in their education, they need to thrive, have good living conditions and a good and inclusive learning environment. The Government will follow up

the amendments of the Vocational College Act of 1 July 2016 by further enhancing student welfare.

By preparing the ground for increased attractiveness of vocational college education as a choice of education, and by enabling students to make informed educational choices, the Government aims at ensuring recruitment of more motivated and better qualified students for vocational college education. This will be done by organising admission to vocational colleges parallel to admission to universities and university colleges – i.e. using the same portal, as well as by improving admission provisions and strengthening career guidance.

The vocational colleges should primarily educate skilled graduates trained to go straight into working life. However, the Government will also improve the opportunities for those who wish to continue to higher education.

Research literature about other types of education shows that it requires a significant commitment from the students themselves if they are to succeed. Students must be committed, highly motivated and spend adequate time on education-related activities. This also applies to vocational college education. In addition, research about higher education shows that an increasingly diverse student body makes it important for the programmes to be well adapted in order to get all the students involved. This is best achieved through active, varied teaching methods, by providing students with frequent feedback, and by setting clear demands. This has an obvious relevance for vocational college education. Education offered in close cooperation with working life, whether through practice, mentoring, assignments or reciprocal visits, is very well suited for this sector.

The Government wants to enable the students to concentrate mostly on professional and school-related activities that contribute to the success of their education. A Proposition (Bill) to the *Storting* (the Norwegian Parliament), *Prop. 95 L (2015–2016)*, prepared the ground for a powerful improvement in student rights that took effect from 1 July 2016. With this White Paper, the Government wants to strengthen these rights further. It is important that the students' voice is heard in matters concerning their education and that students are given a real opportunity to influence the decisions made in the governing bodies of vocational colleges. Vocational colleges must follow up by facilitating student involvement and student democracy, both in flexible and campus-based programmes.

### *Teaching staff must have updated and work-related vocational skills*

In order for vocational college education to be attractive and for students to be able to engage and succeed in their studies, the education must be of high quality. One of the most important measures to improve the quality of vocational college education is to ensure high quality of the teaching staff. The teaching staff of the vocational colleges should be characterized by high technical and professional skills. In addition, formal qualifications and pedagogical skills are important. Many vocational college programmes are offered online, and it is therefore important to strengthen the teachers' expertise in the educational use of digital learning tools. By making available educational development funds and by introducing a

quality award for vocational college education, the Government wants to promote the development of quality learning environments and education programmes.

A solid knowledge base is the foundation for vocational college education to be of high quality and provide expertise that is immediately useful in working life. This knowledge base must be updated continuously in contact with working life and national and international professional and expert environments. According to the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), the knowledge base in vocational college education is experiential and work-related, thus requiring close cooperation with the relevant sector, business or industry.

For the vocational colleges, it is thus important to be in contact with both professional development in the relevant part of working life, and developments taking place in other expert environments. Professional innovation and critical reflection are the hallmarks of solid academic environments in the vocational colleges, as in other businesses. A good academic environment keeps abreast of new knowledge about teaching and learning, and initiates development of teaching and assessment methods adapted to the subjects' specificities and development. More robust academic environments will be better able to utilize each other's assets, knowledge and expertise, and attract valuable resource persons from other businesses and enterprises.

*Vocational colleges must offer education programmes that are needed in working life and attractive to students*

Vocational colleges' close cooperation with business and industry must be reflected in the teaching staff and in the development of the fields of study and the education programmes. The Government wants to strengthen this cooperation and to ensure that future vocational college education to an even greater extent is adapted to working life needs. National surveys shall strengthen the knowledge base for good dimensioning of the educational offer and for good educational choices.

Documentation of the graduates' competence, excellent opportunities to combine different modules, and vocational college education of longer duration are key contributions to ensuring the necessary vocational skills for working life.

Norwegian business and industry express a great need for the expertise from vocational colleges. Today, the number of applicants to the colleges is too low to be able to meet this demand. The vocational colleges must work long-term to make themselves more relevant and attractive to students by offering educational programmes of high quality that provides students with good employment opportunities. The Government wants the college owners to base their offer and the content and relevance of the education programmes on knowledge of national and regional skills needs and on feedback from business and industry.

It is also important that the labour market shows education applicants which job opportunities that are available after completing vocational college education, and the opportunities for further and continuing education that are available for employees. To ensure good applicants and high numbers of applicants for vocational college education, employers must recognize

the skills provided by vocational colleges, both through appointments and through salaries and their way of referring to the colleges. Through the 2016 wage settlement in the municipal sector, the parties established a separate wage scale for skilled workers with effect from 2017. These workers will automatically get a promotion when completing additional training equivalent to 60 higher education or vocational college credits. In this way, the municipal sector and the social partners have shown in practice that vocational college education is important, and hence contribute to making vocational college education an attractive career path.

In order to provide relevant education of high quality, vocational colleges must have an overall strategy for development, innovation and quality improvement of their education programmes. To be successful, such a strategy must be based on a thorough assessment of working life needs. The Government will therefore amend the Act on vocational college education to provide that local businesses and industries should be represented in the college boards. Through board representation, local business and industry can contribute to making strategic plans for the development of the vocational colleges and thus also influence in what direction the vocational colleges should develop and which academic and professional priorities that should be made.

Educational quality should be prioritized by the board and management. For vocational colleges, this means that students must be integrated in a work-related knowledge culture of high quality. Working life in general, and trades and businesses in particular, must have decisive votes in the operation of vocational colleges, to ensure both relevance and innovation. Close relations between the vocational colleges and industries that employ their graduates are necessary to ensure relevant and updated vocational college education.

*The vocational college sector must be well organized, with clear ownership and good governance*

Through a single government grant scheme, through dialogue and legislation, the Government will provide the counties, and in longer term the regions, with good conditions for offering vocational college education in line with regional and national skills needs.

A more appropriate grant scheme, consisting of a basic grant and a performance-based grant with an open budget frame, will form a good basis for the vocational colleges to develop further, and educate an increased number of skilled workers.

To clarify that vocational college education is at the level above secondary education and training, the Government permits vocational education to be referred to as higher vocational education.

In order to strengthen the vocational colleges' boards and collaboration with working life, the Government proposes to expand the vocational college boards, and that at least two of its members must be affiliated with a relevant part of working life. It will also help strengthen the rights of students and staff to introduce voting rights for student and staff representatives in the vocational college boards.

An evaluation of the quality enhancing measures of the White Paper will form the basis for further development of the vocational college sector and vocational college education in the future.

The Government will facilitate an effective and efficient operation of the vocational college sector and for its education of graduates with relevant and high quality skills. The vocational college sector is currently relatively small, with a varied educational offer. The sector is heterogeneous; the vocational colleges are of different size, of different types of ownership, varied organization and offer a rich variety of educational programmes. They vary in size and activity, from small vocational colleges with fewer than 50 students and few permanent employees, to colleges with over 500 students, many employees and operations at several campuses. There are wide variations in the administrative and financial resources between the various vocational colleges. However, the organizational, governance and management challenges are largely the same, whether the vocational college is public or private, or whether it has a clear regional affiliation and attachment, or a national range.

Increased cooperation and mergers within the sector can provide significant synergies for the students, the labour market they will be entering into, and the institutions themselves. The Government believes that both private and public vocational colleges should consider the possibility of a new and more solid structure. Vocational colleges should consider the value of cooperating, and possibly merging with other vocational colleges. Larger units can provide greater professional expertise and capacity in specialist environments, in student democracies and in management and administration, which will eventually help improve the quality of the education.

As a follow-up of a White Paper on new regions in Norway, all the regions will have to develop regional skills plans, and in these plans, the role and offers of the vocational colleges must be considered. A transition to larger regions may in the long term contribute to larger vocational colleges, and to a better-adapted vocational college education at regional level. A good example in this context is the Trøndelag region: In connection with the merger of the counties of North and South Trøndelag, the two counties have also begun discussing whether their vocational colleges should be merged, and a cooperation project called *Fagskolene i Trøndelag*, 'vocational college education in Trøndelag', has been established.

Published by:  
Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research

Public institutions may order additional copies from:  
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Cover illustration: Anne Leela, Gjerholm design

