



# Cooperation between municipalities and vocational schools

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THE NORWEGIAN ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES (KS)  
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SUMMARY

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This study examines how vocational schools can become strategic partners for Norwegian municipalities, in their efforts to develop the necessary competencies, skills and expertise in local healthcare and education/upbringing services. The purpose of the study has been to provide insight into municipal competence needs that can be covered by vocational education and training, and help municipalities and vocational schools collaborate to ensure that vocational educations meet the needs in municipal services. The study is based on surveys and qualitative interviews conducted with municipalities and vocational schools, as well as desk studies.

## **Study programs at vocational schools**

Vocational schools offer education based on upper secondary education or equivalent prior learning and work experience, which is equivalent to at least a half and a maximum of two years of study. The knowledge, skills and competencies gained from a Norwegian vocational school education corresponds to level 5 in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

A large part of the studies that are approved by the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) in the field of health and education is based on national plans made by the National Committee for Vocational Education in Health and Education Studies (NUFHO). The purpose of these national plans is to contribute to the development of a national standard for vocational education within health and education. As of March 2017, there are 17 active, subject specific national plans in this area. 14 of the plans concern health and care education, while 3 focus on upbringing/education. The vocational schools are obliged to outline more detailed education plans in accordance with current national plans. In this study, we have identified a total of 116 different study programs in healthcare and education/upbringing at Norwegian vocational schools. The most widely offered educational programs are "Health, Aging and Active Care", "Cancer Care and Relief Care", "Mental Health and Drug Abuse" and "Rehabilitation." Within education/upbringing, "Children with special needs" is the most prevalent education on offer.

## **Knowledge of the vocational education sector among Norwegian municipalities**

Although the study shows that many municipalities have knowledge of vocational schools and their portfolio of study programs, there is a large variation between municipalities in this area. This is evident, for example, by the fact that one quarter of the municipal respondents in the survey indicate that they do not have knowledge of the studies offered at the vocational school(s) closest to their municipality, and that more than one in five states that they are not able to explain how a vocational school differs from high schools and universities/colleges.

## **The municipalities' competence needs and competence development work**

In the healthcare area, the municipalities state three overall drivers for their need for further education for skilled workers: the Norwegian Health Care Interaction reform ("samhandlingsreformen"), more home-based services and an ever-aging population. The municipalities specify a need for more skills and competencies on several areas: substance abuse and mental health care, aging/geriatrics, dementia care, developmental impairment, rehabilitation, habilitation, cancer care, neurological disorders, relief treatment, nutrition, preventive work, and counselling. Welfare technology is emphasized as an area that will increasingly become relevant, and where it, accordingly, also will be a need for tertiary vocational education. Within the field of education/upbringing, there is a demand for vocational educations related to children with special needs, work with the youngest children, multilingualism and multicultural competence, environmental work, early intervention, special education and ICT/digital competence, among Norwegian municipalities.

Both quantitative and qualitative findings in the study show that there is great variation in the extent to which municipalities have competence plans/strategies that concern vocational schools and the skills and competencies they can supply.

### **Cooperation between municipalities and vocational schools**

A key prerequisite for cooperation between municipalities and vocational schools, is that the vocational schools offer education that is in line with the municipalities' need for competence. Collaborative meetings appear to be one of the most important elements to ensure this. However, less than one sixth of the municipalities in the study state that they have regular meetings with one or more vocational schools. Less than a third of municipalities report that their municipality has a formalized cooperation or regular dialogue with vocational schools. The degree of cooperation is greater in healthcare than education/upbringing.

More than two thirds of municipalities report that they have employees with a vocational school education in healthcare or education/upbringing. Most municipalities that have been interviewed state that employees who carry out vocational school education are not given new job titles. It is more common for employees to receive increased salary after completing vocational education. Some municipalities have procedures for allocating increased responsibility to employees who carry out vocational education. Examples of this include responsibility for internal education and training for other employees in the municipality, being primary contact/having responsibility for relevant patient groups, acting as professional resources in their unit or entire municipality, carrying out development projects, being responsible for apprentices, preparation of new procedures and plans, and/or facilitation of ethical reflection.

Several of the municipal leaders that have been interviewed state that they have seen clear growth and development among staff who carry out vocational education. According to these leaders, vocational education has contributed to the fact that employees have become:

- ▶ More aware of their own role, responsibility and purpose of the work they are carrying out
- ▶ More self-confident and assured of the actions that should be taken in different situations
- ▶ More reflective and more active in professional discussions
- ▶ More efficient in sharing and actively contributing to professionalism and knowledge in the organisation
- ▶ Better at following up and acting professionally towards parents, relatives, patients, users, etc.
- ▶ Better at stating in professional terms what previously, for many, was tacit knowledge
- ▶ More engaged and have a new "drive"

### **How can municipalities and vocational schools collaborate better to ensure that skilled workers in municipalities attain necessary expertise?**

The municipalities largely point to themselves when they are asked to emphasize key barriers to cooperation. Many acknowledge that they do not know enough about the content of the vocational school studies, the various forms of training that are on offer, or the purpose of vocational education. In addition, a significant proportion of the municipalities consider that the vocational schools are not good enough at marketing their studies, and that this is also a barrier to cooperation.

Our study reveals several factors that should be in place for the municipalities to meet their competence needs within healthcare and education/upbringing through strategic cooperation with vocational schools. At the overall level, the survey has identified two basic prerequisites for active cooperation:

- ▶ **Knowledge of the studies offered by vocational schools.** The municipalities' knowledge of the vocational school sector largely influences attitudes and the degree of cooperation. Both

vocational schools, municipal leaders and vocational school students can play important roles in making the vocational schools better known in the municipal sector.

- ▶ **State funding.** Funds from the Norwegian Directorate of Health and the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training currently finance a significant proportion of vocational studies within healthcare and education/upbringing. These funds are viewed, both by municipalities and vocational schools, as essential for the opportunity of municipal employees to be able to carry out vocational education.

Furthermore, strategic cooperation requires two active partners. Municipalities and vocational schools have a mutual interest in good cooperation. For municipalities, vocational schools are a source of important competence for their healthcare and education services. For vocational schools, the municipalities are important "customers" and source of student supply to the educations they have on offer. For municipalities and colleges to gain mutual benefit from this cooperation, there are several factors that should be in place:

- ▶ **Regular and binding collaborative meetings.** It is crucial that municipalities and vocational schools meet on a regular basis to communicate and listen to each other's wishes and needs. The study shows that the municipalities that have regular and formalised meetings with schools are most satisfied with the cooperation, and to the greatest extent experience that their competence needs have impact on the studies offered by vocational schools. However, less than one of six municipalities in the survey state that they have regular meetings with a vocational school. Therefore, for many municipalities a first and basic step towards strategic cooperation with vocational schools will be to initiate such meetings.
- ▶ **Collaboration agreements.** To ensure a formal and binding framework for cooperation, it will also be beneficial to make a formal agreement regulating this partnership. The study shows that few municipalities have entered such agreements as of today.
- ▶ **Anchoring the partnership strategically and operationally.** It appears as a success factor that the municipality is represented both by leaders who can convey strategic considerations and make strategic decisions, as well as representatives who are closer to the practicalities of carrying out municipal services within healthcare and education.
- ▶ **Use of teachers as a link between municipalities and vocational schools.** Municipal employees who also work as teachers at vocational schools can serve as an important link between municipalities and vocational schools.

In addition to the joint efforts listed above, there are several measures municipalities and vocational schools can do individually to facilitate good cooperation:

- ▶ **Municipalities must assess their own competence needs - and communicate this to the outside world.** For vocational schools to be able to offer education that is in line with municipalities' needs for competence, it is a prerequisite that the municipalities analyse what this need is and convey this to the vocational schools.
- ▶ **Municipalities must share information internally.** In addition to communicating needs externally, it is important that the municipalities communicate information about the vocational schools internally, throughout their own organisation.
- ▶ **Municipalities must make practical arrangements and create incentives to enable staff to complete vocational education.** Not all municipal employees have, or believe to have, an opportunity or motivation to complete vocational education. It is therefore necessary to make sure that employees find it possible to combine education and work. It is also important to create incentives for vocational education by making it a part of the professional career path, for example in terms of increased responsibility, new tasks, titles and/or increased salary.
- ▶ **Vocational schools must market themselves and conduct outreach activities.** For municipalities to get acquainted with educations offered by vocational schools, it is vital that

the vocational schools actively put themselves on display. This can be done through collaborative meetings and other meeting places, and through active outreach activities.

- ▶ **The vocational schools must be flexible and constantly develop, adapt and renew the studies offered.** Developments related to technology, digitalisation and e-learning are constantly advancing, and vocational schools should be open to municipal needs and demand for alternative forms of education, for example regarding video-based and/or online education. The vocational schools' flexibility and ability to quickly offer new and relevant educations is also a potentially important contributor to enhanced cooperation.

### **Possible influences on future cooperation between municipalities and vocational schools**

Vocational schools have the unique opportunity to provide important, relevant and professional skills to the benefit of municipal health and education services. Our study has identified both obstacles and measures we consider necessary to create more active cooperation between municipalities and vocational schools. Beyond this, we believe the following factors have potential to influence the role of vocational schools and their relationship with municipalities in the future:

- ▶ **Will larger regions offer greater opportunities?** With the forthcoming Norwegian regional reform, new and larger regions will take over the role of counties as school owners for public vocational schools. We cannot say with certainty which consequences this will have for the operation of vocational schools. One scenario is, however, that the vocational schools will also be merged into larger units, in line with the new regional structure. We believe such a move can provide several new opportunities for vocational schools, including larger professional environments that can work on developing educations and conduct marketing and outreach activities towards the municipalities.
- ▶ **Should vocational schools cooperate with other academic or professional communities?** Our impression is that many vocational schools lack sufficient capacity or resources to keep up-to-date on professional development and new research. Thus, the schools are largely reactive to the needs of the municipalities. We believe that vocational schools can act more proactively and be better equipped to offer education in line with municipalities' need for expertise in services that are constantly changing. Cooperation with other academic or professional communities can be a potential measure to achieve this.
- ▶ **Digitalisation provides both opportunities and challenges.** Digitalisation provides opportunities for facilitating education programs that make the vocational schools offer more accessible, less vulnerable to geographical distances, and more practically feasible regardless of the individual students' working hours, family situation, etc. This is consequently a development vocational schools should be aware of and work actively to accommodate. To achieve this, there is a need for both technical resources and expertise. At the same time, it is a fact that large sections of the target group for vocational education have varied digital skills. Thus, it is also important that the municipalities are conscious of their responsibility for increasing the basic digital competence among their employees.
- ▶ **Vocational schools need assistance to become better known.** As we have pointed out, it is important that vocational schools market themselves actively, so that more municipalities get acquainted with them and the studies they offer. However, we are not sure that this should be a responsibility for vocational schools alone, given that many schools are small and have limited resources for marketing and outreach work, both in terms of funds and staff. Thus, perhaps the state should contribute to the work of making the vocational education sector better known, in the form of informational campaigns etc. In the future, this is also a responsibility that might be entrusted to the new and larger regions that, according to current plans, will be implemented in 2020.