VETprep Podcast Episode 1

Young People's Pathways Through Vocational Education

Transcript

Episode summary

In this episode, Erin Schols speaks with Eva Lykkegaard and Anke Piekut from the University of Southern Denmark about vocational education and training, young people's pathways, and how VETprep is exploring vulnerability, agency, and support across different European contexts.

Moderator

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Guests

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Erin Schols (0:06)

Hello and welcome to the first podcast from the VETPrep project. So VETprep is a three-year research project. Its full title is VET Participation, Retention, and Educational Policies in the Wake of COVID-19, a cross-country approach. The project brings together partners from Denmark, Croatia, Estonia, Scotland, and Spain to look at young people's pathways into vocational education and training. across Europe, education systems have tried for many years to reduce inequality. Yet young people still do not have all the same opportunities, support, or outcomes. VETprep starts from this challenge.

It asks how schools, policies, social conditions, and support systems shape young people's educational choices and experiences. In this episode, we focus on one of the project's central ideas, agency. In simple terms, agency means young people's ability to shape their own educational path, not alone, but within the opportunities, barriers, expectations, and support systems around them. Today, we are not presenting final findings. Instead, I'm joined by Anke Piekut and Eva Lykkegaard, both associate professors in educational sciences from the University of Southern Denmark, to talk

about why this question matters, how VETprep is approaching it through qualitative and quantitative research and why listening to young people is important for understanding vocational education in practice. welcome both of you. Thank you for joining. Great. So, to get started, for listeners who are new to VETprep,

Eva Lykkegaard (01:30)

Thank you.

Anke Piekut (01:32)

Thank you.

Erin Schols (01:36)

This project looks at young people's pathways into vocational education and training or VET after COVID nineteen. So, from both of your perspectives, why is it important to study these pathways now?

Eva Lykkegaard (01:48)

I think it's important to study these pathways now because vocational education is a really important route for many young people, but it's not experienced in the same way by everyone. So, some young people see that as a meaningful and realistic choice and a realistic next step, while others they do not really see it as an option at all for them. So that is exactly why these pathways matter, so educational choices are not made in a vacuum.

They are shaped by school experiences, by confidence, family background, the guidance that the students have received in their previous schooling, and by how vocational education is organized and valued in any given country. So, what we really see in the VETprep project is that the picture differs quite a lot across the participating countries. In some places VET is a mainstream pathway for many students and in others it's much more of a minority choice. So, if we really want to understand young people's choices, we need to look not only at the individual young people but also the wider context around the young people. So that is what VETprep is trying to do to understand both the structures that shape these pathways and how young people themselves make sense of their options and their futures and their choices.

Anke Piekut (03:15)

And from my perspective it is important to study these pathways now because vocational education is still affected by quite strong social hierarchies in education. In Denmark and also in some of the other countries in the project, VET can carry a certain stigma. It is not always seen as equally prestigious or as more academic roots and that can shape how young people actually talk about their choices and even whether they see VET as an attractive option.

At the same time, research actually shows that many students in are happy with education and find it meaningful. So there seems to be a gap between the public image of VET and the lived experiences of the students. And that is why in VETprep we focus strongly on young people's own perspectives. We want to understand how they make their choices and how their experiences might challenge these more negative narratives. So, in our interviews, we already see many young people actively choose VET and often quite early on. So, they are not just pushed into it, they have a sense of direction and interest. So, a key aim of the project is to follow these young people over time and explore but support the senses of agency and belonging in it. At the same time, we look at how broader structures can either support or create barriers for these educational pathways. So, in that way, we try to connect young people's own voices with the wider systems around.

Erin Schols (04:43)

Anke, you mentioned briefly agency and as we mentioned, that's one of the central ideas of this episode, so in kind of simple terms, plain English, what does agency mean when we talk about young people making educational choices? And then also next to that, then why is that useful for VETprep to look at agency alongside these wider social structural factors?

Anke Piekut (05:06)

When we talk about agency in this project, we are really talking about young people's capacity to make a difference in their own life. So, it's not just about choosing between options. It is also about how young people interpret the situation, how they reflect on who they are, and act in ways that shape the future. So, agency includes things like initiative, intention and the feeling that what I do actually matters.

But agency can also take the form of resistance or actually non-action. For example, when young people choose not to engage with the pathway because it doesn't make sense or because there are structural barriers that need to be addressed first. So, in VETprep we actually also interested in a slightly broad idea of agency. We call it

transformative agency. So that means we are interested in whether young people can not only navigate the options they are given, but sometimes also push against expectations and take ownership of their pathway.

For example, we met an 18-year-old student with a serious visual impairment. In school, he struggled to keep up and also found social situations difficult. But he chose a business and commerce program because it allows him to use assistive technologies and still build a career despite his disability. And I think that is a good example of how young people actively shape a pathway that works for them.

So, we also see how agency can involve rethinking and changing directions. One student told us he had always wanted to become a car mechanic. But when he started the program, he was disappointed because it involved so much computer work and all the electric vehicles. So, he realized that he preferred practical hands-on work. So, after trying welding during the course, he decided to switch to a welding program the next semester. And as he said, “I want to work with my hands, not just sit in front of computer.” So even though he had a really strong passion for cars, he was able to reflect on his experience and handle the disappointment kind of, and choose a path that made more sense to him. So, when young people choose VET, even though in some national context is seen as a less prestigious option, they're not just making a choice, they are in a way defining what makes meaning for them. So, it's important to remember that agency always happens in a context.

It develops over time and through relationships with families, schools, peers and the wider society. So, we see agency as something that is shaped by structures, but it is also able to shape these structures back. And that is why it is so useful for VETprep to look at agency together with social and structural factors, because it helps us understand not only whether young people have a choice, but whether they feel able to act on those choices and even maybe transform them.

Erin Schols (07:50)

Thank you very much. So, then we'll continue with a bit of the qualitative perspective around the project. So Anke, for you, so your work gets close to young people's own stories. So how do you reach them and create space for these conversations, especially when the young people have all this noise and this pressure around them? And then next to that, what are you listening for when they talk about their choices and transitions and experiences in VET?

Anke Piekut (08:16)

In our work we try to get as close as possible to young people's own perspectives, experiences and their voices. I mean voice is important part of the project and that really shapes how we do our research. So, we combine classroom observations with narrative interviews. And the observations help us understand the concrete context the students are part of. I mean the everyday dynamics in class, the interactions between teacher and students, the affordances and pressures that surround them.

And then the interviews allow us to explore how the young people themselves make sense of those experiences. An important part of the project is, like you said, building rapport and trust with the students. So, we spend time in the schools, we engage with them during observations, we approach them in a way that makes participation feel safe and voluntary. And some students we approach ourselves because they are open and they want to engage and sometimes teachers help to introduce us.

But in all cases, and this is really important, the students choose to take part voluntarily. At the same time, the observations also strengthen our analysis because they help us validate and situate what the students tell us. So rather than working with what could be decontextualized accounts, we are able to connect the narratives to what we actually see and experience. So in that way, we stay close to the specific context and the students and we have a better way to understand how meaning is shaped in the interaction between students, teaching and the environment.

And this is also important for how we understand the narrative interview itself, because it's not just a method for extracting information or harvesting students' experiences – it's a kind of social practice where meaning is created in the interaction between us and the students. And in that sense, the young people are not passive respondents. They are active participants who reflect and shape their own stories as they speak.

So, then our answers are not fixed on neutral accounts, but something that is formed and adjusted and negotiated during the conversation. And this is also important for how we approach agency because that allows us to see young people, not only as people who have experiences, but as people who are actively making sense and positioning themselves within those experiences. And that means that we don't have really like close questions; we ask instead more direct questions. That could be, “what did your classmates say when you chose VET?” and “what had you heard about the school before you started?” or even “how do you imagine your life in five years?” So, these kinds of questions are easier to relate to and invite the young people to tell their own stories in their own way. So, in this way we open a space for them to tell stories that matter to them and we get what we could call richer and more grounded accounts.

When we listen, we are not only listening to what they choose, we are also listening to how their experience is of participation, whether they feel they belong, whether they can act, whether they feel they are met with barriers and how they make sense of the

pathways over time. So, the goal is really to understand not just what young people do, but how they experience being in VET and how meaning is created in this process.

Erin Schols (11:19)

I imagine you get quite interesting stories from this kind of interaction.

Anke Piekut (11:24)

We do.

Erin Schols (11:25)

And actually, so then from these stories, so what seems to help young people feel that VET is a place where they belong and can succeed?

Anke Piekut (11:34)

From the students' stories, a few things really stand out in terms of what helps them feel that VET is a place where they belong and can succeed. One important factor is a strong sense of professional relevance. So, the students really value when education really connects to the trait they are training for. For example, if they are training to become hairdressers, they expect even subjects like Danish or Math to relate to that profession. That connection makes the learning feel meaningful for them and helps them to see themselves in a future role.

For some students, the sense of belonging starts even earlier, really early, as a strong identification with the profession. For example, we met a 17-year-old who wanted to become a motorcycle mechanic. And he has been repairing bikes, he tells us, and even racing them with his father in the field since he was very young. And these shared experiences with family and his father have created both skills, but really a strong sense of identity and belonging around that profession.

Another key factor is the social environment in the classroom, like feeling safe, having good relations with classmates and experiencing that the teacher is both supportive and is clear, makes a big difference. And it also matters that the teachers not only care about the students, but actually have knowledge of the profession they are teaching towards.

Family support also plays an important role. Many students talk about parents and grandparents who have similar vocational backgrounds. And, if not, who actually are proud of their students choosing VET. So that recognition seems to strengthen the sense of belonging and motivation. At the same time, it's actually interesting that several students mentioned that friends or people outside the close family do not always value VET. So, they can experience kind of a lack of recognition from the outside.

But despite that, many of them still describe a strong sense of belonging and success within the education itself because they feel they are learning something hands-on and valuable – something they can use, they can see a difference and they feel it fits who they are and who they want to be.

Erin Schols (13:36)

And then from the flip side of that, you could say, so then what would make students then feel pushed away or uncertain or maybe even at risk of leaving?

Anke Piekut (13:46)

I think one important issue is when there's a kind of disconnect between theory and practice. For example, if there's a strong focus on the general subjects, like math or social science, that does not feel clearly linked to the vocational training, some students really struggle to see the point. So, this can be particularly challenging because a relatively high number of students also come in with weak academic skills, which can make these subjects feel even more overwhelming or difficult to engage with.

The same can actually happen with the broader programs, like if you choose technology, construction and transport. If the content leans too heavily towards one area, such as technology, even the students might want to become, for instance, a carpenter. There can also be more individual challenges, such as learning difficulties, strong dyslexia or other diagnoses, which can become barriers if they are not properly supported by the educational setting.

Gender is actually another important factor. We spoke to an 18-year-old female student who wants to become a carpenter. And she's the only girl in a class of around 20 students and she experiences that whenever she makes a mistake it is commented on as something related to her gender. And even if she just is the last one to finish a task, comments are made about her being a girl. This is the one part. The especially hard part is

she finds it really difficult when the teacher overhears these comments but doesn't address them or reacts on these comments.

So, these examples show that vulnerability is not just about individual factors but how structures, norms and everyday interaction can create situations where some students feel included and supported or not. And again, I mean this point back to the importance of looking at participation and equity because it's not only about getting students into VET but very important about whether the environment allows them to take part on equal and meaningful terms.

Erin Schols (15:43)

So, then Eva, moving over to more the quantitative side of the research in VETprep. So, your work zooms out from these individual stories to then look at the broader patterns. Since the project is still in progress, of course, what are you quantifying to help VETprep develop an understanding of these factors over time?

Eva Lykkegaard (16:04)

So, we have a actually discussed in the VETprep project group whether agency can actually be measured or not. But we landed on yes it can. And, but not agency as one simple fixed trait or as one single item we could put in a survey, but through like different dimensions such as confidence, motivation, future orientation and how the young people they understand the options that they do have.

So the quantitative part helps us zoom out and see broader patterns in young people's pathways into and away from the vocational education and training. So, it lets us explore how things like school experiences, confidence, but also gender, age, family background, and the stuff that Anke was talking about, how they are linked to seeing VET as a realistic option for them or not. But also how that differs across the participating countries in the project.

So overall the quantitative aim is not to reduce agency to a number. It's more to use these cross-national data to identify these broader patterns, which we can then read together with the young people's own qualitative stories like the ones that Anke just shared with us.

Erin Schols (17:24)

Okay. And then just expanding a bit on this idea of the five different countries and the need to look broader than just a national context, why is that so important for the project?

Eva Lykkegaard (17:38)

It's important pieces because young people are not choosing within the same conditions everywhere. So VET has different status, different structure and different future possibility depending on which national context you live in. So, comparison helps us to see what is specific to one system, to one national system, to one culture and what seems to matter for choosing that or not choosing that more broadly across these different European countries. we actually also look at the differences or com and compare agency in the qualitative part.

So, it's not just how the systems differ, it's also how young people themselves understand and navigate their option in these different contexts. So, all in all, I think that these cross-national insights they might help improve and inspire VET systems in the participating countries, but hopefully also beyond.

Erin Schols (18:42)

Okay, so then kind of bringing these together, as we know the project is still in progress, still quite some to go. But what are you beginning to see when you bring the student stories together with these statistical patterns? And what kind of questions are still open?

Eva Lykkegaard (18:58)

When we bring them together, we see both an overlap in the quantitative and qualitative parts, but we also see some tensions between the statistical patterns and the students' voices and their stories. So, there are some clear similarities. For instance, we see that family background, we see that in the narratives that Anke was sharing earlier, but we also see how family socioeconomic background stands out really clearly in the quantitative parts as something that predicts whether or not the students will choose a VET path. But we also see in both the quantitative and the qualitative parts that whether or not the students have clarity about their future, it seems to matter for whether or not they choose a VET path.

Anke Piekut (19:55)

What I think I can add from the qualitative side is that the student stories give us a much more detailed understanding of how education is actually lived and experienced. In the interviews, we see young people who are actively reflecting, adjusting and making sense of the pathways over time even when they face barriers.

Eva Lykkegaard (20:12)

Yeah, and we also…Anke and I have been discussing, we also see some differences on the findings we have from the quantitative and the qualitative parts. So, in the quantitative data, choosing VET seems somewhat more constrained. So, it is linked to lower self-efficacy, lower family resources, and in some cases it seemed to be like a non-motivated orientation. So choosing VET is something students do if they didn't know what else to do so they might as well choose VET. Whereas in the qualitative data that Anke has, the young people often seem more agentic and more actively engaged in making sense of their pathway and also making sense of choosing a VET education.

Erin Schols (21:02)

I imagine that's quite interesting to think about why that could be and what the different factors are that cause those differences.

Eva Lykkegaard (21:11)

Yeah, yeah. Maybe it has to do with like taking out in a questionnaire or talking to someone l like Anke, it's something different, your voice, yeah.

Anke Piekut (21:21)

The process of meaning making has some affordances and we have some nuances and elaborations of how they see themselves in education. So it's a different base we can contribute to a more whole and full understanding of the VET choice.

Erin Schols (21:43)

So, I imagine that's definitely something interesting. Are there other challenges that you've come across so far in the project? Like reaching young people, collecting the data,

doing this cross-country comparison, or just keeping the research meaningful in practice?

Anke Piekut (22:00)

Yeah, I mean, some of the challenges we face are quite practical. Gaining access to schools, reaching out for the young people and coordinating data collection across five different countries all take time and require a lot of flexibility. And I think on top of that, working with schools can be complex in itself, at least in the Danish context. There are often many layers of organization and management, and setting up agreements for things like observation or interviews can be difficult and time consuming.

I think another key challenge is comparison. Eva talked about it too, because VET systems differ significantly across countries, so what counts as VET and how it is organized in one country does not mean exactly the same thing in another country. So that makes it challenging to compare findings directly and that requires really careful interpretation.

Eva Lykkegaard (22:52)

Obviously in a cross-country comparison, language is a challenge. So, it's not just translating interview guides and surveys, but it's also making sure that questions and concepts mean roughly the same thing across countries and cultures. So there's definitely a challenge there. And also, it has been harder than we hoped for to track students longitudinal as they move into and across VET. Following the young people across these transitions is simply it more difficult in practice than we hoped for. So, we are throughout it all, we are trying to keep the research meaningful for practice but not, I mean, not just academically interesting, which is difficult.

Erin Schols (23:45)

I imagine you could have two sets of results, really the what we've learned about VET and then how to do this in the first place. Yeah. Okay, so then start to wrap up here. So, as researchers are working with these different kinds of data, what do you hope this episode helps listeners understand about studying young people's pathways into VET?

Anke Piekut (24:08)

For me it's really about recognizing that young people's pathways are not just patterns or outcomes, but they are ongoing processes where meaning is made. So, what I hope listeners take from this is the importance of staying close to how young people

experience, negotiate and sometimes question their pathways and to take those perspectives seriously as knowledge in their own right.

Eva Lykkegaard (24:33)

And I think that what I hope listeners take from this, is that no single method can tell the whole story. So the statistics can show us broader patterns, whereas the student stories help us understand what those patterns actually mean in young people's lives. When we bring those together, we get a much more complete and useful understanding of pathways into VET and of students' agency.

Erin Schols (25:00)

Okay. So then as the final question for both of you. So, in one sentence, what would you say is one assumption about VET or young people's choices that you hope this project challenges?

Eva Lykkegaard (25:14)

I hope it challenges that idea that young people just choose freely because choices are always shaped by the context around them. However, I also hope it challenges the idea that VET is only like the second best option, because for many young people it can also be a very meaningful choice.

Anke Piekut (25:35)

And I hope it challenges the assumption that what we see as students' choices fully explains the pathways, because meaning, participation and experience matter just as much. And like Eva, I also hope it contributes to shifting the broader narrative around VET in a more positive and nuanced direction.

Erin Schols (25:55)

Now thank you both very much. That will conclude our podcast for today. For our listeners, please follow the project for future podcasts and I think a lot more interesting insights from the research. So, thank you both. I thought it was very interesting and really insightful!

Eva Lykkegaard (26:09)

Thank you.

Anke Piekut (26:11)

Thank you.