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16th Nordic Conference held by NORDYRK  
Et nordisk forskernetværk om  
erhvervspædagogik og erhvervsdidaktik

## **Evolving VET: Navigating traditions and transformations**

### **Evolution or transformations in VET?**

What might evolve? What might transform? And which are the controlling forces?

*Jón Torfi Jónasson*

**June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2024**



UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

## Preamble – it is about education and communication

- In 1905 a new law on farmers education was passed in Iceland. Inspired by the Danish and Norwegian *folk high school movement* the law on farming colleges, - education for farming – was changed to a law on colleges for educating farmers.

(The idea of education plays a major role)

- In 2016, after decades of debate, upper secondary academic education, was changed from 4 to 3 years on the basis that three years was sufficient to prepare for university.

(It all centres around the institutional side of education – education as an idea is absent.)

Would this be symptomatic of the development of the discourse on education during this time?

### Current issues:

Attention to the basic terminology we use

How we think about the connection between education and the future

How we connect and communicate – or don't - in our professional discourses, but most importantly to and with those outside our professional world. I place this discussion in the perspective of fragmented discourses

Understanding of how things change – or do not change – what impedes change

How we think about evidence and how it may be harnessed

## Arenas for discussion – Language - terminology

Terms that should be discussed- we should spend much more time discussing the thoroughly :

1. Education
2. LLL – AEL –Continuing education - ...
3. Skills and competence – moving on to permaskills and skills intelligence
4. Needs (perhaps the scoundrel in the current educational discourse)
5. Evidence – evidence-based action
6. Degrees, credentials, qualifications, ...
7. Culture, tradition, vested interests, ... (the chief controllers of no change )
8. ...

(The green terms reappear in the following presentation.)



## An example: the term **Education**

I wanted to move from *learning to education* (the latter being more open – i.e., the idea of education),

But I was informed that most people want the opposite (as they were talking about the institution of education), i.e., they wanted to move from *education to learning*

Here the Nordic languages have the subtleties English does not have as the discourse is normally conducted: Scandinavian/Nordic languages have important nuances

*Education as referring to the system*

(Utdannelse – utdannelse/utdanning – utbildning – koulutus – menntun)

*Education as an idea –*

(Dannelse – dannelse/danning – bildning – learning – sivistys – menntun)

Thus, I would now phrase my thought:

**Education (school) – learning – education (idea)**

(Thus, we should talk about language)

## The future and the present:

### How might education deal with the future?

#### How we talk about the future.

I have been very interested in how we talk about education and the future for a long time. The connection between the two is not simple.

I have complained about the lack of proper focus on this issue in the educational discourse during the last decades.

(Recently I have substantially changed my argument as will transpire).

Points I have tried to make in the past:

- Much is known about what is developing (don't pretend we don't know a lot – even if there is much we don't know)
- But most of us know only a tiny portion of these developments (which may be our excuse – and perhaps it is best to be ignorant about some things)
- Of course, education should be relevant – also tomorrow – but how?
- There are more changes than those related to technology (we should talk about all of them)
- The most important changes should relate to the ingredients of education, -- not method, form or frameworks – thus the notion of *education* becomes crucial – as the main point of departure.



## How might education deal with the future?

Thus, I want to re-emphasise two important and highly related strands of thought when attending to the **future** within the field of VET

- I. The importance of placing the focus on the present – at least no less than on what happens in the future (this the most important change in my views)
- II. The normal terminology often refers to skills – basic skills or a variety of different skills – even a category called 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. But competences are increasingly used, and I will note that different concepts and very different perspectives are being introduced that may challenge the usefulness of the emphasis on skills. But the problem with skills – and even competences- is the way these concepts tend sift out the notion of education – they are in that sense non-educational (at least tend to be- and the proponents would probably not see it that way).



## The future and the present:

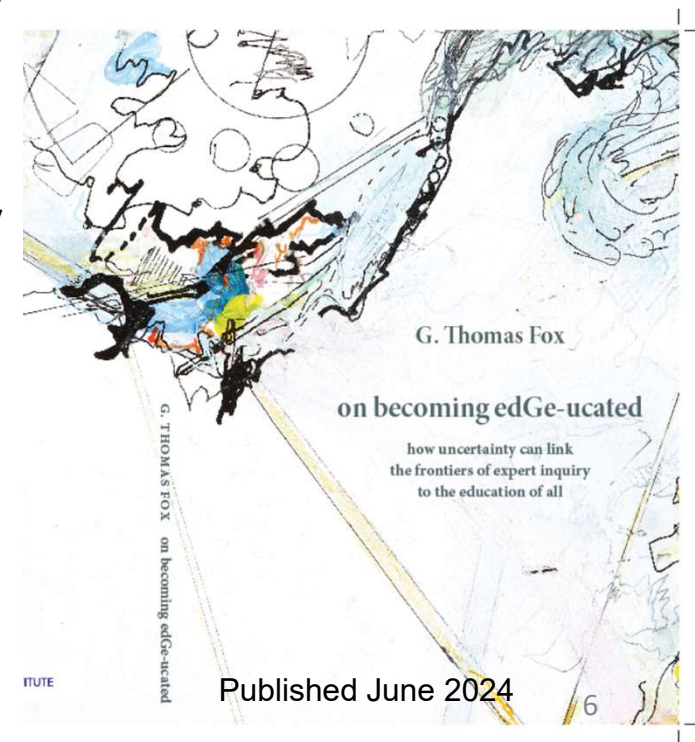
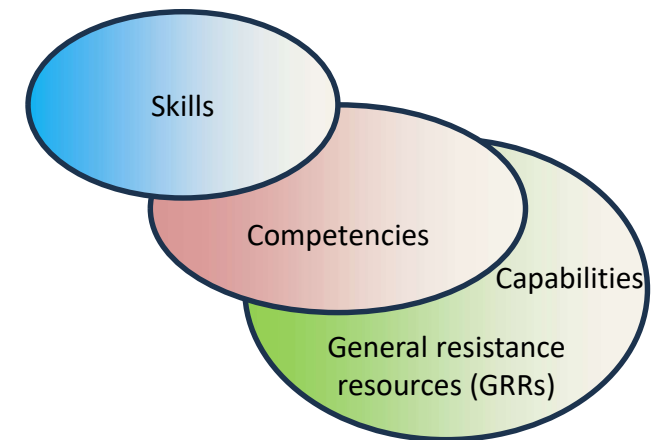
### How might education deal with the future?

Evolving VET: Navigating traditions and transformations

In recent years there have been a number of important developments that are more focussed on the individual's ability and motivation to act in challenging circumstances, inspired e.g., by the salutogenic approach developed by Antonovsky from whom we derive the notion of resistance resources, which refer to the ability to cope with novel challenges. We also note the importance of being acknowledged and valued as developed inter alia by Honneth. We also have the influences of positive psychology and transformative and also capability theoretical ideas. Each of these terms refers to grand theoretical frameworks, each of which – but in different ways – emphasise the ability to cope, flourish – **now** and **later**.

From a different direction we have the ideas developed by Fox, using the notion of edGe-ucation which acknowledges that one can usefully go straight to difficult questions, and grapple with them and gain sophisticated understanding without going through endless basics (tracing the historical steps of the development of knowledge). This allows powerful curriculum to be in focus at all levels of education.

All of these shift the focus somewhat to the *idea of education*: to understanding, to the capability to function well, coping with novel circumstance and challenges. These ideas are optimistic, relevant and demand that *education* once again becomes the centre of *education*.



I suggest that all these ideas converge to directing attention **to the present**, where the individual is participating in, and learning to interact with complex cultures and societies – with complex new challenges:

Thus, we emphasise the present, even when preoccupied with preparing for the future.

It is not that we don't know much about what is developing, we know a lot – but the present still happens to be the most sensible focus.

If there is a visible – even gradual shift in emphasis from skills, to competence, to resources or capabilities, ... in the theoretical discourse – what about the other discourses, outside academia – are they moving in the same direction?

Keep this question in mind when I draw attention to apparent fragmentation of discourses.





## – Fragmentation and communication

- Fragmentation of discourses.
- Communication within and between the different discourses is often lacking.
- There is (undue) optimism about who listens and how ideas travel.

Here I present an attempt to indicate this fragmentation – by noting several discourses and simultaneously I give an impression of the extent and seriousness of apparent fragmentation – it is not an attempt to map the situation.

I also continuously wonder how the different discourses interact.

I mention two sides to this fragmentation

One is that there exist such a multitude of discourses, most of which are within their own bubbles – and simply not reaching other discourses.

Second, is that even though the terms used are the same or similar, what they refer to and thus how they are understood is often totally different. The apparent communication is not working. But it seems that we are often oblivious to this.

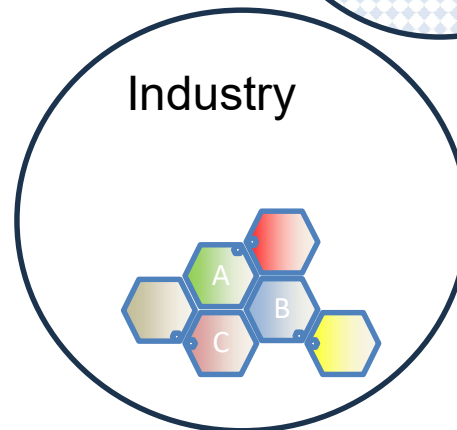
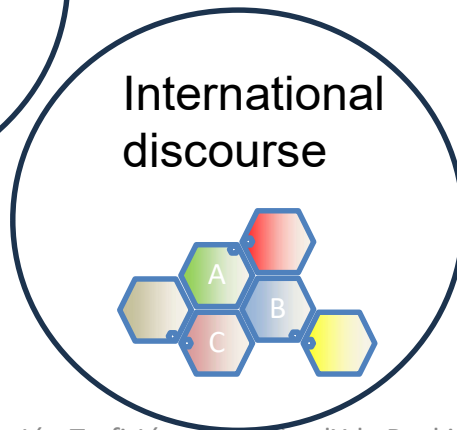
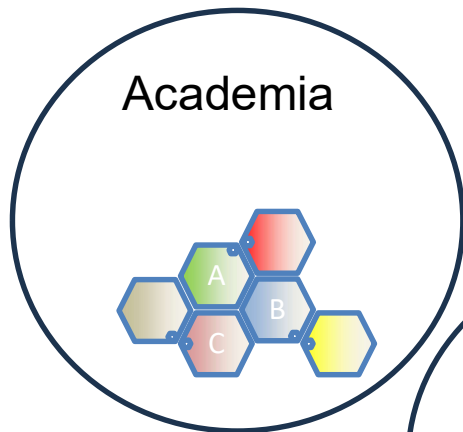
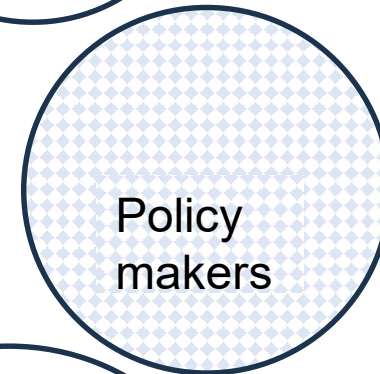
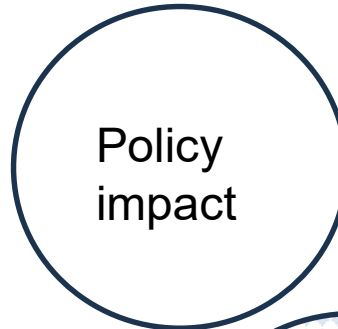
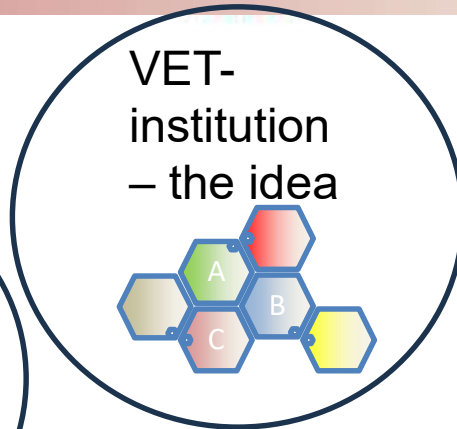




– The various discourses / worlds

Three main questions

1. How much interaction is there between the spheres?



Within each sphere there are many!

This is not a map!  
Just an impression.

3. How actively and effectively does academia communicate its work to the other spheres?

2. How much interaction is there within the spheres?

## – VET –the idea and the system

VET or TVET

Is both an institution  
and an idea



To treat vocational education as a homogenous object of inquiry seems sometimes to call for justification (which is normally absent).

There are deep-rooted characteristics of both the institution and the idea, and these vary between cultures

- The cultures in which these are rooted are both strong and different
- Some parts of these systems have incredibly deep roots.
- The systems adopted are surprisingly different – even in the closely connected Nordic countries, even when the underlying ideas are similar
- The system and content varies according to school level (which somewhere is gender related) – vocational education is now increasingly at both upper secondary and tertiary levels
- The challenges faced are very dependent on the occupational field, which is too often ignored
- The research bases varies substantially between fields – in some fields there is a strong research base – in others very weak

Differences between systems relate to (and tend to unduly ignored)

- Different views on what are the principal challenges
- Different cultures
- Different systems
- Different linguistic usages (different terms, different understanding what is being placed in focus)
- Different political emphasis
- Different economies
- Question of responsibilities (individual, industry, state ...)

## – The international discourse

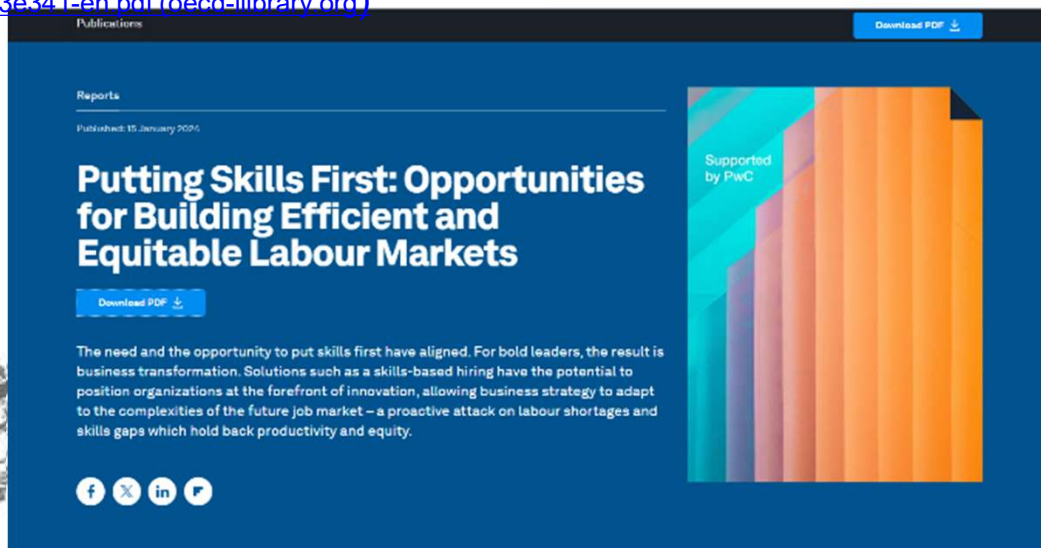
The international soft policy discourse is substantive and quite rich and varied – but perhaps less so than we might expect: UNESCO, World Bank, OECD, EU, CEDEFOP, NVL ....



# The role of global influencers



[2023\\_e5f3e341-en.pdf \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](#)



The emphasis in the international discourse?  
UNESCO, World bank, OECD, EU, ....

Education – skills – competence -  
.... There are variations – but less than  
might be expected



## European Year of Skills wraps up with a call for a “century of skills” in Europe and beyond



World bank

World Bank Group  
**SKILLS 4 D**  
 Skills Global Solutions  
 OCTOBER 2023 | ISSUE 1  
 VET Teachers are critical to ensure successful skills and workforce development

- Books
- Think Tank Reports
- Related Guides
- Citing and Referencing

ARTICLE  
**Challenging the skills fetish**  
 Wheelahan, Leesa ; Moodie, Gavin ; Doughney, James  
 Oxford: Routledge  
 British journal of sociology of education, 2022-04, Vol.43 (3), p.475-494

PEER REVIEWED OPEN ACCESS

Image: Pixabay

communication

to contribute to the green and digital transitions,

Skills are central to achieving sustainable, innovative growth

- » National Skills Strategies
- » Vocational Education and Training

OECD

- » Adult Skills Review
- » Career Readiness

- » OECD Centre for Skills
- » Skills Outlook

Education at a Glance 2023  
OECD INDICATORS



OECD

Spotlight on Vocational Education and Training  
Insights from Education at a Glance 2023  
September 2023

OECD Skills Outlook 2023  
SKILLS FOR A RESILIENT GREEN AND DIGITAL TRANSITION



LAND



Jón Torfi Jónasson NordYrk, Reykjavik Ju

CEDEFOP

Skills and learning  
Explore Cedefop indicators on what is trending in learning provision and qualifications

Workplace trends  
Explore trends in workplace training, employment contracts, job turnover, wages and others

Skills in online job advertisements  
Explore analyses on impact of green transition on jobs and skills

**Skills in transition**  
The way to 2035

national/regional/local authorities  
employer organisations  
trade unions  
learners/workers/citizens  
academia/researchers  
NGOs/civil society

Megatrends  
Incentives & support  
Upgrading jobs

PERMASKILLING

CEDEFOP  
Next generation skills intelligence for more learning and better matching  
Skills anticipation trends, opportunities and challenges in EU Member States  
POLICY BRIEF

Skill trends complexity requires method diversity

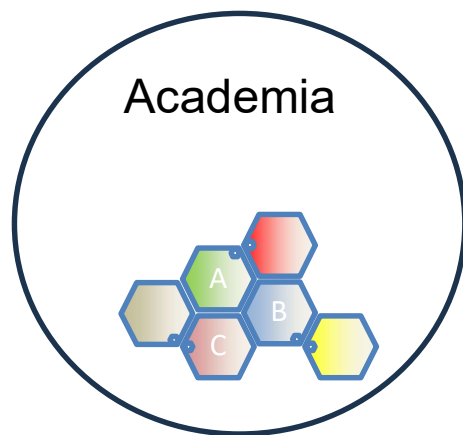
## – The research community

Large number of journals, conferences – and an active research community:

Scopus gives ~1200 titles per year using “vocational education”. (But somewhat complicated to define)

Interaction within the community seems to be lively with journals and conferences.

Academia is surprisingly fragmented but probably interacts more than any of the other discourse spheres.



Dimensions of fragmentation – and these are really important.

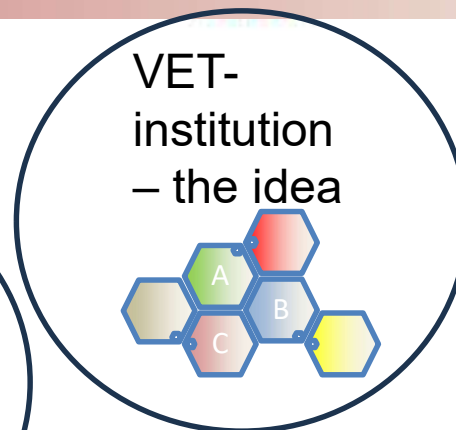
Background participants :

- Have different foci – areas of interest
- Come from different vocational fields
- Come from different academic fields
- Have very different roots in the VET+ system



## – The VET system and the idea

Number of people involved? In Europe?



Dimensions of discourse fragmentation:  
countries, level within the system, occupations,  
background of people, ...

Thinking about development:

What affects the content and form of these arenas?

How effective is this influence? And how timely?





## – Industry – the world of work

Does industry listen to any of the other circles? Should it?

What are the explicit interests of industry? WoW.

What are the implicit interests of industry?

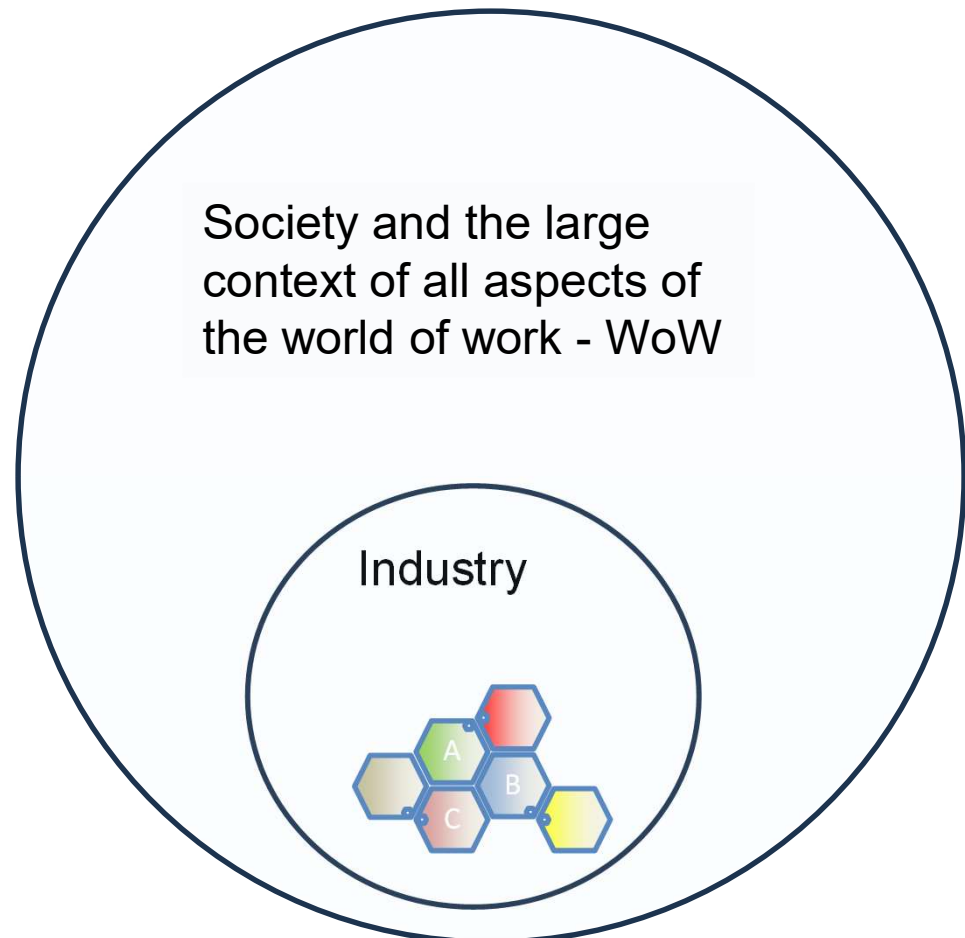
How influential is industry in the development of VET – and through what mechanism?

How diverse is industry?

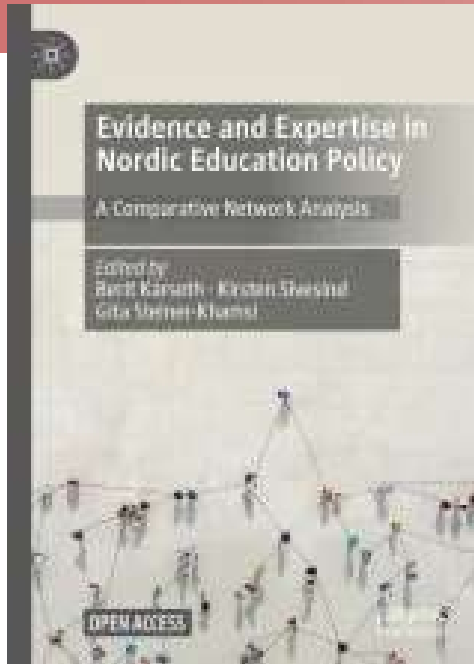
In terms of composition

In terms of developments

In terms capacity

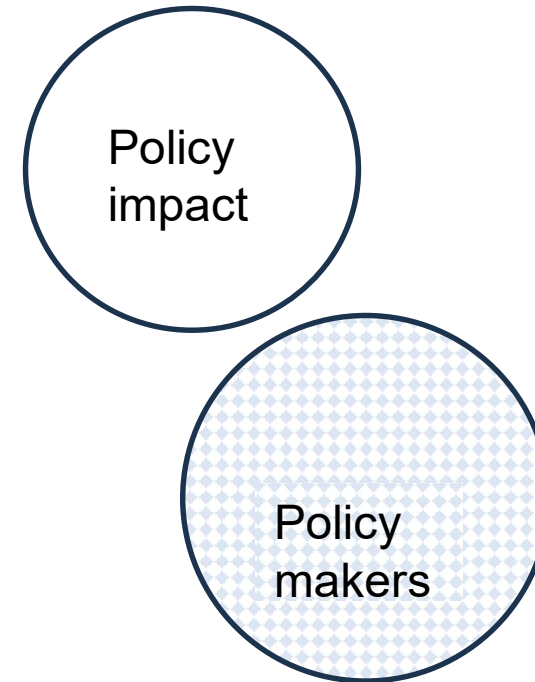


## – The policy discourse



### Does policy have an impact:

- What counts as change?
- What can be changed?
- What cannot be changed?
- What should be changed?
- What shouldn't be changed?



### SCRUTINISING THE NORDIC DIMENSION IN EDUCATION

MYTHS, REALITIES, AND INTEGRATION EFFORTS IN EUROPE'S NORDIC REGION

Edited by:  
John Benedito Krejler



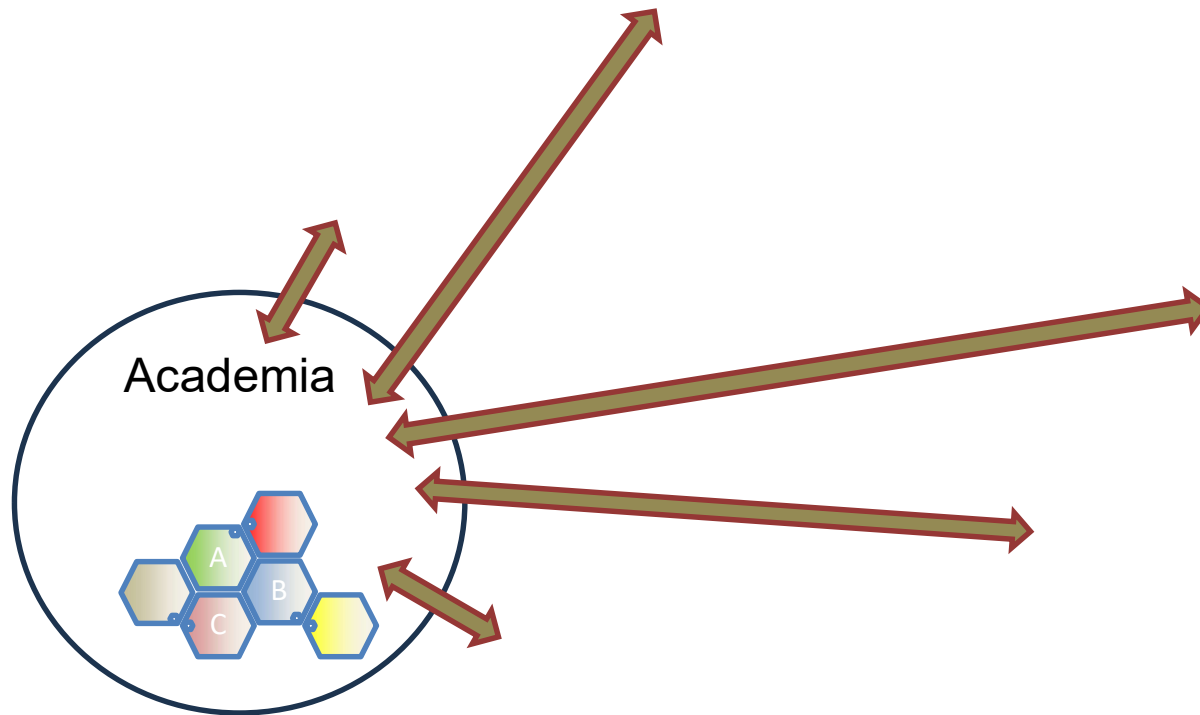
- Who are the formal policy makers?
- Who are the effective policy makers?
- What are the ideas that change policy?
- What are the vested interest that push for change? Or - no change?
- Our principal question:  
**To what extent does academia play a role?**

- The research community

How do these discourses interact?

What is the role played by academia in potential interactions?

We must deliberate this.



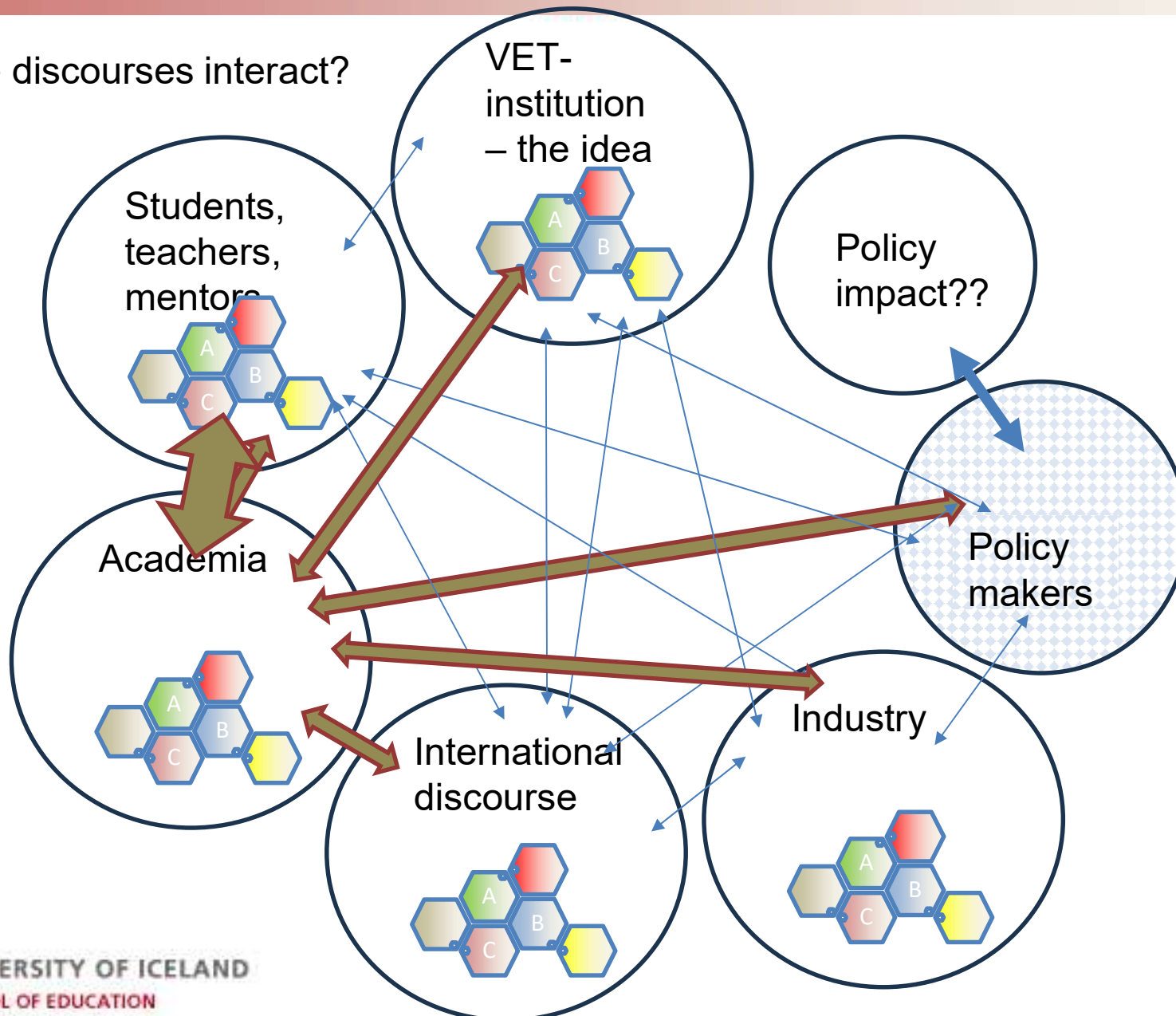


# - The various discourses

How do these discourses interact?

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## Evolution – transformation –?

Paper in JVET 74(1) 2022 see pp 84-85

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/13636820.2020.1833078?needAccess=true>

Does the vocational curriculum have a future?

Michael Young: “My prediction is that the vocational curriculum in its present form will disappear.”

Jim Hordern: “There is good reason to suggest that the vocational curriculum will not disappear, ... “

It is of course worth speculating what it means if a curriculum – disappears – what present form means – but the discussion between these two academics is important both at the deep and the superficial levels.

And we can also turn it into the more general question: where is VET heading – within each of our cultures? Is it evolving – transforming – or disappearing??

40 years ago, I was asked to predict educational development for the next 25 years. I was asked because I was considered likely to delineate the enormous changes that people knew would take place. I knew a fair bit about the use of computers in education – and would perhaps be able to explain why schools might perhaps no longer exist. But, I predicted little change; very mundane and boring reading. But I was largely right.

Since, - my speculation about how education would – and should develop, has been among my main interests:

Change - of – and within - the system of education: When do we see stagnation – stability - evolution – transformation?

What changes, and what doesn't?

One should look both at the inside of the educational edifice and outside it.

What drives changes and what holds them back?



## Evolution - transformation

**Inside institutional education**

Credentials – curriculum – pedagogy change very slowly – largely because they are institutions in themselves – not organizations

There are developments: *Institutions drift* toward homogeneity and higher status and there is a gradual *academic drift*.

What characterises these institutions and accounts for slow development?

The most important factors are culture (e.g., traditions), curriculum and the fragile connection to the world of work? Perhaps also vested interests within the system?

**How does the interaction between these worlds develop?**

Do they open up to each other – as the intention is? Do they connect better?

Or do they close in onto themselves? Does the increased professionalisation (at the educational side), and specialisation (at the industrial side) at least partly, induce isolation? How does the education system follow the changes in the world of work?

**Outside institutional education: the world of work**

Multifaceted substantial changes: There are simultaneously rapid changes or transformations *in the social culture, norms and structure, social composition, modus operandi of the world of work, - there are visible grand challenges, and most aspects of technology are transformed.*

**The academic sphere -- us?**

How do we develop? Go deeper – connect better? Do we recognise our inert culture?



## The role of academia: How do we talk - connect?

Let us turn to ourselves:

Our *raison d'être* in academia is that it is the hallmark of modern culture to be informed, enlightened and our research activity is our contribution. We also believe that understanding and evidence is the precondition for sensible action.

We labour to develop our ideas, meet and write to refine them and disseminate them. On the whole we do this quite well. They will thus be a basis for further developments. Science for the sake of science.

And many of us also assume that these ideas will be used outside our confines, present understanding that guides both policy and practice. But there are two substantial problems.

The lesser one is that our ideas are rarely clear-cut and easily understandable outside our circles. And there are preciously few who have the interest or competence (or time) to take them up.

But the major one is that there is very little either explicit or implicit in our research that informs about action – except to suggest that action is appropriate. I think this refers to most serious misapprehension of the research community. (And the reference here is to good, solid, sophisticated research.)

 Education at a Glance 2023  
OECD INDICATORS



Support Mechanisms  
for Evidence-based  
Policy-Making  
in Education

*Eurydice Report*



## The role of academia: How do we talk - connect?

- The notion of evidence-based action, i.e., that once you have got the evidence, you know exactly what to do, is based on problematic thinking – to be polite.
- This rather complex aspect of the complex research –practice, or -policy nexus should stimulate us to discuss – at least occasionally –how our endeavours could connect to the world outside academia. And we should discuss this at our academic conferences. There is no other (or better) forum.
- Of course, we see all kinds of very sensible structures set up related to various fields of science which all have the same issues. These apply in different ways to our concerns: There are *science parks* or *acceleration* or *incubation centres* or *hubs*. *Clearinghouses*, or the ideas of *translational science* or *knowledge* may be fruitfully used within various fields. When attending to long-range issues we have mode 2 university departments, and then triple (or quadruple and quintuple) helixes may perhaps be more relevant. We should discuss what is most relevant for the various corners of vocational education.
- The fact that these various platforms or operational spaces are set up acknowledge the complexity of harnessing research. And of course, a lot of research is constantly being applied – but it is not applicable as it stands. Here I am referring simultaneously to various types of research and mountains of data – assuming all to tolerate critical scrutiny. (And CRT research is of no help here.)



## The role of academia: How do we talk - connect?

- Risking to be arrogant I claim that it would be unfair to suggest that somebody else – i.e., those outside academia, is better suited to deliberate with overview and critical understanding - and then harness, what we provide. It is us that are immersed in the projects we cherish. Some of us are paid for extensive researching and teaching – we sometimes spend months or years – and often more years – collecting data, reading about related developments, mastering the concepts and vocabulary of the field; we have an insight and mastery that nobody else has. We know well the strengths – but also the weaknesses of our work. And the situation is normally not simple.
- Of course we are not alone in our research endeavours. There may be scores of our colleagues doing related research in different contexts and the meta-research or meta-meta-research shows that a picture from a single study is rarely reflected in all the other studies. And we realise this. Very few outside our academic circles have anything like our understanding of the possible nuances and the potential relevance of our work.
- So of course, we should shoulder a substantial responsibility for discussing the possible implications of our research. And take time to do it – on top of our necessary and fruitful normal conference discussions and interactions through journals. We are those who best understand our data, the context and the challenges that it faces. But suggesting and determining action, whether in practice or policy require sophistication, creativity and boldness but also political sense and thorough understanding of the vested interests and institutional straight-jackets that limit the scope for action. I feel an effort of this type is generally lacking among the social sciences – even if we find interesting and welcome examples.

I am convinced that a conference of this type is important, probably crucial as a platform to develop and communicate ideas – to gain both depth and width. And to engage in a critical discourse as a method to both evolve and transform ideas.

But in the process, we should also be:

Informed – **enlightened** and even critical of our own discourse. Thus, all the hallmarks of education should characterise our endeavours.

Aware of the ethical or rather the **political** character of enlightenment. To decide where and when to act and how to choose between possible actions is a political more than a scientific decision. But is inseparable from our professional duty as academics to initiate and engage in that discussion.

Discussing the **curricular content** of VET which to me is most important area for the field. We should, among other things discuss what makes VET educational – and thus important.

Probing the **nature of societal change** – there are so many things holding back, but hardly any of those are negative or malignant – they are just a part of the nature of human society – and some of what we have, we want to cherish and retain.

Be conscious of the importance of **communicating** what we know and believe in. Acknowledge our role – duty? to communicate – and not only among ourselves. And we should discuss this. I am convinced that a lack of communication to the outside of our safe space really impedes important developments. We are probably not contributing what we have to offer.







The worlds of VET are immense and important, but we may speculate if they receive the academic attention they deserve and deliberate what academia can contribute to the discourses that mould its evolution – or transformation?

I wish you a good conference  
Thank you – kærar þakkir



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