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**‘We have got the freedom’
A Study of Autonomy and Discretion among
Vocational Teachers in Norway and the UK**

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Editor's Foreword

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Abstract

The paper examines the claim that the Scandinavian ‘social democratic’ model has been able to support ‘better’ forms of work organisation, which afford employees higher levels of autonomy and control, when compared with ‘liberal market economies’, such as the UK. It focuses specifically upon the experience of one occupational group, vocational teachers in English and Welsh colleges of further education (FE) and their counterparts in Norwegian upper secondary schools. This group has been subject to a process of educational restructuring and the application of new public management, albeit in different forms and to differing degrees. However, very little is known about how their jobs compare in terms of their levels of discretion and autonomy, and their influence in decision-making processes both within the college/school and in the wider policy environment. The paper draws upon a range of interviews undertaken within FE colleges and upper secondary schools in England, Wales and Norway, alongside interviews with national stakeholder representatives. The research finds evidence to support the view that Scandinavia is indeed distinctive, with Norwegian teachers enjoying comparatively higher levels of job quality in relation to the key indicators of autonomy, discretion and decision-making influence.

Introduction

There has been increasing concern in the UK that despite substantial growth in employment prior to the recent recession, the quality of many jobs is poor and, in some cases, deteriorating (Green 2006, Kenway 2008, Lloyd *et al* 2008). The policy debates in the UK around job quality have tended to focus mainly on issues of low pay, job insecurity and, more recently, the limited progression opportunities available to those at the bottom end of the labour market (DWP *et al* 2008, Lawton 2009). However, poor job quality can also be a problem for workers at every step of the job ladder and is not just confined to a lack of material benefits. A key aspect that is often overlooked within UK policy circles is the way in which work is organised, in particular the level of autonomy and task discretion afforded to employees and the extent of their wider influence within organisational decision-making. By contrast, these aspects of job quality have a more established presence elsewhere in Europe, as can be seen for example in the European Union's policy on 'more and better jobs' and the quality of working life/work humanisation agenda in Scandinavia.

While the UK has often been criticised for having high numbers of relatively low skill, poorly designed jobs, the position of those higher up the occupational hierarchy, particularly professional groups, can also be problematic (see for example Warhurst and Thompson 1998). Evidence from surveys in the UK indicate that between 1992 and 2001 professional workers experienced a greater decline in task discretion and choice over their working methods than any other occupational group (Green 2006: 105). One of the sectors most affected was education. Once a field predominantly controlled and managed by educational professionals, the education sector in England and Wales has been subject to a wide range of changes under the general label of 'new public management' (NPM) (Pollitt 1993). This process has seen a move towards new forms of managerialism, with a more 'entrepreneurial-competitive' regime that is centred around notions of performativity. In England, where the reforms have been more extensive, evidence from across the sector has detailed higher levels of stress, work intensification, burgeoning bureaucracy, greater surveillance of teachers' work, and a growing gap between professionals and senior management (Ball 2008).

A key question is whether similar jobs in other countries are also experiencing these same trends towards declining levels of discretion and heightened managerial control. While surveys can provide a broad-brush picture of different types of work practices, they offer little insight into the finer detail of how a particular job may be organised and managed across different countries. The number of comparative studies of specific jobs remains extremely small and those that do exist have been predominantly confined to lower level and intermediary positions (e.g. Finegold *et al* 2000, Gautié and Schmitt 2010). The extant research, nevertheless, paints a rather consistent picture; compared to a number of continental European countries, workers in the UK tend to experience jobs with narrower tasks, less discretion and greater direct controls.

This paper seeks to contribute to the evidence base on comparative differences in work organisation through an exploration of the work of vocational teachers in England, Wales and Norway¹. Scandinavian countries are typically presented as leaders in terms of the ‘quality of working life’, in particular in relation to levels of autonomy, discretion and decision-making influence (Gallie 2003), and have been at the forefront of publicly-supported workplace development/innovation initiatives for many years (Payne and Keep 2003). However, there are few studies that actually compare the experience of work *in specific jobs* in Scandinavia with those in the UK. Vocational teachers offer an interesting comparison. Although there are many similar pressures and challenges in the field of vocational education, individual countries have tended to follow distinctive pathways in relation to the extent to which they have adopted forms of NPM. The research thereby provides an opportunity to explore how the job of a vocational teacher has been affected by different national institutional and policy contexts.

Initial vocational education takes place predominantly in colleges of further education (FE) in England and Wales, and in upper secondary schools in Norway. Colleges were removed from local authority control in 1993, while upper secondary schools in Norway remain under the control of the 19 counties. The FE sector has probably been affected more than any other part of the education system by NPM and processes of marketisation, managerialism and audit. Subject to a highly centralised funding regime, the result is said to be a culture of ‘performativity’ that has intensified

¹ Education and training is a devolved issue in the UK, with the parliaments/assemblies of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland having control over this area of policy.

work regimes, proliferated bureaucracy and paperwork, increased managerial control and eroded levels of professional autonomy (Avis 2003, Jephcote *et al* 2008, Mather *et al* 2009). In Norway, quality-assurance and accountability tools, such as national testing, have only recently been introduced into parts of the education system and NPM has so far made fewer inroads (Helgøy and Homme 2006). Nevertheless, despite a very different institutional environment, evidence suggests that teachers in Norway also confront pressures of increased workloads and mounting bureaucracy (Lyng and Blichfeldt 2003). It is not clear, however, whether the problems experienced in Norway are of a similar magnitude to those in England and Wales.

This paper seeks to identify the similarities and differences in the work organisation of vocational teachers² in England, Wales and Norway. To what extent do these jobs differ in terms of their levels of autonomy and discretion, and what influence do teachers have over broader decision-making? While a great deal has been written about the declining autonomy of FE lecturers in England and Wales, much less is known about their Norwegian counterparts and, indeed, whether the Norwegian social democratic approach has been able to sustain (at least in relative terms) a better form of work organisation for teachers.

It is also possible to link this question to issues of performance and innovation. The argument is often made that affording teachers greater autonomy can also be beneficial to teaching and learning. Cribb and Gewirtz (2007: 206) highlight how teacher autonomy has frequently been seen as a ‘precondition for the exercise of teacher’s professional expertise, ... a source of job satisfaction, health and well-being for teachers, a source of creativity, experimentation and variety and a source of effectiveness’ (see also, Eurydice 2008). More broadly speaking, the claim is that discretion allows professionals to use their own judgement, knowledge and experience to improve the service that they are providing (Taylor and Kelly 2006). The findings from the research are considered in the light of these assumptions about the centrality of autonomy and discretion to improving the educational experience.

The first section of the paper explores existing evidence about national differences in the way in which jobs are designed, before focusing explicitly on the experience of vocational teachers in England, Wales and Norway. The second section

² Different terminology is used to describe those who teach vocational courses reflecting the respective organisation of post-compulsory education. In this paper, ‘lecturer’ is used in England and Wales, ‘teacher’ in Norway and ‘teacher’ for generic discussion.

describes the methodology used in this study and presents some key features of the colleges and schools that formed the basis of the research. The main part of the paper draws on findings from the three countries to examine the extent to which there are similarities and differences in the organisation of work. The article concludes by assessing whether teachers' experience of work confirms or revises the predominant expectations concerning the impact of national-based systems of employment and policy regimes on shaping work organisation.

Work Organisation and Institutional Differences

If existing theoretical and empirical studies of work organisation are anything to go by, one would certainly anticipate better outcomes in Norway than in the UK. There is a widespread acceptance that there are substantial differences in national skill and employment systems in Europe (Streeck 1992, Regini 1995, Brown *et al* 2001, Hall and Soskice 2001). Distinctions have been made between the predominance of higher skilled, more autonomous work in 'coordinated market economies' (the classic example being Germany), and lower skilled, more tightly controlled work in 'liberal market' economies, such as the UK. In explaining these patterns, most commentators point to the significance of the wider societal and institutional environment, including product and labour market regulation, the industrial relations system, the welfare state regime and the vocational education and training system (Maurice *et al* 1982, Bosch and Lehndorff 2006, Gautié and Schmitt 2010). Gallie (2007: 100) adds a further dimension by stressing that power is central, in particular 'the capacity of governments and organized labour to constrain the actions of employers in the interests of improving the quality of working life of employees'.

The existence of comparative evidence on whether these differences actually exist in practice, however, is extremely limited. Gallie (2007:88), for example, argues that these contrasting patterns have mainly been based upon 'impressionistic comparisons of national evidence largely related to the formal character of institutional arrangements'. He claims that rather than Germany being an idyll of job quality, survey data indicates that it is the Scandinavian countries which are distinctive in terms of the quality of working life. Evidence from the European Working Conditions and Employment in Europe surveys have found higher levels of control over the work process, more opportunities for learning in the job, and greater

employee influence over work practices and management decisions in Denmark, Sweden and Norway (Dobbin and Boychuk 1999, Gallie 2007, Holm *et al* 2008). In contrast, the UK has a substantially higher number of jobs that are organised along Tayloristic principles and which are subject to direct control by supervisors (Holm *et al* 2008).

Comparative case study research has also shown that for lower level and intermediate jobs, skill levels and task discretion in the UK are typically lower than in a number of continental European countries. Studies have found hotel receptionists and housekeeping supervisors in Germany and bank clerks in Germany and France in jobs with more functional flexibility and broader tasks than those in the UK (Quack *et al* 1995, Finegold *et al* 2000). Other jobs in hotels, such as room attendants, however, appeared to be broadly similar in scope and design (Prais *et al* 1989, Vanselow *et al* 2010). A recent study of five European countries found that shop assistants, hospital care workers, call centre agents and food processing operatives in the UK typically experienced the lowest levels of task variety and discretion (Mason *et al* 2007, Grunert *et al* 2010, Lloyd *et al* 2010, Méhaut *et al* 2010). These studies reflect the findings of earlier comparative plant studies undertaken by the National Institute for Economic and Social Research during the 1980s (see for example Prais and Wagner 1988, Steedman and Wagner 1988).

Existing research suggests that there are differences in patterns of work organisation across countries, although the jobs studied tend to be lower skilled and are predominantly confined to the private sector. Such comparisons, while extremely valuable, nevertheless remain rare and have little to say about the position of professional workers in the public sector. This latter group of employees has been particularly affected by the diffusion of NPM practices. While it is generally accepted that the UK has been a 'leader', other countries have also pursued aspects of NPM. Norway is considered to be more of a 'laggard' (see Wallis 2009) but even here, elements of NPM have been implemented, with a process of 'autonomisation' of parts of the state and an increased emphasis on efficiency (Christensen *et al* 2008). Although the form and content have differed (Pollitt *et al* 2007), the overall direction of NPM is to move 'the locus of control and decision making away from professionals to a new internalized management function' (Ferlie and Geraghty 2005: 432).

The FE sector in England and Wales has been particularly affected by the implementation of NPM, with the emphasis on 'market-testing' and performativity.

Researchers have drawn attention to the detrimental impact on lecturers' work, including the loss of control and autonomy, and on teaching and learning itself (TLRP 2005, Coffield *et al* 2008, Hodkinson 2008). FE lecturers in England, it is argued, have been positioned as 'delivery agents' of government programmes and priorities, weighed down with heavy workloads and onerous administrative demands, in a system that constricts the 'space' available for teacher-led innovation, creativity and improvement (see Coffield 2008, Simmons and Thompson 2008). The Welsh Assembly took control of education with devolution in 1999 and, although some differences are emerging, there remains a similar regime focused on centralised funding, targets and external inspections (Jephcote *et al* 2008). For both England and Wales, uncertainty in funding combined with minimal labour market regulations and weak trade unions has led to a process of casualisation, so that by 2005, only 55 percent of FE teaching staff in England held permanent contracts (Lifelong Learning UK 2009), and just 49 percent in Wales in 2007/8 (Statistics for Wales 2009).

In Norway, vocational teachers are employed under the same terms and conditions, and often in the same school, as those teaching the academic streams. Over recent years, there has been a tendency to apply more 'output-oriented' and quality measures to education, including the introduction of national testing. However, these reforms have been resisted by teachers and their trade unions, in particular the proposed introduction of inspectors and performance-related pay. Helgøy *et al* (2007: 200) claim that teachers have a 'relatively strong collective professional identity' and have opposed 'transparency' policies, seeing them as a 'breach of trust' and 'degrading' to their professional status (Helgøy and Homme 2007: 245).

Vocational teachers are, however, almost invisible as a subject of research in Norway, with the evidence available on the impact of reforms on teachers' work tending to focus on primary and lower secondary schools. This research suggests that teachers in Norway have a 'high level of autonomy at the collective level' (Helgøy *et al* 2007), although, compared to their counterparts in Sweden, they have less control over their work within the classroom. Until the recent 'Knowledge Promotion' reform in 2006, teachers' work in the compulsory phase of education was highly controlled by the central state with a prescriptive national curriculum, specified teaching methods and an emphasis upon team-based collaboration (Helgøy and Homme 2007, see also Klette 1998:56).

Klette (2002) contrasts the Norwegian model of ‘you have to deliver’, with the state formulating what and how teachers should teach, with the UK’s ‘you have to achieve’ approach, where content and delivery are left broadly to the teacher but outcomes are heavily monitored and controlled. As with other teachers in Norway, vocational teachers are not subject to external inspection (there is no equivalent of Ofsted in England or Estyn in Wales), and upper secondary schools are not driven by performance-related funding and audit to anything like the same extent as FE colleges in England and Wales. Nevertheless concerns have been raised about increased workloads and the shift that has taken place in the teacher’s role towards that of ‘counsellor’, ‘social worker’ and ‘paper administrator’ (Lyng and Blichfledt 2003: 69-70).

The research focuses on two key areas which the literature suggests are important for the study of work organisation. First, the level of autonomy exercised by teachers within their job; and second, teachers’ collective influence in the wider decision-making processes which shape their working lives. To compare levels of autonomy and discretion, the distinction made by Klette (2002) between ‘delivery’ and ‘results’ is used. ‘Delivery’ relates to issues around the ‘what’ and ‘how of teaching, while ‘results’ are explored in terms of ‘what is achieved’, for example, retention and results. The second area examines the extent to which teachers are involved in decision-making within their college or school and in the broader policy context. If Norway does provide a better model, as existing literature might lead us to suspect, how is it better and why? A key research question is whether there are country specific patterns of work organisation that are also reflected in professional, public sector roles.

Methodology and Research Sites

The research focuses specifically upon vocational teachers of hairdressing in four FE colleges in the UK (two in England and two in Wales) and three Norwegian upper secondary schools (see Table 1). Interviews were held with senior college/school management, the head of the department and a number of hairdressing teachers at each site. Teachers interviewed also completed a one page tick-box questionnaire which covered standard measures of job satisfaction, job autonomy and work intensity. In addition, interviews were conducted with relevant sectoral and policy

bodies: in the UK, national-level representatives of Lifelong Learning UK, the sector skills council for the learning and skills sector; the Institute for Learning, the England-only body responsible for the professional development of lecturers; the English employers' body, the Association of Colleges; and the lecturers' union, UCU; and a lecturer at an FE college involved in the delivery of initial lecturer training. In Norway, interviews were conducted with representatives of the Directorate of Education and Training (the executive arm of the Ministry of Education and Research); the main teachers' union, the Union of Education Norway; a county and a university college delivering initial teacher training. The research was conducted between February and June 2009³.

In all three countries, the hairdressing teachers were women, as were all but one of their direct managers, and were predominantly teaching hairdressing, including both theory and practical elements. In England and Wales, some lecturers were involved in teaching 'key skills' (i.e. communication, application of number, and information technology) although predominantly adapted to hairdressing. In Norway, a number also taught on the broader 'arts and craft' programme delivered during the first year of upper secondary school which provides a general introduction for those entering a range of associated trades.

The four English and Welsh colleges cater for a wide range of both full-time and part-time students taking a plethora of qualifications of different types and at various levels. In hairdressing, the students were predominantly studying national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 1, 2 and 3. These are competence-based qualifications, which are undertaken alongside some 'key skills' at level 2 or below. The curriculum and assessment methods are written by awarding bodies (there are three main ones covering hairdressing) on the basis of detailed occupational standards and evidence requirements developed by Habia - a government appointed body. Most students progress through the levels over three years, although they can move into salon employment with a level 2 qualification. Admission numbers are usually around 20 for each year group and competition for places means that colleges are able to select students at the start of their studies using a range of academic, practical and behavioural criteria. Each college (and most individual departments) are externally inspected and graded on a scale ranging from 1 (outstanding) to 4 (inadequate) in

³ The names of colleges, schools and individuals have been changed to preserve anonymity.

England, and 1 (good with outstanding features) to 5 (many important shortcomings) in Wales.

Norwegian schools tend to be smaller and more specialised, with vocational students pursuing apprenticeship programmes on a mainly ‘2+2 model’ (see Payne 2002). Students spend two years in school studying hairdressing (and arts and crafts more broadly) alongside a number of general subjects (Maths, Norwegian, English, PE etc.). In contrast to key skills in England and Wales, these subjects are taught at a higher level than in lower secondary school and are delivered by specialist teachers. Most students then go on to a two-year apprenticeship in a salon at the end of which they are required to pass their journeyman’s exam in order to show they are qualified to practice as a hairdresser. Those who fail to secure an apprenticeship place must be offered a third year within the school and sit the same examination. Alternatively, after the two years, students can take a year-long supplementary general education programme that provides access to higher education. While some schools are able to select on the basis of exam results in lower secondary school, other schools are required to accept any student that applies.

Table 1: Characteristics of case studies

	Ofsted/Estyn rating		Student number (FTEs)	Numbers of hairdressing teachers		
	College	Department (hair & beauty)		Full-time	Part-time	Temporary, hourly paid, agency
England1	1	n.a	4-5000	7	6	7
England2	3	3	4-5000	3	2	10
Wales1	2	1	4-5000	1	5	7
Wales2	3	2	1-2000	3	3	2
Norway1	n.a.	n.a.	1200	4	0	1
Norway2	n.a.	n.a.	900	3	0	0
Norway3	n.a.	n.a.	700	3	2	0

The norm in Norway is to employ teachers on a full-time permanent basis, with temporary contracts being used to cover those on leave or on courses. In England and Wales, there was found to be a much wider range of contracts, with full-time, permanent lecturers being in the minority in all four hairdressing departments and managers relying heavily on short part-time hours and hourly paid lecturers. Contracted working hours for full-timers were 37 in England and Wales, with

between 22 and 24 teaching hours, alongside a requirement to be in attendance at college for nine and 10 hours in Wales and for all remaining hours in the two English colleges. In Norway, contracts are standardised across the country, with annualised hours that work out at an average 35 hours per week. Teaching hours are 22 per week, with a further nine hours attendance requirement and four hours allocated for working from home. Class sizes were lower in Norway with a maximum of 15 students, compared to 18 to 20 starters in England and Wales. In addition, the number of students in Norway at any one time studying hairdressing was between about 30 and 60 in each school, compared to the much larger body of students in England and Wales taking a variety of full-time and part-time hairdressing courses; for example there were 100 such students at Wales² and 350 at England².

The next two sections examine the extent to which these teachers had discretion, autonomy and control over their work and how much influence they had over decision-making within their college or school and at the broader policy making level. The research focuses on the role of full-time and large part-time jobholders in the UK, rather than on the experience of casual workers.

Discretion, Autonomy and Control

Delivery: curriculum and pedagogy

While the courses taught in the English and Welsh colleges were extremely diverse, all of the hairdressing departments visited offered predominantly ‘competence-based’ NVQs. Lecturers teaching NVQs have to ensure that students cover both the theory elements and acquire the very specific and detailed breakdown of competencies as specified by the awarding body. As such, there is little room for lecturers to exercise discretion over the content of what they teach to students. Although they can teach elements not included within the specifications from the awarding bodies, the burden of assessments and evaluations of students means that lecturers rarely find the time. For example, the NVQ in hairdressing requires the student to undertake nine units, each of which is broken down into multiple tasks or competencies. Each student has to be evaluated (successfully) at least three times on each task and then has to pass written tests at the end of every unit.

We have to follow the performance criteria of the awarding body...
you can't go ahead and teach them something that isn't in the unit
because you have got the time constraints. (Linda, Wales²)

One lecturer explained that if she was in advance of the curriculum, she would have some 'fun days': 'I will start cutting, colouring and doing things that we really shouldn't be doing' (Rachael, Wales1).

Many commented upon the heavy burden of assessment required by NVQs, the difficulties involved in tracking students' work, and the associated paperwork this entailed. The head of department at England1, who could remember what it was like before the introduction of NVQs, stated:

The awarding bodies have logbooks and every box has to be ticked... but that is NVQs isn't it... Quite frankly, I can't stand the things but we've got them... there is far too much tracking involved... The kids have folders, they have portfolios this big for NVQ level 2 and they struggle to carry them.

A younger lecturer at the same college also remarked:

we are constantly bombarded with big files to look through. From an assessors' point of view, it's quite a job during a practical session to actually track the work they have completed in that time. And if you have got eighteen learners in a class then it is quite a lot of time... just filling in folders... we are constantly signing and marking those.

One awarding body used by England1 had recently made provision for the theory element of the course to be tested 'on-line' through the use of multiple-choice questions rather than through written assessments marked by the lecturers. This was seen as a positive move by lecturers in terms of reducing their workload, although some expressed reservations concerning the narrow nature of multiple-choice methods.

If FE lecturers are constrained by the curriculum and assessment process, they retain more autonomy in relation to pedagogy and their choice of teaching methods.

As one lecturer put it:

There's nothing telling us how to teach students... so yes there is flexibility there in teaching... we are encouraged to use a little bit of PowerPoint... [and] varied teaching methods, to stimulate students, but nobody says you have to do it this way, you have to use these lessons. (Tina, Wales2)

Despite this apparent freedom, there was on-going monitoring and intervention in relation to the teaching process. A national official from the lecturers' union, the UCU, explained that whereas 'before the early 90s the FE teacher was king or queen of their classroom, you know management didn't go in', now there is 'increasing intervention by management... and much more focus on quality'. Across the colleges, quality assurance schemes and monitoring were seen as an essential element

of improving teaching and learning. Students regularly evaluated lecturers' performance with responses collated by senior managers before being fed back to the relevant teaching group.

Observation of teaching was also common, whether from other lecturers (particularly internal verifiers of NVQs), heads of departments and designated internal inspectors, or from the external inspections of awarding bodies and Ofsted or Estyn. Many lecturers commented on the positive role of inspections, which they felt helped to improve their performance: 'it keeps us on our toes' (Rachael, Wales1); 'it is good to give you a little shake up' (Tina, Wales2); '[it shows] anybody who isn't up to scratch' (Lisa, England2). The national union official explained, however, that not all lecturers felt this way and that there had been 'huge outbreaks of discontent about lesson observation... with management being much more hard line'. He claimed that, 'in some places unless you are graded as excellent or good you get marched off to compulsory CPD and possibly capability proceedings'. Representatives from both the union and the Association of Colleges (the employers' body) argued that the emphasis on targets and inspection had led many college managers to adopt a risk-averse attitude to innovation and experimentation in teaching and learning.

At England2, the role of management in the teaching process had extended even further, no doubt as a result of obtaining a score of '3' in their last two Ofsted reports. Each course tutor was required to meet with the vice-principal four times a year during which they had to show their schemes of work and lesson plans along with evidence of how they had reflected on them:

He [the vice-principal] wants to see me reflecting on my scheme of work... I have got to reflect on my scheme of work and I've got to reflect on my lesson plans. They also advise you to reflect on your day (Sarah, England2).

Lecturers spoke of having five formal teaching observations in the previous year. Therefore, while lecturers insisted that they had freedom in how they taught, the prescribed nature of assessments, the use of student evaluations, formal observations of teaching and on-going course reviews, all ensured that in practice the teaching process was extensively monitored and controlled.

In Norway, there is a tradition of the state providing fairly detailed guidelines in terms of curricula and timetables (Møller *et al* 2005, Helgøy and Homme 2007). A national curriculum was established for all subjects in upper secondary education in 1994 and each subject is allocated a specified number of teaching hours. New

curricula have been written as part of the latest, 'Knowledge Promotion' reform. The current emphasis is more on specifying 'learning outcomes' and the 'competence' that students should acquire rather than the detailed content of their study programme. The changes allow more space for local decision-making with regard to teaching but can also be seen as part of a trend towards NPM through the specification of 'outcomes' that can then be measured, tested and compared across institutions (see also Solhaug 2008).

The Norwegian teachers stated that the new curriculum was less prescriptive than was previously the case: 'The implementation of the new reform has left us with a broad choice' (Inger, Norway1). Another commented:

We have got the freedom, nobody is telling us this, this, this. We have got the goals [as stated in the curriculum]. This is what students are supposed to be managing when they end their course and how we get the students there is up to us (Kristine, Norway3).

The new curriculum is a short document running to just a couple of pages, which can be contrasted with the lengthy course outlines and detailed units of assessment required for NVQs. This suggests that vocational teachers in Norway have greater autonomy when it comes to deciding what they teach. Teachers of hairdressing in Norway also have fewer demands in terms of assessment, with exams being set within the college. The Norwegian teachers spoke of undertaking just two assessments per term. Again, this is in stark contrast to England and Wales, where lecturers have to continually track, assess and moderate students' work in order to ensure that the requirements of NVQs are fulfilled.

On the surface, vocational teachers in Norway appear to have less autonomy in relation to their actual teaching methods. In Norway, students have a *right* to receive teaching that is 'adapted' to their individual needs and own particular styles of learning (Eurydice 2008). Teachers are expected, therefore, to discuss with individual students the order in which they are taught particular elements as well as the learning methods that are used, with the emphasis upon students learning to solve problems for themselves. As one teacher at Norway1 put it, 'The opportunities to choose how to teach are not that good because it is supposed to be the student's choice... they have to come up with the ideas themselves and then we advise them.' At other schools, the teachers interviewed considered the adaptive approach to be largely impractical, arguing that many students lacked both the knowledge and capacity to make informed choices and that it was often necessary for teachers to plan and direct their learning.

In practice, then, Norwegian teachers are perhaps less constrained in terms of their choice of teaching methods than might first appear to be the case.

As with the colleges in England and Wales, the Norwegian students also evaluated their teachers via student feedback forms submitted to senior management. At Norway², these evaluations went first to the ‘chief inspector’ in the school. The information would be fed back to the teachers concerned who would then discuss this with their students and consider any necessary changes. In contrast to England and Wales, however, there was no formal inspection or observation of lessons either internally or externally, and teachers generally rejected the idea that they were being ‘watched’ or ‘monitored’ by management’. It was explained that if there were a problem with teaching, then it would be signalled by the feedback from students or more direct student complaints, which would be taken up by the school management. At one school, the procedure was that a serious concern would involve a meeting with the management, the individual teacher and the trade union to discuss how to proceed. Issues related to the quality of teaching were largely considered to be the preserve of individual teachers and their teaching teams, with intervention only undertaken when a ‘problem’ was identified.

Outcomes: retention, achievement

Interviews with managers and lecturing staff at the four English and Welsh colleges confirmed the pressures that both groups face operating within a regime of performativity based around funding, targets and external inspection. Colleges are driven by the need to secure funding, linked to student recruitment, retention and certification, and are graded by external inspectors in relation to their performance against ‘national benchmarks’ which are constantly being revised upwards (see Hodkinson 2008). For college management the stakes are high, as poor performance can lead to the removal of the senior management team. As a human resource manager at Wales¹ explained, ‘It’s literally getting the students in, retaining them, and then getting the results... the 3Rs – recruitment, retention, results.’ Ultimately, failure to deliver to target can result in the closure of particular courses or even the entire department.

All four of the English and Welsh colleges set targets for recruitment, retention and achievement, which were then passed down to individual departments and lecturers. England¹, England² and Wales² reviewed their programmes at least once

every term focusing upon these key performance measures. Part of the way to improve performance was to ensure that selection processes were more rigorous to exclude those students more likely to fail or drop out. Lecturers at England1 referred to the initial diagnostic reviews of students, designed to select those who were more likely to succeed, ‘taking up days’ and ‘being quite monotonous’, with the burden of administration and paperwork taking ‘the emphasis away from what you are here for [i.e. teaching]’. The focus was on recruiting only the best students. As one lecturer put it, ‘they will only be looking at the cream to obviously make sure that on paper the college looks good’, the concern being that any courses that did not meet the targets could be ‘removed from the curriculum’.

In this respect, the research found little evidence of any substantive difference between the experience of lecturers in England and Wales. The head of Wales2 explained that the college was ‘audited to death’ to the extent that it was spending £45,000 every year on an internal audit. He added, ‘We are absolutely engulfed in paperwork, mindless paperwork and administration... I think the bureaucracy in Wales is probably as bad as it is in England.’ In his view, the pressures upon Welsh colleges were further compounded by a poor funding settlement from the Welsh Assembly Government, with year-on-year reductions in funding in real terms which meant that ‘you are constantly working hard to stand still, to balance budgets, to keep people in jobs, to provide, and most important of all, a quality facility for students.’

Levels of monitoring were visibly higher at colleges and departments which were under pressure to improve their inspection grade. England2 had undergone two full Ofsted inspections and two monitoring visits in two years, a process described by the head of hairdressing as ‘horrendous’. The department had on both occasions received a grade 3 (satisfactory), leading to the realisation that without an improvement in retention and achievement, ‘the key factor in Ofsted’, the department would never receive a higher grade. As a result, they had become more selective in terms of the students admitted to their programmes:

... as I said, we have changed our programmes now... and as a department we don’t have to accept everybody, it isn’t a bums on seats ethos, not in this area... That’s going to improve our data (head of hairdressing, England2).

An instructor gave an insight into the impact that inspection can have in terms of generating additional demands on the college and its staff:

Everybody is running around trying to make sure all their paperwork is together and in nice little folders ready for the inspectors to have. (Lisa, England2)

This concern to meet targets also manifested itself in intensive micro-management of lecturers' work. Course tutors were required to report to the Head of Department on a monthly basis, identifying any students who were at risk of dropping out or not achieving. A lecturer complained that she found the situation stressful and that there was pressure on standards 'because the college themselves seem to want retention to be good and it's all about really to me, "bums on seats"' (Liz, England2).

This picture can be contrasted with the situation at Wales1. The hairdressing department had just been graded 1 by Estyn, eight years having elapsed since it was previously inspected. Departmental managers enjoyed the process of inspection, seeing it as 'an opportunity to show off – that's how we look at it.' Levels of monitoring were lighter and the lecturers interviewed did not complain about excessive bureaucracy and paperwork. As one commented, 'I don't see how you could slim it down, it's part and parcel of the job... we don't have that much paperwork really' (Rachael, Wales1). Compared to termly reviews elsewhere, feedback was provided to the faculty management on a yearly basis in respect of recruitment and retention targets. The college's location in the heart of a city, where it was the main provider of hairdressing courses, meant that it was in a position to select good quality students. It also operated a probationary period, when students first registered, so that any dropouts would not be counted against them.

While levels of monitoring and paperwork varied across the colleges, the vast majority of lecturers struggled to work within the current audit regime. Lecturers spoke at length about the pressures to constantly track and monitor students in order to provide college management with the data needed to secure funding and for external auditing and inspection processes. These pressures diverted time and energy away from teaching preparation and development:

I have come back after all these years and the paperwork is phenomenal. (Liz, England2)

I find it just so tedious a lot of it because it seems to be you know a load of rubbish. You know just writing the same thing again and again... you are setting up files all the time. (Debbie, Wales2)

Although lecturers were more positive towards the external inspection process, as outlined in the previous section, there were more criticisms from both managers

and lecturers about the focus on meeting retention and results targets. However, some saw the process as being positive and necessary. One lecturer stressed the benefits, reporting that, 'we are continually being assessed internally, so we assess the assessors and then Estyn assesses us and so the cycle of quality then obviously maintains good standards' (Linda, Wales²). At Wales¹, a lecturer with managerial responsibilities believed that targets worked to the benefit of lecturers and students: 'I don't think it's restrictive, it's nice to work to a target, to achieve, the best you can ... you want to do the best for your learners'. The head of hairdressing at England² similarly argued that it was 'important' for lecturers to be 'answerable to their role as a teacher', adding if there is no target, 'they would just plod along and they wouldn't care and our Ofsted grade would go down'.

In Norway, upper secondary schools are administered locally by the county authorities and there are no inspectorates or quality assurance systems similar to those that operate in England and Wales. There are 'system revisions' of schools undertaken by the Ministry of Education but as a representative of the Directorate for Education and Training explained, 'we don't like it [external inspections], we trust each other'. While national tests had been implemented for all students at age 16 and were publically available, the impact on school management is very different. 'The headmasters [sic] are not sacked but I think the school owners [i.e. the counties] have been more conscious to follow up' (representative, Directorate). For vocational schools, exams are developed in each school, making comparisons difficult. Norwegian schools are, however, required to keep track of students' attendance, follow up any absentees and provide data to the counties on dropout rates. Funding is allocated by the counties according to the number of classes, with additional funding for students from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special educational needs.

The move towards NPM was manifest in the introduction of measures in one county for funding to follow the student, with money being withdrawn if students dropped out. The county authority had instituted 'three count dates' during the course of the academic year. With Norway¹ facing a 'drop out' rate of around 35 percent, this meant that 'three times a year, we lose money' (principal). The sum was estimated to be in the region of NOK 7 million per annum or the equivalent of 10 to 12 teachers. If students 'drop out', however, the course will still be offered with full funding the following year. The county authority also set targets to reduce drop outs, although failure to reach these carried no penalties. As the principal explained, 'I

don't lose my job because I think that the government is so happy that I'm here because it is so difficult to run'. A similar mechanism was being considered at the county authority covering the other two schools:

they want us to keep a closer monitoring on truancy and also achievement levels... With the new model for budgeting... there will probably be some money allocated per groups and some allocated per head, per student and they will be counted when they start and also in February and if we lose a lot of students then we will also lose money. (vice-principal, Norway³)

Concerns over student retention meant schools were placing a greater emphasis on monitoring student attendance and dealing with issues related to student well-being. Teachers were required to document individual meetings and discussions with students and parents and agree relevant action plans. More student counsellors were employed and at Norway¹ there was a requirement to have twice yearly 'conversations' with students, whereby teachers would write 'a few lines' about how the students were doing in each subject. Most stressed that the burden of bureaucracy stemmed from the need to document any problems with students alongside contacts with parents and school counsellors. As one teacher said, 'if we get a case on anything, we have the documents' (Kristine, Norway³). The head of arts and craft at Norway² explained: 'I get a list every week... of all the students who are not coming... I have to ask the teachers what they are doing, are they following up the families, the homes, the student?' He observed that these aspects of the job had become more extensive: 'If you go back ten years in Norway... it is very clear that the bureaucracy is much more and time consuming and the reporting is taking the time from their direct contact with each individual student'. A teacher explained that these demands increased the more students there were in the class who lacked motivation or were not attending: 'If you have more students in the class with needs, then you are doing more documentation' (Heidi, Norway²)

Teachers at Norway² were critical of the amount of paperwork required in the job. When asked if there was much paperwork involved, one teacher replied: 'Oh God yes... A lot of feedback that students have got to have. Also we have to tell if the students have been away, how much they have been away in a term'. However, complaints about paperwork did not figure prominently during interviews with managers and teachers at the other two schools. Norway³ is located in a relatively affluent area and has a strong reputation for hairdressing. As one lecturer put it, it was

mainly a case of dealing with 'normal students with normal teenage problems', where behavioural issues were 'not worth mentioning'. Here the requirements around documentation and reporting were considered by teachers to be a manageable element within the job. One might be tempted to infer then that this reflects the reputation of the hairdressing department and the kind of students it was able to attract. Instead, Norway¹ gives an indication of the levels of paperwork required of teachers operating in more challenging circumstances.

Norway¹ has large numbers of students with motivational and behavioural issues. The principal explained that this reflected the operation of 'a market for education', with students' choice of school determined by their grades at the end of compulsory education. Notwithstanding its student profile, levels of documentation and reporting were not considered excessive. Even so, the principal was still concerned to reduce the administrative burdens on teachers as far as possible: 'I am thinking all the time about who's going to do it, can I have someone in the administration do that routine or do the teachers have to do it?' The hairdressing teachers confirmed that while there was 'pressure to keep track of students and where they are', they did not consider themselves to be overloaded with paperwork nor did they feel closely monitored by management.

Despite substantially different country-based contexts, teachers' responses to the questionnaire indicated very similar levels of (high) job satisfaction. These findings were confirmed during the interviews, as teachers in all three countries described the satisfaction they derived from helping students and watching them progress and achieve. When it comes to the pressures of the job, in all countries managers and teachers spoke of the challenges involved in dealing with growing numbers of students with personal, social and behavioural problems and the requirement to act more as a 'social worker'. However, an important difference was that lecturers in England and Wales reported higher levels of, what James and Diment (2003) have called, 'underground working', that is to say working outside of their contracted hours in order to get the job done and deliver an experience for students consistent with their own notions of professionalism. As one lecturer put it, 'my home life gets squeezed because I won't let things slip.' By contrast, the majority of Norwegian teachers commented that they were generally able to complete work within their allotted hours, not least because the levels of bureaucracy and paperwork

required in the job were much lower. Lecturers in England and Wales also reported higher levels of stress and exhaustion.

Lack of time appeared to have an impact on the ability of lecturers in England and Wales to undertake collaborative activities around teaching and learning:

I don't think there is enough time sometimes to actually share a lot of that kind of creativity and ideas. (Cheryl, England2)

What everybody lacks is the time... If you take... my hairdressing lecturers... some of them are very vibrant and full of ideas, really creative people. You sit down and talk to them and you get these amazing ideas and that's what they need... time together to thrash ideas out, inspire each other. (head of department, England1)

In terms of the organisation of work itself, the Norwegian model, at least *potentially*, allows more space for teacher-led innovation, although that space is far from uniform and often depends upon the circumstances of the particular school concerned.

Decision-making Influence

What then of the ability of teachers to exercise influence at the level of their college or school? For lecturers in England and Wales, there appeared to be little opportunity to influence the processes and policies that were implemented by college management. Furthermore, very few of the lecturers interviewed were members of a trade union which they tended to see as being involved mainly with individual problems around contracts and grievances rather than the management of the college. While there was some praise for individual departmental managers, college managers were generally perceived as operating at some distance and as being largely removed from the process of teaching. One lecturer explained that senior college management had been a 'long time out of teaching' and in developing strategies and plans, they 'don't always consider what the teacher does on the ground' (Julie, Wales1).

By contrast, all but one of the Norwegian teachers interviewed belonged to a union and considered that their union representatives were actively involved in decisions relating to the organisation and management of the school:

They [the union] have very much power and I think every second week they have a meeting with management... they take part in decisions that affect the school, especially when it comes to salaries (Hege, Norway1).

Regular meetings, every two weeks at Norway1 and Norway2, were held between local union representatives and college management at all the schools. The principal

of Norway¹ argued that a strong union representative was important for good employee relations, insisting, 'I want a strong union rep because I will know what the problems are and we will discuss it over the table.' At this school, a new system of performance bonuses had been introduced the previous year, which had been unpopular with many of the staff and unions. Applications for the bonus were evaluated jointly by the principal and the trade unions, with the unions ensuring that all those who applied received it. The result was an abandonment of the policy in the following year.

Studies have also highlighted the tradition of 'democratic leadership' in Norwegian schools, with established norms of non-interference in teachers' classroom practice and a relatively non-hierarchical approach to management (see Møller *et al* 2005). A teacher confirmed this view: 'We have the vice-principal, the door is always open to listen to whatever we have to say and it's quite a good relationship, it's not like a hierarchy, where we are here and they are there' (Heidi, Norway³). This contrasts markedly with the more business-focused 'managerialism' that exists within English and Welsh colleges.

There are also differences in terms of the influence exercised by educational professionals and other key stakeholders within the policy making process. In England, where tripartite social partnership is absent within the education and training system, policy making is highly centralised with ministers and senior civil servants managing the system, more or less unilaterally, from above (see Keep 2006, Coffield *et al* 2008). A representative of the lecturers' union (UCU), referred to 'continual micro-management by politicians... all of whom think they've got to make their mark on history, so we get another initiative and another initiative.' The ability of the union to exercise influence over national policymaking was seen as limited: 'We've got input, whether we have impact is another matter. I mean you can have impact around the margins but you can't deflect them [policy makers] from the central tenets.' A representative from the Association of Colleges (the employers' body) also referred to the problems created by constant 'top-down' reform, with seemingly endless changes to policies and targets such that 'the FE lecturer manages change as part of their natural state'. As one head of department (England¹) commented:

Education is such a moveable area, it is a continuously moving area, there are always changes and it is never sitting still... I think maybe one of the things teachers would really appreciate is to actually be left

alone for a bit to get on with doing what they are best at, which is teaching and developing learners.

In Wales, it was felt that policy making was more consensual and that bodies, such as CollegesWales (previously fforwm), were more actively involved (see Rees 2007). Nevertheless, in relation to concerns over bureaucracy, the perspective of one college head was that ‘our view is heard but nothing is done about it’. The Welsh government has certainly been more interventionist in terms of wages and conditions, providing funding for a new pay settlement in the sector designed to create parity with school teachers. A collective agreement was reached between the representatives of college employers and the trade unions, which has been implemented across all Welsh colleges. This contrasts with the situation in England where, although there are national agreements over pay and conditions, these are not binding. Indeed, the union estimates that every year as many as 60 per cent of colleges do not implement the pay increases.

In Norway, the social partners have traditionally played an active role in a policy formation process geared to consensus-building and have exerted powerful control over vocational curricula and examinations (Skule *et al* 2002, Helgøy and Homme 2007). Some commentators suggest that in recent years the process whereby the social partners monitor and control the quality of vocational education and training, through equal representation on national and regional-level bodies, has been replaced with ‘a regime of participation, in which the social partners are consulted for advice but are clearly subordinate to the state’ (Host 2008: 90). Whether the role of the ‘social partners’ has been scaled back or has simply changed remains unclear. A representative with the main teachers’ union in Norway, the Union of Education, insisted that they still had a major input into policy:

When they are making this curriculum [Knowledge Promotion], they [the Ministry of Education] send them out for hearing and then we make our remarks... We had a huge hearing of the latest curriculum and the government changed it... You can’t change everything but they really consider it and I think we have a lot of say.

Educational professionals in Norway retain a relatively strong collective voice, certainly when compared to England and Wales. As one head of department commented in relation to the ‘English model’ of inspection regimes and targets, ‘if it was not up to the unions we would have that system a long time ago’ (Norway2). This

is not to say that teachers in Norway do not have to grapple with policy change. As one teacher observed:

We have been through many reforms... 1994, 1997, 2006. Sometimes teachers have a feeling that every new Minister of Education brings a new reform and even if there wasn't a reform, they would introduce new systems like national tests for students, all these sorts of things... there are so many things dropping on your head that you felt you were quite lost. (Hege, Norway1)

There is no doubt that the pace of policy intervention in this area is quickening as the global discourse of NPM reaches into the Norwegian education system, and policy and media concerns over the quality of schooling mount following poor performance in the OECD's Pisa tests. However, there are checks within the Norwegian system, such as the strength of teacher unions and a multi-party political system geared to coalition-building that provide powerful 'lock-ins', which mean that change tends to be more 'negotiated' and far less frenetic than in the English model (Helgøy and Homme 2006).

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has compared the job of a vocational teacher of hairdressing in England, Wales and Norway, focusing specifically upon aspects of work organisation and issues of managerial control. Our findings are consistent with the growing literature highlighting the deteriorating conditions of work for FE lecturers in England and Wales in terms of intensified work regimes and increased administrative demands. The research found that, when compared to their English and Welsh counterparts, the Norwegian teachers are far more likely to be employed in a full-time permanent job, have slightly lower teaching hours and smaller classes, are less burdened by assessment, bureaucracy and paperwork, and are more likely to be able to complete their work within their contracted hours.

Teaching students to become hairdressers involves broadly similar tasks in all three countries. Nevertheless, the research indicates a distinctive pattern in the way that teachers are managed and the extent to which they have discretion over what they do. The colleges in England and Wales are dominated by the use of targets and controls that are not just 'results' orientated but are increasingly directed at the way lecturers teach. While lecturers in England and Wales insist that they still have the freedom to choose their own teaching methods, the nature of NVQs and their burden

of assessment means that what they teach is heavily prescribed, far more so than is the case in Norway. In addition, lecturers in England and Wales are found to be subject to higher levels of managerial control and surveillance over the ways in which they teach. In Norway there is also a concern to intervene in the teaching process, but this is undertaken predominantly through changes to initial teacher education programmes and continuous training, rather than by monitoring teachers' practice. Norwegian teachers remain largely free from the types of controls seen in England and Wales and are still largely 'trusted' to get on with the job by senior management.

A key explanation for these differences in job design derives from the direct impact of NPM in England and Wales and the attempts to micromanage aspects of the education system. It also reflects a system of qualifications that have been developed to meet employers' needs, without any real influence of the teaching profession, their trade unions or unions in general (see Keep 2006). In Norway, the decentralised nature of decision-making around much of education, the political make-up of national government and the central role of unions within institutions have ensured a slower and more consensual approach to change. The development and maintenance of a more trust-based system relies upon the strength of these underlying institutions and the ability of trade unions to maintain a relatively powerful position. Teachers expect to be trusted and are largely trusted to deliver within the classroom. In England and Wales, however, the culture of targets and external inspection has become so embedded within FE colleges that many lecturers, particularly newer entrants, feel that there is no alternative. The inspection regime under which they work is seen by many as either inevitable, given the way colleges are funded, or necessary in order to provide effective teaching. Although lecturers complain about bureaucracy, it seems, as Hodkinson (2008: 314) has recently argued, that many believe 'these things are important or that there is no other way things can be done.' Indeed, it could be suggested that a significant sign of de-professionalisation is when many within the 'profession' believe that they cannot be trusted to deliver without such controls.

There may be implications too in terms of the impact of job design on the teaching process. The way in which the job has been designed in Norway means that, at least *potentially*, teachers are likely to have more time and space available to try out new approaches aimed at improving teaching and learning and to develop local solutions to the problems they encounter (see Lloyd and Payne 2010). Management

too is likely to be more supportive of risk taking than in England and Wales where a 'blame culture' is said to have developed in many colleges in response to the pressures of audit (Avis 2003, Simmons and Thompson 2008). Whether these opportunities lead to improved outcomes is another question, and depends upon a multitude of factors at both school and individual level. However, Norwegian teachers are not having to face a daily battle against a culture of audit and managerial control.

The research on vocational teachers provides some support for Gallie's view that Scandinavia is distinctive, with workers having relatively high levels of control and autonomy over their work. The findings indicate that teachers in Norway exercise more discretion and have a greater level of autonomy than is the case for lecturers in England and Wales and that these differences are, in part, a product of contrasting national based systems of employment and policy making regimes. However, it is quite clear that these influences and outcomes are not static or pre-determined, and are subject to continuing pressure over how and where control is exerted. In England and Wales, policy rhetoric is increasingly emphasising the need to 'professionalise' the workforce and to develop reflective practitioners with higher levels of pedagogic competence (see Orr 2008, Lloyd and Payne 2010). Yet this is at odds with the reality of a target-driven system and a workforce which increasingly has little or no experience of vocational qualifications that are not assessment-led and competence-based.

In Norway, there have also been pressures exerted in different directions. Attempts have been made to introduce more controls on teachers through a focus on targets and funding linked to dropouts, while, at the same time, there has been a loosening of the grip of a centrally determined curriculum. Teachers and trade unions remain key players in Norway, with the ability to exert pressure on political parties, local college management and government that helps to maintain relatively high levels of teacher autonomy.

Discretion and autonomy are central aspects of job quality, yet there are few studies that attempt to assess whether (and how) seemingly similar jobs differ between countries. As this paper has argued, the Norwegian social democratic model has delivered for a group of public sector professionals comparatively higher levels of job quality in relation to the key indicators of autonomy, discretion and decision-making influence. While the NPM regime remains largely intact in the UK, Norway

provides an example of an alternative way of managing workers that is not based on low trust and which does not require extensive systems of monitoring and control.

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