

The Danish Union of Electricians

Summary

Apprentice representation in Denmark is rooted into existing structures and tradition of trade union work. The design and content of VET programmes are largely developed by the labour market partners. Gaining influence as an apprentice is integrated into the functioning of the labour market, and the ways that VET is planned in accordance with the labour market.

Trade unions for VET learners often have youth committees which represent the apprentices within the union. Apprentices therefore do not have their own trade union, but are part of the trade union for their specific VET profession. As trade unions are sectoral, so is apprentice representation to a large extent. The Danish Union of Electricians is an excellent example of this. The union's work take place in a context of tradition for union work, and the apprentices' representation is well developed within and outside the organisation. The apprentices have both direct and indirect influence on their conditions via their representation work at the union.

The relatively good conditions for apprentices in Denmark provide a visible result of how trade union work can act as apprentice representation. Apprentice representation, however, face challenges. It has become increasingly difficult to organise apprentices and engage the VET learners in representation work. Also, the public image of VET may deter young people from entering VET. The rootedness of apprentice representation in societal structures and labour union work as a corner stone of the Danish labour market model nonetheless provides a continual basis for apprentice representation in Denmark.

Introduction

Apprenticeship representation context

The overall strategy for VET in Denmark is to attract more young people to VET. In the electricians' programme, there has been a significant increase in the number of young people entering VET. From 2015-2018, there was an annual increase of 10% in the number of VET students entering the electricians' programme. The increase applies to students with ordinary educational agreements¹. This increase in the number of students is partly attributed to the major reform of the electricians' programme which took place in 2015. This reform made the programme more flexible and suitable to labour market needs.

In Denmark, it is a legal requirement to establish local educational committees (*lokale uddannelsesudvalg*). There is one local education committee for each VET programme at each VET school. The committees consist of a representative from the VET school and representatives from both the employer organisations and the trade unions. According to the law, the committees must be open to an apprentice participant, but the committees are not obliged to have an apprentice at the committee meetings.

¹ Ordinary educational agreements last for 3 years; that is, for the entire apprenticeship period in the main course of the VET programmes. This has been a recent increase in short educational agreements, which last for shorter periods than 3 years (e.g. 1, 1.5 or 2 years). DEFU would like to reduce the number of these short educational agreements.

Zooming-in on the initiative

The Danish Electricians' Union (*Dansk EL-Forbund, DEF*) is a trade union. DEF has a national youth committee (*Ungdommens Landsudvalg, DEFU*) which has 10 members; including a chairman of the committee. DEFU covers members of DEF who are under 30 years old. The majority of these young members are apprentices. There are around 4,500 electrician apprentices in Denmark, and around 85% of these apprentices are organised in DEF.

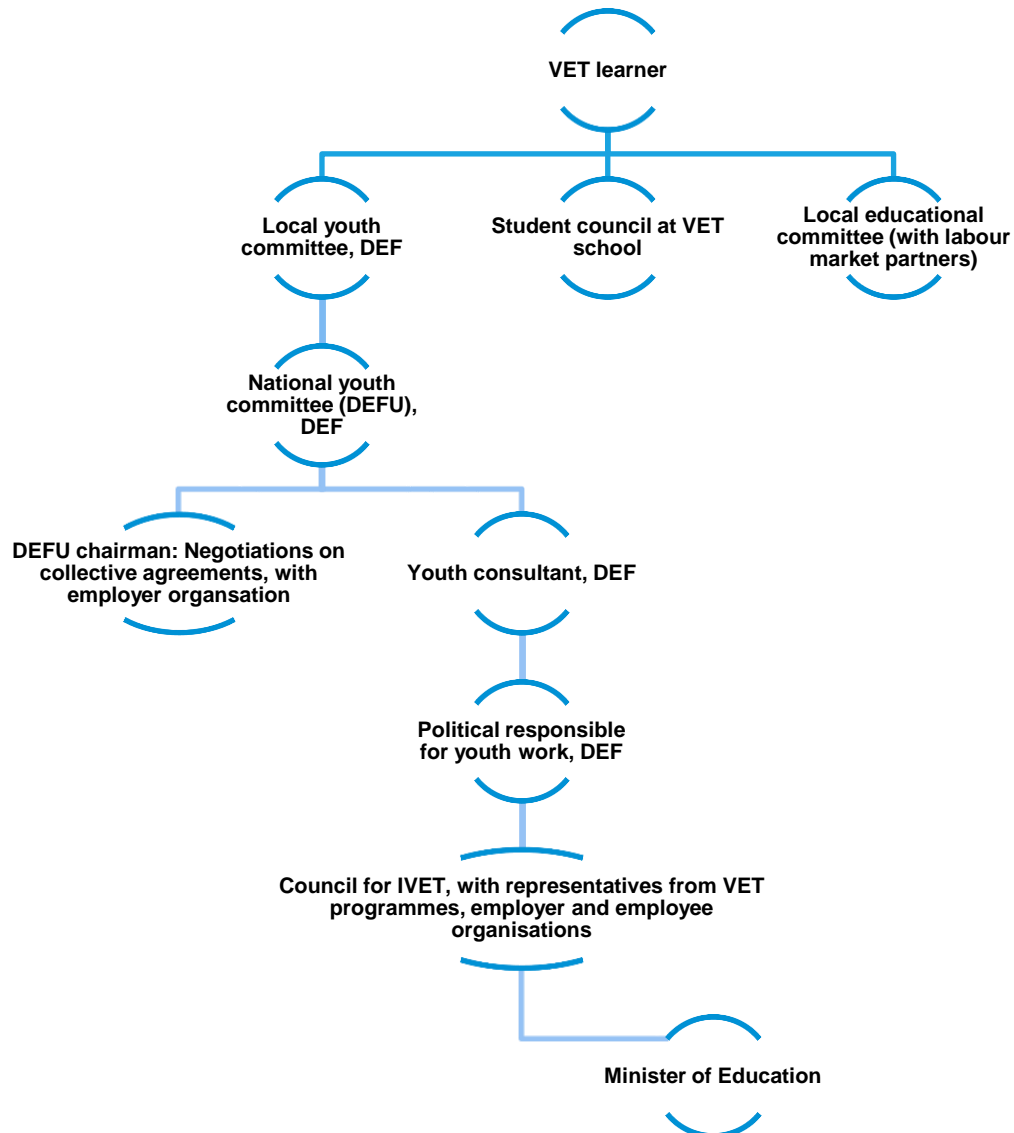
The monthly fee for apprentices in DEF is 155 DKK (20.8 EUR). This fee applies when the apprentice has started to earn a salary after concluding the educational agreement. The fee is not paid to DEFU separately, but is paid to DEF. Money from DEF is allocated to DEFU.

DEF has 11 local committees around Denmark, and these include local youth committees. A representative from the local youth committee can be elected to represent the local youth committee in the national youth committee. The chairman of the national youth committee is present at negotiations of the collective agreements, when these concern apprentices. DEFU is in this way represented when collective agreements are being decided. Collective agreements are of particular importance in Denmark, as the country for example does not have a statutory minimum salary.

DEF holds a congress every fourth year. The congress is the supreme authority of DEF, and the union's plan for the next four years is decided at this congress. An annual meeting takes place every year at DEF to coordinate the work in the union and allow delegates from around the country to meet.

The politically responsible person for youth work in DEF participates in the meetings of the Council for IVET (*Rådet for de grundlæggende Erhvervsrettede Uddannelser, REU*), which is an advisory committee to the Minister of Education. REU includes representatives from all VET programmes and the labour market partners. Figure 1.1 below demonstrates the way the channels of representation for learners at DEF.

Figure 1.1 Channels of representation for learners at DEF:



Source: author

National and international collaboration

In the Confederation of Trade Unions (*Fagbevægelsens Hovedorganisation, FH* – former *LO*) there is a youth consultant to coordinate the work between the unions in FH. FH was recently merged with another confederation, and the youth work is currently undergoing restructuring to accommodate all new members. DEFU has two representatives at the FH youth network. Plans for cross-union activities within the FH network include:

- Campaigning together at parliamentary elections in Denmark and the European parliamentary elections (in FH there is a consultant employed to implement campaigns for FH's young members);
- Working to create better working conditions for new graduates in the labour market;
- Participating at the annual People's Meeting (*Folkemødet*) in June;
- Protesting together, if the government suggests cut-down in the education sector.

DEFU is also part of the “educational alliance” (*uddannelsesalliancen*), together with other trade unions and student organisations. The alliance protests against governmental cut-downs in the education sector.

DEFU is not very much involved in international collaboration. Danish apprentices have fairly good conditions compared with apprentices from other countries. The Danish VET programmes are designed differently to VET programmes in other countries – also compared to VET programmes in Sweden and Norway. For such reasons, it might not always be useful to collaborate cross-nationally. There are however shared agendas for young people in labour markets across Europe. In this area, it might be useful to collaborate.

FH has a representation to the EU in Brussels. DEF’s international collaboration largely goes through FH. DEF is not a large union, and there is a limit to how much the union is able to engage in international collaboration on its own.

The European Apprentice Network seems to be primarily based on VET students as students per se – and not as employed apprentices, as is the case in Denmark. In Denmark, there is not an issue of unpaid apprenticeships as this might be the case in other countries. DEFU would like to express solidarity with these unpaid apprentices in other countries, but to DEFU there are other concerns of primary importance.

DEFU members find international collaboration very interesting. There has for example been talk about visiting trade unions in Eastern Europe to promote the knowledge of the benefits of trade unions. But it may also be difficult to compare unions and education providers across countries (also in terms of facilities at the schools). This means that it can be difficult to establish common ground.

Consultation and representation of apprentices

Overall, the national youth committee is responsible for coordinating the work of the local youth committees. A youth consultant at DEF works to ensure continuity in the youth work between the local committees and the national level. The youth committee and the youth consultant meet at least six times year. The meetings are facilitated by the youth consultant. Apart from coordinating the local youth committees, activities and tasks for DEFU include:

- Developing an **action plan** with areas of priority for DEFU.² The action plan is decided on the annual meeting. The action plan concerns issues around improving conditions at the workplace and at the school, and ways of quality assuring the VET programme. The action plans often look like each other from year to year, in terms of the issues raised in the plans. At the moment, there are many cuts in the education sector in Denmark, and DEFU would like to raise this as an issue.
- Supporting the establishment of “**apprentice clubs**” (*lærlingeklubber*) for electrician apprentices at workplaces. This is aimed at creating a community around the apprentices’ professional identity. Currently there are not enough apprentice clubs, and DEFU would like to improve this. If the apprentices stand together at the workplaces, it might be easier for them to make demands to the employers (e.g. about salaries);
- Organising the summer course “**Boost your education**” to teach skills that the schools may not have been able to teach. The course is taught by suppliers of new systems within the profession. Apart from the technical aspect of the training, the course is aimed at creating a community around the apprentices’ professional identity. In general, members of DEF have a strong professional identity. Around 150-200 apprentices attend this course;

² Action plan for 2019, decided in 2018 (Danish only):

https://www.def.dk/sites/default/files/documents/handlingsplan_2019_final.pdf

- Organising courses for apprentices which focus on **union work**; including the history of trade unions in Denmark, and the ways that the Danish labour market model works. This is supposed to equip the apprentices to become active and represent electricians through the union. DEFU organises trainings for apprentices to enable them to take part in the work at the local educational committees. Often, the apprentices are around 16 years old and are not used to work with for example decrees;
- Organising the course called “**the Youth Foundation Course**” (*Ungdommens grundkursus*). This is aimed at teaching the learners about collective agreements and how to gain influence;
- Preparing proposals on behalf of apprentices for **negotiations of collective agreements** that take place every second or third year. The chairman of DEFU presents these proposals himself at the negotiation table. When preparing the proposals, DEFU members have to learn to be realistic in terms of what they can obtain through negotiations. They have to think carefully about how and what to prioritise during the negotiations; for example, higher salaries, education or parental leave. Therefore, directly representing apprentices at the negotiations means that DEFU takes a lot of responsibility for the negotiations;
- Influencing the **debate** on VET and image of VET by taking part in debates that they are invited for;
- In March 2019, DEF organises an apprentices’ trip to a large **fair in Hannover**, Germany. The fair focuses e.g. on the future of technology. Around 60 apprentices will go on this trip.

Learners at DEF may apply for time off from their apprenticeship placement to participate in union work.

Results

The relatively **good conditions of apprentices in Denmark provide a visible result** of how trade union work can organise people to stand together and gain influence. The **structured system of negotiation** – where both employers and employees “get something” from negotiations – **has been in place in Denmark since the 19th century**. There is a long-term tradition for this work, and in DEF it is considered key to teach the learners about this and involve them in the system from early on.

According to a DEFU member, the work does provide learners with influence. The fact that the **DEFU chairman is present at the negotiations of collective agreements is particularly important** for the ways that DEFU members take the work seriously. They have a direct influence on their conditions.

Limitations/barriers

DEFU faces a number of challenges in terms of the image of VET in Denmark, for various reasons:

- The **public debate often highlights the lack of apprenticeships**, which probably deters many young people from entering VET. This emphasis on lack of apprenticeships does not correspond to DEFU’s experiences of apprentices’ reality;
- Many people in Denmark consider **VET to be a second choice** that implies the person was not able to enter university;
- The future of robot technology, moreover, means that people sometimes think of VET as being old-fashioned and a training which will be out-dated in 10 years;
- **Journalists are often not interested in VET**, and it is very difficult to gain any speaking time in the media.

DEFU would like learners to be a more integrated part of the local educational committees. It is difficult to organise the learners because of the dual VET system: the

learners do not necessarily gain attachment to the schools in a way that would motivate them to engage politically at the school councils. Therefore, instead of the school councils, DEFU would like to encourage the learners to become more active in the local educational committees. It is in general difficult to develop a student environment, because the learners change between the school and the workplace. This also makes it difficult to ensure that the learners take responsibility for their learning environment at the schools – and this is important to ensure that the schools' facilities are up to date with the rapid technological development within the profession.

It is a **challenge to motivate the apprentices to participate in youth work at DEF**. The work is voluntary, and all learners do not necessarily attend all meetings at DEFU. In particular, the local committees at DEF find it difficult to convince the apprentices to become a member of the union, as well as to activate the apprentices to participate in the work of the local youth committees. DEFU ensures to organise meetings around the country to enable participation from everybody. At least two meetings a year should be held outside the capital.

In the last year of compulsory school, **DEF representatives visit the foundation course at the VET program to present and promote union work and membership**. Also, in the foundation course of the electricians' VET programme, two consultants from DEF visit the learners to tell them about the benefits of union membership. The consultants visit the VET students again when they enter their main course and have to enter apprenticeships. In addition to this, the local committees visit the apprentices several times during their stays at the VET schools. A representative from the local committee is always present at the learners' final exams. DEF also supports projects which visit pupils in their last year of compulsory school. The current project, which DEF supports, is called "The Trade Union's School Service" (*Fagbevægelsens Skoletjeneste*).

DEFU is a part of DEF. This means that DEFU has to comply with policies of DEF, and that DEFU also represent DEF; for example, when speaking publicly. Internally in DEF, DEFU also has to keep in mind that it is a committee within DEF and that certain rules and guidelines have to be followed.

As mentioned above, it is difficult to activate learners in local youth committees; in particular because of the nature of the dual VET programme. With DEF's apprentice representation it is important to keep in mind that DEFU members and members of local youth committees do the union work for free, and that they have to prioritise to do this. Not everybody seems willing to do this.

Strengths

The **strength of DEFU is that it is part of organised representation structures**; both in DEF as such, but also more generally in Denmark which has a tradition of union work and collaboration across interests and institutions. DEFU's work is supported by the historical union structures in Denmark, but also a **general willingness in Denmark to listen to younger and more unexperienced people**. Denmark, together with other Nordic countries, are well-known for relatively flat hierarchies. Such structures and framework facilitate the work of DEFU. **DEFU also takes seriously the training of learners**, to enable them to participate in union work and to understand the structures in the labour market that they are part of.

The DEFU chairman's participation in negotiations is a strength, as it obliges DEFU to think realistically and constructively about the demands they can make at the negotiations. As emphasised by a DEFU representative, **negotiation is about giving and taking**. This means that DEFU members have to prioritise and learn that they cannot have everything from the employer. In Denmark, compromise and negotiation are key elements of negotiations of collective agreements.

Zooming-out of the initiative

Lessons learned and recommendations

The case of DEFU demonstrates the importance of integrating VET learners into representation work to allow and enable them to gain influence; the importance of providing training for the VET learners to enable them to take the responsibility of representation work; and the importance of integrating apprentice representation into wider structures in society, including the labour market.

To further strengthen the representation work, the case study brought the following recommendations:

- It would be useful if the European Commission could **support a change in the public debate in terms of how VET is perceived and talked about.** For example, the Skills competition (which is both national and global) could be promoted more. Also, already existing national and European level competitions within some VET programmes could be promoted further. One rarely sees news about these competitions in the media. People in Denmark might be proud of some Danish young apprentices winning a global skills competition. As such, it would be useful for the representation work, if there would be greater willingness in the public to take seriously VET;
- **Develop the ability to identify opportunities for and entering international education programmes.** As a young apprentice it can be difficult to identify the opportunities for international collaboration. There seems to be many opportunities for students in general upper secondary education, but opportunities seem to be more limited for apprentices. For example, Erasmus+ is also for apprentices, but the actual exchange opportunities offered within Erasmus+ seem to mainly be for university students; and
- **It would be useful if the employers could be better informed about the benefits for the employers of having apprentices with international knowledge and experience.** It might also be difficult to convince an employer about the benefit of international experience for the apprentice; both if the apprentice works abroad, and if the apprentice participates in conferences at a European level.

Conclusions

The integration of apprentice representation into wider societal structures is key. **The case of DEF and DEFU show how apprentices have direct and indirect influence on their education (at the school and at the workplace) and their position in society.** This is important to feel heard. By feeling heard, the apprentices are also willing to take more responsibility for their education.

Some level of apprentice representation is inscribed in the law (a seat for apprentices at the local education committees). But more importantly, and with the importance of union work and collective agreements in Denmark, apprentice representation is an integral part of the structure in society. As the case study has shown, **the strength of apprentice representation depends on the legal and institutional framework, as well as historical, economic, political and social factors.**

This case also demonstrates that apprentice representation could be improved even further by keep ensuring that the VET learners are motivated and educationally equipped to take on the responsibility for apprentice representation.