



Gender & Diversity in VET

Facilitating for “untraditional” female students in Norway

1. Introduction

The summer between completed elementary school and start-up at the upper secondary school has proved to represent a critical phase for students who have chosen innovative. It is in this period many change their minds about the choice they made. A preparatory course immediately before the start-up at upper secondary school has proven to be a useful measure to prevent such changes.

Preparatory courses are of special interest for females who have chosen untraditional programmes. The content will vary depending on the type of framework of the course.

In addition to workshop training these courses addresses building of self-confidence, as well as building of confidence in the group. The content is above all how it is to be a girl amongst many male students, to discuss female issues on the basis of their own experiences, to increase awareness on the strengths they have, how self-esteem is affected by the community around us, gender equality and master suppression techniques.

The courses have generally lasted for two days, but one-day courses have also been offered.

Such a course can help to make the students familiar with the school before the start-up, and to develop self-confidence and better ability to cope being a minority in the class. It will also serve as an arena to build network with other students who also have chosen innovative. In addition such courses have had a preventive effect on dropouts during the summer between primary and upper secondary school. The good experience of such courses applies primarily girls. Preparatory courses for boys have not worked in the same positive way.



Experience indicates that one should try to arrange a number of smaller local courses instead of larger regional events. Local courses increase the opportunities to reach all students who might be interested in participating. This requires however several course instructors who need to be trained to conduct these courses.

In areas where there are several secondary schools with the same type of gender stereotype classes, one has had successful experience in gathering the gender minority students in one school. This type of gathering of students may be appropriate to create a larger environment, and thus prevent the experience of solitude and isolation of this group.

The facilitation of the learning environment for untraditional students can consist of many different kinds of activities.

2. The working environment in the class

The class represents the most important arena for safeguarding and support for students who have chosen innovative, and is of great significance to these students in order to complete the study programme.

The following measures have proved successful to the strengthen the working environment:

- Gathering in few classes

At schools where there are several classes in the same field, gathering of students who have chosen innovative in the same class, help to develop a more supportive community. Gender minority students often feel insecure in the majority group, especially girls. Experience indicates that the risk of undesirable behaviour from peers of the opposite sex seems clearly greater for girls than for boys. Therefore, it is perhaps also a greater risk for girls than for boys that the peers' behaviour can lead to dropout from school. Gathering of students of the minority gender in one class is helping to provide them with better security. However, the minority students in such classes should not exceed 50%.

- Composition of classes

It may be important to open to various forms of tailoring classes, for example, one can avoid the combination of students of the minority gender and students who have special needs in the same class.



But it is also important not go too far in the direction of creating special environments in the classes.

- **The choice of head teachers and subject teachers**

Teachers play a crucial role in every classroom. They are the actors that shape the success or failure of their students. Their interpretation of the curriculum and interaction with learners, the way they assign duties and homework, are important factors in a student's learning.

The head teachers' and the subject teachers' attitudes towards students who have chosen innovative, and how teachers deal with the challenges associated with mixed classes, is crucial to the quality of the learning environment. Finding subject teachers, who deals with this in a good way, can reduce dropout during the process of education.

The general impression is that teachers at large have a positive view at students who have chosen innovative. At the same time, it is also clear that it can be fairly large differences in attitudes among teachers, in their ability and perhaps also their willingness to specifically serve the needs of these students.

It's very important to focus on such conditions, and at least prevent the negative attitudes to come up in relation to the students who have chosen innovative. If possible, more positive teachers should replace teachers with negative attitudes, or more positive teachers could supplement the class if possible and/or necessary.

Where possible, one should also consider identifying teachers from, in the context, the minority gender. It is not only among the students the gender distribution is unbalanced, but also among the teachers certain subjects are dominated by one gender, which of course influences the educational situation.

3. Measures for teachers and instructors

- **Training and guidance of the subject teachers and head teachers**

The variations in teachers' attitudes, along with the fact that many teachers have no experience in dealing with students of the minority gender in their classes, indicate that both training and supervision of the subject teachers, and in particular the head teachers in such classes, may be necessary.

However, one should not forget that mixed classes could be more demanding than classes of only one gender. The presence of "the opposite sex" may be an additional



distraction of mind and a potential source of excitement in the class. It would therefore be a good idea to work consciously with the training and support for teachers who have classes in which there traditionally has been only one gender. This can be done in different ways, but the most important is at the teachers should have a forum to discuss common experiences.

An advisory group for head teachers can be established to contribute to the experience and increased knowledge, and it can serve as a forum for new ideas.

It may help teacher teams to develop projects that would contribute to the creation of schools in which girls and boys thrive socially, emotional, and academically; pursue interests and build competencies free from gender-biased, stereotypical expectations.

It is the responsibility of entire school to organize and cater for students who have chosen innovative, but head teachers are the most important persons in the facilitations of the classroom work. Head teachers are also the most important actors in creating a healthy working environment in the classroom.

An advisory group must be rooted in the school's leadership and have

- access to necessary resources
- knowledge of the school's culture and "codes"
- knowledge of the guidelines
- knowledge of minority gender in untraditional lines (or other target groups)

However, beyond changing their own teaching behaviours, teachers need to be aware of the gender bias imbedded in many educational materials and texts and need to take steps to combat this bias. Gender-fair materials need to acknowledge and affirm variation. They need to be inclusive, accurate, representative and integrated, weaving together the experiences, needs, and interests of both males and females. Furthermore, teachers can help students identify gender-bias in texts and facilitate critical discussions as to why that bias exists.

- **A question about minority**

An advisory group is an example of activities that have been developed through focusing on students who have chosen innovative as a minority. When the girls or boys are in the minority at school or in class, they claim the same rights and the same respect and



protection, such as ethnic minorities. Thus this issue has been put into a broader, more general social framework.

The processes that can be observed in classes where perhaps especially girls are a small minority are the same processes that can be observed in classes where the minority is, for example, ethnicity. Measures are needed to counteract the adverse aspects related to the situation as a minority, and to create a virtually equal situation for the minority and majority.

A central lesson to be drawn from the work with students of a minority gender is that it is not only necessary to have measures including the gender that is in the minority. Equally important is to implement measures that are intended to minimize the negative reactions and behaviour from the majority. Normally it is not the behaviour of the minority that is the problem when we face what is perhaps mistakenly often described as "minority problems."

A teacher of girls in a typical male class in vocational training said:

"Several boys at this age are very childish, acting very immature when there are girls in the classroom. Their level of testosterone is high, and they are acting according to this fact.. The girls have to learn to signal where their boundaries go, and boys have to learn how to behave in relation to girls. "

In other words, this illustrates that many problems that can occur in a classroom with students of the minority gender, not primarily are caused by them, but on the contrary are caused by the majority, because they are not accustomed to working with minority in this situation. Measures must therefore be set in to change the majority behaviour.

Another teacher placed a girl on the table and draw a circle of chalk around her. Then he told the boys in the class that this circle was her absolute boundary and that nobody ever should cross this line without permission from the girl herself. The initiative was thus not directed against the minority student, the girl and her behaviour, but was first and foremost a measure to restrict the majority's behaviour towards the minority.

4. Educational facilitation

Questions have been raised about the importance of the subject and the teaching content. Many subjects may be perceived as gender biased in the sense that they are associated with one gender. This may be due to both academic content and focusing, which can be characterized by long traditions of the subject and of related professions



that have been dominated by only one gender. Focus and emphasis on various topics in the curriculum can be characterized by an implicit or explicit gender bias.

If attitudes and values of one particular gender are communicated in all essentials, it may create the impression that the vocational field or profession is appropriate for one gender, and to a lesser extent for the other.

These are matters that are important to be conscious of, both in recruiting to traditional gender stereotype fields, and in organising the teaching of students of the minority gender.

Female students, teachers and employees have traditionally dominated health and social care. The result is that a lot of teaching material and curricula has had a "female" angle, with a focus on traditional "female" tasks and roles in this field. One has emphasized topics that are close to former experiences of the girls, and often started the school year with different female related issues as menstruation, pregnancy, birth, and problems associated with this. When boys are recruited to these subjects, they will experience alienation in relation to the content of the subject, which is reinforced by the fact that they are a small and visible minority in the class. In the efforts to recruit and keep the boys in these subjects, it is therefore necessary to look at the academic content and focus in teaching the subject. When it comes to girls in male-dominated vocational fields, however, less focus has been on the gender biased content of these subjects.

5. Social facilitation

- Receiving students

The way students who have chosen innovative, are received when they enter upper secondary education, is important. Many of these students have emphasized the importance that older students, who have been in the same situation, have received them and served as helpers in the early days after the start-up.

- Meeting places and networks

The establishment of common meeting places for students, who have chosen innovative, have proven to be important measures with regard to development of networks and communities between the these students.

Some schools offer untraditional students rooms that are solely devoted to them, often with their own key and often decorated with utilities as lounge suites, CD players and PCs. How many students who use the rooms, can vary. This is primarily important for the



new students, and represents an important arena for the continuation of the contacts that were established during preparatory courses.

However, these rooms seem primarily to apply to girls. Boys have proven to be less interested in such meeting-places; and some of them find that using such shielded rooms leads to stigmatising. It is too visible to the rest of the school, and many are experiencing it as a form of failure to participate in this type of special service. For boys, it is therefore necessary to consider alternative measures. The experience is that boys, who have chosen innovative, appreciate meeting spaces outside the school.

6. Networks for "untraditional" students and apprentices

In order to establish arenas of experience between vocational schools, regional networks for those who have chosen innovative, could be an option. Such meetings could be arranged for both students and apprentices, and for both genders, either separately or together.

These factors must be emphasized:

- Planning ahead is important.
- The link between students, apprentices and employees, who have chosen untraditional subjects, is central. Experience can be exchanged, and the students may get a better understanding of the vocational field.
- Networks containing both genders could help suppressing prejudices.
- Meetings should be held at regular intervals; this is important for the maintenance of the network.
- Meetings should offer a bit of fun – to enhance professional benefits and to recruit new students

7. Cooperation between schools and enterprises

Industry is, and will continue to be, a central part in the work of untraditional choices from education in vocational schools and into the enterprises. Local enterprises should play an



important a role as motivators in the schools, supplier of role models and as facilitators for apprentices of the minor gender.

The first meeting with industry can be a critical phase for just these apprentices. Dropout has a tendency to increase in this transition period. The local unions at the workplaces should also make an effort to help students who have chosen the innovative

- **Some lessons learned from the cooperation between school and enterprises:**

- Enterprises should be involved in the cooperation early on. Both the general knowledge of industry and knowledge of the untraditional professions should be integrated into teaching as well as in educational and career guidance as soon as possible. Early contact between the industry and potential apprentices will facilitate the transition from school to apprenticeship for both parties.
- Existing partnership agreements between schools and enterprises should be developed to include the work of untraditional vocational choices. The good examples of such cooperation should be used as motivation to create new networks between other schools and enterprises.
- Positive experience gained should be used actively to motivate less engaged enterprises to participate in the cooperation to enhance untraditional choices.

8. Sources

<http://www.etterstad.vgs.no/satsing/satsing1.shtml>

<http://www.ostforsk.no/pro/utdanningsvalg/kap1-2.html>

<http://kilden.forskningsradet.no/c17251/artikkel/vis.html?tid=23895>

<http://www.byrådsavdeling-for-kultur-og-utdanning.oslo.kommune.no/getfile.php/Byrådsavdeling%20for%20barn%20og%20Otdanning/Internett/Dokumenter/notat/utdanningxogxopplxring/u-150.rtf>