

Chapter 12

Early Leaving, Non-Completion and Completion in Upper Secondary Education in Norway

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Introduction

The Structure of Upper Secondary Education and Training

In one way, the Norwegian system of education can be understood as part of the Nordic model – an egalitarian, redistributive system. Upper secondary education is by and large public, as are other types of education. From an international perspective, the Norwegian Parliament was from very early on, as early as 1920, ready to adopt the principle of a common school for all (Dokka, 1988). The right to freely available public education was extended from 7 years at the end of the Second World War to 13 years from 1997; 10 of these years are compulsory.

Over the last 4 to 5 decades, Norway has also moved from a school system practising segregation to a school system focused on the principle of inclusion; for instance, in the case of special education, extended use of special classes and special schools has been substituted, at least in theory, by mainstreaming (Markussen, 2009). In this period, the concept of *equality* has also undergone change, from one of formal equality, via the principle of equality-of-resources and, later, equality-of-results, to the principle of equality-of-opportunities, which remains the focus today (Hernes, 1974; Aasen, 2006).

The project of modernising upper secondary education in Norway by developing an organised, public and universal system – including both general and vocational education – started in the 1960s. Integrating both vocational schools, with different traditions, and the apprenticeship system into the overall upper secondary education system has been a long and complicated process, characterised by tensions, conflicts and compromises (Olsen, 1996; Michelsen & Grove, 2005).

During these years, there has been considerable reform activity within Norwegian upper secondary education. As well as an ongoing process introducing small changes,

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there have been three key or major reforms over the last 40 years. The first was in 1976, when the general, academic upper secondary schools (*gymsnas*), which prepare students for higher education, and the vocational schools, which prepare students for the labour market, were merged into a common unified system of upper secondary education.

The second major reform – Reform 94 – more or less created the Norwegian upper secondary education as it is today, when it comes to structure and the qualification system. The main features of this reform were (1) to give every 15- to 16-year-old a statutory right to 3 years of upper secondary education, thereby making it possible for all students within vocational education and training (VET) to complete; (2) to give every student a right to a place in one out of three chosen study programs; (3) the reduction in the first year of upper secondary from 109 courses to 13 study programs; and (4) the introduction of a ‘2 + 2’ model within VET (the model will be explained below). The main driving force behind this reform was the mismatch created by falling job opportunities in the youth labour market and an upper secondary system without the capacity to accommodate all the young people who were flocking to upper secondary.

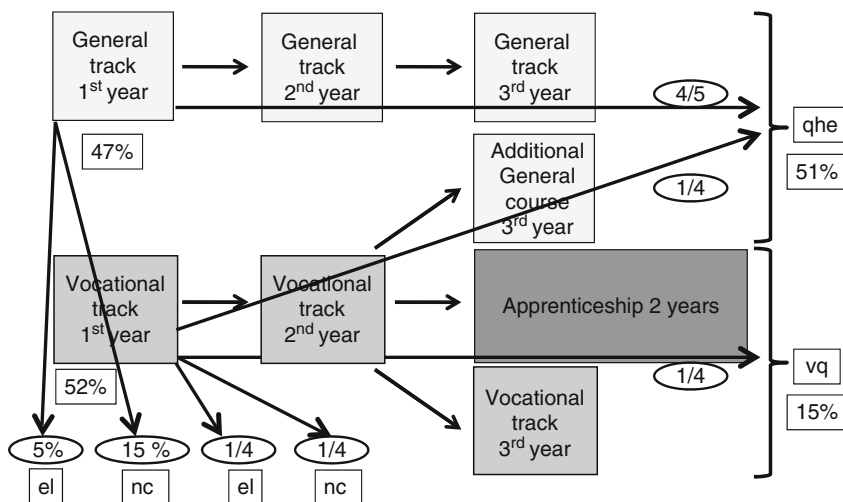
The third comprehensive reform was in 2006, and it led to changes in primary as well as in lower and upper secondary education. In upper secondary it adjusted some of the structures; for example, reducing the number of vocational study programs from 12 to 9, and creating new subject structures within the different programs. Compared to Reform 94, which had really transformed upper secondary education, the reform of 2006, according to Markussen (2007), produced only small adjustments to structure and qualification systems.

It is possible to postpone commencement in upper secondary until 5 years after completion of compulsory education. Nevertheless, the large majority of students start immediately after lower secondary. There are no general entry requirements, apart from having completed compulsory education. While admission in general is fairly unrestricted, there are entry requirements to certain educational programs. If there are more applicants than the number of places, admission to a program depends on the grade point average (GPA) from 10th grade. Among those applying for upper secondary in 2005, 2006 and 2007, 83% were admitted to their program of first choice (Frøseth et al., 2008). This selection was based on GPA from the last year of compulsory education. Hence, GPA regulates admission to the most popular study programs. It also regulates entrance to the second and third years of upper secondary. Still, this is a restrained form of meritocracy, in so far as the counties are obliged to provide school places securing everyone admission to one out of three individual choices.

During transition from compulsory education, and through the different levels of upper secondary education in school or apprenticeship, the students have a ‘right to necessary guidance on education, careers and social matters’ (Opplæringslova [Education Act] § 9-2).

The Main Pathways

Upper secondary education consists of both general and vocational tracks (see Fig. 12.1). Within the general tracks there are three study programs: (1) general academic studies; (2) music, dance and drama; and (3) sports and physical



Note: qhe = qualification for higher education, vq = vocational qualification, el = early leaver, nc = non-completer

Fig. 12.1 Structure and throughput in upper secondary education in Norway (Source: Markussen et al., 2008)

education. The students in these programs follow a direct 3-year line through upper secondary. After finishing and passing all exams, they are qualified for entering higher education.

There are nine vocational study programs: (1) building and construction; (2) design, arts and crafts; (3) electricity and electronics; (4) health and social care; (5) media and communication; (6) agriculture, fishing and forestry; (7) restaurant and food processing; (8) service and transport; and (9) technical and industrial production. Starting in a vocational program, there are three paths through upper secondary (see Fig. 12.1).

The main road through VET is the so-called 2 + 2 model, which means that the students first complete 2 years of schooling and then 2 years of apprenticeship in a firm. It is important to stress that this is the normal model for vocational education, and that VET, including the apprenticeship system, is a part of upper secondary education. The 2 + 2 model is a corporatist arrangement in which the public sector provides school places and the business sector provides apprenticeships. It is possible to qualify for around 180 different occupations through the 2 + 2 model, and when a person has gone through this education, passing all exams, he or she is able to start as a qualified worker within his or her given occupation. Approximately one sixth of all who start their third year of training/education in upper secondary are apprentices (Frøseth et al., 2008). However, only around 50% of the new apprentices are 18 years old, the rest are older. As in some other countries, there has traditionally been an age-related heterogeneity among apprentices in Norway. Should not enough apprenticeships be available for the 18-year-olds, the county authorities

are obliged to offer them training at school in the form of a third-year course. Both these vocational tracks provide the students with a certificate after a craftsman's or journeyman's examination.

The second road within vocational education is a 3-year, school-based education structured towards an occupation. This is possible for 10 different occupations.

The third option for those who have started in a vocational study program is to switch to an additional general course. This is possible after 2 years in a vocational program, and those who complete after 3 years are qualified for higher education. It has turned out to be an option with a fast-growing popularity among vocational students, and has established itself as an important alternative to apprenticeship (Høst and Evensen, 2009). However it is not an easy pathway to higher education, as the students have to complete all the general subjects in 1 year. Statistics show that these students are more likely to fail by the end of third year than other students, and this happens for 30–40% of them (Markussen et al., 2008).

The system allows students to switch pathways. If students wish to change programs, the right to education is extended by 1 year. The structure of the system makes it easier to switch from a vocational to a general track than the other way around. The county can approve apprenticeship contracts which prescribe that the entire education, or larger parts than prescribed by the curricula, may be completed as on-the-job training. However, until now this has been available to only a limited number of students.

After qualifying from upper secondary education, students have achieved either (1) *qualification for higher education*, (2) *vocational qualification*, or (3) *competence at a lower level* (Opplæringslova [Education Act] §3-3).

Qualification for higher education is achieved mainly by completing within one of the three general programs. Vocational qualification is gained mainly by going through and passing all exams, including the journeyman's exam at the end of an apprenticeship, within one of the nine vocational programs. Competence at a lower level is obtained by all those not achieving qualification for higher education or vocational qualification. Students may obtain competence at a lower level in a planned manner, as the end of a consciously chosen track of education and training, or they may receive it by default. The latter is by far more common, and will be the case if the students, for instance, leave school, fail, or do not fulfil the requirements in one way or another (see below).

Governance of Upper Secondary Education

Upper secondary education is administered at two levels of government, the state and the county level. There are 19 counties in Norway. In cross-national comparisons, the Norwegian education system has traditionally been characterised as centralised (Telhaug & Mediås, 2002). However, developments in the governance of post-compulsory education since the 1990s have seen increasing decentralisation, as the state has passed on authority to counties and schools (NOU, 2003, p. 16).

The system for upper secondary education is managed within the framework of a mixed system of government, balancing centralised and decentralised authority, as well as corporate influence. The state defines the goals and provides the budgetary framework for post-compulsory education. The regional authorities are responsible for operating and developing the schools, and for developing strategies to attain national goals. The counties are to provide upper secondary education throughout the country, making equivalent educational courses available to everyone. Even though VET and apprenticeships are regarded as an integral part of the system, the responsibility to establish apprenticeship places rests with employers, and the numbers of apprenticeship places are dependent on market fluctuations.

Local authorities may delegate certain tasks to the local administration, to councils, and to the schools. Within nationally binding frameworks, determined by law and curricula, the counties, school principals and teachers may exert influence on subject matter, teaching aids and methods. Even if the reform of 2006 assumes an even larger degree of local freedom of action, new techniques of state administration such as audits and inspections/supervisions are gaining ground. Thus, the balance between modern technocracy and institutional trust, centralisation and decentralisation, is an unsettled empirical question.

After the adoption of the Norwegian Apprenticeship Act in 1950, the social partners – the main organisations representing the employers and the employees – were entrusted with a high level of autonomy for the administration and control of the apprenticeship system through professional self-government (Michelsen & Høst, 2004). From 1992, the secretariat for the National VET Council was formally integrated into the Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs. The National VET Council has, since 2004, had its mandate redefined. It no longer has any decision-making authority, for instance in approving new curricula and trades or dismantling existing ones, but is instead an advisory policy board for the national educational authorities. A corresponding shift in tasks has occurred in the VET boards at the county level (Høst, 2008).

Viewed from a neo-corporate perspective (Streeck & Schmitter, 1985), all of these changes can be understood as a movement away from self-government, in which the social partners were given considerable space for self-regulation in policy-making and policy administration, to a regime of participation, in which the social partners are consulted for advice, but are clearly subordinate to the state.

Main Patterns of Early Leaving, Non-Completion and Completion

Several studies of dropout and completion have documented that even though nearly the whole cohort enters upper secondary education, far from everybody completes (Markussen et al., 2008; Statistics Norway, 2009; Støren et al., 2007). This section will give a brief presentation of the main patterns of dropout and completion in upper secondary education in Norway.

Although upper secondary is voluntary, every year 98–99% of those completing compulsory education apply for a place. Figure 12.1 shows numbers based on a sample study within the cohort starting upper secondary in 2002 (Markussen et al., 2008). Around half the cohort applied for vocational programs and the other half for general programs. Thus, education is the main activity for young people, and around 91% of 16- to 18-year-olds are in upper secondary (Raabe, 2007). As the labour market in Norway has a lot of opportunities, including for youth, the unemployment rate for those under 20 years of age is usually low. It is also very common for young people to combine upper secondary education with work, and all together more than 40% of 15- to 19-year-olds take part in some form of paid work (Statistics Norway/AKU, 2008). This situation may contribute to a certain ‘pull effect’ on students to opt out of school.

In this book, ‘dropout’ is a term used to describe those who do not complete an upper secondary qualification. This chapter makes a distinction between two groups of young people that in other countries would be treated as one group, ‘dropouts’. The term *early leaver* is used here to describe those young people leaving upper secondary education without finishing all the years required to complete; either 3 years as students or 4 years as apprentices. Those who stay the entire time but eventually end up not passing all of the required exams are labelled *non-completers*.¹ The two distinct terms are used when referring to results from the study *Early Leaving, Non-Completion or Completion?* (Markussen et al., 2008). Most studies on dropout do not distinguish between early leaving and non-completion, meaning that when referring to research in other countries, the term *dropout* will cover both early leaving and non-completion.

In this chapter the concern is with early leaving and non-completion only from upper secondary education. Early leaving in compulsory education does exist, but only in very small numbers. Non-completion in compulsory education does not even exist officially, although 7–8% complete without achieving grades in all subjects, or they achieve the lowest grade in one or more subjects (Frøseth et al., 2008). These students are eligible for studies in upper secondary education, but it is likely they will have difficulty successfully negotiating all upper secondary demands.

For the study by Markussen et al. (2008), a total of 9,749 young people in the south-eastern part of Norway were followed for 5½ years: from applying for a place in upper secondary in spring 2002, until autumn 2007 (the numbers in Fig. 12.1 are based on this study). The results show that 5 years after finishing compulsory school, two thirds (66%) had completed upper secondary. Among these, 51% achieved qualification for higher education, and 15% achieved vocational qualification. The remaining one third (34%) had not completed upper secondary within 5 years, thereby obtaining *competence at a lower level*. Of these, 15% had left early,

¹Until 2007, Statistics Norway used the term ‘dropout’ to refer to both groups. The Norwegian translation ‘frafall’ literally translated means ‘falling out’. From 2007, Statistics Norway have presented their yearly statistics on dropout and completion in a new way, distinguishing between ‘completers’, ‘non-completers’, ‘dropouts’ and ‘continuers’.

and 19% ended up as non-completers after finishing all their years in upper secondary but without passing all of the required exams (Markussen et al., 2008).

Statistics Norway does a full-scale mapping of attainment of qualification for every cohort. According to Statistics Norway (2009), the throughput of students in upper secondary has been remarkably stable across cohorts after Reform 94. The share that completed within 5 years in the cohorts entering upper secondary in 1994, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2002 and 2003 varied between 68% and 72%. The above-mentioned studies report status of completion after 5 years, but it is worth mentioning that the vast majority complete in the prescribed 3 years for pupils or 4 years for apprentices (Markussen et al., 2008; Statistics Norway, 2009).

The throughput of students in upper secondary improved considerably after the implementation of Reform 94, especially among the students within VET. As a result of this reform, completion among VET students doubled from 30% for the cohort entering upper secondary in 1991, to 60% for the cohort entering in 1994 (Støren et al., 1998). The main reason for this was that Reform 94 made it possible for all students to go through VET. Prior to the reform, many were stopped after the first or second year because there were too few places at the next level.

Despite this improvement, the completion rate remains significantly lower among students in vocational programs, as compared to students in general programs (Markussen et al., 2008; Statistics Norway, 2009; Støren et al., 2007). The average early leaving rate for all students based on the cohort study was 15%. Figure 12.1 shows that among those who started in a general track, around four out of five achieved qualification for higher education, while 5% dropped out, and 15% did not complete. Within the vocational programs, the situation was much worse: one quarter ended up with vocational qualification, one quarter with qualification for higher education, one quarter dropped out, and one quarter were non-completers. The differences in competence achievement between different education programs may be due to variations in the composition of students with regard to individual attributes such as GPA from lower secondary, records of absence, etc., and context variables such as different opportunities of obtaining an apprenticeship between different trades, and different pedagogical practices and learning cultures within the different programs (Markussen et al., 2008).

A proportion of those leaving early do this between the second and third year. Half of these early leavers appeared to be applicants for an apprenticeship who did not obtain a place, and as a consequence, opted out (Markussen & Sandberg, 2005). Thus, the process of obtaining an apprenticeship seems to affect early leaving among VET students.

To sum up, recent studies of completion, non-completion and early leaving in upper secondary education in Norway have shown that about two thirds complete upper secondary education within 5 years; while one third do not. Not completing upper secondary may be due both to early leaving or non-completion (not passing all exams required).

The reform of 2006 brought some changes in upper secondary, and one intention is to improve the throughput of students. It remains to be seen if and to what extent there will be any changes in the patterns of completion, non-completion and early leaving in upper secondary education as a consequence of this reform.

Main Predictors of Early Leaving, Non-Completion and Completion

Research results have revealed a significant variation in early leaving, non-completion and completion rates in upper secondary related to a large number of factors. Girls have better completion rates than boys, and students whose parents have higher education complete upper secondary to a greater extent than those who have parents with a lower educational level. Students from a minority background more often leave early or do not complete compared to other students, and there are large differences in the completion, non-completion and early leaving rates among students within different education programs. Several of these factors also correlate with each other. For instance, girls achieve better grades than boys, and there are large differences in the composition of students within different education programs with regard to the students' grades, and records of absence (Markussen et al., 2008).

This section will concentrate on results from multivariate analyses, and start by giving a short account of what have been identified as the main predictors of early leaving, non-completion and completion in upper secondary education in Norway. Finally, it will look more closely at apprentices and try to identify the factors that can explain variation in their achievement of competence.

Markussen et al. (2008) looked into the factors which influence early leaving, non-completion and completion in upper secondary education. They conducted a multinomial logistic regression analysis of the conditions that influence the likelihood of having either left early or not completed, as compared to having completed upper secondary education after 5 years. Several variables were included in the analysis, such as gender, family background, achievement from last year of compulsory school, educational content and working methods in compulsory school, adjustment to school, ambition and future plans, spare time activities, and education program and county.

GPA from the last year of compulsory school was found to be the most decisive factor influencing early leaving, non-completion or completion after 5 years in upper secondary. The better the grades, the lower the likelihood of both leaving early or not completing, as compared to completing (Markussen et al., 2008). Other studies have also provided evidence of the importance of school achievement during compulsory education for early leaving, non-completion or completion in upper secondary (Støren et al., 1998, 2007).

The influence of background variables on the likelihood of early leaving or not completing, as compared to completing upper secondary education within 5 years, was quite weak after controlling for grades from compulsory school. Analyses have revealed that background variables to a great extent affect the outcome of upper secondary education through the effect these variables have on school achievement (Markussen et al., 2008; Støren et al., 2007). However, even if the influence is fairly weak, a number of background variables have proven to have a statistically significant impact on the likelihood of early leaving, non-completion and completion in upper secondary education. These variables include gender,

parents' educational level and their position in the labour market, with whom the young people lived as 15-year-olds (both parents or not), and majority/minority background (Markussen et al., 2008). Although the effect of each individual background variable was relatively weak, the collective effect of coming from a home where the parents lived together, had higher education, worked, etc. was highly significant both for grades in compulsory school and the attainment of qualification in upper secondary education. Thus, it makes sense to give a brief account of how these background variables have proven to affect the likelihood of early leaving or not completing, as compared to completing within 5 years. Below, all effects are referred to on the condition 'other things equal', and as compared to the likelihood of completing upper secondary education.

Boys have a higher likelihood of not completing within 5 years than girls, but there is no difference between boys and girls when it comes to the likelihood of early leaving. The parents' educational level had only a weak effect on competence achievement, but those who had parents with compulsory school as their highest educational level had a somewhat greater likelihood of leaving early than students who had parents with higher education. Students living with both parents as 15-year-olds had a lower probability of leaving early or not completing than students who did not live with both parents. Students with a minority background had a higher probability of leaving early or not completing within 5 years than students with a majority background (Markussen et al., 2008). Another study of the same data demonstrates that early leaving is far more common in vocational tracks among students with a minority background than among majority students. In the general track, non-completion stands out as a significantly greater problem among minority students than among majority students (Lødding, 2009).

All things equal, there has also proven to be great variation in the likelihood of early leaving or not completing, as compared to completing, among students in different educational programs. This indicates that there are conditions linked to the education programs which are related to competence achievement in upper secondary education – that is, even taking into account variations in the composition of students between education programs, with regard to, for example, school achievement and parents' educational level (Markussen et al., 2008).

Completion, Non-Completion and Early Leaving Among Apprentices

There have also been analyses conducted into which factors affect the likelihood of completing upper secondary education among apprentices, as compared to dropout (both early leaving and non-completion) (Markussen et al., 2008; Støren et al., 2007). GPA from compulsory school has a highly positive impact on the likelihood of apprentices completing upper secondary education within 5 years. The effect of background variables disappeared when controlling for GPA. This indicates that the influence of background variables on competence achievement among apprentices

is transmitted via grades from compulsory school. Number of absences had a negative effect on the likelihood of completing upper secondary, while considering oneself as practically inclined and process-oriented, and focusing on homework, had a positive impact on the probability of completing upper secondary as an apprentice (Markussen et al., 2008).

These analyses showed that far fewer factors had an effect on completion, non-completion and early leaving among apprentices, when compared to the analysis of the entire group of young people. This may be explained by the fact that apprentices after all are a selected group.

The share of applicants obtaining an apprenticeship varied from 65% to 80% over the 5 years prior to 2008, dependent on variations in economic cycles (Høst, 2008). Analyses have shown that the probability of obtaining an apprenticeship increases with low records of absence and higher GPA from compulsory education, majority background, being a boy, having a father with vocational education and having a statutory right to upper secondary education (Markussen et al., 2008; Markussen & Sandberg, 2005; Støren et al., 1998, 2007; Støren & Skjersli, 1999; Vibe et al., 1997).

Analyses have also shown differences in the chances of obtaining an apprenticeship between trades (Markussen et al., 2008). According to the statutory right to upper secondary education/training, the county municipality is obliged to offer an alternative education in school to students who do not obtain an apprenticeship. In this context it is worth mentioning that research has indicated that the education/training offered in the alternative arrangement to an apprenticeship – the school-based track – does not seem to be of the same quality as the education offered within the apprentice scheme. Students who do not obtain an apprenticeship, and therefore are offered the school-based track leading to a trade or journeyman's certificate, have higher early leaving rates (Støren & Skjersli, 1999) and a larger share of these students fail in the qualifying examination (Støren et al., 2007). This is to some extent due to differences in earlier school achievement among those who obtain an apprenticeship and those who do not, but the differences do not disappear in multivariate analyses where variations in school achievements are taken into account. This suggests a difference in the quality of the education and training offered to apprentices and to those who do not obtain an apprenticeship (Støren et al., 2007).

Understanding Completion, Non-Completion and Early Leaving

Since 1994 about two thirds of every cohort has completed upper secondary education with a qualification for higher education or a vocational qualification. The remaining one third either leaves before finishing or stays through all years but without completing all requirements, and by doing so achieves competence at a lower level. The main predictive variable, when it comes to early leaving and also non-completion, is the student's schooling abilities, as measured by GPA from the last year of compulsory education.

The analyses within the project *Early Leaving, Non-Completion or Completion?* also identified some other school-related variables predicting early leaving and non-completion. Most important is the finding that low identification and engagement with the school, as measured by absence, misbehaviour, feeling socially excluded, having low ambitions and putting little effort into school work, have a negative effect on the probability of completing upper secondary education.

In addition, the analyses showed some demographic and background variables predicting early leaving and non-completion: gender, minority/majority background, parent's education, mother's labour-market status and family structure.

These findings are consistent with research in other countries (e.g., Alexander et al., 2001; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Entwisle et al., 2005; Finn, 1989; Janosz et al., 1997; Lamb et al., 2004; Rumberger, 1987, 2004; Traag & van der Velden, 2008).

Prior to the *Early Leaving, Non-Completion or Completion?* project, there had not been any large-scale studies of early leaving conducted in Norway. One reason for this may be that early leaving has not been considered a real problem until recently. Until Reform 94, being outside upper secondary was not regarded as a problem; rather, it was common that many young people aged between 16 and 19 were working, or switching between education and work. Reform 94, with its strong structural, financial and normative means to make upper secondary normal for all 16- to 19-year-olds, was, however, implemented shortly after a deep recession, which resulted in unemployment for many young people. Thus, the construction of the early-leaver category in Norway may be seen as a consequence of both the state of the labour market and the reform giving every young person a statutory right to upper secondary education.

The launching of the research project *Early Leaving, Non-Completion or Completion?* was one response, as early leaving began to emerge as a problem. Because of the lack of earlier Norwegian research, it was necessary to turn to the international literature when trying to explain early leaving and non-completion and the results of the study. One might say that the study – and other Norwegian research on this topic – has been influenced by approaches employed by researchers internationally.

A three-step explanation will be used to try to explain early leaving and non-completion of upper secondary education in Norway:

1. Compulsory education produces students with a large variation in skills, and not everyone is equally prepared to successfully master upper secondary education.
2. In the transition from lower to upper secondary education, when advising students what kind of upper secondary education to choose, the system does not recognise this variation in knowledge, skills and attitudes.
3. When working with these students in upper secondary education, the system does not recognise this variation, either.

As shown above, GPA from the last year of compulsory education is the variable with the strongest predictive power for the outcome of upper secondary education. An important question is how GPA from compulsory education, as an expression

of the students' knowledge, skills and attitudes, is produced. To attempt to answer this question, two contributions from the international research literature on the subject, by Finn (1989) and Rumberger (2004), will be called on.

Finn (1989) draws up two models for understanding dropout as a process starting in the early years of schooling. Following the 'Frustration–Self-Esteem Model', early school failure leads to an impaired self-view, making the individual oppose the school. This opposition may take the form of misbehaviour, truancy, and in the end total withdrawal. In the 'Participation–Identification Model', Finn focuses on participation as a starting point. If the students are not participating, this might lead to poor achievement, followed by low identification with school, and finally withdrawal.

Rumberger (2004) argues that to study dropout one has to include both an individual and an institutional perspective. His framework, based on the individual perspective, is built on three central elements: engagement, educational performance and background. Educational performance and engagement are related and affect each other. Background influences both performance and engagement. In this way, background, engagement and performance are mutually interrelated. In his institutional perspective he argues that people's actions are shaped by the settings in which they live, and that students' behaviour and achievements have to be studied within different contexts: families, peer groups, schools, local communities, and the larger environment (Rumberger, 2004).

Drawing on Finn (1989) and Rumberger (2004) it is possible to construct a conceptual framework to understand early leaving, non-completion and completion in Norwegian upper secondary education, as displayed in Fig. 12.2.

When children enter primary education, they differ in their relationship to school. Through their early years of living they have acquired different understandings of what the school is and how important schooling is. They also come into primary education with a varying level of knowledge and skills. As shown in Fig. 12.2, much of this variation is due to different backgrounds: gender, minority/majority background, family structure, parents' education, parents' labour market status and cultural capital.

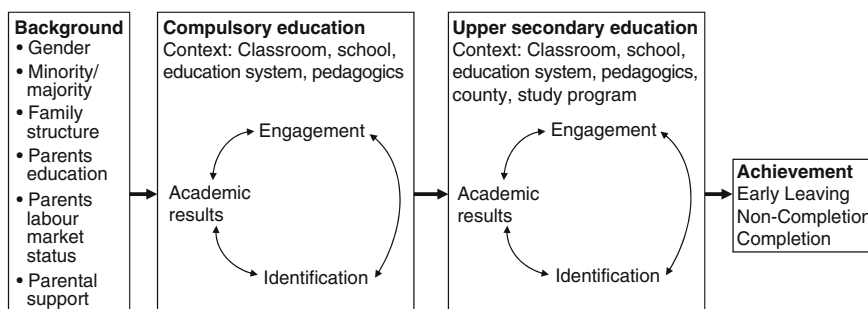


Fig. 12.2 Conceptual framework for understanding student achievement in Norwegian upper secondary education (Source: Markussen, Sandberg & Frøseth, forthcoming)

Some children then, meet school on their home ground, the school recognises them, they identify with school, and the school identifies with them. These children enter a positive circle (Fig. 12.2): they perform well academically, their identification with the school is strengthened, and they show a high level of engagement. Others enter a negative circle: they meet school on away ground, the school does not recognise them, they identify with school to a lesser extent, and vice versa.

These children do not perform as well academically, they do not obtain the same identification with the school, and they show a lower level of engagement (Finn, 1989; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Newmann et al., 1992; Rumberger, 2004; Wehlage et al., 1989). This happens because the school does not adjust its teaching to the variation in the students' knowledge, abilities and skills.

This process first takes place in compulsory education, resulting in varying achievements (see above). These varying achievements imply considerable variation in students' abilities to meet the requirements of upper secondary education. Based on studies of upper secondary education in Norway, it is argued that, as a result of the different lives they have lived with their families and in kindergarten and compulsory school, a large proportion of every cohort at the age of 15–16 has not acquired the necessary requirements (knowledge, skills, attitudes and engagement) to complete upper secondary education, at least not at this stage in life.

Even though this is the case, as many as 98–99% of the cohorts apply and start in upper secondary every year (Markussen, 2003; Frøseth et al., 2008). And nearly everyone applies for, and starts on, a track aiming at qualification for higher education or vocational qualification. Being aware of the great variation in abilities, and being aware of the demands to be fulfilled in order to complete, it could be argued that the education system is doing some students a disservice when leading those not capable of completing, into tracks aiming for full completion. Knowing that it has been possible since 1994, it is worth questioning why very few students (less than 1%) are offered alternative courses – for instance more practical courses aiming for full competence or courses aiming for competence at a lower level.

When these students start in upper secondary, many of them enter into a new negative circle of 'academic results–identification–engagement' (see Fig. 12.2). Teaching in upper secondary does not, as with the transition process to upper secondary, recognise the extent of variation among the students, and treats nearly everyone as if they are capable of completing. Many of the students aiming for completion are not capable of this, and when they experience low levels of identification and engagement, and low academic results, these students have – since upper secondary is not compulsory – the option to leave; and as shown above, many of them do.

The education system is acting upon a tacit assumption, that basically every single individual at the age of 16 has the ability to complete upper secondary education by achieving qualification for higher education or vocational qualification. Yet, it could be argued that many do not have the ability. Because of this, many students start out with goals they are not able to reach.

It may be better if this tacit assumption was replaced by a new basic understanding, explicitly stating that 15- to 16-year-olds at the point of leaving compulsory education have, through the lives they have lived in family, school and society,

achieved very different knowledge, skills and attitudes. Not all of them have obtained the necessary abilities at this stage of life to achieve qualification for higher education or vocational qualification.

Building on this understanding, it would be better for upper secondary education to provide targeted programs, in accordance with students' abilities. For those with appropriate skills, this may be to help them achieve qualification for higher education or vocational qualification. Or it may be to help students aim for and achieve what is called *competence at a lower level*, a theme returned to below. Aiming at competence at a lower level is also targeted education that may break the negative version of the circle illustrated in Fig. 12.2.

Policies to Reduce Early Leaving and Non-Completion

Concern over high early leaving and non-completion rates in Norway has intensified the search for effective tools to (1) prevent young people from quitting, (2) channel early leavers back to school or into qualifying work, and (3) prevent those staying on from ending up as non-completers. Attention will now turn to describing some measures implemented on national and system-wide levels in order to reduce early leaving and non-completion and increase completion in Norway's upper secondary education.

In 1994, as described above, a comprehensive reform of upper secondary education in Norway was implemented. One of the main reasons for this reform was that upper secondary education was not able to cater for all those young persons aged 15–16 who had just finished compulsory education and who wanted to start upper secondary. Because of lack of capacity a large number of young people (those with the lowest GPA from compulsory education) at the age of 15–16 were being forced out of education, becoming early leavers without entering upper secondary education. Amongst other reasons, Reform 94 was introduced in order to put an end to this early leaving between the compulsory and post-compulsory stages of education that was forced upon young people by the system. And this was a success. As noted earlier, a result of this reform was that nearly everybody started in upper secondary education. Furthermore, the reform succeeded in improving throughput and completion: completion among VET students doubled from 30% in the cohort entering upper secondary in 1991, to 60% in the cohort entering in 1994 (Støren et al., 1998).

As mentioned above, in the decades prior to Reform 94, it was common for many young people aged 16–19 to be working or switching between education and work, so that being outside upper secondary education was not considered to be a problem. But when the opportunities in the labour market vanished and upper secondary education was opened up to everybody, the norm was created that every young person should attend upper secondary education. As this took place, not following the norm became a problem, and it could be argued that it was only after the implementation of Reform 94 that early leaving and dropout from upper secondary

education emerged as a real problem. It is interesting that the reform that reduced the numbers of early leavers before post-compulsory education and increased the numbers of completers from upper secondary, also created early leaving and drop-out from upper secondary education as a problem and a challenge.

It was not only Reform 94 itself that was meant to reduce early leaving and improve completion. As part of the reform, some measures aimed at helping potential dropouts to stay in school were also introduced. Two of these measures, the *Follow-Up Service* and *competence at a lower level* are worth describing.

The main task of the Follow-Up Service is to help students who have a statutory right to upper secondary education but who are out of school or work, back into education or to work. The service still exists, but it has not been evaluated for nearly 10 years, so it is not possible, based on data, to say how it is working at present. From earlier evaluations it is known that the service has been struggling to fulfil its task, as almost the only options they had were to return early leavers to school (Grøgaard et al., 1999).

As a part of Reform 94, a new form of competence was introduced. The legislation in relation to upper secondary education stated that after finishing upper secondary education, the students should acquire one out of three possible forms of qualification: qualification for higher education, vocational qualification, or *documented partial competence*. From 2001 the name of this third form of qualification was changed to *competence at a lower level*. At the same time it became possible for students to undertake study towards this competence at a lower level qualification within their upper secondary education, and to work for this as a *learning candidate*, rather like an apprentice in a workplace. At the end of this education, the learning candidate does an exam called the *Competence Test*, and after passing this exam he or she receives a *Certificate of Competence*, documenting the qualifications he or she has acquired through upper secondary education. Competence at a lower level was introduced in order to give those not capable of achieving qualification for higher education or vocational qualification another option within the system, and can be seen as a measure to keep students in upper secondary education.

From 2007 a new way to achieve planned competence at a lower level, the *Certificate of Practice*, was introduced, allowing students to complete their upper secondary education over a 2-year period. The main part of the education is based on practical work in the work place, like an apprentice. When fulfilling these 2 years, and achieving a Certificate of Practice, students will have two options: either to end their education and apply for work on the basis of their Certificate of Practice, or to continue their education as an apprentice aiming for a full vocational education by obtaining a trade or a journeyman's certificate.

In 2003, a national *Plan of Action against Early Leaving in Upper Secondary Education* was launched. In an evaluation, Buland and Havn (2007) point out that a considerable diversity of strategies were developed throughout the country, including career and employment counselling; new systems for early warning; supplementary qualification for teachers in handling the challenges related to early leaving; special attention to the first few months of upper secondary school for

students at risk; additional alternative possibilities for young people for working outside of ordinary school; and improved cooperation between schools in order to facilitate transition from one level of education to the next. These are seen by the practitioners involved as effective means for preventing early leaving and non-completion.

According to the analysis by Buland and Havn (2007), in order for work to reduce early leaving to be successful, it needs to be 'firmly rooted in the educational system on all levels, not as a project, but as an ongoing, ordinary part of the activities of every school'. Thus, they conclude, the task involves systematic, enduring, goal-oriented hard work in different arenas simultaneously. Two evaluations of projects on partnership for career guidance in compulsory education, and in a lifelong perspective, support the significance of these success criteria (Borgen et al., 2008; Røste & Borgen, 2008).

In 2006, a new comprehensive reform of all education for persons between 6 and 19 years of age was implemented. The Government and the Parliament gave many reasons for this reform, but in upper secondary education one of its main aims was said to be the reduction of early leaving and non-completion and the improvement of completion (St.meld. nr. 30, 2003–04).

As a part of the reform, several elements aiming at reduced dropout and increased completion were introduced. Three of these measures are worth mentioning: *career guidance*, the *Elective Program*, and the *In-Depth Study Project*.

Career guidance for young people was highlighted in the reform of 2006 as a measure for preventing early leaving and non-completion. The aim is to bring about a significant improvement of the guidance service through several means, including partnerships for career guidance, which involve a range of different actors at different levels and across sectors. Supplementary qualification for school counsellors is seen as crucial to the endeavours.

In order to strengthen students' basis for choosing educational programs and subjects in upper secondary, two new subjects have been established: the *Elective Program* is taught to all students in lower secondary throughout all 3 years; and the *In-Depth Study Project* is taught in the vocational tracks in upper secondary during the first and the second year.

The three main areas of the Elective Program are knowledge about the structure in upper secondary and working life; trialling of possible programs in upper secondary education; and training, mapping out, and discussing the implications of the student's own interests and circumstances concerning their individual educational and work life choices. The trialling of programs can take place in an upper secondary school or in a local workplace.

The objective of the In-Depth Study Project is that students should be able to try out one or more trades and gain experience with the content, tasks and working methods used in different vocational subjects before they select their own pathway.

Norway has implemented two comprehensive reforms, in 1994 and 2006, and in both cases an important reason for these reforms, amongst many others, was to reduce early leaving and non-completion and increase completion. It has been

shown that Reform 94 succeeded in both reducing the numbers of early leavers between the compulsory and post-compulsory stages of education, and increasing the completion rates within upper secondary education. But early leaving and non-completion rates are still worryingly high and the 2006 Reform is aiming to improve this situation. Special measures seeking to reduce dropout and increase completion – better career guidance and the two new subjects (the Elective Program and the In-Depth Study Project) – have been designed, piloted and recently implemented, and are under evaluation at present. Thus, while it is impossible at the time of writing to say whether they will work as intended, the ongoing evaluations will hopefully tell us more.

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