

English summary  
of Fafo-rapport 2021:09

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## Handling and consequences of the corona outbreak for upper secondary education

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## Chapter 1

This report describes how the actors in upper secondary education handled the coronavirus outbreak in the spring of 2020 and the consequences of the pandemic for pupils and apprentices hitherto. Some topics in the report concern all educational programmes:

- academic and pedagogical content, one-to-one follow-up and assessment
- well-being, motivation and learning
- progression, completion and plans for the future
- Other topics are especially relevant for vocational training:
- training in practical subjects during the lockdown
- access to apprenticeships
- the training situation for apprentices and training candidates
- implementation of craft and journeyman's examinations

## Chapter 2

The report is based on a comprehensive empirical material that was collected mainly in the period from October 2020 to January 2021. We have undertaken surveys of principals, heads of department, teachers and pupils in four selected education and training programmes, a survey of second-year students in all vocational training programmes and a survey among the staff in the apprenticeship training agencies. In addition, we have undertaken qualitative interviews with school owners, principals, heads of department, teachers, vocational training officers and heads of county vocational training boards – 76 informants in total.

## Chapter 3

The transition to home schooling and online teaching in the spring of 2020 was characterised by crisis management and pioneering work. This situation came totally unpredicted, and there was no established knowledge or prior experience to rely on. The digital infrastructure was largely in place, but staff skills levels varied considerably. Nobody was prepared for a situation where the school administrations, teachers and pupils all had to change to home offices and home schooling from one day to the next. Hardly anyone could imagine that the lock-

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down would last for so long. Both school owners and principals report that the dialogue between the school ownership and operational levels was closer than normal during the period following the lockdown.

School owners vary in the degree to which they have provided instructions for the organisation of the school day during the lockdown. Some counties have explicitly called for compliance with the normal school timetable. Interviews with school administrations indicate, however, that this requirement was difficult to meet in practice, for example due to variations in the teachers' home situation and digital skills. There were also different interpretations of the national guidelines in terms of what groups of pupils should physically attend school. Local variations in interpretations and practices have necessarily given rise to major differences in the teaching offered to pupils during the lockdown.

School owners and principals broadly agree that provision of adequate teaching in practical subjects is difficult when the schools are closed. Most work placements had to be cancelled in the spring of 2020, and there were limited opportunities for setting the pupils relevant practical assignments for them to undertake at home unaided.

Both school owners and principals report that the grading work during the spring of 2020 was challenging, and many teachers felt that they had to go to great lengths and make provisions for individual pupils to ensure an adequate basis for grading. However, the informants emphasise that this experience with grading will be useful in the years to come, including in connection with the ongoing reform of the curriculum. There is little doubt that the crisis has helped bring about a comprehensive development of schools and competence when it comes to online teaching and collaboration on digital platforms. The informants highlight the teachers' community spirit and refer to how the schools and teachers have started using new arenas for sharing their experience. On the other hand, the informants also report that all these months of continuous vigilance have caused significant fatigue in the sector.

## Chapter 4

The teachers confirmed that the technical equipment and software required for online teaching were largely in place before the lockdown. The transition to home schooling was nevertheless demanding, both because it came so suddenly and because the teachers had little or no previous experience with online teaching before 12 March. The schools provided some support and training along the way, and the teachers helped each other, but many teachers still felt that they had too few skills to provide adequate teaching online.

The principals, teachers and pupils all report that during the early phase after the lockdown, the pupils were given numerous written assignments to work on

individually. It soon turned out, however, that this was too labour-intensive. The scope was gradually adjusted, and the teaching programme was made somewhat more varied. Teachers in the vocational training programmes found it difficult to create good and relevant assignments. We can see, however, that there were differences between the various programmes. Teachers in the programme for health and social care and the programme for restaurant and food processing provided many examples of practical assignments that the pupils could execute with resources that were available in their homes. Many teachers also started to use various online resources in their teaching. The programme for technical and industrial production met with particular problems in setting relevant practical assignments, and since the school was closed, teaching mainly focused on theoretical subjects.

Pupils whom we have interviewed report to have appreciated the freedom during the first days after the lockdown, but that after a while, the school days became monotonous and boring. Many found it hard to be isolated at home, with little social contact with friends and classmates. Others report to have coped well with home schooling. Teachers confirm that some pupils did well, and some put even more effort into their schoolwork during the school closure. Those who did well with home schooling constitute a diverse group of pupils who for various reasons find the classroom situation tiresome or difficult.

The schools and teachers have been most concerned about the vulnerable pupils, and extra resources were allocated for the follow-up of particular individuals. Some pupils have also had the option of coming to school, but our impression from the interviews with teachers is that this option should have been extended to more pupils. Many teachers refer to minority-language pupils with a short time of residence in Norway as a group that may face challenges in dealing with online teaching.

The teachers whom we interviewed report that grading of pupils largely went without problems, but that new forms of assessment had to be used. The schools shared the view that the coronavirus outbreak and the countermeasures taken should have the smallest possible impact on the pupils' ability to complete their education. The fact that the lockdown happened relatively late in the school year, that the schools reopened for some weeks before the summer holidays and that the examinations were cancelled, helped the teachers secure a sufficient basis for assessment of most of the pupils.

The lockdown in spring 2020 happened after the application deadline for upper secondary education had expired. The coronavirus outbreak therefore gave little cause for the pupils to change their plans. Some pupils in the health and social care programme report to have chosen supplementary studies rather than entering an apprenticeship, because they had too little workplace experience in the spring of 2020. In other respects, it appears as though the students whom

we interviewed tended to stick to the plan they had before the coronavirus outbreak, and the second-year pupils did not appear concerned about not finding an apprenticeship.

Many of the teachers whom we interviewed report that teaching pupils during the 'yellow level' period is more demanding than the media would imply. In the practical subjects, there are challenges associated with the size of the classes and the use of equipment, kitchens and workshops. Much time is spent on sanitising hands and surfaces, but even general studies programmes require a certain amount of collaboration and interaction between pupils. Despite these challenges, many teachers point out that they have learned something from the lockdown, they rethink old ways of following up pupils, they have enhanced their digital skills, and many also feel that they have become more creative when it comes to teaching plans and grading.

## Chapter 5

The survey among pupils in the four selected education and training programmes indicate that during the lockdown, teaching mainly consisted of online, real-time teaching and work on individual assignments. Pupils report less use of group work, and this is corroborated by findings from the teachers' survey.

A majority of the pupils believed that the teachers had a poorer basis for assessment as a result of the lockdown. Approximately 40 per cent of the teachers agreed that their basis for assessment was poorer, but the majority claimed that the lockdown did not affect this, or even had a positive effect.

Practical training in vocational programme subjects was implemented to a varying extent. Approximately one-half of the principals and teachers report that this had to be cancelled or postponed until the schools could reopen. The teachers report that the most common obstacles to the implementation of practical training was that it requires pupils to work together physically, as well as equipment that is unavailable in their homes. Vocational in-depth training in workplaces was cancelled for more than one-half of the pupils who had planned this, and to a greater extent in restaurant and food processing programmes and health and social care programmes than in technical and industrial production programmes. Considering how important practical workplace training can be for obtaining an apprenticeship, such lack of experience may have greatly impacted those who were in their first year of training in the spring of 2020. The responses from the pupils concur well with those from teachers and principals.

The digital frameworks for the transition to home schooling appear to have been adequate. The vast majority of the teachers already had access to a number of digital tools before the lockdown, and most of the pupils had access to a computer and a stable internet connection. However, approximately one-half of the

teachers felt that their digital skills were insufficient, and a majority also claimed that the pupils had inadequate skills.

Most of the pupils have had their parents at home with them for at least part of the school hours during lockdown, and approximately one-half have had other siblings at home. Pupils who had access to a place to study undisturbed felt this to be unproblematic, and 86 per cent had access to such a place at home.

As regards the consequences of the lockdown, the teachers were especially concerned about the learning situation of pupils with various challenges. A large majority believe that the transition to online teaching has had a negative effect on pupils whose academic level is low, pupils who are vulnerable or pupils who have challenges related to absenteeism.

The lockdown has had a varying impact on the pupils' well-being, motivation and learning. Approximately one-half of the pupils report to be as content as before, and approximately one-half of them were as motivated as they were before the lockdown. Approximately 60 per cent claim to have learned less during the lockdown than in the preceding period.

## Chapter 6

At the time of our survey in the autumn of 2020, approximately one-half of the pupils who had been in the second year of vocational training in the spring of 2020 had entered apprenticeships, 13 per cent were in third-year school-based vocational training, while 22 per cent were taking supplementary studies qualifying for higher education. The remaining 15 per cent had chosen a different education, were employed, unemployed or engaged in other activities. Approximately 59 per cent reported to have planned to apply for an apprenticeship before the coronavirus pandemic; this is approximately 10 per cent more than those who had actually entered an apprenticeship in the subsequent autumn. However, most of the second-year pupils, 68 per cent, report that the coronavirus situation has had no effect on the choice they have made after completing their second year. Fourteen per cent of the pupils report that the coronavirus situation has caused them to change their previously planned choice.

After the lockdown in the spring of 2020, the teaching frequently involved theoretical assignments that the pupils were to complete unaided. Group work of a theoretical or practical nature with other pupils was less frequently used. Many of the second-year pupils in the spring of 2020 reported to feel that they were followed up less by the teachers during the lockdown; 16 per cent felt that the follow-up was a lot poorer, and 33 per cent that it was somewhat poorer. On the other hand, one in every three pupils reported that the follow-up was nearly the same as before.

The amount of practical training was significantly reduced during the lockdown; 67 per cent report to have had much less teaching in practical subjects,

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only theory or no practical training at all while the schools remained closed. Pupils in the programme for electricity and electronics report a greater reduction in the amount of practical training than those from other programmes.

The survey among second-year pupils also shows that learning outcomes, contentment and motivation for schoolwork were significantly reduced during the lockdown in the spring of 2020.

## Chapter 7

For obvious reasons, the coronavirus situation has affected the apprentices and the part of their vocational training that is undertaken in in-service training establishments. However, a major effort has been made to keep the apprentices at work and in training, implement craft examinations and maintain a high intake of new apprentices in the training establishments. As a result, the effect of the coronavirus pandemic on this part of the training programme has been less severe than might have been feared, in light of the effect on the pandemic on the labour market in general. The allocation to apprenticeships in the autumn of 2020 went surprisingly well, with a decline of no more than two percentage points in the proportion of applicants who could find an apprenticeship. The decline is greater in the private sector, however. In the counties there is also some concern as to whether the high intake rate can be sustained in 2021, so the risk has not yet passed. In 2020, many pupils were also unable to enter in-depth vocational training as planned, and this may impact on their opportunities to find an apprenticeship in 2021.

The first wave of the coronavirus pandemic caused a large number of apprentices to be laid off, but most of them were able to return to work shortly after. There was another increase from November 2020 to February 2021, but in February 2021 the number of apprentices who have been laid off is nevertheless only one-third of the peak level reached in April 2020. Many of the apprentices have been provided with alternative training options for short periods while they were laid off, mainly under the auspices of the apprenticeship training agencies. The learning environments for the apprentices who have not been laid off have to a surprising extent remained unchanged, according to reports from the apprenticeship training agencies. As a result of the infection control measures, a number of craft examinations have been delayed, some by more than two months, but most of the backlog has apparently been dealt with. The amendments to the regulations concerning implementation of craft examinations have helped achieve this outcome. Statistics also show that the number of approved craft examinations for apprentices was in fact somewhat higher in 2020 than in the previous year.

## Chapter 8

The vocational training officers in the counties and the heads of the vocational training boards report good, close and important collaboration between the county administrations and the social partners during the coronavirus pandemic. In a situation that has entailed major consequences for vocational training and called for quick action and new approaches, a need for smaller and more operational forums than the vocational training boards has emerged. Working groups subject to the vocational training boards have therefore become a key arena for collaboration. Key topics for the social partnership have included criteria for the use of support funding, for example from the Curriculum Renewal programme, as well as provision of up-to-date information on lay-offs. During the coronavirus pandemic, collaboration between the county administrations and the apprenticeship training agencies has been a combination of ongoing contact between the education officers in the counties and the individual agencies, as well as centralised meetings with all or many of the agencies.

## Chapter 9

During the lockdown, academic and pedagogical content had to be adapted to the digital skills and home situation of both teachers and pupils. Considerable emphasis was placed on written, individual assignments, with limited opportunities for collaboration between pupils. One reason for this was to obtain a sufficient basis for assessment.

For the majority of the pupils, the transition to home schooling had a negative effect on well-being, motivation and perceived learning outcomes. The pupils missed school and their peers. However, as many as one in every three report to feel good about home schooling. This is a diverse group, and the pupils' home situation has a significant effect on their perception of the transition to online teaching.

For pupils in vocational training programmes, the lockdown meant that it was difficult to set them relevant assignments in practical subjects. It was therefore essential to let these pupils be the first to return to school after the reopening, both with a view to their motivation and to be able to assess their performance in the programme subjects.

As yet, there are few indications that the closure of the schools in the spring of 2020 has greatly impacted the pupils' progression, rate of completion and further choices of education in the autumn of 2020. This must be seen in light of the fact that the closure came late in the year, and that the schools and teachers went to great lengths to prevent any negative effects on the pupils. It is still too early to say how the coronavirus crisis will affect the pupils, who now have been living with this situation for one year.



In view of the major challenges that the coronavirus crisis has created in the labour market, the allocation of apprenticeships in the autumn of 2020 went surprisingly well, with a decline of only two percentage points in the proportion of applicants who were able to secure a place when compared to the previous year. This notwithstanding, a shift has occurred from the private to the public sector, and it is yet too early to say how the crisis will affect the availability of apprenticeships in the long term.