

CHAPTER 13

LIER UPPER-SECONDARY SCHOOL CASE, NORWAY

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Introduction to Lier Upper-Secondary School

Lier Upper-Secondary School (Lier USS) is a vocational school located in Lier, outside Drammen, which is Norway's fifth-largest city. The school has around 630 students and 130 teachers and other staff. It offers a wide range of programmes: Electrician, Healthcare, Childcare, Business and Administration, Design and Handcrafts, and Logistics. The school also serves as a specialist centre for students diagnosed within the autism spectrum. Over the years, this combination of vocational breadth, specialist support, and international engagement has come to define what Lier USS is and what it stands for.

The school has made raising the status of vocational education a deliberate priority. Since 2014, flexible curricula have been central to this effort. The curricula are designed so that students can earn vocational certificates while also accessing pathways to general studies and higher education. The aim is to merge practical skills with academic knowledge in a way that feels relevant rather than imposed. Experience has shown that international projects, particularly those funded by Erasmus+, have helped on multiple fronts: to build reputation, increase recruitment, and improve student motivation.

International collaboration has been a sustained part of the school's development since 2014. Through Erasmus+ projects, students and staff have been able to travel and build partnerships with schools in Ireland, Germany, Spain, Poland, and England. These collaborations have enriched vocational training across fields, from electrical engineering and floristry to specialist programmes for neurodiverse learners. Mobility is now available across all of the school's

programmes, and handling international projects has become a routine part of how the school operates.

Alongside the international work, there has been growing pressure to respond to a revised national curriculum. The updated curriculum places greater emphasis on basic skills and core values that run through all subjects. At Lier USS, this means dedicating real time and resources to making those values visible in everyday teaching.

In the spring of 2019, the school was accredited as a VET Charter school in recognition of the quality of its previous international projects. Since 2020, exchange programmes have been available across all programme areas. International collaboration is now embedded in both the management structure and the day-to-day culture of the school, rather than being treated as an occasional extra.

School development at Lier USS is a collective undertaking. Teachers, school leaders, and employee representatives are involved in ongoing dialogue about priorities and direction. Nearly 80% of staff are members of labour organisations, and union meetings are held during work hours. Thus, the school genuinely tries to move beyond consultation toward co-creation, making space for support staff and classroom teachers alike to shape decisions.

This collaborative approach is also reflected in how the school revises curricula and introduces new teaching methods. Working groups comprising teachers, support staff, and union representatives meet to share practical experiences. A recent example is the redesign of the healthcare programme, where nurses, teachers, and student representatives worked together to integrate simulation-based learning and digital tools. The new programme design strives for balance between the theoretical grounding and hands-on practice.

Teachers at Lier USS are regarded as professionals who lead their students' learning every day. They are not just implementers of policy. This requires a combination of subject expertise, ethical awareness, and the willingness to try new approaches. One teacher in the Childcare programme, for example, redesigned her assessment strategy around student-led portfolios: learners document their development through reflections, photographs, and peer feedback. The school's leadership team supports this kind of experimentation by providing training in formative assessment and protected time for peer collaboration.

In recent years, Lier USS has invested in helping staff develop a deeper understanding of what professional practice means in a vocational context. Goal

3 of the school's operational plan (Strengthening Relationships and Equitable Interaction) has underpinned a series of workshops on ethical decision-making, peer mentoring programmes, and forums for sharing classroom challenges. A key part of this work has been the partnership with Conexus, led by consultant Jarl Inge Wærnes, who has guided staff through reflective processes aimed at clarifying what it means to be a professional practitioner. In one workshop, participants worked through practical dilemmas (for example, how to accommodate a student with autism in a noisy workshop setting) and developed concrete strategies through role-play and group analysis.

External contributors have added to this work. Professor Eirik Irgens from NTNU led seminars on transformative leadership, with a focus on empathy in diverse classroom settings. Tone Skyseth Westvig from Oslo Municipality's Learning Team introduced practical techniques for fostering social belonging, including 'check-in' circles at the start of lessons, where students briefly share their emotional state. Teachers have reported that these external perspectives helped them feel more confident in addressing complex classroom dynamics.

In 2023, the school launched the 'Leadership Together' initiative, aimed at strengthening collaboration between school leaders and employee representatives. This initiative aimed at clarifying roles and expectations, building ethical awareness around issues such as resource allocation and inclusion, and making the most of limited budgets. Central to the initiative is the Co-Creation Lab, which is a monthly forum where leaders and staff work together on pressing challenges. In one session, analysis of student feedback and attendance data led to the development of the 'Career Bridge' programme, in which local businesses host monthly workshops offering hands-on project experience. Early results from this programme indicate a 20% increase in student participation and improved satisfaction among employers.

For 2024–2025, the school has outlined a series of planned activities: ethical and legal workshops covering workplace agreements (e.g., SFS2213) and educator responsibilities; peer-led learning communities where teachers share strategies across disciplines, for example, integrating AI tools into logistics training or using gamification in healthcare simulations; and a Leadership Shadowing programme that pairs junior teachers with senior leaders to observe decision-making in practice.

One practical example of this commitment to reflection is the 'Reflective Friday' initiative, in which staff dedicate the last hour of each week to noting what they

have learned and setting goals for the following week. One teacher described how taking that time has helped her approach Mondays with more clarity. It is a small shift, but it points to a broader effort to make reflection a normal part of the working week rather than an occasional event.

These developments have not come without difficulty. Time is a persistent barrier: teachers are expected to manage classroom duties, administrative work, and continuous professional development simultaneously. A 2023 internal survey revealed that 65% of staff feel overwhelmed by these competing demands. There is also some resistance to change, particularly among teachers who have worked in the same way for many years and remain unconvinced by new approaches. To address this, the school has introduced “Innovation Grants”. These are small funds for teachers who propose experimental projects. One teacher used a grant to develop a virtual reality module for electrical engineering students, allowing them to simulate wiring complex circuits; the project boosted student engagement and inspired colleagues to explore similar tools.

Internationalisation remains central to the school’s development. Annual Erasmus+ funding of approximately €90,000–100,000 supports student and teacher exchanges, particularly in vocational fields. Childcare students have done internships at German kindergartens; teachers have attended workshops in Spain on inclusive education and brought back practical strategies such as visual timetables for autistic learners. The school also hosts international students, including a group from Poland studying sustainable design. One Norwegian student reflected that working alongside peers from different backgrounds had taught him problem-solving approaches he would not have encountered otherwise; he expects to carry these skills into his future career in carpentry.

The school supports staff development through partnerships with universities, enabling some teachers to pursue advanced qualifications such as master’s degrees in educational leadership or vocational pedagogy. Peer observation programmes allow teachers to visit each other’s classrooms and give constructive feedback focused on strengths. An online resource hub that covers topics from classroom management to trauma-informed teaching provides accessible reference material. The ‘Digital Mentor’ programme, in which tech-confident teachers support colleagues in integrating digital tools, has also made a difference: one mentor helped a previously reluctant colleague to adopt interactive quizzes via Kahoot!, which noticeably increased student participation during theory lessons.

As Lier USS approaches its tenth anniversary, the school has set out several priorities for 2025: expanding support for neurodiverse students through sensory-friendly classrooms and specialist staff training; deepening ties with local businesses to co-develop curricula that reflect current workforce needs; and embedding classroom-friendly research approaches into daily practice, so that teachers can systematically evaluate and refine their methods. One teacher put it simply: “We are not just preparing students for jobs, we are nurturing adaptable, curious individuals who can thrive in a rapidly changing world.” That practical, outward-looking spirit that is grounded in what students actually need runs through everything the school does.

From the beginning, Lier USS has worked to improve vocational education through flexible curricula, genuine international collaboration, and a shared sense of responsibility for the school’s direction. The underlying belief is that every student should have the opportunity to develop their judgment and the capacity to work well with others to help them succeed in future working life. The school tries to enact democracy, intercultural understanding, and resilience in practice and not just name them in policy documents.

The pressure to adapt to revised curricular demands has grown in recent years. The updated national curriculum emphasises basic skills and core values across all subjects, and at Lier USS this translates into concrete work: helping students understand their own learning, building a sense of mastery, and developing study habits that support lifelong learning. Implementing these goals takes time and resources, and the school continues to work at aligning its international projects and internal development efforts with this broader direction.

Taken together, these efforts reflect a school that takes seriously its responsibility to prepare students for a world that keeps changing, and to support the staff who do that work every day.

Professional Development

The Framework for Learning and Leadership was introduced through the Viken initiative and has been actively integrated into the school’s development efforts, working in tandem with Chapter 3 of the school’s overarching principles, particularly section 3.5 on professional communities and school development. This framework serves as a professional and pedagogical reference for all staff involved in upper-secondary education within Buskerud and aims to elevate the

quality of teaching across classrooms and workshops. It aligns with the county's vision and values, designed around four interconnected pillars: human perspective (guiding collaborative interactions), shared attitudes (prioritising student learning and development), professional communities (the primary forum for collective development), and practice principles (research-informed strategies to enhance student outcomes). The framework is binding, designed to shape daily professional practices and serves as a compass for interactions among students, teachers, leaders, and the broader school community.

Leadership transitions since May 2021, including a new principal, assistant principal, and five middle managers, have posed challenges in maintaining continuity within professional communities. However, guidance from organisational psychologist Pål Riis, who has advised the leadership team since 2021/22, has provided stability. Collaborative time has largely been dedicated to development groups. In the 2022/23 academic year, teachers proposed 12 themes for in-depth exploration, forming groups based on shared interests. While end-of-term reflections using the “Done – Learned – Insights” model facilitated idea-sharing, it became evident that mere discussion did not translate into classroom changes, as there was limited commitment to experimentation or iterative improvement.

The 2023/24 partnership with Høgskolen i Innlandet (HINN) focused on inclusive practices and instructional quality, informed by Professor Kirsti Klette's research on effective teaching. Her framework emphasises four pillars: clarity in goals and support structures, well-managed classrooms, intellectually stimulating tasks, and meaningful classroom dialogue. Teachers selected focus areas, while leaders planned meetings with clear agendas, assigned roles (e.g., chairperson, note-taker), and action-learning tools such as the “development wheel” or “process arrow.” Term-end sharing occurred in smaller clusters rather than plenary sessions. Success factors included leadership mentorship, pre-planned agendas, and documentation requirements. Feedback highlighted a preference for collaborating with colleagues teaching the same student groups, a structure implemented in the current academic year.

For 2024/25, professional communities now operate under “Teams Around the Subject,” though cross-disciplinary projects have diverted focus from inclusion and teaching quality, a priority the school aims to recentre by spring 2025.

Internationalisation remains a cornerstone of professional development, supported by annual Erasmus+ funding (€90,000–100,000). Partnerships with

schools in Ireland, Germany, Spain, Poland, and England enable student and teacher mobility, particularly in vocational fields such as electrical engineering, sales, floristry, and tailored programmes for students with autism. Teachers are encouraged to engage in international projects, fostering global perspectives and innovative practices.

Professional development is further supported through workshops, seminars, peer-led communities, online resources, and opportunities for advanced qualifications via the national “Kompetanse for kvalitet” [Competence and quality] initiative. County-wide networks and meetings for new staff promote cross-school collaboration. These efforts underscore the school’s commitment to blending theoretical insights with practical application, ensuring teachers remain dynamic, reflective practitioners aligned with both local and global educational advancements.

Teachers’ Engagement in Research in their Classrooms

Let me start by saying this: research literacy is not just about reading studies or attending workshops. It is about being data-informed and theory-informed at the same time, knowing what works in the classroom and why. But here is the catch: even when we hear great ideas, turning them into action is where most of us stumble. I have seen it again and again, teachers nod along in meetings, but back in their classrooms, nothing changes.

As a leader, my job is to nudge, support, and sometimes push. We track grades, analyse surveys, and observe classes, not to micromanage, but to see where we are headed. Take my master’s project, for example. We built a vocational programme from scratch with local businesses, using action research. Every few months, we would sit down with industry folks and teachers, asking, “What is working and what is not?” It was not perfect, but that back-and-forth between theory and practice, that is where real learning happens. Still, I will admit that keeping that momentum alive is tough. Without buy-in, even the best ideas gather dust.

We have tried everything to make research stick. Every Thursday afternoon, teachers get four hours for development, half in cross-subject groups, half in subject teams. Some groups thrive; others don’t engage to the same degree. A few years back, we let teachers pick topics they cared about, AI in math,

gamification in language classes. A few dove in, but too many just went through the motions. One teacher told me, “It feels like another meeting where we talk, but nothing happens.” That hit hard.

Universities could be partners here, but let us be real, money is tight. We did team up with Høgskolen i Innlandet on inclusive teaching; great workshops, but once they left, we were back to square one. What we need is co-creation. Not “here’s a theory, now apply it,” but “let’s figure this out together.” Teachers and academics should ideally work side by side, designing studies that actually fit our classrooms.

Tools help, but they are not magic. We use process maps and development wheels, visual stuff to show where we are and where we want to go. Imagine a wheel divided into slices: “student engagement,” “feedback,” “differentiation.” Teachers mark their current spot and set goals. Some teachers find this helpful. When a young teacher told me, “This finally made me see why my kids zone out,” I knew we were onto something. But time is always the enemy. Even with those four hours a week, teachers are swamped. Some teachers are also more inclined to rely on their proven experience rather than on recent research findings.

It is important to lead by example. If I ask teachers to try inclusive methods, I should use those methods in staff meetings. We brought in an organisational psychologist to coach us on this. We practiced “action research on ourselves,” reflecting on how we lead, not just how we teach. It is messy, but when leaders model curiosity, it may trickle down.

Here is my dream: universities and schools working as true partners. Not “research projects” that end up in journals nobody reads, but simple, classroom-focused studies. Like, “Does this new feedback tool boost motivation?” Collect data together, tweak it, try again. No jargon, no 50-page reports, just practical steps. Teachers need frameworks that do not feel like homework. It could be a good idea to start small: one question, one class, one term. But none of this works without trust. Teachers need to feel safe to experiment, fail, and try again. Academics need to become more aware and sensitive to the schools’ everyday life. I have sat through too many lectures where theorists talk at us, not with us. But then there are moments, like when a veteran teacher shares a tiny tweak that transformed her grading, that remind me why we should bother. Research literacy is not a checkbox. It is a mindset. And mindsets take time.

Recognition and Appreciation

Changing classroom practices is a significant challenge. There is a gap between sharing experiences that could lead to change and actually acting on what we hear. Teachers often find it easier to talk about what they do in the classroom than to critically reflect on how their practice works or does not. This is a key area for development. Over recent years, we have aimed to define a “Good Lier Practice” framework, but leadership recognises the need to set clearer expectations. This will be the next step for our professional development groups.

TREL’s goal, to create simple, manageable models for teachers to research their own practice aligns perfectly with this need. Teachers require tools that integrate seamlessly into their daily routines. Step-by-step guides or adaptable frameworks could bridge the gap between theory and action. For instance, something as straightforward as a reflective checklist or a collaborative peer-observation protocol might help teachers systematically evaluate their methods.

I see this as critical because one of the weaknesses in Norwegian classrooms, in our view, is the lack of classroom-friendly research approaches. Teachers often lack the time or tools to turn insights into tangible changes. By spreading the expertise of TREL teachers (those participating in research-driven professional development), we hope to build capacity within our teams. These teachers gain skills through projects like yours, and we want to channel that knowledge back into our schools.

In short, practicality is key. If teachers can “tweak” and see immediate relevance to their daily work, these models have a real chance of sticking. The challenge and opportunity lie in designing frameworks that feel less like academic exercises and more like natural extensions of teaching.