



Vocational education in times of Crisis: lessons from around the world

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BOOK REVIEW

Vocational education in times of Crisis: lessons from around the world, edited by Matthias Pilz, Springer, 2017, 490 pp., £104.50/€145.59 (Hardback), ISBN 978-3-319-47854-8

This book is based on papers presented at the second international conference of the German Research Centre for Comparative Vocational Education and Training (GREAT). Given its origin in that event one of its strengths is the one conveyed by the sub-title, in that it does indeed convey 'lessons from around the world'. The 26 chapters include ones from countries such as Bangladesh, Thailand and India, as well as ones from countries which are already well established in this field such as Austria, Germany and the U.K. It does therefore provide an overview of recent developments and debates, and a number of themes can be identified.

The first of these is the difficulty of establishing appropriate high quality vocational education and training (VET) in many parts of the world. Thus, the chapter by Tara and Kumal which discusses the attempt to establish Centres of Excellence in Industrial Training Institutes in the state of Karnataka in India reports on the low level of skills and the low level of skills training in India. The response to this was the establishment of Centres of Excellence (COEs) with funding from the Indian Government and the World Bank. However, the authors suggest that this programme has resulted in only limited success, reflecting a number of problems. These include lack of awareness of the programmes among potential students, the low status of VET of this kind, inadequate staffing and variations in the quality of provision in the COEs. This all reflects the need for better planning of a quality skills development programme. Similar problems are reported in the chapter on VET in Bangladesh which has been recognised as a vital tool for economic development. However, the quality of what has been provided has been weakened by insufficient staff with appropriate experience and training, weak structures for quality assurance and poor levels of ICT to support student learning. There is also a mismatch between the training provided and the needs of employers. This results in only limited evidence that VET has improved the labour market prospects for the young people involved.

This problem of a mismatch between the qualifications which young people are gaining and the needs of the labour market is another theme which emerges not just with respect to India and Bangladesh, but also in other chapters in the book. Thus, Tang & Shi's discussion of *Youth employment and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in China* outlines several problems of mismatch between the skills and qualifications of young people and the needs of the labour market. One is the lack of appropriate training and skills among young migrant workers, while another is the problems created by the rapid expansion of the tertiary system as a result of which there are too many graduates who struggle to find appropriate employment. The response to the first of these has been the development of a programme of vocational education for rural students aimed at training them for their position as migrant workers in the cities. The second has been the proposal to establish by 2020 a world class modern vocational education system with clear progression routes

through vocational schools to vocational colleges to applied universities. This will involve transforming some existing universities into 'applied universities'. This is an interesting and ambitious programme, but underlying some of the problems in India, China and other countries is the lower status of vocational education, and the desire of many young people to progress instead to an academic route and a university degree.

This then leads to a third theme which emerges in the book: the one of 'policy borrowing', and transfer of successful approaches to VET from countries with well established and successful systems of VET to ones which are less successful in this respect. Policy borrowing is always a potentially difficult and risky approach, given the differences in history and context between different countries. Indeed the late David Raffe, whose contribution to this field of study is recognised in a very fitting dedication by Matthias Piltz, has argued for the value of an approach which emphasises 'policy learning' rather than 'policy borrowing'. In response Matthias Piltz, in the final chapter, outlines an analytical tool which can help with the detailed analysis of the diverse circumstances and needs which must be recognised and responded to if any transfer programme is to be contemplated. This is presented as the '6 P strategy for VET export'. The 6 'Ps' which must be analysed and taken into account being: priorities; power; people; poaching avoidance; progression and privileges.

An approach to VET which has probably attracted more positive attention than any other, and more interest in considering the opportunities for transfer has been the 'dual apprenticeship' model. Valiente and Scandurra in their very useful chapter *Challenges to the implementation of dual apprenticeships in OECD countries: a literature review* refer to it as a 'travelling policy'. They note the interest in adopting dual apprenticeships to improve employability of young adults, and smooth the transition from education to work. However, they also note the difficulties in transfer due to different local contexts. While they note the importance of measures to make dual apprenticeships attractive to employers and to students, they note that countries find it difficult to invest in all of the components necessary to make the dual apprenticeship system widespread, and instead there tend to be small scale innovations designed to meet the needs of particular strategically significant sectors of the economy that demand a highly trained labour force and have the capacity and willingness to provide the necessary investment. In this respect, Lerman's chapter on *Why firms do and don't offer apprenticeships* is interesting. He notes the importance of investment in human capital alongside other forms of investment, and considers the costs and benefits to employers, and the barriers to employer-led training. He concludes by quoting South Carolina as an example of how companies can be persuaded to provide apprenticeship training. This involved collaboration between a technical college system and a special unit devoted to marketing apprenticeship. A state budget of \$1 million per annum as well as tax credits to employers of \$1000 per year per apprenticeship, and the provision of low cost college-based education managed to stimulate a fivefold increase in apprentices. Overall then the picture which emerges is the value of a well thought out policy framework which recognises the upfront costs of an effective apprenticeship programme, and the need to work at involving employers in the planning of the programme, but also the long-term benefits which can be secured.

A number of other issues emerge in the book, and two perhaps deserve particular mention. The first is Hordern's chapter on vocational knowledge which emphasises the continuing importance of disciplinary knowledge in the constitution of the occupational knowledge base, suggesting that theories of professional training which foreground learning through the workplace, while neglecting the role of abstract conceptual knowledge are problematic. He argues that it is by establishing a sound base of disciplinary knowledge, including core subjects such as maths and science, that workers develop the expertise to execute tasks successfully in a wide range of contexts. In developing this argument he draws

on Bernstein's concept of the 'region', which refers to the processes through which knowledge is 'recontextualised' from disciplinary sources in accordance with the technological and organisational problems of practice. This discussion of the kinds of knowledge which are 'really useful' is helpful, sitting alongside many other chapters which focus on policy and the problems associated with establishing successful systems of VET.

Finally, Lorna Unwin's chapter draws attention to the key point that VET researchers must not just focus on the analysis and critique of policies and their impact, but must also understand the nature of work and changes in work, if they are to make informed and valuable contributions to the development of VET. An understanding of the rapid changes in the nature of work, and the ways in which it is organised, is crucial for our understanding of the concepts of skills and knowledge, but there is a danger that this is not always at the forefront of the work of researchers in this field.

Overall this book makes a valuable contribution by drawing together the work of researchers from different parts of the world who are facing many different problems in the development of successful VET systems. It analyses some of the problems associated with attempts to transfer successful systems of VET, and approaches which may assist with successful transfer, and it encourages us to consider some of the wider problems which VET researchers should be addressing.

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