

“AFTERWORD” (or: EDITORIAL 2 ?)

Issue 7: Six questions: no easy answers?

It has been a great pleasure to edit this volume of *bwp@* “Berufs- und Wirtschaftspädagogik – online”. Our initial intention for this volume was to obtain a snap shot of what was happening to the structures of Vocational Education and Training (VET) within Europe at a time of unprecedented economic and social change. Other sources of information, such as OECD country reports, while helpful are often out of date by the time they are published. The speed of online publishing has enabled us to provide a more recent picture of what is going on within different countries written from the perspective of internal experts. The exercise has surpassed our most optimistic expectations, and we are extremely grateful to all of our authors for the work they have done and their willingness to be bullied to respond to deadlines.

However, we felt the need to capitalise on all of that effort by trying to stimulate an ongoing dialogue about European VET. To that end we have written this very brief ‘afterword’. Our intention is not to summarise all that has been said in the various papers – that would be an impossible task in two pages. Rather our intention is to pose a number of questions, six in all, which we hope might serve as a means of stimulating further discussion. These are provided in the belief that an important outcome of any research endeavour is a better class of questions not just answers to existing questions. With each question comes a short paragraph of justification. However, these might not be the right questions, or they may be the right questions but not stated in the correct way, or there may be more pressing questions. If you feel this then let us know and we will circulate additional questions.

1. In what ways and to what extent do the historically and locally constructed responses to the pressures of globalization militate against the development of a European Vocational Qualifications Framework?

A striking feature of all of the papers is that change to VET is endemic in all of the countries included in this edition. Pressures for change are both endogenous and exogenous, they typically stem from the perceived pressures of globalisation (however that term is interpreted) with the solutions to such pressures being locally (the idea of glocality) or nationally constructed. By and large the changes are to structural features of VET systems, particularly the qualification structures and modes of delivery. However, what is apparent from practically all of the submitted papers is that such change is always highly path dependent drawing upon the particular historical and cultural traditions of either a nation state or regions within a nation state. This seems to us to raise interesting questions about the possibility of a European Vocational Qualifications Framework which we have tried to capture in the question above.

2. What, in addition to clearer qualification structures, is needed to support the initial transition into, and subsequently mobility within, the labour market?

Another dominant feature that emerged from the papers was the idea of transparency of qualifications. A good qualification provides a clear signal both to the individual acquiring it and to an employer, say, viewing it as to a person's capabilities and competence. A view is that VET qualifications in the past have not achieved this or achieved it only to a partial degree. Thus new qualifications embedded within ever more complex qualification structures and frameworks are needed to provide clear signals. However, it seems to us that signalling requires more than clear frameworks and new types of qualifications. It also requires complex communication channels between for example, central administrators and employers that provide feed forward and feedback about VET qualifications and their interpretation within the labour market. Without such recursive communication, which tests the validity of the signals supposed to be conveyed by a qualification, much effort can be expended and much money wasted in constructing qualification systems for which there is a lack of demand from both employers and learners.

3. What are the relative roles of the state, employers and individuals in paying for vocational learning that leads to qualifications?

Most of the papers focussed on the role of the State in developing new forms of VET qualification systems. But a qualification system is only useful to the extent that people use it. In part such usage is the outcome of economic decision making, in particular who is going to pay for training. Without a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities between social partners in relation to who bears what costs no qualification system is going to be successful. This is territory that has been well trodden in the theoretical labour economics literature with the expectation that employers will pay for job specific training and individuals for more general training. However, the growing recognition that initial education funded by the state will be unable to provide the generic skills for a lifetime raises important considerations as to who will pay for continuing VET, how such VET provision might be linked to active labour market programmes, and how market failure can be avoided.

4. To what extent does a shift away from work-based forms of initial VET towards more school-based forms entail a weakening of the vocational curriculum and experience?

Another feature that emerged in some of the papers was a gradual shift away from work-based VET, for example through apprenticeship programmes, towards more school-based forms. In part this can be attributed to the growing shortage of training places for young people as firms and other organisations restructure their budgets in the face of growing competitive pressures. In part it is also due to the decision making of young people and their families who increasingly, it seems, place value on progression to Higher Education as the key outcome of their educational career. Such progression, especially to more elite universities is viewed as being more certain via the general rather than the vocational

education route. However, it seems to us, that such a shift could lead to the weakening of the vocational experience as learning becomes more divorced from workplaces and actual work activity. In addition, the increasing use of VET to provide further learning opportunities for those at risk of social exclusion could exacerbate this trend.

5. How do we integrate the different modalities of vocational learning – initial, continuing and occupational – to produce a genuine lifelong experience?

A number of papers raised the issue of how to produce a system that seamlessly links together different phases and modalities of VET provision. In part this is a technical problem: how to construct a coherent qualification system from, in many European countries, several unconnected systems serving different fractions of the population usually differentiated on the basis of age. However, it is also a moral question too. Adults are clearly in a position where they have the right to choose what sort of education and training provision they participate in. However, towards the younger members of the population, especially those still in compulsory education, society has an especial duty of care. This raises a potential source of conflict between qualification systems constructed for younger learners engaged in initial VET and those taking part in adult VET.

6. What are the pedagogical principles and practices that underpin the development of powerful vocational learning environments?

Finally, what really matters at the end of the day is the quality of the learning experiences we provide for learners engaged in VET provision. If qualification systems encourage teachers, for example, to train young people to pass tests rather than engaging them in deep and critical learning about the vocation they are interested in, then qualification reform may be counterproductive. However, while we are becoming clearer about the design principles that might underpin the development of powerful vocational learning environments, and the role of new digital technologies within those environments, much remains to be understood. This area seems likely to be a suitable one for exploration in a future volume of this journal.

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