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Retrieving and recontextualising VET theory

Bill Esmond, Thilo J. Ketschau, Johannes K. Schmees, Christian Steib & Volker Wedekind (Eds.)

BILL ESMOND & VOLKER WEDEKIND
(University of Derby, UK & University of Nottingham, UK)

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BILL ESMOND & VOLKER WEDEKIND
(University of Derby, UK & University of Nottingham, UK)

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Abstract

Whilst VET in German-speaking countries and its research base are well-known internationally, its theoretical foundations are not shared in countries where VET emerged later and has undergone more circuitous forms of theorisation. The significance of these different international understandings of the field is explored here through a comparative discussion of the theorisation of VET in English-speaking countries. A critical review of key contributions to this theorisation shows it to draw on a wide range of external disciplines, in a problematic relationship with both a contested liberal education tradition and with neoliberal policy; and within a fragmented field of knowledge production, where it competes with alternative claims to expertise that limit its contribution to the field of policy and practice. It is concluded that, whilst this problematising and problematic theorisation of VET in the Anglosphere has produced significant contributions, their effect on policy and practice has been delayed or distorted, and that significant investment in autonomous research capacity will be necessary for any meaningful renewal of VET.

***Keywords**: educational theory, knowledge production, Berufsbildungstheorie, comparative education, vocational curriculum*

1 Introduction: International perspectives on Berufsbildungstheorie

Longstanding international interest in the systems, policies and practices of vocational education and training (VET) in the German-speaking DACH countries (Germany, Austria and Switzerland) has until recently included little attention to the educational theories that have animated its origins, controversies and development. Its successes have instead been associated widely with patterns of economic activity or social policy (Clarke et al. 2021; Bosch 2017; Greinert 2005; Crouch et al. 1999). More recently, the central traditions of *Bildung* and *Didaktik* in German-speaking countries have attracted renewed international interest as a focus on educational aims that can provide an alternative to neoliberal instrumentalism, although these issues have mainly been raised in relation to general or higher education (Biesta 2002, 2011; Masschelein/Ricken 2003; Furlong/Whitty 2017; Taylor 2017; Hordern et al. 2021). Others have asked whether *Bildung* describes what takes place even in the more 'civic' spaces of vocational routes, and whether VET systems can promote access to labour markets whilst

improving welfare, rights, access to resources or democratic participation (e.g. Sanderse 2021; Tyson 2016; Zuurmond et al. 2023).

Complementary theoretical concepts, taken for granted in German-speaking countries if sometimes neglected in practice, are also little understood and indeed translated with difficulty into other languages, Vollmer (2022) noting the additional difficulties of an intermediary academic English *lingua franca*. The notion of *Beruf*, more closely related to VET, has been noted rather more frequently in the international literature, if less often than widespread interest in 'dual training' suggests that it should (Miller Idriss 2002; Clarke/Winch 2007; Hanf 2011; Maurer/Gonon 2014; Höhns 2018; Láscarez-Smith/Schmees 2021; Deissinger/Gonon 2021). A few contributions in English draw attention to moral dimensions largely ignored in some other VET systems (Lüdecke-Plümer 2007; Lempert 1994, 2008). Recent discussion in English of Kerschensteiner's work (Winch 2006; Gonon 2009) has now been supplemented by selected publication of work by Kerschensteiner, Spranger and Fischer (*Journal of Philosophy of Education* Special Issue 2022). Still less is known internationally of contemporary or later critique of these foundations (e.g., Siemsen 1948; Lempert 1971; Blankertz 1974).

As a comparator to this theoretical tradition, this paper examines the theorisation of VET in English-speaking/Anglophone countries. Given the slower emergence of VET as a distinctive pathway in most of these, and its obscured forms in the USA, early theoretical work failed to contribute to any recognised theory of VET. Only from the late 1970s can we speak of a sustained theorisation of VET, responding to theoretical developments but also to the emergence of neoliberal policies in these countries. These developments led VET research to draw on a range of external disciplines (Bates et al. 1999; Brown/Keep 1999), opening the possibility of richer perspectives but also raising questions about this work's impact on the fields of policy and practice. Against this background, we cannot talk of 'VET theory' as an object peculiar to that field of study, with its own concepts, boundaries and research methods but of 'theorising' the field from multiple perspectives. This approach has easily recognised echoes of the conceptualisation of educational studies in English-speaking countries as responsive to four 'foundational disciplines,' the philosophy, psychology, history and sociology of education (Biesta 2011; Lawn/Furlong 2009; McCulloch 2017). However, such a distinction between Germanophone educational aims and Anglophone external theorisation cannot be mapped geometrically onto the field of VET, not least because of the Anglosphere's especially narrow conceptions of vocational learning, nurtured by long laissez-faire, liberal and colonialist traditions (Green 1995; Winch 2000; Gamble 2021). This places the study of VET in English-speaking countries apart from the study of general education in a further sense than the lower status of occupations linked to VET (Billett 2020; Billett et al. 2022). These traditions on their own neither determine entirely the shape of research in each country, which spilt over such boundaries long before the profusion of post-foundational approaches, nor circumscribe the field of VET itself, which stretches, and often sprawls awkwardly, across various kinds of educational and occupational space. Yet the mobilisation of these distinctive theoretical approaches coincides with different results internationally, suggesting that research, policy and practice build in different ways on shared assumptions about the field even where these are not

acknowledged or understood. These traditions have influenced rather than determined events, with Kerschensteiner and Spranger's commitments to vocational schooling becoming associated with German dual training (Gonon 2009) whilst Dewey's (1916) careful consideration of the vocational failed to attenuate a deep liberal/vocational divide in Anglophone education.

A significant element of these distinctive pathways is a far more substantive separation of VET research from the resources of the state in English-speaking countries than in Germany or Switzerland, where knowledge of VET is connected by multiple strands to the educational mainstream and national institutions. Whilst the latter includes such substantial resources as Germany's Federal Institute for VET (BIBB) and Switzerland's Federal University of VET (SFUVET), research in the Anglosphere competes with marketised policy resources, including international organisations with their own research capabilities, datasets and extensive publications. These differences in the relative strength of resources producing knowledge about VET are often remarked, but not linked to theoretical developments. A little noted indicator is that founders of *Berufsbildungstheorie* and later critics are better known outside German-speaking countries in terms of their contributions to broader educational debate. Blankertz and Lempert, for example, have rarely been discussed in English literature as commentators or architects of VET (c.f. Lempert 1981) but are better known as noted critical theorists whose work on emancipation was central to education theory from the 1960s (Wulf 2003; Mollenhauer 2014; Moilanen/Huttunen 2022). Fischer and especially Spranger are correspondingly noted in the English-language literature less for their foundational approaches to VET than for their role in the *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädogogik* (Human Science Pedagogy) movement and the journal *Erziehung* (Tröhler 2003; Drewek 2004). Friesen (2020) observes that 'sustained English-language accounts of […] Human Science Pedagogy are all but non-existent' and that in Germany it is 'recognized only insofar as it is critiqued and rejected' (Friesen 2020, 307f.). However, this work nevertheless indicates that VET theory in Germany has been intimately connected from its earliest moments with the contemporary educational mainstream. By contrast, fewer contributors to the field of VET in English can claim as significant an impact on the wider study of education as on the field of VET, the work of Michael Young (e.g. Young 1971, 2006; Young/Whitty 1977; Young/Muller 2010) being an important exception.

We begin this discussion by defining the concept of the Anglosphere as an identifiable space with broadly related patterns of educational provision, and with contested traditions that have combined to constrain the development of theories of VET. We then examine two major periods of interest to international readers: firstly, the international reception of Dewey's writing during the period when Kerschensteiner and contemporaries were constructing the theoretical foundations of German VET; and secondly how the theorisation of VET emerged hesitatingly in these countries after the 1970s, in response to theoretical developments in educational and social science theory, and in a context of neoliberal reform. We then locate these developments within the pattern of knowledge production in English-speaking countries, including a fragmentation of institution-based activity and competition with the resources of international agencies. The discussion concludes by evaluating the contribution that this

approach to theorising VET has made to the field and by asking how future approaches might shape the field to support more socially just and sustainable education and working lives.

2 Foundations of Anglophone educational space

In this paper, we discuss approaches broadly shared across English-speaking countries, collectively described as the 'Anglosphere' located across North America, the UK, Australasia and South Africa. These are of course vastly different countries, with quite different education systems and bodies of research. Conversely, they share with others the key characteristic that VET teaches students rejected by general education, leading to over-representation of working-class youth, and guides them towards labour markets. However, this takes an especially stark form in the Anglosphere, for reasons that can be traced back to the origins of capitalist development in these countries.

The provision most recognisable to European readers is the various forms of 'further education' in UK countries, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. (In these countries, 'further education' does not describe post-secondary but what was formerly described as 'post-compulsory'.) As in continental Europe, provision ranges widely from basic literacy programmes to professional postgraduate studies, having emerged from an agglomeration of technical, professional and adult institutions that together covers most publicly funded activity outside schools and universities (Young 2006; AoC 2022). More recently, private and third-sector providers of training have been allocated increasingly important roles in these sectors, especially in England and Australia, where they not only compete with public providers for students but also play a central role in a marketisation of VET, noted especially in the UK, Australia and South Africa (Harris et al. 2006; Chankseliani/Relly 2015; Snelson/Deyes 2016; Akoojee/McGrath 2008).

The USA appears at first sight to be an outlier among these countries, lacking a distinct vocational pathway resembling those in Europe. Yet its vocational spaces replicate the degree of differentiation typical of the Anglosphere. Its community colleges, originating within higher education and designated as part of its 'mass' system (Trow 1974), include the highest proportions of minority ethnic and working-class students and occupy the lowest rungs of a hierarchical higher education system, leading to the poorest outcomes and to the skilled occupations which in Europe are outcomes of VET (Cohen/Brawer 2008; Dougherty 1994). Careers and Technical Education (CTE) provided in schools attracts higher numbers of black students (Gordon and Schultz 2020, especially 183ff.) and its history is enmeshed with post-emancipatory struggles and inequalities (Butchart 2010; Lewis 2014).

This pattern of secondary and tertiary provision in one sense defines the Anglosphere as a recognisable educational space. These are countries where high levels of school participation, often privately financed, long predated any serious recognition of the institutions of VET, which emerged later than in several European states (Beadie 2010; Argles 1964). However, the shape of this provision partly reflects historical understandings of learning and work, which Kuhlee et al. (2022) trace back to the eighteenth-century work of Scottish economist Adam Smith. Smith's (1776/2012) work captures changes wrought by the industrial revolution,

especially the changing mode of production, which continues to exercise influence in the UK and beyond:

> Ideas about 'the division of labour' and the corresponding narrowness of occupations, a scepticism about any theoretical element in training and a suspicion of the producers of labour as self-interested gatekeepers to the labour market all continue to loom large in current thinking about VET (Kuhlee et al. 2022, 384).

This historically diminished understanding of the way skills are embedded in broader occupations and identities also has a material basis. Smith's work reflected emerging patterns of world trade that exploited poorer societies, so that the Anglosphere is haunted by its mercantile, early industrialising and colonialist origins, which positioned education as a technology privileging wealthy elites and those on whom colonisers relied for support (Wedekind 2018; Gamble 2021). The industrial revolution in Britain, with its mechanised mass production, 'artisan discoveries' and colonial markets, required little education for the mass of working-class children but enabled a relatively privileged layer to access minimal levels of schooling. Authors located outside educational research (e.g., Crouch et al. 1999; Busemeyer/Trampusch 2012) distinguish the English-speaking countries as 'liberal market' political economies. Critically, in these countries the individual is expected to invest in skills as in other forms of welfare insurance, connecting VET to the specific version of welfare associated with these countries (Korpi 2000; Walther et al. 2006).

There are of course hazards in characterising such a diverse group of countries over such a long period as a cohesive whole. Whilst it is possible to characterise Anglophone VET as emerging more slowly than in continental Europe, such a characterisation risks oversimplification. In Anglophone countries, educational access, policy and practice have been bitterly contested, with significant advances in participation before a dizzying succession of marketisation and performative measures washed back over education, especially VET, from the 1980s onwards. This limits the value of any functionalist representation of educational and social space that has in reality been contested over extended periods, punctuated by social settlements that contending parties accept temporarily (Thelen/Steinmo 1992; Esmond 2019). For political economists, a key moment was establishment of distinctive patterns of social insurance, marking the foundation of modern welfare states on various national models (e.g. Thelen 2004; Martin/Swank 2011).

However, these accounts place these developments within a political economic perspective, in which the main actors are economic agents. They pay little attention to the place of educational theory, policy and practice in these developments. Yet educational theory, itself reflecting and justifying patterns of practice in different countries, also reflects the social and economic developments during which it emerged. The period in which VET systems began to assume distinct national characteristics coincides not only with the work of Kerschensteiner and Spranger but with the work of John Dewey in America. This work has been no less significant in the evolution of Anglophone education and its own way no less attentive to its vocational aspects, albeit with significantly different results.

3 Theorising the vocational: Dewey and after

The work of John Dewey in the United States has been influential in Anglophone education for over a hundred years and remains a touchstone in these countries for democratic approaches to educational practice (e.g., Ávila et al. 2021). His work to establish philosophy of education took its most extensive form in *Education and Democracy* (Dewey 1916) which he described as an attempt to establish principles for education in an industrialised, democratic society. Dewey (1916) drew attention to the possibilities of learning through vocational practices, much as he had earlier in the same book expounded the potential of children learning through play. In a chapter from which the first major English-language journal of VET took its name, 'The Vocational Aspect of Education,' Dewey also cautioned against the narrow vocationalism then emerging in several countries, in some of the best-known statements of philosophy of education in English-speaking countries:

> Any scheme for vocational education which takes its point of departure from the industrial regime that now exists, is likely to assume and to perpetuate its divisions and weaknesses. […] To split the system, and give to others, less fortunately situated, an education conceived mainly as specific trade preparation, is to treat the schools as an agency for transferring the older division of labor and leisure, culture and service, mind and body, directed and directive class, into a society nominally democratic. Such a vocational education inevitably discounts the scientific and historic human connections of the materials and processes dealt with. To include such things in narrow trade education would be to waste time; concern for them would not be 'practical.' They are reserved for those who have leisure at command (Dewey 1916, 372).

This critique draws attention to the practice of rejecting working-class young people into low-status pathways in which they are denied access to wider aspects of culture. Located within the book's broader statement of education's place in a democratic society, it can be seen as a corollary to his earlier statements about the value of vocational practice in education. An unequal society, in which VET is a feature of social stratification, inevitably results in the kind of narrow vocational curricula discussed below in relation to Anglophone countries.

This work, however, does not amount to a wholesale rejection of study oriented to occupations, especially at later stages. In a world where most young people even in industrialised countries left school before secondary education, this was especially a warning against early selection onto vocational tracks. It also provides important arguments for the inclusion of societal and cultural context in later technical and professional studies, although these became a feature of European VET rather than of Anglophone vocationalism, which tends to reduce learning to the acquisition of narrow work skills, as illustrated by its traditions of competence assessment (Winch 2000; Esmond 2020).

The impact of this work in different countries serves to indicate the way patterns of VET were becoming established. Dewey's work was known in Germany, where it was followed by Kerschensteiner and Spranger as part of a keen mutual observation between American and German educationalists (Winch 2006; Drewek 2004). Yet key German theorists appear to have

been hostile to Dewey's work. Tröhler (2003) in his critique of the role of the *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* movement in contemporary nationalism cites two letters from Spranger to Kerschensteiner deprecating Dewey's work:

> …. which he reduced to education that was merely economic and technical. He assessed this as vastly inferior to the 'latitude (breadth) of German education'. For Spranger, Dewey's work represented – in stark contrast to the higher ends woven into the German mind – a despicable kitchen and handyman utilitarianism (Tröhler 2003, 765, citing letters from Spranger to Kerschensteiner 14.3.15 and 22.3.15).

These exchanges can be seen as part of the wider hostility of this group to Dewey's pragmatist philosophy. However, they also serve as reminders of the purely educational interest of Kerschensteiner and Spranger in vocational matters, and perhaps of the way these positions have been adopted in unexpected ways when translated into the field of practice.

Correspondingly, Dewey's interest in the vocational was initially somewhat neglected in the Anglosphere's emerging vocational routes. His work was co-opted more eagerly into the foundations of liberal education, where commentators and educators sharing Dewey's commitment to democratic educational aims were attracted by his analysis of the potential for a vocationalism imitative of work practice to reproduce societal inequality (e.g. Carr/Hartnett 64ff.). In England, this approach was also represented by R.H. Tawney and others engaged in adult education, which directly opposed contemporary vocationalism to equality of educational access (Tawney 1931; Rogan 2018).

The emerging vocational pathways in these countries, which might have developed this work to examine how and whether technical and vocational pathways might better support democratic participation in society, produced a more hesitant and certainly under-theorised literature. The UK's rather haphazard 'further education' provided an early literature of occasional monographs and handbooks concerned with 'technical education' and its institutions, offering normative accounts of practice with occasional reference to the social sciences (e.g., Richardson 1939; Cotgrove 1958; E. Venables 1967). The most substantial of these, P.F.R. Venables's *Technical Education* (P.F.R. Venables 1955), found no place for Dewey in its name index but in its conclusions recalled further education pioneer T.H. Huxley's 1887 essay on technical education:

> The object we have in view is the development of the industrial productivity of the country to the uttermost limits consistent with social welfare (Huxley 1887, cited in Venables 1955, 570).

This focus on industrial productivity with less attention to educational aspects characterised a further education system largely catering for part-time study by young people who had left school without any qualifications (then most of the cohort). This position in the field of practice was largely reflected in the field of associated knowledge production. In contrast to the emergence of German departments providing VET teacher training and the origins of *Berufs- und*

Wirtschaftspädogogik, the first four teacher university centres in the UK for its further education teachers were established only in the late 1940s. The journal they founded in 1948, *The Vocational Aspect of Education* at first discussed contemporary policy and practice largely independently of theoretical considerations. Its papers made occasional use of survey data, psychology-based experiments (e.g. Richardson/Kelly 1972) or historical studies, often of a heroic type (e.g. Foden 1962). This literature reflected the fragmented, rather prosaic field of study, i.e. of vocational education itself, during a period of slow but unremarkable growth.

In the United States, a more theorised academic literature began to develop after the second world war around the junior (later, community) college, an institution founded to provide late entry into the country's 4-year bachelor courses at state universities and colleges. In the heyday of functionalism, and influenced heavily by institutional theory, Burton Clark (1960) undertook a major study of a junior college and its 'social function' of persuading most students to transfer not to bachelor courses at other institutions but to so-called 'terminal' courses from which they would leave with a vocational Associate degree. What Clark described as 'cooling out', borrowing a term from Goffmann, persuaded students into routes to skilled manual occupations. Brint/Karabel's (1989) study provided a broader and more critical examination of the way these institutions limited the prospects of their minority, female and working-class students in the interests of local businesses and labour markets. However, these studies addressed the role of two-year colleges within higher education, launching Clark's role as a founder of the field of higher education internationally, which now has its own extensive literature and scholarly community in the United States. Studies of other forms of vocational education, as in schools, or of learning at work outside the professions, have remained less developed, as vocational learning takes place in a more concealed form, within the educational mainstream. Theoretical developments in countries where VET is unrecognised as a distinct educational space (as in the USA) or is scarcely recognised as a distinctive field of study (as in France) at first contributed little directly to the theorisation of vocational studies in other countries.

In post-war developing countries colonial understandings of VET, linked to missionary schools as part of a broader 'civilising mission' or as a form Victorian workhouse for the poor, indigent, disabled or those requiring rehabilitation (Badroodien 2001) was replaced by a policy commitment to VET driven by the insights of human capital theory (HCT) (Brown/Lauder/Cheung 2020; McGrath/Badroodien 2006). While the fallacy of this faith in HCT was quickly exposed by researchers (Foster 1965), the power of Bretton Woods institutions in driving the policy agenda ensured that HCT remained the dominant frame throughout most of the twentieth century (McGrath et al. 2021).

By the time post-war economic growth and welfare expansion arrived at their first international crisis in 1974/75, a ferment in social science had coincided with an intensification of contestation over education. Whilst the expansion of education for all into the secondary phase had been largely accepted across industrial countries during post-war economic expansion, disillusion with the outcomes of education growth on left and right had led to demands for reform and retrenchment. Even before the education and training reforms of the Reagan and Thatcher

governments during the 1980s (and foreshadowed in the UK by Labour Prime Minister Callaghan's call for education more accountable to economic imperatives) more critical approaches to vocational education had begun to emerge in the Anglosphere. These did not respond directly to the outcomes of neoliberal policy but to the way social relations had long been ingrained by educational practice.

4 Theorising VET from the 1980s: Reproduction, control and curriculum

Early critical writing on VET in the Anglosphere reflected an international upheaval in educational thought, which sought to explain how educational expansion had not led to greater social equality. Influential education texts during the 1970s drew international attention to education's role in legitimising the reproduction of different social classes (Bowles/Gintis 1976; Bourdieu/Passeron 1977). Much of this theorisation originated outside the Anglosphere, including newly translated work by Gramsci, Althusser and Freire. Bowles/Gintis's *Schooling in Capitalist America* found in American schooling a 'correspondence' between the social practices of schooling and the social relations of production. Bourdieu's *Reproduction* likewise addresses the way school arbitrarily rewards advantaged groups. Technical education is referenced here only in passing, as a site of (self-)exclusion where working-class youth 'enter those branches […] from which there is least chance of entering the next level of education' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 153). This action, as in Greek tragedy, takes place off-stage, although Bourdieu's *Centre de Sociologie Européene* also produced Grignon's (1971) account of technicism in schools (see also Dickinson/Erben 1982). More importantly, these accounts of the relationship between school practices and the stratification of society nevertheless provided sufficient theoretical foundations for the emergence of a critical literature of VET. Whilst it is of course impossible to do more than provide illustrative examples this section provides an overview of critical points in this theorisation.

Early work theorising VET in the Anglosphere directly addressed the way educational practices reproduced the social relations of the workplace. Gleeson/Mardle's (1980) study, written when UK policy discourse demanded 'synchronisation' of education and training with 'manpower' requirements, challenged this human capital account as the justification of existing practices. This landmark study illustrated the central role of socialisation, sustaining 'the affectual skills which underpin the social relations of production' (Gleeson/Mardle 1980, 5). As Avis (1980) summarised this position, 'social relations determine and shape technical relations [but] are not reducible to social relations from which they arise' (Avis 1980, 148). Gleeson/Mardle (1980) drew on contemporary concerns with autonomy and ideology (Althusser 1971; Gorz 1977) to argue that the apparent freedoms of further education enabled young people to enter the production process imagining this had been done voluntarily, 'albeit in a complex and mystificatory form, the *raison d'être* of apprenticeship training' (Gleeson/Mardle 1980, 125). Indeed, this focus on schooling, articulated in policy as a concern for education to prepare the future workforce, was theorised as a preferred site for anticipatory socialisation as late as the end of

the century, Bates et al. (1999) pointing out the advantages of this taking place outside the family or the workplace, compared to:

> […] the status of education and training as legitimate sites for state intervention in vocational preparation […] activity in the workplace, another crucial site for identity formation and arguably the dominant institutional location of economic development, is also a difficult arena for direct political intervention. […] Education and training in contrast, are uniquely open to regulation of their activities. (Bates et al. 1999, 421)

According to such analyses, VET is not constituted by a meaningful engagement between educational and production spaces but by the reframing of institutional practice as the space through which capitalism is able to secure a compliant workforce. As Gamble (2016) argues, education has relations with the world of work but 'its intrinsic worth and its claim to autonomy are both directly related to its specialised function as a transmitter of conceptual knowledge' (Gamble 2016, p.217).

Yet by the 1980s, the terrain of education and training was changing decisively. In the absence of genuine labour market opportunities, the part-time education of apprentices became overshadowed by state provision of training for the young employed. These developments, international in their origins, rationale and scope, were located at the heart of wider public policy transformations associated with globalisation (Avis et al. 1996). In the USA local programmes seldom involved authentic training and sometimes failed to materialise altogether (Lafer 2002). In the period since then, in the United States, where community colleges and CTE are located within general/higher education, opposition to vocational forms has remained consistent, especially among critical educators (Lakes 1994; Kincheloe 1995; Giroux/Giroux 2004). In the UK, national initiatives culminating in the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) provided training that at best offered tenuous employment prospects. The process helped to transform colleges from institutions mainly supporting the transitions of working-class youth into skilled occupations, to large-scale providers of 'pre-vocational' and genericised programmes, for young people who had been unable to find work (Yeomans 1998; Simmons 2010). These changes within further education colleges were complemented by vocational routes within schools. This pattern was also followed during the reform of the vocational system in South Africa (Young 2006).

This move towards more open-ended vocational aims, was expressed by Chitty (1991) as a shift from preparing young people for specific jobs to preparing them for work (or future work) in general. This process was central to the rise of neoliberalism in Anglophone countries, including the shift of resources from the welfare state to support market rationality and personal responsibility. In industry (and, where applicable, at national levels) a systematic dismantling of collective training arrangements accompanied the end of agreements with workers' organisations that had covered multiple aspects of working lives and their rewards (Gospel/Edwards 2011). In the public sector, including educational spaces, the performative measurement central to 'New Public Management' diminished not only the educational but the employment aspects

of professional practice (Shain/Gleeson 1999). This gap has widened still further as economic growth has become the prime motive of international education policies (OECD 1997; Biesta 2021).

These policy discourses are not simply concerned with the workplace but with the recasting of institution-based VET and of a vocationalised schooling on neoliberal lines. Phases and educational pathways across the Anglosphere, including those far from VET, were now subjected to economistic requirements, with ideological accompaniments determined by competing traditions in each country (Apple 2006). Critical accounts identified the changing social relations of work wrought by technology, globalisation and the weakening of worker organisation in all these changes, although VET had become less concerned with reproducing the workforce than with the forms of social differentiation appropriate to an age of high youth unemployment. Moore (1987) argued that a more ideological process was taking place through the curriculum that supported these changes:

> ... a particular ideological representation of 'the needs of industry' is translated into a curriculum form and an associated teaching practice. This process is achieved through of a number of interconnected devices which were originally developed in North America and further extended to the UK situation (Moore 1987, 230).

The transformation of skills into competences and learning objectives displayed as profiles of the ideal worker 'has little to do with the actual *reality* of "the world of work"' (Moore 1987, 231) and provided 'not so much the model worker required by British industry but the model citizen of Thatcherite Britain' (232). The generic curriculum that emerged during this period marked a shift in the purposes of post-16 education to a relatively passive acceptance of mass unemployment during a churn of poorly rewarded, increasingly service-based jobs: if the economic structures of capitalism had been thrown into crisis, the need for social differentiation and control remained. Freedom from the constraints of preparation for specific occupations, permitted a degree of progressive practice, which was characterised in the UK as a 'new vocationalism' (Bates et al. 1984). The generic curriculum and associated progressive teaching methods provided the chief differences from the subject-based curriculum studied by middle-class young people in schools, on general education pathways.

This curricular differentiation began to attract attention as the most important feature of VET. Educational research in general frequently defined itself during this period in opposition to a diminution of educational aims associated with vocationalism, regarding the existence of distinctive VET pathways as problematic and supporting arguments for their integration with general education pathways (Pring 1993; Finegold et al. 1991). Through the 1980s and 1990s, first in the UK and then Australia and more recently South Africa, VET curricula were increasingly reduced to the acquisition of 'competences' identified in extensive lists of learning outcomes and criteria. This concept began in the sphere of Human Resources Development (Horton 2000) but from the 1980s became central to the emerging 'work-based' National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in England and the Competency-Based Training (CBT)

reforms in Australia (Jessup 1991; Hodge 2016). In this approach, assessment of visible performance is favoured over any questions of knowledge or disciplinary understanding; later this approach was assembled into national qualifications frameworks (Allais 2014). As it came to dominate VET across the Anglosphere, research was drawn further into questions posed by the sociology of education which centred on the way curricula limit the life chances of young people. Bernstein's (1976, 1990, 2000) writings on curriculum had focused mainly on general education but now provided important theoretical concepts to understand the limitations of the vocational curriculum. Young, earlier known for a 'new sociology of education' critiquing the social construction of school knowledge (Young 1971; Young/Whitty 1977), now became attentive to the significance of subject-based curricula, designated as 'powerful knowledge' (Young/Muller 2010). Wheelahan (2007) combined Bernstein's concepts, used to explain how knowledge drawn from academic disciplines was not recognised in CBT, with the insight from critical realism that reductive alignment of competences with interchangeable outcomes 'ignores the complexity that is needed to create capacity' (2007, p 648f.). Allais and Shalem (2021) see this attention to the curriculum as part of a process where sociology of education in general became detached from policy, as the 'political arithmetic' tradition of Halsey and colleagues gave way to interest in the curriculum and the institution-based processes analysed by Bernstein. These insights not only inform research into the way vocational and working-class students are excluded from educational progression (e.g. Tranter 2011) but also the way that linking qualifications directly to work practices diminishes educational practices closer to the sphere of production.

In concluding this necessarily inadequate yet overlong sketch, it is necessary to say a little about how learning at work has been theorised in the Anglosphere, in settings where narrow notions of competence frame this far more narrowly than the concept of *Beruf* and more holistic understandings of *Kompetenz* or *Gestaltungskompetenz* (Rauner et al 2012). The theorisation of VET in the 1980s also built on understandings from the sociology of work (e.g. Liepmann 1960; Braverman 1974), with Gleeson/Mardle (1980) reporting that 'craft' work was being deskilled whilst an elite of 'technical' apprentices provided new evidence of social differentiation within VET. Other important accounts in this period suggest that possibilities for learning are inherent in work practice (e.g. Billett 2001; Eraut 2004; Fuller et al. 2005; Guile/Unwin 2022) without accepting policy assumptions that place the labour market at the heart of the neoliberal education project. These tend to place the autonomous learner at the periphery of practice rather than providing accounts of facilitated educational practice (e.g. Tanggaard 2005; Esmond 2020a, 2020b).

Whilst this sketch cannot do justice even to the main strands of theorisation emerging during the 1980s and 1990s, its further evolution during the 21st century has entailed an ever more complex theorisation of VET, as postmodernist, poststructuralist and Bourdieusian concerns with specific sites or groups sometimes draw attention to micro- or meso-level factors that emphasise interactionist perspectives rather than aggregated outcomes of structural inequality. This is of course a pattern across the social sciences internationally, echoed in a body of VET research that drew strongly on these disciplines, especially sociology. The few major UK VET

studies, such as those funded by the Teaching and Learning Research Project drew on interactionist perspectives and mid-level theory to provide cultural explanations of further education's difficulties (e.g., James/Biesta 2007). Yet all these approaches have been slow to achieve change in the policy space, although the newfound interest of policymakers in knowledge-based curricula can partly be credited to work discussed above. There is a powerful sense of the expectations of this period remaining unmet, just as Allais and Shalem (2021) speak of sociology of education 'losing explanatory and political power' (2021, 197) during this period, retreating into silo-based approaches. These difficulties, however, not only reflect a diversification, or fragmentation, of theorisation but the diverse institutional settings producing that research, discussed in the following section.

5 Theorising VET: the knowledge production space and its outputs

The critical theorisation of VET discussed here, whilst drawing on wider approaches to social science, emerged mainly from within university education departments in which the theorisation, research and development of VET were very much specialist concerns. By the end of the 20th century, VET researchers had become aware that the absence of a strong field of knowledge production entailed 'operating at the margins … of their own subject disciplines […] inhibiting the development of large, well-integrated research communities' (Brown/Keep 1999, 12). For Bates et al. (1999), VET research found itself 'adrift' of general educational research, leading to an 'outsider status':

> … with respect to mainstream traditions in educational research [… which ...] stem […] from the historically-based equation of education with schooling, and the associated teacher training function of university education department (Bates et al. 1999, 419).

For Bates et al. (1999) these foundations included 'disciplines relatively underutilised in educational research, such as economics, political science, social policy, labour market studies, and social history' (Bates et al. 1999, 420). These were comparable to the diversity of settings in the field: sixth form and further education colleges; youth training schemes (now transformed into apprenticeships) and other forms of workplace learning; overlaps with schooling and higher education; curricula and levels of study subdividing and stratifying as they overlap and merge with occupational structures. To these difficulties, we can add the diversity of institutional interest, as VET became more than ever a concern of other university departments. Brown/Keep (1999) identified 18 academic disciplines from which VET studies had been commissioned, giving the example from their own University of Warwick of 12 departments active in this field, as well as a linguistics study commissioned by the Employment Department on the 'meaning' of training.

The relationship between diverse theorisation and the weakness of the knowledge production field has been discussed extensively in relation to education departments in general, with the distinction between Anglophone and German experiences widely noted. This discussion is summarised briefly here before returning to the greater differences in the field of VET. As the

Colleges of Higher Education that provided most teacher training moved into or became universities (Shattock 2013, 31-43) their disciplinary foundations initially echoed Richard Peters and Paul Hirst's rationale for the 'degree worthiness' of teachers in the application of external disciplines: philosophy, history, sociology and psychology of education, discussed in collections edited by Tibble (1966) and later Hirst (1983). Furlong/Whitty (2017) distinguish the emergence of UK education departments from their earlier foundation in Germany, modelled on philosophy faculties and consolidating education as a coherent, autonomous discipline whose concerns were 'primarily philosophical and ultimately moral' (Furlong/Whitty 2017, 13). Furlong/Whitty (2017) find echoes of this approach in Australia, much of the USA, France and even China (Furlong/Whitty 2017, 21ff) and the same pattern is true for English-medium universities in South Africa (although there was a strong influence of the German tradition in Afrikaans-medium universities, though largely focused on schooling [Enslin 1984]). Carr (2006) attributes their emergence to the dominance in US and UK academia of logical positivism in the mid-20th century, leading education departments to seek legitimacy through new constructions of educational theory, 'abandoning [education's] concern with philosophical theories and reconstructing itself as an applied science' (Carr 2006, 140). Whilst Carr had earlier argued that educational practice itself should provide the rationale for teachers' actions and curricula (Carr/Kemmis 1986; Long 2008), in postmodernist and poststructuralist times, the possibilities of any kind of educational theory have been more directly challenged (e.g., Stronach/MacLure 1997). Yet the notion of foundational disciplines retains some currency, with Hordern et al. (2021) arguing that these disciplines (adding Young's curriculum theory) and *Bildung*-centred Didaktik can both be opposed to imperatives of contemporary policy as 'methodologies answerable to an idea of educational practice as normative and purposeful' (Hordern et al. 2021, 143).

These tensions between education departments in the UK and the foundations of educational knowledge can be multiplied in relation to VET. Here the first VET teacher-training institutions in the UK, discussed above, emerged only post-war, initially outside the universities, with much teacher-training still taking place on short courses within colleges. The Post 16 Education Centre at the Institute of Education, University of London, established only in 1986 with funding from the Manpower Services Commission Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) funding (Young/Hordern 2022). Consolidating and maintaining this base has entailed struggle with competing claims to expertise. Bates et al. (1999) argue that positioning research as the social practice of university education departments misrepresents the diversity of research in the field of VET, characterising the field as an 'archipelago' of related interests that should be better connected through research communities. This position presents opportunities, Tanguy/Rainbird (1997) identifying a wide range of research sites in Britain that contributed to understandings of education's relationship to work, including Industrial Relations departments and their journals, the field of Youth Studies, associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and finally journals that have brought together sociological and economic perspectives, such as the *Journal of Education and Work*, and the British Sociological Association's journal *Work, Employment and Society*. More recently, Clarke et al. (2020) observe the increasing dominance of comparative studies that address 'firms, labour

market, governance, skills development, qualifications and the VET system itself' (Clarke et al. 2020, 296). Within this, the most widely noted accounts are those of economists and political scientists, attentive to the distinctive approaches to social and economic policy in so-called 'liberal market' and 'co-ordinated market' economies, identifying VET as a pivotal area of distinction (e.g. Martin 2017; Busemeyer/Trampusch 2012; Iversen/Soskice 2020). Yet these studies, attracting wide attention internationally, remain largely aloof from educational questions. Nor is their lack of attention to educational questions to be taken lightly, since its neglect is central to the development of neoliberal policy and its ventures into the knowledge production space. These have affected multiple sites, including the industrial relations departments cited by Tanguy/Rainbird (1997), weakened along with the sociology of work itself in favour of the proliferation of 'organisation studies' (Adler 2009). However, their role in relation to VET has been especially significant. In developing countries of the Anglosphere with their focus on expanding schooling systems there was even less focus on VET in university education departments. In South Africa, knowledge production about VET until the early 2000s was the purview of a state funded research unit of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and a number of independent researchers and consultants funded by various local and international development agencies. Consequently, this work had a strong policy orientation and limited theoretical focus. (Powell 2013).

The sphere of knowledge production has come under the same pressures in recent years as those that have driven VET systems to strengthen those aspects that guide young people into labour markets, with relatively little consideration of broader educational aims. This approach, framed in the policy sphere as the necessary means of securing the competitiveness of nations and individual prosperity, draws exclusively on the premise of human capital theory, that an increase in education and skills will generate increased investment in advanced technologies that utilise such skills, leading to economic growth (Becker 1993; Brown et al. 2020). This policy direction has been widely associated with the onset of neoliberalism from the Reagan/Thatcher years onwards and consequently with the Anglophone countries where these policies were first established. These countries were also first to develop the qualifications frameworks, learning outcomes and competency-based assessments that later came not only to shape work-based qualifications but to dominate educational practice within VET (Brockmann et al. 2008) in these countries.

These concepts are also promoted by what Thompson et al. (2022) describe as an international 'policy-making assemblage' comprising the mechanisms of the OECD, World Bank and other international organisations. This body of thought, ordering 'what is seen, acted on, and thought about ... and what counts as solutions to social issues' (Popkewitz et al. 2018, 108) is perhaps the dominant contribution of the Anglophone liberal political economy to ideas about education around the world. These extend effortlessly into VET through its influential collections of reports, commentaries and policy declarations on VET and post-secondary VET, notwithstanding the way these reports are coloured by the acknowledgement of the strengths of dual training, which is appropriated to neoliberal ends (e.g., OECD 2010, 2014). Above all, they are sustained

by the networks of researchers, databases, centres, foundations and funding streams that allow this assemblage to direct the production of knowledge about VET.

Nor are the European Union (EU) and its 'soft policy' activities immune from these ideas. The EU and other European agencies, notably Cedefop, demonstrate some ambiguities in these areas. On the one hand, they acknowledge the existing strengths of European VET, including those of 'dual training', advocating the adoption of comparable practices elsewhere. However, the tools of qualification frameworks, learning outcomes and transferability, originating in the Anglosphere, have also found support in these areas and have been described as part of 'Europeanisation' (Ante 2015) albeit on the eve of the UK's exit from the EU. However, given the largely instrumental concerns of international agencies, this is unlikely to result in a strengthening of the theorisation of VET. In English-speaking countries, international agencies and national policymakers alike increasingly draw on research resources that provide technical responses to what are in reality educational and societal problems, leading to a further weakening of institution-based research and the development of theory.

The increasing dominance of the research outcomes of these bodies suggests that the theorisation of VET has certainly contributed to the volume and the quality of research in the Anglosphere but that this is becoming increasingly cut off from the field of policy and practice. For example, despite the elevation of VET, professional routes and 'technical education' in the policy discourse of these countries, this has resulted neither in any new insights from the 'policy assemblage' nor in major investments in academic research. Within the UK, for example, the recent research assessment exercise (REF2021 2022) pointed to an absolute fall in external research income across all Education submissions over the previous seven years, and the fall in VET research is likely to be higher. This report emerged in the middle of a pandemic, during a period of economic crisis and on the eve of European war. These crises attracted little decisive, enabling action in the field of education internationally, with most agencies suggesting technology-driven solutions to the educational and social problems engendered by these developments (Avis et al. 2021). In the financialised economies of the 21st century, where rentier incomes for the wealthy have been replaced by greater inequalities of earned income, new inequalities are emerging within VET, at the very moment when policymakers identify new opportunities for these institutions (Piketty 2020; Esmond/Atkins 2020, 2022). In a period of growing world inequalities and environmental emergency, commitments to development through education and a 'greenwashing' of VET suggest little understanding of the broader possibilities for a VET that responds to these crises.

6 Conclusions or new beginnings?

The starting point of this discussion was the significance of theory for international understandings of VET. Since the direction of VET research, policy and practice in German-speaking countries is suggested by this special issue to have been shaped in some ways by its theoretical foundations, we sought to understand whether such a relationship exists internationally. Specifically, we sought to understand better the differences between approaches to research in

German-speaking countries, which at least initially had some basis in educational theory, and the more haphazard emergence of theorised education understandings in Anglophone countries; and how this may have shaped the continuing difference between their systems of VET.

In the process we have shown that work to explain the educational and social aspects of VET has no less significance than those forms of theorisation that are firmly located within the educational sphere. Drawing on a wide range of external understandings that go beyond those acknowledged by liberal traditions of general education, research in English-speaking countries has provided important alternatives to the formulae of neoliberal policy. Engagement with external disciplines has enabled it to link educational issues to societal processes and inequalities. Inevitably, this work lacks the direct influence on policy and practice that Germany and some neighbouring countries can claim. Yet, in articulating the links between educational practice and broader social processes, Anglophone research also points to possibilities for more profound changes, even if these are not always articulated. Its downfall is rather the fractured field of knowledge production, where it competes with resources that sustain that body of policy through a its own research apparatus, which increasingly drowns out the insights of theorised academic research. Consequently, the impact of theoretical work has at the best been distorted or delayed.

This position is by no means hopeless for the future of vocational education or indeed for those social spaces in which its ideas and practices exercise any degree of influence. As was shown in relation to the outcomes of earlier theorists, events in the field of educational practice, in policy and in the social world have the capacity to shape the way theorisation plays out in the longer term, so that VET's theoretical foundations have been less acknowledged in contemporary practice. Nevertheless, significant investment in autonomous research capacity will be important for any meaningful renewal of VET, which will entail attention to broader questions of economy, society, policy and philosophy, as well as specific educational and indeed practical occupational questions. Ideas about 'powerful knowledge' and knowledge-based curricula have been taken up by policymakers in a distorted way; this and the creation of new higher-level vocational routes currently serve to produce new inequalities within VET settings. Yet in time these can open up space for new studies, concepts and theories that can illuminate the future of VET.

Our analysis has looked back to early developments, yet it also raises questions for the future. How might VET research and VET itself, despite often unpromising beginnings, become instruments for greater social justice or more sustainable societies? These possibilities can draw on classical and critical voices from several European countries, and in addition from those that are new emerging around VET in the global South. VET practices in the Anglosphere are notoriously located in the moment, responding to economic crises and sudden policy turns. If deeper consideration of theory can enable not only historical perspective but clearer understanding of the future, the study of these theoretical approaches will be worthwhile.

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The Authors

Professor BILL ESMOND

University of Derby, Institute of Education

Kedleston Road, Derby DE22 1GB, UK

w.esmond@derby.ac.uk

https://www.derby.ac.uk/staff/bill-esmond/

Professor VOLKER WEDEKIND

University of Nottingham, School of Education

Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, Nottingham NG8 1BB, UK

Volker.Wedekind@nottingham.ac.uk

https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/education/people/volker.wedekind