
Introduction

Matthias Pilz

The origins of this book lie in an international conference held in autumn 2010 to mark the foundation of the German Research Centre for Comparative Vocational Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) at the University of Cologne. The title of the conference was similar to the title of this book: ‘The Future of VET in a Changing World’.

The Significance of the Title

The examples cited below demonstrate the topicality of, and need for, research into comparative vocational education and training in today’s world. If, for example, we consider the question of parity of esteem between general education and VET, it is clear that in many countries, vocational education is regarded as being of secondary importance or even as inferior. And this is the perception not only of employers, but also of students and their families and of the teaching staff in vocational institutions and higher-level educational establishments.

Taking an international perspective highlights the fact that different countries often have found very different ways of assessing and tackling these problems. In some countries, the problem of parity of esteem is not perceived as particularly pressing because there is lower demand for skilled and qualified employees or because the need for training is met through other, more academic, programmes. Other countries, including some English-speaking countries, face a shortage of skilled workers with intermediate levels of qualification and increasing ‘academic drift’. By contrast, German-speaking countries are internationally renowned for their well-

Matthias Pilz ✉

German Research Center for Comparative Vocational Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.),
University of Cologne, Venloer Str. 151–153, 50672 Cologne, Germany

educated skilled workforce but have for decades faced problems in enabling those with occupational qualification to progress within the traditional academic educational system.

All these examples demonstrate that, in an international context, it is impossible to gain a full understanding of a problem and its consequences and to start to formulate generally applicable remedies without critical reflection. Avoiding ethnocentrism is important but also perhaps the most serious challenge in moving forward.

This leads on to a second aspect. Research into international comparative vocational education and training not only provides a much better and deeper understanding of other education systems but can also make an often substantial contribution to mutual learning. Take, for example, the debate on modularisation in VET. The discussion in the German-speaking countries could have produced initial results much earlier if the parties involved had taken on board the substantial experience accumulated by the English-speaking countries. Instead, the discussions were criticised for polarisation, producing a stalemate that means we in the German-speaking world are now some ten years behind.

Yet there is also evidence of learning from others. Current efforts to develop national qualification frameworks clearly reflect the long-term experience of other countries. At the same time, however, it is important to emphasise the need for close scrutiny of other education systems so as to avoid a situation in which country-specific experiences are transferred wholesale and inappropriately. Many of you are personally involved in, or at least familiar with, the problems of implementing a national qualifications framework. To take just one example, classifying vocational education programmes in such a framework can often produce a lack of clarity in the definition of reference levels, and the practical benefits are not always commensurate with both the effort and the cost expended.

Moreover, country-specific data can be misinterpreted and wrong conclusions drawn. For example, for many years, the OECD's *Education at a Glance* series has deplored the low number of university graduates in German-speaking countries. Accordingly, every year the recommendation is made to increase graduate numbers by means of targeted educational policy initiatives. And every year, the Minister for Education and other education experts in the countries concerned respond by emphasising the importance of the 'dual' apprenticeship system and the high quality of the training and knowledge it provides.

In summary, then, there are compelling reasons for a comprehensive understanding and interpretation of country-specific characteristics before conclusions are drawn or proposals for reform are formulated. In this context, it is important

also to stress the need to generate international studies involving large-scale assessments in the field of vocational education and training, since there is still a shortage of empirical evidence that the competence level of students with qualifications from the 'dual' system is equivalent to that of students having obtained academic qualifications in many countries.

Another important aspect to be taken into consideration is the active contribution such studies may make to the development of vocational education processes. India, for example, faces a growth in its population of some five million over the next five years, which will produce over a million untrained and under-educated people and a shortfall of real talent. At the same time, the numbers of young Indians trying to secure places at the country's most prestigious universities are increasing. The mismatch between growing demand and the increase in university places means that many young people miss out on an opportunity to go to university. Vocational education and training may be the solution for them.

On the one hand, availability of VET can give young people basic professional qualifications; on the other, it also offers high-level vocational career paths to those who have high potential but have not studied at university. The contributions made by VET are also confirmed by the Indian government, which stresses three main aspects. First of all, VET offers broad prospects to young people; second, VET will provide India with the skilled labour force it needs to fulfil its economic ambitions; and finally, VET can also help to combat rural depopulation.

China, Japan and some western countries, by contrast, represent radically different challenges, in particular the ageing of their societies. In China, for example, the most pressing issue is how VET should be organised to ensure that even if the total number of young people declines, the proportion of students meeting medium-level vocational qualifications standards will increase. In Japan and the western societies, meanwhile, issues facing the VET system include the need for lifelong learning and the need to integrate disadvantaged young people into the education system.

In conclusion, international and comparative approaches to VET will be fruitful only if there is a comprehensive and deep understanding of other countries and their cultures. The prominent educationalist Georg Bereday articulated this 50 years ago when he wrote, 'A long stay in the country to be researched is important. There is no better method to sharpen the view than simply to live among the local people. Someone who can come across a culture in close contact, in thousand daily situations, can gain the feeling for the characteristics of their lives, which can never be learned from merely reading books. This understanding is not only important itself, but also it is a key to choosing the right research method when it comes to analysing the school system. Normally, as a part of the training for all the researchers in comparative education science, one should stay at least one year in a foreign country.'

Structure of the Book

This book brings together a wide spectrum of approaches and methodologies relevant to international comparative vocational education and training. Country case-studies, pure research, approaches to comparison and policy papers demonstrate the sheer diversity of VET systems across the world. Yet this diversity has a distinct origin. It is clear that, compared to general education – which is generally well structured – VET encompasses diverse institutions, actors, vocational education programmes, forms of learning and certification and qualifications. This can be attributed to two factors. First, different countries have differing traditions of vocational education, which may for example be school-based or labour market-oriented. Second, the very mission itself of VET differs from country to country. For example, it may take the form of vocational basic education or vocational orientation or it may span the spectrum from broad vocational initial training to practical training for specialists. And the target group also differs widely: in one country, VET may focus on disadvantaged young people, while in another, it will appeal mainly to the young population in rural areas or may specifically cater for those with good secondary qualifications. It all goes to show that there is no such thing as one single best VET policy; the debate is always about the country-specifics of a VET system and what its main priorities are. Yet it is exactly this diversity that gives rise to many different examples of best practice.

This book is an attempt to make this diversity accessible to the reader by imposing a structure on it. The structure we have opted for comprises four main broad sections. The first section of the book focuses on Anglo-Saxon countries, while the second looks at Asia (including India), and the third includes contributions with an emphasis on Europe. The fourth and final section brings together contributions with a global focus and those that raise theoretical aspects of VET in an international context.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those who presented conference papers and chaired sessions but also all those who attended the conference and, especially, the authors who have contributed to this book. They have been disciplined in submitting their rich and enlightening contributions on time and in incorporating feedback from international reviewers. I should also like to thank the reviewers for their detailed scrutiny and invaluable additions.

I would also like to express my particular gratitude to Dipl.-Region.-Wiss. Jochen van der Burgt, who not only managed the smooth running of the conference but has also put an enormous amount of work into getting this book published (supported by Dipl.-Hdl. Kirsten Schmidt-Altmann and Balasundaram Krisanthan).

Finally, thanks are also due to other organisations that supported the conference. As well as the University of Cologne and its Faculty of Management, Economics and Social Sciences, I would like to mention German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the German Federal Foreign Office, the Japan Foundation (including the JSPS) and the European Union.