

Introductory comments on VET

A draft towards this note was prepared for the VET meeting in Zurich 13-14 September 2012. The points were intended as a pool from which I might informally make a selection in the staged "key note conversation" between Kenneth King and myself. I have now revised the text a bit to build into it some ideas from this very valuable conference which it was a privilege to attend.

1. Defining Vocational Education and Training (VET)

I define VET by its purpose. **VET** refers to deliberate interventions to bring about learning which would make people more productive (or simply adequately productive) in designated areas of economic activity (e.g., economic sectors, occupations, specific work tasks). In my view a broad definition of 'education' includes 'training' as a subset. Then VE (Vocational Education) would also include VT (Vocational Training). Adding the T in VET is then just for extra emphasis on the 'training' aspect. I see "education" as all forms of deliberate interventions designed to bring about learning, and "training" as such interventions which are specifically aimed at mastery of relatively specified roles or tasks.

In the Western tradition of educational philosophy there is also a conceptualization of "education" which stresses the aim of enabling persons to "realize their potential" across a wide range of valued "human development" (e.g., ideas of *Bildung* or other concepts of "well-rounded education"). With regard to preparation for work roles, that may be a broader concept than 'training', but it is nonetheless a narrower concept of education than the one I prefer.

Many forms of VET will also have other aims which are not unique to VET. These other purposes or aims will also apply to other forms of education, e.g., knowledge, skills, insights and mind-sets which are deemed to be generally valuable for the learners, not only in designated areas of economic activity. Such "other" aims will be especially pertinent for longer and full time VET courses for youth—in contrast to short and episodic training events (e.g., for persons already at work in the occupations concerned) which in my understanding also are part of VET.

VET also needs to be conducted according to general social norms about how learners and people in general are to be treated by institutions, e.g., that persons be treated with respect. Thus "work productivity" is not the **only** aim and concern of VET, but it **is** its distinctive objective which sets it apart from other forms of education and training.¹ In any assessment of how well VET performs there is therefore good reason to pay particular attention to that ob-

¹ I see "education" as all forms of deliberate interventions designed to bring about learning, and "training" as interventions specifically aimed to achieve mastery of performance in specified roles or tasks. There is also in the Western tradition of educational philosophy a narrower concept of "education" which refers to enabling persons to "realize their potential" across a wide range of valued "human development" (e.g., ideas of "well-rounded education").

jective, also because the pursuit of other goals (e.g., equity) make little sense unless VET in fact improves the productivity of learners and enables them to benefit personally from such a gain. In particular, the higher unit cost which many forms of VET have as compared to general education, is hard to justify unless VET serves its distinctive purpose adequately—hence the concern which frequently is found with tracer studies and/or rate of return analysis in evaluations of VET.

There are of course also learning outcomes which may not be stressed any more in VET than in programmes of general education but which nonetheless are of great economic importance (e.g., a literacy, numeracy, ability to cooperate, and readiness to take responsibility and initiative and to learn new tasks). Clearly, VET is not the only learning arena which matters for performance in the workplace. In fact, especially in a rapidly changing society and economy, general education will be important across economic sectors as well as for other important purposes than economic production. There are also mind-sets and norms of great importance for productivity (e.g., entrepreneurship, drive, reliability, honesty, endurance etc.) which mostly are acquired in other socialization arenas (especially the family) than schools or training centres.

2. A skeptical note on 'skills development' as a term to replace VET

By skill in any purposive behavior (action) I refer to ability to perform satisfactorily, usually with regard to some designated task or set of tasks. Of course skills matter in occupations and in more specific occupational tasks. But skills matter also if I climb a tree in my garden at home in order to prune branches, or if I try to find my way around a new town. Some people also seem to have more skill than others have in getting along and cooperating with other people. Such skills matter of course in a variety of life situations—not just work. In my view, 'Skills development' is too wide a term to point to the goals of VET in a sufficiently focused way. On the one hand, it is too broad with regard to the domain of application of 'skills'. There is at least a need to focus on *vocational* skills or *work skills*—bearing in mind that many such skills are not unique to work tasks, neither are they necessarily mainly acquired in VET.

On the other hand, if the 'occupation(s)' for which basic VET prepares is to serve as a "community of practice", it seems too narrow to focus on skills alone. In such VET, which typically is of some duration, VET involves socialization to a working community that has the potential of providing social support for 'quality work'. This ideal is built into the very term 'vocational' in English, and of course, into the term *Beruflich* in German. Knowledge matters too: knowing *what* do and *why* is a prerequisite for autonomous skilled work. There is the concept of 'know-how': knowing *how* to do something and under *what conditions* it needs to be done. Thus, the concept of knowledge is much wider than 'theory'. It overlaps with skill, but has more holistic connotations. Illustrations of terms used for distinctly practical knowledge are the terms 'savvy' (from the Latin *sapere* as in *homo sapiens*) and Michael Polanyi's concept of 'tacit knowledge' (e.g., knowing how to hammer nails into wood without bending the nail or hitting your thumb). Skills are of course a useful concept for what VET should teach, but it is in my view an impoverishment of VET to reduce all that VET should teach, to 'skills'—even when one stays focused on the prime goal of VET: preparing for designated occupations and work tasks.

3. Is there a new wave of support for VET in development financing agencies?

If there is a wave of new interest in VET, it has been slow to make itself felt in international financing institutions for development. The World Bank is an influential institution in financing development and advising on development policy. I have seen World Bank presentations that have emphasized the current importance of 'skills development' and 'work force development'. They are seeking to enlist donor support for World Bank administered trust fund financed activities that will emphasize such activities. One might therefore expect the World Bank to work actively to promote VET-development. So far, it is hard to trace such an emphasis in World Bank lending.

But, VET hardly received any mention in the Bank's 2012 "Education Strategy 2020". The strategy paper adopts a wide concept of the 'education system' but does not include VET among the examples of what counts as examples of that wide concept.

The record in the 1990s and early years of the present century was one of declining shares for VET, of total education sector lending with a flattening out at a low level since the mid-1990s. On p. 49, Vocational training is shown under share of Bank Education Sector Lending by sub-sector. It was 13 % during 1991-1995, it then declined to a low of 4 % during 1996-2000 and rose slightly to 5 % during 2006-10.

In the strategy paper, "skill deficiencies" are mentioned as a problem, but only in very general terms as a passing reference to 'need':

Youth are leaving school and entering the workforce without the knowledge, skills, or competencies necessary to adapt to a competitive and increasingly globalized economy. As a result, to find employment they may need remedial, second-chance, and job training programs (p. 17)

It explicitly recognized as a priority only for Middle Income Countries and then with reference to 'Workforce Development.

In middle-income countries, where a higher proportion of available jobs is likely to require higher-level skills, one priority is to improve quality assurance and financing for tertiary education and for workforce development. (p5)

Apart from the strategy paper, separate documentation (not yet released) exists for the SABER concept (System Approach for better Education Results) for Workforce Development. SABER is diagnostic tool, seemingly intended to provide bench line data for joint Bank-country policy analysis and to sensitize the so far small number of participating countries about the condition of **"systems, institutions and policies in place to promote the development of an appropriately-skilled workforce to support countries' economic and social development goals."** It makes use of a template for initial diagnostic analysis leading to ratings by appointed reviewers of the specified aspects on the current state of affairs.

My inference is that notwithstanding the studies done at the Bank in the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, VET remained a marginal sub-sector for Bank education-sector and that the Bank is distinctly cautious about VET-lending, recognizing its importance and potential mainly in Middle Income Countries. The recent emphasis on an initial diagnostic approach to 'Workforce Development' fits the inference of 'caution'.

A review of other major external financing agencies ('donor' countries and regional development banks) could show less prevalence of caution than the World Bank seems to have. Such a review is yet to be made.

In low and medium income countries, it could be that there have been signs of rising interest among national policy makers in VET development, driven by the need to accommodate rising 'social' demand for post-primary education, following quantitative advances in the provision of primary schooling under Education for All policies.

My impression is loosely founded, but I suspect there is still much caution among external financing agencies, based on their experience from supporting VET development in the past. VET in low and medium income countries does not seem to have thrown up institutional models that have worked well enough to acquire a clear reputation of 'success'. Not only 'school based' VET, but also attempts to build dual-systems or National Qualifications Frameworks and 'training authorities' are all examples of models whose achievements have fallen far short of their hopes and ambitions. Demonstrated 'success' of models that lend themselves to 'replication' become especially important for further development of VET because of its frequently relatively high unit cost. The aim of VET also begs the question of whether VET actually leads to better income for the learners and to application in productive work of the knowledge and skills acquired. Thus, evidence of (in economic terms) *external* effectiveness and of external efficiency rightly tend to be important in policy analysis of VET.

The current scene among low and medium income countries may well be one of rising interest in VET among national policy makers, but also of continued 'caution' among potential sources of external finance.

4. A Norwegian example of a possibly emerging policy dilemma

Other goals than productivity can also be politically important for VET. I have just come from a meeting on a research project on the workings of Norwegian basic VET for 16-20 year-olds. The main goal for VET is to make young people more productive in designated occupations or groups of occupations. Another but less formally declared political goal is that VET should enable young people who have not previously performed well in school, to obtain vocational qualifications that enable them to find productive employment and reduce their risk of 'marginalization'.

In Norway as in so many other countries, the employers who receive youth with credentials from basic VET want employees who not only have satisfied certain basic vocational skill requirements. They want employees who are mentally alert, act responsibly, work well with others, who can communicate with workmates, bosses and customers, and who are able and motivated to learn new tasks.

In earlier times, when opportunities to advance along the educational ladder towards higher education were far more socially constricted, able and responsible sons and daughters of workers and farmers entered VET. Now they too, much more often than in the past, proceed along the path towards higher education rather than entering VET.

As increasingly high proportions of the age group start university preparatory general education after completing basic education (now about 50%), it seems as if those entering vocational courses increasingly consist of those who have not done well in school previously. This is an impression, there may not yet be any study which probes into such a trend. But

assuming this trend exists, VET risks becoming a repository for youth who risk marginalization in the transition to adulthood. This is hardly what employers are looking for when they hire supposedly 'skilled' workers. At present, the proportion entering vocational tracks without completing (who thus do not enter the labour market with any recognized certificate) is alarmingly high.

A policy issue for VET is how to pursue the goal of VET for labour force productivity and at the same time give due regard to social inclusion for youth at risks of marginalization. Is this issue a true or a false dilemma? Is there any 'one best' choice for further developing VET in such a situation?

5. Themes for policy research on VET

'In reserve' for my contribution to the Zurich conference was a list of themes suggested for research on VET policy development. These were lifted from a chapter I wrote in volume VI of Rupert Maclean & David Wilson (eds.) series *International Handbook of Education for the Changing World of Work*. Dordrecht: Springer. (Available on the web).

With respect to the theme of the Zurich conference, I judged the most relevant parts in that chapter to be sections under the more general heading of "New Models for VET systems" as well as a brief section on "Dual systems of basic VET". Under the former heading the further specification of themes were:

- National training authorities
- Training funds
- National Qualifications Frameworks²
- Decentralization (to institutional management and involving industry)
- Alternative models of financing
- Encouraging Private Provisions
- Schemes to make industry do more training
- Modularization of the curriculum

I maintained in 2009 that there is a striking paucity of sustained research on the workings and consequences of such 'New Models', possibly because much of the research that has been done on these issues has been produced for evaluations commissioned by external financing agencies and therefore within narrow time limits.

The Zurich conference was indeed useful in filling some holes in my own knowledge about recent work and work in process in particular regarding National Qualification Frameworks. But I would still maintain that there is a striking shortage of sustained research that can inform policy analysis of VET. Initiatives to stimulate such research are needed.

² This topic was much discussed at the Zurich conference. It would in my view be a mistake to view NQFs as a model that had been particularly promoted by the World Bank in externally financed VET reforms in low income countries. Johansen and Adams in their World Bank's 2004 policy study on *Skills Development in Sub-Saharan Africa* (2004:81-82) urged caution in adopting NQFs, on the basis of the early experience with such frameworks. (available on the web).