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## BOOK REVIEW

McGrath, Simon,<sup>1</sup> Mulder, Martin,<sup>2</sup>  
Papier, Joy<sup>3</sup> & Suart, Rebecca<sup>4</sup> (Eds). 2019.  
*Handbook of vocational education and  
training: Developments in the  
changing world of work.* In 2 volumes.  
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### Why this handbook?

The *Handbook of vocational education and training: Developments in the changing world of work* ('the *Handbook*') is as ambitious as it is significant. The editors have articulated the need for the *Handbook* as being a consequence of the 'mushrooming of new journals, the expansion of the volume of research, and the widening of international cooperation by international Vocational Education and Training institutions'.<sup>5</sup> The ambition of the *Handbook* is to provide a comprehensive overview of current thinking and scholarly writing in the field of vocational education and training (VET).

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5 The *Handbook* is in the genre of both the *International handbook of education for the changing world of work: Bridging academic and vocational learning* (McLean & Wilson, 2009) and the *International handbook of educational change* (Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan & Hopkins, 1998).

The two volumes it comprises are all the more significant when it is borne in mind that, despite the growth in awareness of the importance of VET and the increasingly diverse scope of delivery of VET, the field of education research is still primarily focused on schooling and on higher education.

The editors of the *Handbook* express the wish that this latest work will be seen to build on the volumes edited by Rupert McLean and David Wilson. In recognising the burgeoning debate, research and scholarship in the field of VET, the editors are justified in hoping that this publication will serve to further stimulate and nurture scholarly research and debate in VET.

This review presents an overall comment on the two volumes of the *Handbook* and does not presume to provide a synopsis of the wealth of individual papers they contain.

### **Who is the intended audience?**

The reality of a rapidly changing world of work, together with a future which is arguably less predictable than at any other time in history, has posed challenging questions for a range of sectors and definitely for VET. The rapidly unfolding, but not universal, shift towards digitisation has stimulated concerns about the readiness of policymakers, VET institutions and employers to embrace and build upon these changes. Students and their parents have become increasingly aware that the era of a 'job for life' is long gone; policymakers and politicians need to make decisions about resource allocations that will meet the long-term needs and aspirations of their people; institutions that aspire to advise and prepare graduates to be ready for this ill-defined future face the challenge of radically redefining their programmes; and employers must reposition and adapt their business enterprises for this future in an increasingly competitive and even hostile global environment.

However, these sectors are not mere consumers of that future; they are also agents in its shaping. As agents they will be the audience for the authors in the *Handbook* and will want to shape their actions through a deeper understanding of the *Handbook's* textured and diverse reflections on the world of work and of the interplay between the formal economy, the informal economy (sometimes called the unorganised economy) and the virtual economy.

Seeking the answers to their questions, readers of the *Handbook* will appreciate the extensive scope and diversity of international experiences of, and reflections on, VET. There are chapters on the nature of the curriculum in VET and the most desirable composition of knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for a graduate to step confidently and successfully into a rapidly changing world of work (Volume 1, Parts 1 and 2; Volume 2, Parts 5 and 6); on the appropriateness of systems, infrastructure and the allocation of resources (Volume 1, Part 3; Volume 2, Part 6); on the preparation and continuing development of VET lecturers (Volume 2, Part 9); on the interface with employers and employment (Volume 1, Part 4); on measuring the preparedness and competence of graduates (Volume 2, Part 7); and on

supporting students in the demographic complexities that inform these international realities (Volume 2, Part 8).

The *Handbook* is an invaluable tool for champions of VET development and for those who wish to understand the potential of this sector for emerging and established economies to eliminate unemployment and poverty, to reduce inequality, and to promote sustainable and climate-sensitive growth. Thus, this publication is a resource for policymakers, international development agencies, initial and continuing teacher developers, curriculum and instruction specialists, and economists and leaders who are tasked with responding to the global challenges listed above.

### **What is the scope of the Handbook?**

The *Handbook* has an impressive international participation, with contributions from scholars across 27 countries. There is a significant level of contributions from the United Kingdom, Germany and South Africa, and the *Handbook* includes contributions by scholars from every continent. However, subsequent editions may consider including VET in Canada; and, as more scholars engage in VET research, one presumes that there will be greater exposure to the development of VET in South America and the remaining 52 countries of Africa.

The *Handbook* comprises two volumes containing a total of nine parts: Volume 1 comprises Parts 1 to 4 and Volume 2 comprises Parts 5 to 9.

All the contributions have been peer-reviewed and each provides a wealth of references that will be of great value to readers. The structure is true to the title of the *Handbook*: Volume 1, Part 1, delves immediately into ‘The changing world of work’, and this is followed in Part 2 by a focus on ‘Skills for sustainable human development’. The foregrounding of these two parts is appropriate, and it serves to establish the platform for the subsequent parts, which address particular aspects of this platform.

Part 3 takes us into ‘Planning and reforming skills systems’ and delves into policy frameworks, an analysis of qualifications frameworks, governance, the financing of VET, workplace-based learning, and linking student career guidance to job placement. The last of these is a particularly relevant consideration for systemic development in many countries.

Part 4 considers the nature of ‘Private training’ and covers apprenticeships, informal versus structured approaches, the role of public and private providers in delivering private training, and the emerging field of e-learning.

The second volume opens with Part 5, which focuses on ‘Vocational learning’. This part provides a detailed reflection on what is often considered to be the heart of the VET challenge: the actual delivery of, and exposure to, the learning and teaching that will prepare graduates

for the evolving contexts in which they will find themselves once they are employed. It progresses from an insightful overview of philosophical and contextual perspectives on vocational learning to providing reflections on experiences in China, the United Kingdom and Hungary. It includes very useful inputs on accommodating cultural diversity and on the importance of qualitative research in VET.

Part 6 grapples with the tough questions of ‘Competence and excellence’ in VET. It deals with what is meant by competence and excellence and how this is to be stimulated and achieved. It does not limit itself to technical competencies but also explores the nature of future skills requirements and the achievement of intercultural competence.

Part 7 follows logically from Part 6 by providing a set of chapters on ‘Measuring learning and instructional performance’. This takes the reader through approaches that span the Logic Design Model, outcomes assessment, performance testing, competence testing and self-assessment, as well as self-assessment and reflection, simulated assessment, electronic portfolios and professional competence diagnostics. It also explores the often-neglected aspect of adult writing skills in VET settings.

Part 8 focuses on the issue of ‘Supporting learners’. Structuring effective and desirable learner support is significant in a sector which has such a large proportion of learners who describe themselves as having been unsuccessful in ‘mainstream schooling’. The extent to which institutions succeed in igniting or reigniting self-esteem in such students can be the extent to which these students will benefit most intensely from the VET experience. Producing self-confident and competent graduates from VET institutions is a sine qua non of addressing the persistent undervaluing of VET in post-colonial contexts and developing the parity of esteem that is more common in systems in Germany and Switzerland.

Part 9 deals with ‘VET teacher/trainer education’. For many in the sector, this is where ‘the rubber hits the road’, in that VET teachers are at the coalface of vocational delivery. The section provides analyses situated in Australia, Zimbabwe, the United States, Russia, Mexico, India and Switzerland, and explores pedagogical issues in the preparation of VET teachers and trainers. The chapters point to a variety of approaches that are essential to learning and teaching in VET as a sector and the graduates from VET institutions are to enjoy the parity of esteem afforded to their university peers.

### **What are the challenges in producing such a handbook?**

The *Handbook* does not describe itself as being an international handbook, which is well advised. There are stark contextual differences between countries which value and aspire to promote VET. As a result, the particular contextual differences of systems make the transfer of one country’s experience to another extremely improbable without adapting such experience to the context onto which it is to be grafted. Some examples of these contextual differences include the demographic realities of countries, some with ageing populations and

others with great youth potential; countries with almost total absorption into employment as against others with very high levels of young adults who are not in education, employment or training (the NEETs); systems in which VET must take into consideration a significant rural constituency with limited connectivity and infrastructure versus predominantly urbanised and relatively well-resourced contexts; systems that have established a parity of esteem between routes into VET and routes into universities versus systems which continue to consider university access as more valuable than VET (and reward university graduates disproportionately as a consequence); and systems that are ready to embrace an era of digitisation and those that are struggling to establish the necessary infrastructure to provide digital access to their populations. These scenarios illustrate the contextual realities that would have to be navigated in order to enable countries to benefit from one another's successes and failures.

## **Conclusion**

The *Handbook* certainly delivers on its ambition of providing comprehensive exposure to the current thinking and writing of scholars in the VET field. While the publication is not structured to tease out the contextual differences mentioned above, the reader will find comment and analysis in its chapters that do raise these very starkly differing contextual matters. These analyses and reflections are likely to be of interest and value to policymakers, institutions and VET leaders who are engaged in developing their systems and who wish to consider their options based on the experience of others.

The enormous value of this magnum opus will lie in its affirming the role and gravitas of scholarly research and analysis of VET. The importance of VET in providing pathways for marginalised and excluded young people and adults to realise their expectations and build a more equitable, sustainable and collaborative world remains at the core of this sector.

The publication of the *Handbook of vocational education and training: Developments in the changing world of work* is timely and will be appreciated by the many students, employers, lecturers, scholars, researchers and policymakers who will no doubt acknowledge its volumes as an essential reference and a source of innovation and inspiration. The rapidly changing world of work, and its implications for VET, will require that the *Handbook* be updated and that its users be able to access such updates. Readers will surely look forward to future editions of this important work.

## **REFERENCES**

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