
EDITORIAL

Research in vocational education and workplace training – policy and practice

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This third publication of JOVACET follows the Special Issue which emanated from our 2018 conference on adult learning and education. While the Special Issue was focused on papers presented on the theme of the conference, the conference call for papers also yielded additional submissions outside the scope of the Special Issue, which contributed to this subsequent volume. Articles in this issue are situated in the vocational education and workplace training domains and constitute research at the level of practice as well as at the macro-policy level.

Our first article herein, authored by Barabasch, Caldart and Keller, concerns competence development in apprenticeship training, and how innovation in the labour market in Switzerland is impacting on VET (vocational education and training) learning cultures as well as on approaches to learning at, and through, work. The Swiss dual-learning model, in which the major part of apprentice learning takes place in the workplace, is widely admired, and Switzerland is seen as an innovation leader among its peers in Europe. Even so, the constant drive for innovation, new technologies and work processes can be seen to be impacting on workforce development. Vocational learners are requiring new skill sets, for instance less product-specific knowledge and more ‘agile’ approaches such as ‘creativity’, ‘reflectivity’, and ‘taking the initiative’. Through a case study of the Swiss telecommunication industry, the authors examine how a new, innovative learning culture is being shaped in order to adapt to new work demands.

Next, Gaffoor and Van der Bijl report on an investigation into factors that influence retention and attrition at a sample technical and vocational education and training (TVET) college in South Africa. The reasons for student dropout at public colleges have not been well documented and only a handful of studies have been conducted to date. The social and

economic cost of young people leaving schools and colleges with incomplete qualifications is potentially crippling, and it is imperative that institutions understand the ‘push’ or ‘pull’ factors that are at play. Using the early constructs of Tinto, and later Bean, the authors attempt to provide a more holistic explanation of why students fail to complete their college programmes.

From explanations of early college exit, Groener and Andrews examine the access pathways into higher education offered by TVET colleges through their vocational qualifications in early childhood educator training. Public colleges have for many years offered early childhood development (ECD) programmes for aspirant teachers, and a persistent source of frustration has been the lack of articulation in this field between TVET college and university qualifications. Universities offer initial teacher education in ECD but only very recently has there been an attempt to build pathways into these university qualifications by perusing the nature and content of the programmes offered at colleges. Nonetheless, it is not the lack of articulation which is the main focus of this article, but rather the aspirations of students who enter TVET colleges in order to create a basis for recognition of prior learning (RPL) for access into university by an alternative route. Evidence from Groener and Andrews’ case study shows that students in the sample who had the goal of access to university after completing their vocational college programme, demonstrated considerable agency and determination in overcoming structural and institutional barriers in pursuit of their goals.

Moving from learner-centred studies to broader social and policy constructs in TVET, Kraak’s article considers the concept of ‘intermediation’ in the brokering of training compacts, especially in the light of the role that sector education and training authorities (SETAs) are required to play in South Africa. SETAs have a range of mandated functions with regard to employers in their scope of authority, but, with regard to training and development, they have an essential role in, inter alia, fostering links among employers, unions, and training providers. South Africa still has some way to go in developing the kind of relationships between employers and training providers that have seen established vocational systems become successful, and in enabling young graduates in these systems to become sought-after, highly skilled employees. Notwithstanding the slow progress towards the goal of a coherent system in which supply and demand can coexist, the author points to at least two successful examples of intermediation which could serve as a basis for future initiatives. An interesting dimension of the article is the inclusion of key stakeholder perspectives of four senior officials in the skills system, perspectives which suggest that, in the current dispensation, the expectation of intermediation may be a step too far for most SETAs. In this regard, Kraak acknowledges the input he received from the late Adrienne Bird, Director of the Special Projects Unit in the Department of Higher Education and Training, where she was leading the Centres of Specialisation initiative to revitalise the apprenticeship model. Adrienne Bird was a passionate advocate of vocational education and training and had a distinguished career in the South African post-apartheid skills development system. Her untimely passing in 2019, after a long battle with ill health, leaves a void in our still fragile and emergent national training architecture, where her dedication, experience and keen insight will no doubt be

missed.

Needham continues on the policy theme in his article as he interrogates the inability of the public TVET sector to meet human-capital development goals of reduced unemployment and improved economic returns on education investment. He argues that, while privatisation of education is a global phenomenon, in South Africa it is the result of the state's adoption of neo-liberal reforms and a shift in emphasis on education as a public good in favour of narrower interests. The dominant discourses of performance management, efficiency, accountability, and the like have come to characterise education, to the detriment of developmental goals. He critiques privatisation policy approaches, for instance the 'outsourcing' of public education to private providers and the disincentivisation of public colleges to offer occupational programmes which, he argues, led to the creation of multiple private providers to offer this training. When colleges were subsequently encouraged to offer SETA-led occupational programmes, many colleges found themselves ill-equipped to take on this task, he contends. In essence, the article concludes that neither public nor private providers have been well served by the confusing privatisation policy messages, and the two systems of provision have as a result been pitted against each other rather than working collaboratively for more effective skills development delivery.

Finally, in this issue of JOVACET, there is a book review by Martin Mulcahy, a former educator, policy analyst, and education adviser with vast experience of post-school education and training. He reviews the latest Springer handbook edited by McGrath, Mulder, Papier and Suart (2019), which is a mammoth two-volume edition covering nine broad themes and containing a host of scholarly articles within each theme. Mulcahy provides an informative overview of the handbook and its various sections, which will no doubt be a welcome and essential introduction to both volumes for vocational researchers, policymakers, teachers and students. We are indeed pleased that this timeous review could be included in this edition of JOVACET.

The authors of papers in this issue of JOVACET demonstrated patience and diligence throughout the rigorous peer-review process, and undertook with good grace the amendments that needed to be made to their articles. We trust that readers will appreciate their effort.