

Book Reviews

Vocational Training. International Perspectives (eds) Gerhard Bosch and Jean Charest, Routledge, New York and UK, pp. 308. ISBN 978-0-415-46721-6 \$US148

This volume arose out of international seminars on national vocational education and training systems (VET) over 2005–2007, involving leading researchers in the area. The book includes a covering chapter by the editors, and a chapter devoted to each of the following ten countries: Australia, Canada, UK, US, Denmark, France, Germany, Mexico, Morocco and Korea. The country studies are organised largely by institutional pattern, using the well-known ‘market’ and ‘coordinated’ typology. The first four countries are included as exemplars of liberal-market economies; the following three as exemplars of coordinated market economies. Mexico and Morocco are categorised by Bosch and Charest as state-led VET systems. State-led systems are those where, due to poorly mobilised unions and employers, the state largely assumes responsibility for directing and financing VET provision. This is perhaps a most suggestive group — given the challenges in training for developing countries. Korea, with its highly dualistic economy (chaebols vs. SMEs) and rapid shift from a ‘developmental state’ — state-led system — to a largely deregulated economy, emerges as a taxonomist’s nightmare.

The volume is thus centred around ideas that now dominate academic analysis of VET systems, particularly the view of such systems as the outcome of self-reinforcing institutions that create economic incentives towards either a ‘high’ or ‘low skill equilibrium’ (Finegold and Soskice 1998; Brown et al 2001; Hall and Soskice 2001; Thelen 2004). In simple terms, the quantity and quality of vocationally trained labour is a major factor in influencing not only what firms make (product market strategies associated with quality, innovation or price), but also how they make it (production strategies based on flexible vs. mass production). The strength of this perspective lies in its linking of institutions — such as the level and systems of education, the labour market, government policy, and so on. The idea has been extended by some who bring differences across countries in income distribution and consumption patterns into the picture (Keep and Mayhew 2001). Similarly, a more even distribution of school educational outcomes, and post-school qualifications to be found in coordinated market economies, in turn feeds back into maintaining a high quality VET system. More equal income distribution within a developed economy raises the overall demand for higher quality products and services. This type of output is argued to be produced by more skilled labour. Conversely, a ‘low skill’ equilibrium is in part the outcome of a workforce with a large minority of low-pay low-skill workers. The latter are engaged in the production of cheap mass-produced goods and services purchased by other low-skilled workers. (Picture a cleaner employed by Westfield in one of their large shopping malls working long, irregular hours for minimal pay, whose kids live on take-aways and frozen food in a rented house furnished from reject shops and mass-market budget stores.)

Given this shared intellectual grounding across the ten authors, each chapter is oriented around major themes for each country. These include:

1. The provision of a recent history of national institutions underpinning each VET system. These accounts are a major strength of the book. Many of the chapters successfully merge the discipline of history, with its paradoxes of change and continuity in national institutions, and a sociological analysis of institutions as creators of economic incentives and cultural norms. This is especially so for the chapters on the UK, Korea and Germany;
2. Examination of governance of VET systems in terms of the roles of unions; employer associations and the state in determining content; duration, testing, certification and mechanisms to ensure quality. An interesting insight here is the problem of federal versus unified centralised government systems. For example, education and training is constitutionally the responsibility of the provinces in Canada. This duplicates effort and limits labour mobility due to non-recognition of qualifications across the provinces. In contrast, VET policy in Germany is the responsibility of the central government, which is argued to assist in creating a national VET labour market with widely understood occupational titles closely linked to nationally defined and recognised qualifications;
3. An outline of the nature of industrial relations bargaining (especially the divide between national industry-based bargaining and decentralised enterprise based bargaining — with the former creating tight links between qualifications and standardised pay rates);
4. Identification of state sanctioned occupational licensing regulating competition and creating incentives for workers to participate in VET.

A major contribution of the book is that in each chapter the respective national VET system is placed in the broader context of school and university education and training systems. Considerable use is made of official data to chart the stocks of qualifications from the three sectors within the workforce and the flows from school into the two post-compulsory schooling sectors. In some chapters, such as the excellent one on Australia, there are data on the flows between these two sectors. By placing VET in the broader educational context, the contributors reveal some unintended effects — for example, how participation in VET has declined rapidly in countries such as Korea, as it is squeezed between the aspirations of parents for a university education for their children and government policy promoting a ‘knowledge economy’. They show that, on the other hand, there are real concerns about current and prospective VET skill shortages, and large over-supply of university educated labour that has already caused a substantial drop in financial returns to holders of university degrees. By contrast, a major strength of the German apprenticeship system is that it continues to attract a high proportion of the academically able student cohort eligible for university entrance.

Now, for a few minor quibbles. First, data in some of the chapters are too dated. The volume has a publication date of 2010, but in some chapters the data for VET is current only to 2003. While perhaps resulting from the timing of the

initial seminars, updating relevant information is important. This is not pedantry. To illustrate — in the case of Australia, a sustained upturn in apprenticeship intake occurred after 2003, which persisted up to the 2008–09 global financial crisis; exceeding previous peaks in the late 1980s. Second, some important data are not consistent across chapters. For example, on the important topic of the returns to different levels of qualifications, some chapters use ratios and others means and medians of actual wages. In some chapters, returns per qualification are for full-time workers, but in others, they are all employed persons.

Third, whilst the volume is to be commended for taking an historical perspective, in most chapters the period under analysis is only three to four decades. For a longer historical perspective, the recent edited work by Clarke and Winch (2007) could be consulted. It provides a history of the ideas animating vocational education in many of the countries covered in the Bosch and Charest volume. Thus, a reader of the chapter on the German dual system in the volume reviewed here would be forgiven for thinking that it arose *de novo* in the early 1960s, whereas its ideological foundations, we are told by Greinert (2007), are to be found in the Bismarckian period where the apprenticeship system was conceived as a means of protecting the petty bourgeoisie against 'proletarianisation'. Combining general education with vocational training was seen as essential to nation building, especially amongst the petty bourgeois and working class. For the lower classes, the concept of *Beruf* was to be the key to socialisation as *Bildung* was for the bourgeoisie and ruling class.

Fourth, a seemingly inevitable problem with edited works is that conflicts in interpretation emerge across chapters. For example, in Australia 'only around 10 per cent of commencing undergraduate students are admitted on the basis of a VET qualification' (p. 44). This evidence leads the authors of this chapter to be somewhat critical of the apparently limited pathways between VET and university. By comparison with Germany, however, the performance of the Australian system of sectoral articulation is outstanding, as in the former country 'only 0.6 per cent ... of all university students are admitted to university from a vocational training course' (p. 141).

VET has emerged as a key item on the public policy agenda across the globe for a number of reasons. First, in debates about national economic competitiveness the topic of skill formation, especially when expressed in the language of Human Capital Theory, remains one of the few fields for government action permitted under neo-liberal discourse. Active industry policy is simply beyond the pale. Second, chronic skilled vocational labour shortages — notably in Anglophone countries — has fostered decades of constant tinkering with state VET policies. Third, increasing participation in VET is viewed as a means of redressing income inequality and better integrating rapidly growing immigrant communities in countries such as the UK, Germany, Australia and the US amid concerns about urban unrest and religious radicalisation. Fourth, ageing demography has focused attention on how to make better use of the shrinking share of the population that is gainfully employed. Finally, the inclusion of the state-led countries — Mexico and Morocco — and the past experience of modern Korea (and the difficulty in categorising it, mentioned earlier), point to emerging issues for

VET in developing countries. The opportunity for discussion is not explored in this book. Without the same institutional traditions as Anglo-European countries, the challenges in institutional formation, nation-building, and economic change are considerable. The BRIC group, SE Asian, and other countries will wrestle with these issues, and points to future research.

For public policy makers and students, this volume will serve as an essential reference work to improve their understanding of the VET system in their own country and, more importantly, of their system in an international context. It will also serve as an implicit warning not to burden VET systems with excessive expectations for their role in economic and social policies.

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