Historical bases for appraising vocational education systems

1. Appraising vocational education systems
Much public and governmental discussion about vocational education inevitably focuses on its institutions and systems and whether they are securing the outcomes wanted by governments, professional bodies, industry groups, workplaces, and individuals. Often lost in these discussions, is the fact that these systems, institutions, and their structural arrangements are products of earlier deliberations and demands to address the real or perceived imperatives of those times. Historical accounts remind us of these earlier deliberations, what these deliberations lead to, the important goals they aimed at, and also whether and at what cost they should now be overturned. In the frenzy of constant reforms and structural changes, such as attempts to standardise European education systems, it is salient to be reminded of what these systems were designed to achieve, what mechanisms were planned and enacted, and what their outcomes were. Consequently, educational historians play important roles here.

2. Purposes, premises, and genesis of vocational education systems
Historical accounts, such as those provided by Gonon (2002, 2009a, 2009b) are helpful in understanding the development of national vocational education systems and their current constitution. Accounts about ancient Greece (Lodge, 1947), builders of the great cathedrals of Europe (Gimpel, 1961), the decline of guilds (Hanf, 2002), and formation of vocational education systems in Europe and elsewhere (Gonon, 2009b) all make particular contributions to these understandings. They help delineate the origins, purposes, and premises of vocational education as a discrete sector that emphasises particular kinds of goals and provision experiences for those learning to secure occupational outcomes, yet in ways that reflect national factors.
Gonon (2009a, 2009b) identifies the complex of factors that came to shape their form and purposes. These include: the importance of skill formation; the engagement of young people with nation states; their avoiding unemployment and reliance on that state; and, instead, contributing to the state through their employment. He notes how these factors led to the
entrenchment of vocational education within bureaucracies that enact the business of
governments. Certainly, more than generating skilled workforce for a newly industrialised
nations, was the need for orderly and educated societies (Gonon, 2009b). In southern
Germany, engagement in vocational education provisions emerged as a response to an
emerging and potentially radicalised working-class. So – as in France, Austria, Britain and
other European countries – vocational education provisions and systems were introduced
both to manage the supply of skilled labour and as a vehicle through which young people
came to participate in their nation’s social and economic activities.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the German state took an active role in vocational
training by establishing a legal framework through which it was enacted. The
Handwerkerschutzgesetz (Craft Trade Workers’ Protection Act of 1897) and policies
favoured the development of small to medium-sized enterprises. In 1890, the reformation of
chambers of trade as public boards attempted to reinvigorate the guild-based vocational
training system displaced by industrialisation and the formation of the nation state, with these
vocational schools but providing a more liberally focussed education of young people (Gonon
2009b). However, it was the failure of these Volkschulen led to Kerschensteiner’s suggestion
to transform this form of schooling into an education provision based on learners’
occupations (Gonon, 2009b). He was aware of not only of developments in industrial
vocational training in German-speaking countries as well as in France and England, which he
had visited. An outcome of the report of his travels and deliberations – Observations and
Comparisons – was an approach to education that aimed to secure a model of middle-class
occupational identity and loyalty to the state that was consistent with contemporary
conservative values and that met German needs for stability (Greinert, 2005). By the
beginning of the 20th century, vocational education had gained a particular role in managing
youth, which continues to this day. Apprenticeship certificates were used to demonstrate
vocational education as generating social utility and reliable citizenship (Stratmann, 1994).
Vocational education became a school for the nation, after the Volksschule and before the
military, and through these functions it became important to the state.

Hence, whilst the provisions of vocational education in the past been, and are currently,
focused on developing the capacities required to secure paid employment there have been
distinct emphases in their project (Greinert, 2005, Hanf, 2002). These emphases have address
concerns variously associated with the supply of skilled labour, the problems of unemployed
youth (Dewey, 1916), and the concerns to engage these young workers with civil society
(Gonon, 2009b). Across nation states, too, these foundational purposes of vocational training have been manifested in quite distinct ways. Not all provisions of vocational education have been equally focussed on developing the capacities required for specific occupations or specialisms within occupations. What has distinguished the provision of vocational education in the United States from many of its counterparts in Europe was a more broadly based and less occupationally specific provision of vocational education, than many of its European counterparts. At the turn of the 20th century, despite being championed by Germany, apprenticeships were rejected in America as a widely applicable educational provision for young people because of concerns about American workplaces’ capacities to support that mode of learning (Gonon, 2009a). In their place, community colleges were established in American states to provide a vocational education provision with an emphasis on general educational outcomes. Moreover, even these provisions were not nationally consistent but subject to each American state’ preferences, which is evident in less extreme ways in Switzerland. Indeed, whilst developments occurred in Switzerland, they were did so in different ways across the German-, French-, and Italian-speaking parts of this country and as influenced by its cantonal system of governance (Gonon, 2002). Hence, when one system is critiqued or compared it is important to be reminded of their origins and purposes.

3. Origins and salience of diversity

So, even with vocational education systems focussing on initial preparation for an occupation, the extent of the differences in provisions is such that they cannot be easily compared. For instance, the current Swiss, German, or Austrian dual-apprenticeship systems are engaged with by a high percentage of school leavers. Yet, in these countries, the range and availability of apprenticeships is quite distinct from other countries where the preparation is largely based within technical of vocational colleges (e.g. United Kingdom, Sweden), or where only relatively restricted apprenticeship systems exist (e.g. Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) as well as in countries such as Singapore where they do not exist at all. Instead, in the dual programs, apprentices’ time is divided between engaging in workplaces tasks, often as employees, and being taught in vocational schools in short blocks of attendance. These kinds of programs require high levels of engagement and interest by local employers and industry, and are founded on tri-partite (i.e. government, industry, and unions) alliances to secure commonly agreed goals. These social compacts, at their best, are underpinned by a common concern for the development of skills and can extend to either societally endorsed conventions or regulation by legal measures to protect young people and
to mandate their conditions of employment. Moreover, they are supported by an extensive institutional infrastructure that extends to the qualifications required to teach in vocational colleges and to assist apprentices in workplaces. So, it might be mistaken it is when global agencies mandate that apprentice-type arrangements need to be instituted world-wide, regardless of the existence of the antecedent conditions and institutional arrangements upon which they rely.

Yet, even within this kind of approach, there are variations across the German Länder and the Swiss cantons. Rather than having a dual provision of experiences, the Swiss model includes a third space – a specialist training facility – which is not typical of the German system (Gonon, 2002). This third learning space was introduced specifically to combine the advantages of both on-the-job training and classroom learning. This provision arose from a national debate about whether to transform vocational schools as educational institutions or to transform workplaces into places of instruction. Gonon (2002) claims that both industrial organisations and political parties demanded that the state intervention was required to both preserve traditional apprenticeships and modernise the approach, which up until this time, like elsewhere, was primarily based on service to a master. Further provisions within the existing training schools, and also the establishment of specialist training schools and training workshops, would provide a level of preparation in the classroom that was not available through service to a master.

Consequently, the deliberate purposes of these particular arrangements was associated with providing students with work-related knowledge in a systematic education way. This included providing an environment where students could engage in trial and error, and practice, and in circumstances removed from the direct demands of production. Indeed, Switzerland’s approach was also distinctive in that general education in schools sat alongside occupational preparation for apprentices, in both workplace experiences and in these training centres to augment in specialised ways apprentices’ occupational knowledge. So, more than being wholly technical, the discussion in Switzerland extended to having a vocational education inculcating the value of personal industry. Gonon (2002) notes the concern was to make school more like farming – in a country where the virtues of farm life (self-resilience, fortitude, independence, reward for effort) were seen to reflect core national sentiments that might not be learnt in (easy and comfortable) urban life. So, avoidance of idleness and engagement with work were also impetuses for this particular set of educational arrangements. Also in reforming, reorganising and developing further the educational system would not only lead to the improvement of experiences for apprentices, but also to raise the
status of their work. Moreover, there was a realisation that much of achieving the goals for an effective vocational education system would need to be premised upon activities at the local level. Collectively, and reflecting upon how the state’s interest in vocational education has played out in so many countries, these considerations appear to be remarkably well considered, prescient and forward looking. In this way, Gonon (2002) makes accessible the complex of factors that shaped the Swiss variation on a model that was adopted across the Germanic world.

Apart from concerns about avoiding idleness and engaging young people in civil society, what also sets the German, Austrian, and Swiss systems apart from others is the commitment to the training of apprentices by enterprises, and the resources enterprises commit to this activity. Whereas the outcomes of state interest and control of vocational education in nearly all other countries has led to an increased emphasis on the expenditure of public resources, and seemingly grudging engagements by the enterprises who ultimately employ apprentices, in the German-speaking countries, the arrangements are quite distinct and reflect a shared responsibility for the initial vocational preparation of workers. One factor which might sit behind this arrangement is that the retention of craft institutions sustains both the standing of the apprentices’ and trade workers’ occupational identity whilst being seen to provide a preparation which is informed by and responsive to employers’ needs. So, it is these kinds of explanations of the origins, purposes, structures and practices that historical accounts have and continue to make that are helpful to make informed decisions about and well-grounded appraisals of vocational education systems.

4. **Contributions of historical analyses**

Perhaps more than any other educational sector, vocational education is subject to constant demands for change and responsiveness to current and emerging social and economic imperatives within nation states and globally (Billett 2011). Yet, the changes brought about and the outcomes they are supposed to achieve are often not informed by accounts that show how existing systems have developed to achieve particular purposes. The historical accounts, such as those made above, offer bases to understand how these changes can best meet the needs of particular societal moments or developments and offer ways of understanding alignments between what is required. This includes the national and situational factors that shape what is enacted and the likelihood of desired outcomes being achieved.
5. References