

What makes education "vocational" in an integrated tertiary sector

Author

Hodge, Steven

Published

2013

Book Title

Structures in tertiary education and training: a kaleidoscope of merely fragments?

Version

Version of Record (VoR)

Downloaded from

<http://hdl.handle.net/10072/170028>

Link to published version

<https://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/publications/all-publications/structures-in-tertiary-education-and-training-a-kaleidoscope-or-merely-fragments-research-readings>

Griffith Research Online

<https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au>

What makes education 'vocational' in an integrated tertiary sector

Steven Hodge, University of Ballarat

An integrated tertiary education and training sector is a significant policy goal in Australia. In a key document that elaborates this goal, the rationale for pursuing integration is that it will make 'a continuum of tertiary skills provision' (Bradley et al. 2008, p.183) available to students and workers. The review identifies some mechanisms for effecting the change, focusing on governance and funding arrangements, but the educational meaning and implications of an integrated tertiary sector were not pursued in the document and there has been little attention to these questions since. In this essay I take the opportunity to outline some educational issues of a tertiary education sector, concentrating on what I believe is the fundamental purpose of tertiary-level education: to develop the 'vocational'.

To build my case I will examine some different conceptualisations of the vocational. The influential analysis of Hansen (1994) emphasises both personal and social dimensions of the vocational and their complex interaction in the realisation of a vocation. I argue to extend Hansen's scheme to admit the possibility of multiple 'vocations' over working life and to regard the vocational as synonymous with *the* project of adulthood. In that project, people continuously develop abilities, learn more about themselves and about the multiple contexts of work. Through different kinds of work and education they also acquire understanding of the tasks and roles of particular occupational practices and knowledge structures that relate, but are not confined to, those practices. The vocational thus encompasses phases of satisfying and productive balance or 'equipoise' between the personal and the occupational, and phases of imbalance and dissatisfaction, each phase producing the conditions of the other. This 'dynamic' conception contrasts with the idea promoted in education policy, and labour economic theory more broadly, that the 'vocational' is simply about work and any relationship between the personal and the occupational as something that can be comprehended and analysed in terms of 'match' or 'mismatch' between acquired and deployed skills.

I will argue that the dynamic, working life project concept of the vocational can be fruitfully applied to the challenge of making a continuum of tertiary-level learning opportunities available to Australians. I draw on Dewey's educational theory and highlight limitations in existing vocational education and training and higher education, and suggest changes that would make tertiary-level provision vocational in the dynamic sense. The essay does not cover the important questions of the place of adult and community education in a tertiary sector and the relationship between tertiary-level education and schooling.¹

Conceptualising the vocational

Any venture into the semantics of the vocational is fraught, yet still worthwhile if it prompts stakeholders to reflect on the question of what makes education vocational in an integrated tertiary sector. In this section I will dwell briefly on meanings of the vocational, touching on history and

¹ Actually, according to the dynamic concept of the vocational advanced in this essay, adult and community education stands out as a particularly effective form of vocational education.

surveying key literature. My goal here is to develop an analysis of the vocational that will be helpful in a debate about the purposes of tertiary-level education.

A history of the concept of vocation reveals that it originally had Christian religious significance as the 'calling' (*vocatio*) from God to take up the work of the church. A person might feel such a calling, and, if church authorities deemed the intuition to be authentic, the called would be obliged to turn away from whatever earthly occupation they were in or destined for (Billett 2011). The Reformation brought with it a transformation of the vocation concept (demonstrating that it has long been a volatile one), so that a calling could be to any sort of useful work, not only ecclesiastical (Dawson 2005). It has been argued that this notion of work as a means to salvation was appropriated by modern capitalism, where it turns up as a sense of duty to work (Weber 1930). From a historical perspective, then, vocation comes to us as a relational concept, in which people and their work are in some way bound.

A literature has grown up around the task of teasing out a secular concept of the vocational (for example, Frankena 1976; Gustafson 1982; Doyle 1982; Hansen 1994; Dawson 2005). In what follows I will present an influential analysis from this literature. Writing about the 'calling' to become a teacher, Hansen (1994) explains that the term 'vocational' has fallen into disuse, suggesting that influential contemporary ways of thinking about work, introduced by sociologists, political scientists and psychologists, 'have provided language and perspectives for thinking about teaching as a job and as an occupation nested within a broader system of social institutions' (p.260). To make his case for the relevance of the concept of vocation to teachers' work, Hansen draws attention to its constituent meanings. To start with, vocation has a personal dimension. He calls this aspect 'psychological', and suggests that in this aspect vocation denotes 'a hopeful, outward-looking sentiment, a feeling of wanting to engage in the world in some way' (p.264). Drawing on a characterisation of work by Dorothy Emmet, Hansen explains that:

To 'venture' forth raises the image of an adventure, a plunge into an activity whose outcome will be, at least to some extent, uncertain and unpredictable. To 'devote' oneself in the doing of it recalls one of the original meanings of the term 'vocation' – to commit oneself in an enduring way to a particular practice. (p.264)

But Hansen stresses the point that the concept of vocation refers to more than just a psychological state. Indeed, the focus of his analysis is on the relationship between a subjective sense and objective practices. The 'inner feeling', says Hansen, is 'only part of the story. A social practice is the other part, one in which to enact or bring to life that feeling, in the literal sense of those terms' (p.264). Speaking again about teachers, he explains that:

Would-be teachers step into a practice with traditions undergirding it, with layers of public significance built up over generations. The sense of teaching as a vocation presumes a willingness to engage the public obligations that go with the task, to recognize that one is part of an evolving tradition. (p.272)

Hansen's (1994) differentiation of personal and social dimensions in the concept of the vocational finds parallels in Billett's (2011) analysis of vocational education. Billett draws a fundamental distinction between 'vocations' and 'occupations' that map to Hansen's distinction between the personal and social components of vocation. For Billett, vocations are 'personally directed and assented but often socially derived practices, that reflect an individual's enduring aspirations and interests' (2011, p.66). In contrast, 'Occupations necessarily comprise socially and historically constituted practices that have particular norms and practices, as well as standing in the community' (2011, p.85). Billett's analysis

confirms that the concept of the vocational contains both personal and social meanings, and his elaboration of the concept reveals a complex relationship between the two components.

Hansen (1994) and Billett (2011) both underline the relational nature of the vocational, emphasising personal and social practice dimensions that are mutually enriching. Interest in a form of work and an awareness of personal abilities emerge together. Once in work, processes of mastery of a practice and deeper understanding of self evolve in tandem. In Hansen's view, a person's discovery of their vocation in the context of some form of work is never guaranteed, leading to a distinction between an occupation and mere work.

I will not venture an interpretation of the spiritual connection between self and job that Hansen (1994) and other writers link with the concept of the vocational, but I think it is safe to say that a sort of balance can be struck between a person's mix of abilities and interests and the configuration of the demands and rewards of a work practice, such that the practitioner is fulfillingly engaged and the practice enriched. By the same token, there can be imbalance that goes either way, with a worker under-engaged on the one hand, or unequal to the demands of the work on the other. These scenarios, framed in terms of balance or imbalance, are consistent with Hansen's analysis. However, his analysis leads to a static or terminal concept of the vocational, by which a person either finds their vocation or they do not. Yet many people (and teachers often fall into this category) find that periods of vocational balance have a kind of 'life cycle' that gives way to disenchantment or worse. Perhaps the classical case of finding a vocation, of the person who discovers themselves and keeps growing in a role, is not the norm.

Disequilibrium between person and practice and the dissatisfaction this entails is often not the end of the story. People in this position might find ways to endure, but others will be on the lookout for new opportunities and challenges. The good fortune of a new balance might itself turn out to be temporary, as a new cycle is triggered that leads eventually to imbalance and disaffection. The vocational thus is not only relational, but the relationship is dynamic and can extend across a working life. Younger workers can find themselves in more disorienting extremes of under-engagement or being overwhelmed, while more mature workers can size themselves and opportunities up more cannily and, if they are lucky enough to avoid serious dislocation along the way, can manoeuvre themselves into sustained periods of vocational equipoise. Cycles thus become occasions for learning about as well as fostering abilities, and learning about as well as transforming practices, and this rich learning becomes a condition favouring more and more felicitous choices of work. The understanding of the vocational that emerges from this analysis can perhaps be characterised as 'dialectical' as well as dynamic, since cycles of balance and imbalance lead to cumulative changes in persons and practices, with qualitatively new states of vocational equipoise emerging over time.

The vocational in current tertiary-level education

Different and contending conceptions of the vocational inform current tertiary-level education in Australia, including provision under the national VET system and higher education. A convenient starting point is Karmel, Mlotkowski and Awodeyi's (2008) discussion of the relevance of VET to the occupations of graduates. They explain that, 'Vocational education and training (VET) is, by definition, vocational in intent. Its purpose is unashamedly instrumental; it is about acquiring skills to be used at work' (p.7). What this statement tells us is that the vocational can be unproblematically identified with work, and that work resolves into the deployment of skills. It follows that vocational education seeks nothing more than to facilitate the acquisition of these skills. On the face of it, the concept of the vocational as schematised by Karmel, Mlotkowski and Awodeyi conflicts with the

relational version analysed by Hansen (1994). Their definition appears to overlook the personal dimension of the vocational, preferring instead the ill-defined concept of 'general' as the alternative to the job-specific vocational, thus forgoing analysis of the relational nature of the concept. However, Karmel, Mlotkowski and Awodeyi's concept is rooted in labour market economic theory, and this body of knowledge offers comprehensive perspectives on people and occupational practices that acknowledge, after a fashion, the relationships that exist between them.

In labour economic theory, education's engagement with the vocational is limited to the development of a kind of capital ('human capital') that significantly influences a person's opportunities in the world of work ('labour market'). Private engagement in or public provision of education are viewed as 'investment' decisions made according to calculations of private or social 'returns' (Ross & Whitfield 2009). The actual rate of return is considered a function of the degree of 'match' between 'acquired skills' and 'deployed skills' (Cully 2008, p.9), and this is the way the vocational relationship is conceptualised in labour market theory. According to Karmel, Mlotkowski and Awodeyi:

If the match is very good, then we would conclude that the VET system is performing its role in providing individuals with vocational skills. If the match is poor, then we need to think about whether the VET system is not as effective as it should be, or whether we should rethink the nature of vocational education. The classic example of a mismatch would be a physicist or electrician driving a taxi. In such cases, from the point of view of training for a skilled workforce, the education is totally wasted. Where the nature of the matching is more problematic is a tradesman, for example, becoming a manager. Here it would not be reasonable to say that the vocational education is a waste, but it may suggest that trades education needs to be considered more broadly, rather than merely being the acquisition of trade skills for a particular occupation (p.7).

This framing and interpretation of 'mismatch' points to some important differences between the labour economics concept of the vocational and the dynamic version outlined earlier. A more subtle difference is indicated by the fact that the illustrations speak of, for example, 'a tradesman ... becoming a manager', while the dynamic concept does not envisage a direct correspondence between person and practice, only a state of relative balance or imbalance between them. The person and their evolving configuration of abilities and interests is the key term, rather than an identity between person and role. A more obvious difference is that the dynamic concept does not entertain the idea of 'wastage', when a person moves from one role to another. It is through movement between roles, including between diverse roles, that the worker's abilities are nurtured, awareness of them sharpened, and knowledge of occupational fields and clusters developed. Related to this point is that notions such as 'intended occupation' and methods of comparing these with actual occupations (Karmel, Mlotkowski & Awodeyi 2008, p.8) are far more problematic in the context of the dynamic concept, since occupational intentions, especially for younger people, are likely to be coloured by the sense of adventure identified by Hansen (1994) and the valuation of occupations as promoted by society (Billett 2011).

The attribution of wastage also assumes something like a hierarchy of occupations, structured in terms of returns on time allocated to labour market participation (that is, wage levels), such that (presumably) the education of a physicist could be regarded as 'totally wasted' if the person goes on to work as a taxi driver, yet the metamorphosis of a tradesperson into a manager is felt to be merely problematic. The dynamic concept of the vocational, on the other hand, entertains no such hierarchy, only a gradient of meaningfulness determined by the extent of equipoise between a person's current configuration of abilities and interests and the configuration of demands and rewards encountered in work. By this account of the value of work, it may be that the occupations of taxi driver or manager

are positive, progressive states, and their being so is potentially due in some way to the seemingly misaligned education, as much as a sign of bad use of educational resources.

Karmel, Mlotkowski and Awodeyi's (2008) discussion also serves as a stepping stone to a consideration of the ways in which higher education is vocational. They observe that 'the instrumental nature of university education is not as clear-cut as it is in VET' and go on to explain that:

The professional fields of medicine, law, accounting, teacher education, nursing, and engineering are largely vocational in nature ... Other fields by contrast are far less vocational in nature and provide a much more generic training, the most obvious examples being the humanities and pure sciences. The social sciences and the applied sciences fall somewhere in between. This is not to say that the non-vocational fields are not valuable preparation for work (p.7).

This explanation posits a continuum between the areas of higher education they believe are consistent with their definition of the vocational (that is, 'about work') and areas that are 'non-vocational'. The paradox introduced in this way of non-vocational education that is nevertheless a 'valuable preparation for work' underlines a difficulty faced by a number of writers who have addressed the question of the vocationality of higher education. Barnett (2000), for example, referring to the 'new vocationalism' in higher education writes that this term 'reminds us ... that higher education has, since its inception in the middle ages, been vocational, both overtly and more discreetly, through the more personal and intellectual powers it sought to offer' (p.x). Barnett's distinction between the overt and 'discreet' vocationalism of higher education maps to Karmel, Mlotkowski and Awodeyi's distinction, but frames the discreet as the development of 'personal and intellectual powers' on the part of the learner rather than the uninformative 'general' tag that Karmel, Mlotkowski and Awodeyi apply to education that is not vocational in a job-skill sense. Barnett's discreet sense of the vocational, on the other hand, agrees with the dynamic approach, addressing the dimension of personal abilities and interests.

Billett (2011) follows the consensus on the self-evident vocationality of professional preparation, but he draws attention to the practice of making the study of a body of knowledge itself an occupation. In other words, academic work – teaching, scholarship and research about bodies of knowledge – is very much an occupation. Winch (2010) also acknowledges this kind of vocationality in higher education, but his distinction between 'subjects' (bodies of knowledge) and occupations is fundamental, with the notion of the former being positioned in terms of the latter constituting a special case. After all, the majority of graduates from discreetly vocational or non-vocational higher education programs do not make occupations of their subjects.

What Winch (2010) emphasises in his distinction between subjects and occupations is recognised by a number of commentators on tertiary-level education who explore the fact that the overt concern of some areas of higher education is indeed not occupations but the production and systematisation of knowledge (for example, Young 2008). This knowledge, about nature and the human world, is developed by those who have made such subjects their occupation, and is taught by them to others who may be regarded as candidates for entry to these subject occupations. But because this kind of learning is always about something that transcends a practice of the subject occupation – about the multiple contexts of our world – the knowledge gained during discontinued subject apprenticeships, and the process of learning that went with them, has a great deal of potential for teaching people about themselves and the contexts of and knowledge relevant to occupational practices. In other words, Winch's subjects might not be occupations, but that does not stop them being eminently vocational. This kind of potential makes Karmel, Mlotkowski and Awodeyi's (2008) 'non-vocational' or 'general' areas of higher education vocational in the dynamic sense.

What makes education vocational in an integrated tertiary sector: bringing back Dewey (again)

In this section I will focus on educational engagement with the vocational. I will employ the dynamic concept of the vocational because it captures the complex reality of people thinking and feeling their way through working life, creating themselves in a process full of uncertainty, sometimes 'finding themselves' during periods when their abilities and interests are challenged and enlarged in the right way by the demands and rewards of jobs. At these times of equipoise, work practice itself may be transformed through innovations introduced by a worker inclined to place their whole ingenuity, perhaps infused with education and experiences of the most diverse kinds, as well as more direct training in and mastery of the techniques and knowledge specific to the practice, at its service. Also, the dynamic concept does not lead to the paradoxical notion of non-vocational education that nevertheless serves as valuable preparation for work, and it takes us past the static relationality of Hansen's (1994) analysis to encompass multiple cycles of vocational equipoise and dissatisfaction across working life.

How should education engage with the vocational cast this way? About 14 years ago, the late Australian VET researcher John Stevenson tackled many of the concerns that animate this essay. Stevenson (1998) concluded that 'bringing back Dewey' was a way to effect a reconciliation of economic, humanistic and critical perspectives on the goals of vocational education. His analysis was critical of the influence of the economic perspective on VET, arguing that the role of the self in negotiating productive careers and driving innovation was overlooked in such a perspective, and that economic prosperity was itself threatened by the dominance of the economic perspective in the policy and practice of VET. Stevenson advocated a reconciliation of the three perspectives and showed that an appropriate model for VET could be found in the educational philosophy of Dewey. The analysis pursued in this essay leads to a similar point.

John Dewey was an American philosopher who took a keen interest in the relationship between education and social and economic progress. He strenuously argued that vocational education should not be about reproducing the existing industrial order, with its dehumanising and inequitable conditions, but rather should give workers the knowledge to transform work in the future. The economic perspective is accommodated by Dewey's vision because he was an advocate for the value of work and believed that industrial innovation was a good thing. His philosophy is humanistic because he found that the development of people was the key to these other advances, but stressed that learning, work and a productive economy are to be pursued for the sake of individuals.

To achieve these ideals, Dewey believed that the traditional division in educational thought between the 'general' and 'vocational' had to be overcome. Divisions such as this, he believed, entrench conservative regimes that discriminately allocate creativity and drudgery to different social groups, ultimately restricting the potential of society and the economy. 'But an education which acknowledges the full intellectual and social meaning of a vocation', he explains:

would include instruction in the historic background of present conditions; training in science to give intelligence and initiative in dealing with material and agencies of production; the study of economics, civics, and politics, to bring the future worker into touch with the problems of the day and the various methods proposed for its improvement. Above all, it would train [the] power of readaptation to changing conditions so that future workers would not become blindly subject to a fate imposed on them. (Dewey 1916, p.173)

This vision of vocational education identifies, in a somewhat truncated form, the features of an education with the capacity to engage with the dynamic concept of the vocational. Dewey's prescription highlights the importance of understanding immediate as well as broader contexts of occupations. This kind of knowledge, at least a tacit form, is what is developed through cycles of encounters with different jobs, occupations, occupational clusters and occupational fields. This in turn facilitates apposite job choices and also gives workers a sense of the broader directions, purposes and problems of occupations and industries that can underpin innovation. In the dynamic concept of the vocational, worker development entails the continuous transfer of knowledge between work settings, and it is Dewey's concept of training in science, or exposure to theory, that articulates with this part of the vocational. Dewey's vision also anticipates a working life in which a 'power of readaptation to changing conditions' is a positive acquisition, foregrounding a central feature of the dialectically vocational self.

I will attempt now to unpack some of Dewey's insights, picking out key ways that current vocational education and training and higher education are challenged by them, and how they might respond to them. To start with Australian VET, the most direct challenge posed by Dewey's pronouncements is to the orientation of the system to meeting 'industry needs'. The system is defined by close specification of what must be learned for competent performance in particular jobs and has in place a whole institutional apparatus for keeping abreast of and specifying industry skills needs. It hinges on effectively transmitting these specifications into the learning situation, and trainers are trained with the aim of preserving the educational intentions of the designers. It is a system that in many ways translates labour economic theorems into institutional realities as a mechanism for qualitatively and quantitatively tracking labour demand, collecting and disseminating detailed, relevant market information, and shaping supply to fine-grained specifications.

This system is pre-eminently vocational in the sense of being about jobs, but falls flat in terms of the dynamic conception of the vocational elaborated in this essay. Teaching a person the tasks that comprise a particular job in the absence of education about other aspects serves to institutionalise a set of shortcomings. It misses the opportunity to teach about the broader contexts of the occupation – its history and futures, the industry it is part of, and its challenges, allied roles, clusters and fields and the social and economic significance of the role. Knowledge of these contexts, as has been argued above, facilitates future job choices and informs innovation. Describing tasks has the effect of neglecting the knowledge structures that transcend them, and although 'underpinning knowledge' is inventoried by competency standard designers, resource constraints on the practice of VET ultimately ensure that knowledge is taken as a secondary goal, after demonstration of performance criteria. Making learning conform to the description of performance also has the effect of sidelining the complex problem of discovering what assumptions and values are held and brought into play by those competent in a role. The neglect of the attitudinal and ethical dimensions of work in our specification and teaching about jobs leaves the personal aspect of vocational learning untouched at a fundamental level. Because the meaning derived from engaging in particular job roles must be a function, at least in part, of the relationship between the values typical of an occupation and those of the worker, a whole plane of 'match' and 'mismatch' is missed by analysts and policy-makers. Our VET system, then, due to its focus on equipping for performance of current jobs, fails to be fully vocational.

A second and significant challenge of the system is the overly rigid mechanisms for comprehending and recording skill needs using the format of competency standards. This is a major paradox of Australian VET and means VET practitioners are severely constrained in the exercise of their creativity. While most are nominally free to use their judgment to design and/or conduct the activities that learners engage in, the outcomes of those activities are predetermined, promoting

train-to-the-assessment pedagogies. In turn, those who develop training packages in or for the industry skills councils are constrained by the format of competency standards and training packages. The system is ill-fitted to embrace innovation, largely due to a prior commitment to the assumptions about the demand and supply of skills springing from labour market theory.

What is needed is a curriculum that is cognisant of the tasks that make up an occupation and introduces learners to relevant contexts, knowledge structures and value structures that pertain to particular occupations, occupation clusters and fields. In terms of teaching and training to address such a curriculum, it is clear that work sites and dedicated learning spaces will both be necessary at a minimum. Tasks cannot be effectively taught away from the context of practice (Lave & Wenger 1998), and indeed, when the attempt is made to formalise context-dependent knowledge, an artificial and volatile knowledge is promoted that has quite a different life span and value from formalised context-independent knowledge (Gamble 2006). However, space is needed away from practice settings to learn about contexts, knowledge and values, and educators would need to be able to create curriculum and use pedagogies that engage learners with such complex and demanding material. Vocational curriculum should also incorporate an extensive elective structure to facilitate exploration of occupational fields and knowledge by learners. Current training package design certainly contains scope for electives, but the financial and time constraints endemic to VET dictate that few learners actually get to choose from among the 'electives' permitted in qualifications.

Higher education articulates with the dynamic concept of the vocational in quite different ways. Obviously there is the preparation of professionals that takes place in higher education, which conforms to a more orthodox view of the vocational. The education here is directed to occupations, but in contrast with VET, curriculum is derived from different sources, including analysis of practice and of the knowledge structures relevant to the goals of practice. Curriculum form, too, is differentiated according to practice fields and shaped by structures of knowledge, and then differentiated again according to institutional traditions and policies. Attention to professional identity and its development confronts learners with the value dimensions of work, engendering self-reflection and questioning. Again, the 'massiveness' (Billett 2011) of knowledge in the professions may be a spur to self-reflection and the development of awareness of abilities. In terms of the dynamic vocation concept, this kind of education addresses occupational practice in a rich way and engages the personal dimension too. Awareness of the contexts of practice may be promoted, but this is not clearly an aim of professional curricula. The more discreetly vocational part of higher education in various ways develops awareness of the contexts of occupations, by virtue of both the content of curriculum (for example, history, sociology, economics) and the elective structure of undergraduate degrees. The complexity of bodies of knowledge to which learners are exposed can foster self-reflection and questioning, while some courses explicitly engage learners in value-based reflection. Outside the development of self and the knowledge of contexts, this part of higher education does not typically address occupational practices (except induction into the occupational practices of a subject), although it may develop bodies of knowledge that come into play in some occupations (for example, mathematics).

A major challenge for higher education in the context of the dynamic concept of the vocational is how to make its wealth of knowledge accessible to everyone and on their own terms. As it stands, traditional university curriculum is organised in ways that generally demand the prolonged and continuous commitment considered necessary for the mastery of subjects. While it is clear that such learning takes time and requires sequence, the fact that most learners can derive vocational benefit without completing a subject apprenticeship suggests that a rethink of curriculum structures will be necessary, possibly beginning with degree-level studies. Perhaps the metaphor of pathways should be

supplemented by that of 'doorways', encouraging workers at all stages to dip into higher education and construct their own learning paths, potentially conforming to the traditional ones. Learners could be given the opportunity to study whatever subjects they can or need to engage in. Obviously, higher education institutions would need to be very clear about what is entailed by study at different levels and in different subjects, and be creative as well in accrediting unorthodox combinations of units and subjects. Opening up higher education knowledge development opportunities in this way would be facilitated by the fact that many undergraduate subject programs are constructed from units that have been developed quite independently and introduce a unique set of perspectives, which can often be studied and mastered as a unit. Some aspects of traditional modes of curriculum development in higher education, then, do not militate against a 'many doorways' approach.

A second challenge relates to articulating and acting on the sense of the vocational in non-professional areas of higher education curriculum. I have argued that, while some subjects are not (or not usually) occupations, they can still be vocational. While the vocationality of these higher education options is something that may cohere spontaneously during a person's vocational journey, the scope is there to make this vocational relevance explicit to learners. Since most of these subjects will address one or more of the personal, contextual or knowledge dimensions of the vocational, an effort to articulate vocational relevance does not need to be in terms of specific jobs, but would need to refer to examples of occupations, clusters or fields. Related to this challenge is how to make better use of the educational potential of practice. Dewey pointed to the value of employing practical problems to enhance learning, and his suggestions on this point were meant to serve as a way to break down the dichotomy of general and vocational modes of education. Of course, this model of learning is already a feature of some higher education programs, such as medicine, nursing and management, where problem-based, inquiry-based and case-based approaches are used. Finding ways to bring subject learning and practice contexts, including occupations, together should boost learning and help to establish the broader vocational credentials of subjects. The contiguous learning model advocated by Beckett and Hagar (2002) has even greater relevance in this context than in VET (where combinations of in-practice and out-of-practice learning modes are more common).

Conclusion

What makes education vocational in an interconnected tertiary sector? The answer to this question depends on what we mean by vocational. I have argued that the vocational is a dynamic process of the interaction between a person's configuration of abilities and interests on the one hand, and the demands and rewards of social practices such as occupations on the other. The vocational is a long-term project because an enormous amount of learning is ultimately required for a person to know about themselves, how they can relate to occupational practices, and what these practices involve. During this process there are phases in which the personal and practical are in equipoise and phases in which equipoise breaks down or builds up. People move between occupations and jobs as they learn more about themselves and occupational practices. Periods of equipoise are sought after and make for meaningful, productive and innovative work. Analyses of the secular concept of the vocational, such as Hansen's (1994), which reify the period of vocational balance, overlook the cyclical nature of modern engagement with work across working life, during which multiple moments of equipoise might be experienced, interspersed with periods of disorientation and/or steep learning. Labour market conceptions of the vocational narrow the focus even further, identifying it with practice, and then reduce practice to skills.

An integrated tertiary sector was envisaged by Bradley et al. (2008) as a means of making available to Australian students and workers a ‘continuum of tertiary skill provision’. Implicit in this vision is a narrow conception of the occupational, but potentially a rich conception of the vocational as the object of educational provision, because it calls for a system that ‘engages effectively with other education and training sectors to provide a continuum of high-quality learning opportunities *throughout an individual’s life* [author’s emphasis]’ (p.6). The concept of the vocational advanced in this essay demands an educational engagement across the tertiary sector with the capacity to develop proficiency in occupational practices and understanding of the knowledge structures that transcend specific practices. It must offer multiple contexts that encompass practices and foster self-reflection and awareness of abilities, assumptions and values. Across tertiary-level provision the potential is there to address the complex demands of a truly vocational education. But work needs to be done to make these opportunities available. The narrow focus of VET needs to be challenged so that the richness and diversity of occupational practices – the activities as well as the knowledge structures, contexts and values – are reflected in curriculum, a challenge that might be taken up initially by making curriculum innovation a priority. Higher education needs to be challenged to break down curriculum structures so that people can access the rich and diverse educational opportunities they need or see as promising, without having to subordinate themselves to onerous subject apprenticeships.

References

- Barnett, R 2000, ‘Foreword’, in *Working knowledge*, eds C Symes and J McIntyre, SRHE and Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Beckett, D & Hagar, P 2002, *Life, work and learning*, Routledge, London.
- Billett, S 2011, *Vocational education*, Springer, Dordrecht.
- Bradley, D, Noonan, P, Nugent, H & Scales, B 2008, *Review of Australian higher education*, final report, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra.
- Cully, M 2008, *Working in harmony: the links between the labour market and the education and training market in Australia*, NCVET, Adelaide.
- Dawson, J 2005, ‘A history of vocation: tracing a keyword of work, meaning, and moral purpose’, *Adult Education Quarterly*, vol.55, no.3.
- Dewey, J 2009 (1916), *Democracy and education*, Feather Trail Press, New York.
- Doyle, ME 1982, ‘Called to be an informal educator’, *Youth & Policy*, issue 65.
- Frankena, WK 1976, ‘The philosophy of vocation’, *Thought*, vol.51, no.203.
- Gamble, J 2006, ‘Theory and practice in the vocational curriculum’, in *Knowledge, curriculum and qualifications for South African further education*, eds M Young and J Gamble, HSRC Press, Cape Town.
- Gustafson, JM 1982, ‘Professions as “callings”’, *Social Service Review*, vol.56, no.4.
- Hansen, DT 1994, ‘Teaching and the sense of vocation’, *Educational Theory*, vol.44, no.3.
- Karmel, T, Mlotkowski, P & Awodeyi, T 2008, *Is VET vocational? The relevance of training to the occupations of vocational education and training graduates*, NCVET, Adelaide.
- Lave, J & Wenger, E 1993, *Situated learning*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Ross, R & Whitfield, K 2009, *The Australian labour market*, 3rd edn, Pearson Education Australia, Sydney.
- Ryan, R 2011, *How VET responds: a historical policy perspective*, NCVET, Adelaide.
- Stevenson, J 1998, ‘Finding a basis for reconciling perspectives on vocational education and training’, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Vocational Education Research*, vol.6, no.2.
- Weber, M 2001 (1930), *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, Routledge, London.
- Winch, C 2010, *Dimensions of expertise*, Continuum International Publishing Group, London.
- Young, M 2008, *Bringing knowledge back in*, Routledge, Abingdon.