

Transitions from Education to Work: Workforce ready challenges in the Asia

Pacific, edited by Roslyn Cameron, Subas Dhakal and John Burgess, Routledge, 2018, 249 pp, (Hardback), iISBN: 978-1-138-69175-9

The transition from school to work is a fundamental platform to build societies in order to sustain resilient economies. However, it remains a major labour market policy challenge across nations, largely pertaining to mismatch between skills acquired through educational provisions and those required for productivity, consequently employment and employability in globally competitive work environments. The premise of the book is grounded in contentions that mismatch between skill sets and labour market needs lead to poor productivity and unemployment. The book is organised in three parts. Part I comprises two chapters outlining the issues and challenges of work-readiness. In Part II, the authors analyse the challenges of work-readiness for labour markets in Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, India, Australia, Nepal and Laos. Asia is well represented here. Other Pacific nations are likely to present quite distinct set of challenges with work-readiness. The country cases reported in Part II cover different types of economies, education systems and industrial arrangements yet encounter common as well as distinct challenges with work-readiness of graduates. While there are consistent claims of mismatch between what graduates learn in educational institutions and what employers need, the need for greater input into the curriculum from employers is understated. Paradoxically, while a mismatch of skills and implied poor productivity is consistently argued across the nine country cases, many graduates still seem to find employment as foreign workers in other countries. The final two chapters in Part III give a synthesis of comparative analysis and conclusions.

In Chapter 1 Burgess, Cameron, Dhakal and Brown summarise a range of issues about work-readiness. Their examination and interpretations of 'work-readiness' unpacks the complex nature of this phenomenon. A clear description for the context of the book sets out a common basis for understanding the concept when reading the country chapters (3 – 11). The authors paid particular attention to discussing the key stakeholders and their roles in improving graduates' work-readiness. They contend that tertiary institutions and employers play a key role. They also mention "individuals, families, communities, organisations and governments" (p. 12) as important investors. In all the discussions

throughout the book, the important role of learners and their responsibilities seem to be shadowed under commentaries about other actors.

In Chapter 2, Nankervis, Prikshat and Cameron, review wide sources of literature to elaborate on work-readiness in the context of Asia-Pacific economies. Their thorough analysis of the models and taxonomies forms an informative background to the phenomenon. The taxonomy of 'soft' graduate competencies summarised in Table 2.2 (see p. 28) is a useful tool for understanding eight key competencies that are quoted by employers as being important, yet lacking in graduates. The use of stakeholder theory to explain the roles and responsibilities of the various actors is clear and convincing when reading how the contributions of each stakeholder can assist in enhancing work-readiness of graduates. Their discussion is comprehensive, though falls short of highlighting weak links between the formal and workplace curriculum. Nankervis, Prikshat and Cameron's point about attitudes, values and expectations held by generation Y are cautionary, yet noteworthy. These are the attributes employers report to be lacking most. Even if all the well informed suggestions by the various authors are to be implemented, transformations in mind-sets of young graduates will be imperative to ensure all parties are fully engaged and genuinely committed to work-readiness efforts.

In Part II, each of the country chapters follow a clear structure, commencing with the national labour market and economic context, demographics, education systems, work-readiness challenges and issues, policy initiatives and suggested strategies. Such a neatness in structure, and a final summary tabled at the end of each country chapter offers readers with a 'at a glance' view of the cases. The summaries provide a synopsis that is to be read in the context of each country being at its own stage of economic development; different demography of the working population; different education systems and accreditation processes; disparate levels of industry engagement and contributions; varying policy responses; and assorted investments.

In Chapter 3, Chang and Connell succinctly describe the disparity between labour demand and supply in Taiwan. A point that they highlight is the tension between education sectors (i.e. Vocational colleges and universities), and the standing of qualifications awarded by each. Although universities are described to be more 'vocationalised', the curriculum still remains 'academised', (p.51) that is, principally

theoretical and lacking in practical aspects. The quality of the curriculum and teaching staff are questioned. The mention of customised courses commissioned by employers is a distinct model in Taiwan - meeting the needs of individuals as well as employers. The authors acknowledge an unusual trend among youth who they describe as the 'flash generation' – frequently exiting employment because they are unable to cope with pressure. They stresses the mismatch between expectations and reality, and modern parental protectionism. Aside to suggestions of relaxed controls on employment of foreign workers and revision of labour laws, the authors recommend revitalisation of the education system, appraisal of the curriculum and teacher training, and collaborative strategies shared between key stakeholders as the way forward.

Nguyen and Ngoc's Chapter 4 on Vietnam report that young people have a strong preference for university qualifications although the programs fall short of meeting the skills demand by employers. Almost a quarter of graduates find it difficult to secure jobs in the areas they studied. The quality of training that is determined by resources at hand instead of what the market requires is detailed. Nguyen and Ngoc provide a very candid description of the issues (see p. 78) that are common across all national cases in the book. They go on to make recommendations for government policy, higher education institutions and for employers.

The issues with work-readiness in Malaysia are no different to most other nations. The accounts presented by Salleh, Emelifeonwu, Winterton and Chan in Chapter 5 suggest that language and personality traits (values/attitudes) especially towards what they describe as the '3D' (dirty, difficult and dangerous) jobs that are high in demand is of concern to the country. The standing of occupations seem to influence graduates' willingness to engage in employment. Like in Taiwan, Malaysian parents seem to have a greater say on occupations young people would engage in. The reluctance of employers in providing on the job training for fear of poaching by other enterprises through higher pay rates is a universal issue. The authors suggest strategies for educational institutions (see p. 98) though these seem limited in addressing issues with developing soft skills. There are a number of Malaysian Government frameworks already in place for reforms by 2020 which the authors suggest will in time respond to issues with work-readiness in the country.

Chapter 6 on the Indonesian case by Priyono and Nankervis reiterates issues that are common in Taiwan, Vietnam and Malaysia. That is, the quality of skilling does not meet industry needs, employers are not willing to train workers, and the low status of vocational education. The authors quote a number of reviews and evaluations by international agencies (e.g. OECD, UNESCO, World Bank). Although there are claims of poor skilling, Indonesia provides substantial number of workers as foreign labour. According to Priyono and Nankervis, the curriculum for technical vocational education and training (TVET) is obsolete. They recommend site based education to meet local needs, collaborations between government, industry and education institutions, recognition of prior learning, and certification to maintain consistent standards and competencies. Their suggestion for greater internationalisation of the curriculum is rational.

The Singapore case in Chapter 7 is quite different to those in other Asian countries in that the systems draw heavily on the Australian education system as well as from leading European nations. Waring, Vas and Bali present a comprehensive account of recent reforms to appraise the continuing education and training system in Singapore. A focus on employability and portability of skills across industries is futures oriented – not mentioned in other case chapters. Singapore’s plan for early career as well as mid-career employees reflects a lifelong learning agenda. The government provides incentives for individuals as well as employers to reach national initiatives. Waring et al. summarise recent reforms with clear goals and measures.

The Indian case in Chapter 8 is written by Prikshat, Kumar and Raje. While India is well placed to make contributions to the global economy, reports claim an alarming percentage (between 75 and 80) may lack skills for a growing labour market. The authors outline seven key policy initiatives. Prikshat and his co-authors bring to light the potential for India to become the largest contributor to the global workforce, necessitating work-readiness as a key national priority. Their recommendations include stronger collaborations between stakeholders, private sector participation, appraisal of the curriculum and pedagogical approaches, quality teacher training, and practical components to provide opportunities in the context of work.

Montague, Connell and Mumme’s Chapter 9, based on Australia, explains the complexities in sustaining an internationally recognised system to remain competitive.

Australia, like Singapore, has a specific challenge - respond to an aging workforce to be replaced with work ready graduates. Even as a developed country, there is a need to further improve educational policies. The summary of core work-related abilities, basic and functional skills in Figure 9.2 provide a wide-ranging yet succinct set of attributes for work-readiness. Montague and his colleagues suggest strategies common for other nations, but extend to include changes to education frameworks, increased funding and incentives, and regulation of private section education providers.

The context of Nepal in Chapter 10, by Dhakal, is quite distinct from other cases. Records on skills gaps and industry requirements are sketchy according to Dhakal. The country relies heavily on donor nations to support skills based education and training. There are limited provisions to narrow the gap between what graduates learn and what employers need. However, specialised skills training programs seem to adequately prepare high numbers of outbound workers. In other words, the skilling process serves the labour markets of foreign countries. Dhakal suggests a clear higher education policy framework is necessary, and there needs to be a stronger link between industry and education providers.

The final chapter (11) in Part II by Apayvanh is from Laos. Employers in Laos experience waves of transitional workers who are available mainly during off –farming seasons. The quality and quantity of graduates is reported to be an issue. Graduates expect high wages and large number of young workers tend to emigrate across borders (e.g. Thailand). Apavanh highlights the lack of qualified trainers and instructors, explaining that they do not have access to adequate facilities, pedagogical strategies, and industry experience. He recommends greater reforms in the TVET sector instead of universities.

The first of two chapters in Part III (Chapter 12) is by Dhakal, Burgess, Cameron and Nankervis who present a comparative perspective on work-readiness challenges in the Asia Pacific region. They draw on the case reports in chapters 3 to 11 to provide an overarching framework. In comparing the different perspectives, they look at key issues in terms of the history and scope of educational sectors, skills shortages and associated issues, policy gaps and challenges, and innovative employment initiatives in response to the various challenges. They contend that without the concerted efforts of all stakeholders, work-readiness issues will remain unresolved.

In Chapter 13, Cameron, Burgess, Dhakal and Mumme provide a concise conclusion to the book. They commence with the key issues and challenges, followed by the influence of regional 'megaforces' (p.236) as the major impetus for changes to work-readiness efforts. They then highlight an urgency to address skill mismatches to sustain economic and social imperatives. Cameron and her colleagues draw on the cases in Part II to summarise stakeholder responsibilities. They also suggest skills mobility and international skills recognition and go on to recommend ASEAN regional and global partnerships. They conclude the book with a list of strategies and solutions, and areas for future research.

Overall, the content reflects the purpose listed by the editors. The book makes a significant contribution to the field of work-readiness of young people and will be of interest to stakeholders who can contribute to improving systems and processes to skilling graduates for employment, employability and productivity.