

**Perspectives on enhancing the standing of vocational education  
and the occupations it serves (Editorial)**

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## Perspectives on enhancing the standing of vocational education and the occupations it serves

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The societal standing of vocational education is often perceived to be low, compared with other education sectors, albeit more so in some countries than others. However, this issue of standing is global and prevalent in countries with both developed and developing economies (UNESCO 2019). The consequences of this low standing can be profound. They include how governments, industry, enterprises and communities view and sponsor vocational education, and what constitutes its purposes, form and its administration. These perceptions also shape how both young and older people elect to engage with (i.e. preferred, non-preferred choice) and participate in vocational education provisions. Its standing also shapes how parents advise about it and employers' willingness to engage with its provisions (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2018; UNESCO, 2018). These factors have never been more salient than in an era in which young people and their parents have high aspirations about work and working life, and whom desire high status, clean and well-paid occupations. Aakrog (2020) suggests this generation of young people is quite different in their approach to selecting occupations than their parents. Contemporaneously, it has been suggested that traditions, familial expectations and material considerations as well as strong desire for self-realisation underpin contemporary decision-making about post school options (Clement 2014). Certainly, the relationship between occupations and the standing of VET is profound and enduring. Overtime, it has been the voices and sentiments of powerful others (e.g. aristocrats, theocrats, bureaucrats and academics) that have shaped the discourses about the standing of occupations and their preparation (Billett, 2014). Almost all these sentiments have been developed through perspectives that fail to acknowledge the complexity of much of these occupational activities, nor an understanding of the requirements to develop the capacities to perform those tasks.

So, in many ways, this privileging has and continues to come at a cost to the standing, processes of and goals for this important educational sector. Perhaps this has never more been the case than in an era of high aspirations and expectations by young people and their parents, when decisions about preferred occupations are made in the absence of knowledge about them and their enactment. This circumstance is seemingly leading a growing percentage of young people to move away from considering VET as a viable post-school option.

Indeed, governmental concerns in countries with advanced industrial economies about the development of technical skills and young people's preference for higher education (i.e. university) over VET are pertinent here. The UK is experiencing declining levels of participation in courses for advanced technical skills required for contemporary and emerging economic needs (Wolf, 2016), and in Germany it is claimed to be having difficulty securing adequate numbers of quality apprentices. This has led to competition amongst companies to secure such apprentices (Deissinger – per com). South Korea has long struggled to attract young people to manufacturing work that sustains its economy (Cho & Apple, 1998). This issue of participation is not restricted to schooling and entry-level occupational preparation. There are also growing concerns about low levels of adult competence in technologically-driven work, and engagement with continuing education and training, in many countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operational and Development, 2013). CEDEFOP and BiBB recently held a joint international symposium to address the issue of the low standing of vocational education and its economic consequences. One idea being proposed widely is to have provide higher educational courses through VET institutions and have apprentice degrees to enhance their status is but one response being mooted. It is also suggested that the degree and extent of connectedness amongst education systems, social partners and local communities is an indicator of the relative esteem in which VET is held (Clement 2014). 0

These issues highlight how the issue of parity of esteem that plays out in at least two circumstances. Firstly, where VET is taken to be an element of upper secondary schooling, comparisons with general or

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academic education within schooling is inevitable. In such comparisons, and in the contemporary press for schools to pair people for university education, there is a risk that VET will be seen primarily for those who perform poorly in schooling. Secondly, where VET comprises a post-schooling activity, it is compared with the processes and outcomes of higher education. This factor alone (i.e. the different forms and locations of VET) emphasises the need to understand provisions of VET from a range of perspectives. These include how it is manifested in particular countries, its relationship to other education sectors in those countries and how occupations are perceived in those countries (Cedefop, 2014).

This special issue aims to elaborate the sources of the low standing of vocational education and training (VET) and the occupations it serves (Billett 2014), their manifestation in the countries represented in the special issue and, importantly, how this can be redressed. The special issue is informed by the following questions.

*How can vocational education's standing be enhanced to secure greater participation and better educational outcomes for its graduates?*

*Informing sub-questions:*

*What shapes community members' perceptions of vocational education and the occupations it serves?*

*What has to change to realise enhanced engagement by students and support from parents and employers?*

This special issue comprises country perspectives from Denmark (Vibe Aakrog), Finland (Heta Rintala Petri & Nokelainen), Norway (Hilde Hiim), Switzerland (Barbara Stalder & Fabienne Lüthi a), Israel (Mirit Haybi-Barak & Avihu Shoshana), Spain (Ignacio Martínez-Morales and Fernando Marhuenda-Fluixá) and Australia (Stephen Billett, Sarojni Choy and Steven Hodge). Each of these papers discusses factors associated with the standing of vocational education from the particular country perspective.

#### A global concern manifested locally

Although the low standing of vocational education and the occupations it serves is a global concern, its manifestations and, therefore, impact and potential remedies are likely to be quite country distinct. For instance, (Martínez-Morales & Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2020) report significant improvements in the standing of Spanish vocational education because of reforms introduced to enhance the quality of the education, the greater alignment between content taught in experiences provided and the requirements of workplaces. Here, this structuring and reforms were in response to some of the vocational education provision being largely informal, unstructured and unregulated. Yet, for other countries where these kinds arrangements are well established, other concerns emerge. For instance, in Germany the opportunities available to and high aspirations of young people is seeing apprenticeships becoming a less preferred option, for instance. Moreover, how vocational education is positioned in the education system and structure is highly diverse across nation states. Whilst some countries, such as UK, Australia and Germany have distinct and separate vocational education sectors and institutions, others to a greater or lesser degree are embedded within schooling and postschool educational institutions that are primarily concerned with general education (e.g. US). When vocational education is embedded in senior schools, the distinction between so-called 'academic' and 'vocational' tracks is perhaps more distinct than when there is a separate sector and specialised institutions focusing on vocational education (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2018). Even here, there are local factors and trajectories. For instance, in Spain, initially it was important to relocate specific vocational education provisions in schools to emphasise rigour and quality of education. Later, specialist vocational education schools emerged as a development from this initial relocation.

Switzerland also presents a distinct country specific case. Here, up to 70% of school leavers participate in vocational education. So, unlike other countries, participation is not so much policy concern, but the overall outcomes for completers. Central here is the progression to higher education and to augment vocational qualifications with degrees, thereby will be realising work-related outcomes for vocational

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education students that are comparable with those who participated directly to higher education (Stalder & Luthia, 2020). Then, in Finland, a large component of the vocational education student cohort are adults and whose engagement in initial vocational education is not primarily a follow-on from school, but something as into in early adult life. In this country, policy goals are often associated with the quality of the learning experience and how this can assist students and graduates developing kind of capacities that will be effective in workplaces. Hence, there is a key focus on learning environments (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020).

The point here is that the specific issues associated standing of vocational education and considerations of how it might be addressed, inevitably need to consider and account for the particular local circumstances, which includes the majority of the vocational education system, separation from school and its alignments with the requirements of occupational performance in workplaces.

### Discourse

While the discourse across countries, both those reported in here and elsewhere appears to be quite consistent, in terms of the relative unattractiveness of the occupations that vocational education serves and as an educational sector. The key exceptions here is Switzerland where vocational education is held in relatively high esteem and there are high levels of participation. Elsewhere, it is often viewed as an option for those without the abilities to progress to higher education (Cedefop 2019). All of this generates a powerful societal discourse that is hard to negotiate around and has implications for the attractiveness of vocational education, and also how it is positioned as an educational sector and the kind of support it receives. In this special issue, (Haybi-Barak & Shoshana, 2020) draw out the very sharp distinctions made between 'technological education' and 'vocational education'. The former is seen to represent modern and emerging forms of work that are high status and important for the economy and, the latter, associated with skills that are manual, menial and associated with earlier forms of work. Moreover, the distinction extends to the kinds of people who participate in each of these two sectors. In particular, vocational education is associated with lower educated migrants who exist on the periphery of Israeli society, and who make martial contributions to the economy. These kinds of views echoed back to Hellenic Greece were Socrates and Plato dismissed the work of Artisans as being unworthy of Freeborn weeks. What is palpable in this paper is the deeply entrenched societal view about vocational education, the occupations it serves and those who participate in it.

The Barak article, perhaps more clearly than has been depicted elsewhere, illuminates how government decisions about vocational education play out. What this article serves to emphasise is that although social marketing can be used to encourage participation in vocational education that unless it is held in high regard within government, it will continue to be positioned as of low status, for young people with no other options and limited in its educational scope. As elsewhere, the projection of these kinds of societal sentiments is reflected in how vocational education is seen in the community, and, accordingly, how people come to engage with it. So, whilst a key concern is about the standing of the occupations that vocational education serves, both are also shaped by these kinds of societal sentiments. So, as is evident across a range of initiatives to enhance the status of vocational education, such approaches will be unproductive unless a more informed and impartial discourse is enacted.

People might suggest that the case for parity between vocational and higher education is closed. That may be so, but societal discourse that is positive and productive rather than inherently negative is required for not only the viability of the provision, but also for the sense of self of those who work in the sector and those who are vocational education students. Noteworthy here is the focus of Stadler's (2020) contribution that indicates how personal resources that are central to securing effective job outcomes include individuals' appraisal of their worthiness, effectiveness and capabilities as a person. Persistent societal sentiments about the low standing of vocational education and the occupation it serves works against these important resources. In this way, Stadler makes the point that all too often the standing of vocational

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education is measured in terms of student enrolment rate, employer engagement or prestige. Yet, other measures such as those that support positive learning outcomes for young people, including pathways to higher education become salient. Here, (Aakrog, 2020) comment about strategies not being sufficient, is very evident.

### Policy goals and initiatives

Given the country-based distinctiveness of these issues, the policy goals and initiatives associated with this low standing can be quite nationally distinct. For instance, in Norway (Hiim, 2020) and Denmark (Aakrog, 2020) there is a clear effort to improve retention in vocational education programs, which are a common form of postschool education. Hence, efforts about improving the standing of vocational education are directed towards improving its quality. This includes specific teacher education, curriculum reforms and to more closely align what is taught and experienced in Norwegian, for instance, to align vocational education provisions with the requirements of work (Hiim, 2020). In Finland, there is a concern also about declining numbers of school leavers who are progressing into vocational education (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020). Yet, in Denmark, for instance, the focus that is on elevating the standing of vocational education through making entry requirements more difficult and making the institutions and programs more attractive to young people (Aakrog, 2020). However, the consequence appears to have been a less inclusive provision of education, and one that excludes socially marginalised students, including those from migrant backgrounds. In Spain, initial reforms of vocational education were directed towards addressing issues of low literacy of those participating in vocational education institutions (Martínez-Morales & Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2020). Hence, the need to integrate vocational education provisions with schooling in which the academic curriculum is being enacted. Later, curriculum initiatives were enacted to make the content and focus less on 'academic' considerations and more on those associated with the requirements of work.

Also, to overcome views that vocational education is 'dead end', arrangements are being implemented to ensure that there is articulation to higher education. This is salient consideration. As mentioned, it seems that, at least in Switzerland, when there is a pathway from initial vocational education to higher education that the employment and salary outcomes are equivalent to those going directly to university (Stalder & Luthia, 2020). Moreover, it was found that not only levels of salary, but also measures of work quality (i.e. discretion and collegiate interactions) or equivalent also arise from progression on these pathways.

It is perhaps noteworthy that countries that have mature vocational education systems, as reported here Finland (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020) and Switzerland (Stadler 2020) have relatively positive status and standing compared with countries that have weak, underdeveloped or fractious systems, and not just in western countries (UNESCO, 2018). Consistently, countries have well-funded systems, trained teachers and constructive relations with community and industry (Billett, 2013). There are also efforts to provide experiences in workplaces and effectively integrate those experiences into the students' program of study (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020). This is part of an overall concern about the quality of learning environments.

An indicator of that maturity is the provision of qualifications that are accepted and respected. It is noted that the standing of qualifications at the commencement of working life are a key determinant for productive career progression and quality of work (Stalder 2020).

### Curriculum initiatives and practices

Curriculum initiatives associated with enhancing the status of vocational education also differ depending upon the kind of goals that are attempted to be achieved. For instance, in Norway curriculum initiatives attempt to make the curriculum more theoretically premised were intended to make it more educationally attractive to young people (Hiim, 2020). Moreover, the structuring of an initial broadly focused set of experiences to address broad industry sectors rather than specific occupations was an attempt to render it less narrow. In Denmark, the initiatives include providing youth orientated learning environments,

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transition from vet to higher education, improving the quality of training and provision of workplace experiences (Aakrog, 2020). In Australia, information strategies are being deployed by both federal and state governments to inform students about occupations and vocational education in ways intended to promote informed and impartial decision-making about postschool pathways (Billett, Choy, & Hodge, 2020). As noted, in Spain there were a series of reforms to initially dignify and give greater educational rigour to vocational education and then to make it more relevant to the world of work and occupation it serves (Martínez-Morales & Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2020). Hence, initial reforms were aimed to provide more general education, which later was overturned by considerations about modernising the vocational education provision to make it more occupationally relevant with the guidance of industry stakeholders.

In Denmark, a five-day programs introduced into schooling to assist young people make decisions about postschool pathways. However, it seems that this is not wholly effective, possibly because the career guidance counsellors were not equipped for the role (Aakrog, 2020). For students who had decided their occupation, this program did little to change their choice, and for those who haven't, it seemed not to be impactful. When appraising the series of reforms in Denmark, Aakrog (2020) concludes that these initiatives are not sufficient. That is, intentional initiatives that do not engage or help young people, from their perspective, may be fruitless.

### Pedagogic practices

Issues associated with improving pedagogic practices to make the learning experiences better and to address specific educational concern such as the development of conceptual knowledge also feature here in Finland, Denmark, Norway and Spain. For instance, in attempts to dignify vocational education in Norway (Hiim, 2020), an emphasis on improving teacher quality through a more extended period of preparation has been introduced. Here, there is a specific attempt to address the parity question by providing students with educational experiences which are designed and enacted by qualified teachers. The provision of workplace experiences in the curriculum is adopted to enhance relevance and the provision of authentic work experiences, for instance in Denmark. Yet, as with curriculum initiatives, without actions to find ways of engaging with young people and their parents, these structures alone may be insufficient. So, whilst governmental action often focuses on enhancing the provision of vocational education, seeking to align its purposes and processes with the world of work, unless what is being proposed is going to engage young people, it may not be very effective.

### **Conclusion**

What is evident across these abstracts is that how VET is manifested and is standing is, by degree, quite country specific. Because of this, what constitutes its standing and efforts to enhance the standing require a consideration of the specific national historical, institutional and contemporary context. All of this reinforces a conclusion from a Cedepof study (2014) that sought to identify means to enhance the attractiveness of VET for young people. It concluded that no single approach or single factor could assist address this problem because of the complex of factors and their varied across countries in their study. Nevertheless, it is possible to propose that factors such as decent and well-regarded occupations, prospects of employment and desirability for young people are likely to be elements that will attract and retain interest. Such a complex of factors suggests that the actions of governmental agencies and institutions are likely to be required. This can extend to governments acting to provide more transparent pathways, promoting higher forms of vocational education, engaging with industry and professional groups to promote the standing of programs and outcomes, and also schools and school teachers playing an important role in redressing a parity of esteem issues within schooling, and proposing VET as a viable educational option, premised upon employability outcomes. Hence, social partners in the form of schools, but also those in local communities working to make accessible and attractive what constitutes the

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employment destinations for VET graduates. The local aspects are important, as it is within local communities that parents and young people make choices about their pathways to working life. Hence, advice, options and opportunities at the local level may become necessary prerequisites for advancing practice of vocational education and training. In this way, the connectedness of vocational education and training institutions, the communities they serve and broader educational provisions are likely to be key foundations for enhancing the status and attractiveness of VET to young people.

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