



This article critically examines the meaning of "sustainability" in vocational education and training (VET). It argues that VET is too often narrowly framed by the demands of the labor market rather than realizing its potential to challenge inequality and transform lives. Inspired by John Dewey's vision for VET as an agent of social change, the article draws on theories of expertise, workplace learning, and policy analysis to advocate for a more expansive approach. It introduces an analytical framework contrasting expansive and restrictive VET characteristics. The article concludes by questioning restrictive assumptions about expertise and posing reflective questions on how VET institutions, workplaces, and policies can embrace more holistic, empowering and democratic visions of VET's role in building individual and societal capacity.

Schlagworte: sustainability; vocational education and training (VET); berufliche Bildung; beruflicher Identitäten; digitale Teilhabe; Österreichische Berufsbildungsforschungskonferenz (BBFK)

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# Sustainability of what and for whom?: unlocking the educational, democratic, and disruptive potential of VET

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## Abstract

This article critically examines the meaning of “sustainability” in vocational education and training (VET). It argues that VET is too often narrowly framed by the demands of the labor market rather than realising its potential to challenge inequality and transform lives. Inspired by John Dewey’s vision for VET as an agent of social change, the article draws on theories of expertise, workplace learning, and policy analysis to advocate for a more expansive approach. It introduces an analytical framework contrasting expansive and restrictive VET characteristics. The article concludes by questioning restrictive assumptions about expertise and posing reflective questions on how VET institutions, workplaces, and policies can embrace more holistic, empowering and democratic visions of VET’s role in building individual and societal capacity.

## Introduction

In 1915, the American philosopher, John Dewey outlined his vision for ‘a kind of vocational education which will first alter the existing industrial system, and ultimately transform it’ (cited in Labaree 2010, p. 9). We can see, therefore, that he anticipated a key theme of the conference – the potential of VET as a ‘change agent’. Using Dewey’s bold statement as the catalyst for my keynote lecture, I built on his conception of vocational education as a means for pursuing democratic values and to enable individuals to build the capabilities they need to resist and challenge power and inequality in a changing world. In doing so, I explored the positive and negative dimensions of the concept of sustainability in the context of vocational education and training (VET) from the perspectives of pedagogy, curricula, and policymaking. I argued that VET policy, practice and research is too often framed by the norms of an overly restrictive view of the world of work and would benefit from some ‘expansive’ thinking. Sadly, Dewey’s vision was swept aside in the 1920s by the proponents of the ‘social efficiency’ movement in the United States of America who viewed VET as a vehicle for preparing ‘non-

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academic' children to take their place in what was becoming an increasingly stratified labour market and society (Unwin 2016).

The call for VET to meet rather than also question or even transform the needs of the economy continues to play a major role in the way VET is conceived and organised in many countries (including my own – see Unwin 2019). I am not, of course, suggesting that VET should abandon its central role in ensuring people develop the types of expertise they need to earn a living and provide access to the types of work they will find satisfying and enriching as well as ensuring they have the capability to withstand economic, technological, and societal change. A key part of my argument is that the world of work (and workplaces – however defined) and the world of education have much to learn from and teach each other. VET straddles both these worlds and, hence, challenges educational norms through:

- its use of social and (situated) theories of learning.
- its recognition of the importance of horizontal as well as vertical progression.
- its combination of sites of learning – workplace, workshop and classroom – resulting in the recognition that 'learners' bring capabilities and knowledge from one site to another and have the capacity to show their 'teachers' new ways of working.
- its deployment of different types of 'teachers'.
- its focus on multiple outcomes – expertise, identity, maturation – and range of assessment methods.

Yet, when VET is viewed through the narrow lens of its position within a country's education system (sometimes defined as an 'alternative pathway' and contrasted with so-called academic education), it can become restricted to serving narrowly defined purposes and loses its potential to transform lives and society more generally. Despite the growth in what is now often termed 'higher vocational education' and hybrid qualifications that allow movement between and within vocational and academic pathways, it is perhaps surprising how much research and debate continues to inhabit the same separated tramlines of IVET (initial vocational education and training) and CVET (continuing vocational education and training). This continues to cause problems for comparative studies as researchers struggle to move beyond definitional barriers. What is clear is that all countries continue to face considerable challenges in adapting, enhancing, and sustaining their VET provision. Those challenges include the extended school-to-work transition and demographic shifts, the willingness of employers to contribute to costs, the pull factor of higher education, structural changes in local and national labour markets, and the impact of technological innovation on employment and work organisation (Cedefop 2018). Increasingly, we need to view these challenges through the lens of climate change. And this is where we encounter the concept of 'sustainability'. Number eight in the United Nations' Sustainability Goals, which connect improving global equality and prosperity with the protection of the planet, aims to: 'Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all'. This is supported by goal 16 (peaceful and inclusive soci-

eties), goal 4 (inclusive education and promotion of lifelong learning), and goal 5 (gender equality and empowerment of women). The notion of 'sustainability' requires, therefore, a disruption in the current way many societies are organised and, in relation to this paper, how VET is conceived, organised, and practised.

In the rest of this paper, I briefly review the issues I highlighted in the keynote lecture as being central to debates about which aspects of VET should be sustained and which disrupted, and how VET can work as a change agent. I have provided references for those readers who wish to follow-up any of the points raised in the paper which are of interest and/or which I have only been able to refer to here in a shorthand way.

## Unsettling continuities and new challenges

One of the most noticeable impacts of the recent Covid-19 epidemic in the United Kingdom (UK) was the realisation by the government, the media, and the population more broadly that the definition of a 'key worker' needed to be widened beyond the obvious categories of health professionals such as doctors and nurses. The country suddenly realised the value to everyday lives (and the economy) of lorry drivers (delivering food and other vital commodities), supermarket staff, cleaners, transport workers, and other taken-for-granted occupations. Whilst sadly this recognition may be temporary, there was at least a moment of public reflection about the deep-rooted, almost subliminal nature of occupational prejudice and how a society's well-being was dependent on an interconnected web of multivariate forms of expertise. A key inspiration for Dewey was the great American poet, Walt Whitman, whose 1855 poem 'A Song for Occupations' provides a democratic celebration of the expertise and contribution to society of people doing what might be called 'ordinary' jobs. Whitman lists not only the occupations but also the artefacts created as part of the work process. His poetry throws out a challenge to the way occupations are ranked in national education systems and the consequent reductive approach to the design of curricula. Stripping the vocational curriculum to a list of basic competences squeezes out what Livingstone and Sawchuck (2003) refer to as occupational 'hidden knowledge' and, therefore, the broader educative potential of VET.

Breaking out of the straightjacket of reductive occupational hierarchies will require considerable effort, partly because we have to face-up to the reality of the dark side of the world of work and society more generally where continuities such as exploitation and prejudice still abound. The impact of these continuities can be clearly seen in the gender divides that still characterise participation in apprenticeships and full-time VET programmes. Detailed and updated knowledge and understanding of the lived reality of work and workplaces must, therefore, be central to any vision for VET. This goes beyond an individualised approach to the analysis of occupational competences that separates an occupation from its context.

The heterogeneity of workplaces has always been a challenge for VET and for VET research. The pace of change in the way many workplaces (including spaces such as

homes, trains, cafes etc.) are organised has increased in intensity for a range of reasons including developments in technologies such as automation, Artificial Intelligence, and the increasing dominance of what Haskel and Westlake (2018) term ‘intangible assets’ (ideas, brand marketing, networks). The focus on maintaining customer loyalty has added to a renewed emphasis on cognitive and interpersonal capacities. This is as apparent in craft or artisanal employment (e. g. barbering, brewing, textiles) at both the high end (e. g. expensive handmade Swiss watches) to the high street (e. g. particularly in food) as it is in manufacturing (see Lahiff et al. 2019 for a study of aerospace engineering apprentices in England and Germany).

In their study of the Swiss watch industry’s response to Japanese competition in the 1980s, the economic geographers, Jeannerat and Crevoisier (2011), identified the following ways in which those involved enacted the required transformation:

- focus on authenticity and aesthetic appeal of their historic craft tradition.
- deployment of new synthetic knowledge to institute cross-industry technological improvements and modularise production.
- collaboration with the fashion industry and other producers of luxury goods to broaden the types and levels of expertise required to shift into a new way of working.
- combination of craft heritage and modern technology – long-standing VET practices of skill formation + learning new techniques required to meet new production standards.

Contemporary workplaces require people to cross boundaries, work in teams, work in a project-based way, thus breaking down rigid concepts of hierarchies of skill and expertise (though we should remember that this does not necessarily affect pay scales and conditions).

## Using an analytical and relational approach

Alison Fuller and I have drawn on Wrzesniewski and Dutton’s (2001) concept of ‘job crafting’ to reveal how people in occupations as seemingly diverse as hospital porters and university academics find ways to disrupt their restrictive job descriptions to better utilise the breadth of their expertise (Fuller/Unwin 2017). We connected these insights to our long-standing research on the diverse ways in which workplaces are organised and managed (see inter alia, Fuller/Unwin 2010). This enabled us to conceptualise workplace diversity within what we termed the Expansive-Restrictive Framework. The framework is comprised of characteristics that employers and VET institutions can interrogate as part of their discussions about how to sustain, enhance and change their practices. The best workplaces instinctively generate learning opportunities by organising work in ways that enable people to share and create knowledge and solve problems together as part of their everyday interactions. This relational approach was central to the original development of the framework and to its subsequent iterations (see Fuller/

Unwin 2019). It has enabled us to work with a range of employers and VET institutions, and related bodies such as trade unions to reposition VET as a change agent for expanding the capacity of both organisations and individuals. A key question for VET institutions (and educational institutions in general including universities) is how far they reflect expansive characteristics and what is stopping some of them from doing so.

The framework does not represent a binary divide – most organisations will shift along a continuum from expansive to restrictive according to the circumstances shaped by the productive system in which they sit (see Felstead et al. 2009 and Unwin 2017 for more details). Every public or private sector workplace, regardless of size or type, is part of a productive system comprising two interlinked axes displaying the social and technical relations of the production process): (i) the vertical axis contains the interconnections of scale, or ‘structures of production’, from the top layer (e. g. ownership of a company) down to an individual workplace; and (ii) the horizontal axis which contains the ‘stages of production’. Publicly funded VET institutions sit within a government-led productive system, but private sector VET providers will also be subject to government regulation. Using the productive system concept helps employers and VET institutions and researchers pinpoint where they might want to focus their attention when seeking to better understand the factors helping or hindering improving quality in, for example, apprenticeships.

The expansive-restrictive framework can also be used to analyse the nature of VET policymaking. Using this approach, we could construct an idealised model of VET to stimulate questions about how far VET policies (or a nation’s overarching policy stance) are enabling us to move further towards Dewey’s vision.

### **Expansive characteristics**

- VET framed as holistic and dynamic model of learning across the life course.
- VET’s lifeblood is the dynamic phenomenon of occupational expertise.
- VET develops learner agency to challenge outdated work organisation and practices.
- VET learns from embracing workplace innovation.
- Building workplace capacity seen as prerequisite for ensuring VET can reach its goals.
- VET programmes build a platform for educational and occupational progression – vertical and horizontal.
- VET institutions incentivised to collaborate with employers/sector bodies on innovative programme design collaborative projects.

### **Restrictive characteristics**

- VET framed as vehicle for developing competences in young people based on strictly defined occupational standards.
- VET shapes learners to fit in with existing work practices and cultures.
- VET is slow to respond to workplace innovation.

- VET programmes build a permeable platform for educational and occupational progression within limited occupational and educational boundaries.
- VET institutions funded to recruit learners, meet assessment requirements, and meet employer/sector body needs.

## Implications for Curricula and Pedagogy

David Guile and I (Guile/Unwin 2022) have recently drawn on ideas from the fields of communication studies and cultural sociology to explore the implications of the changes in work organisation and practice for the way expertise is conceived and, as a result, how it is developed. In particular, we were inspired by Barbour et al.'s (2016) concept of expertise as a 'capacity for action' because it captures the way in which expertise involves the capacity to think and act in different ways in response to context and the people involved and encountered (both within and outside the workplace). Viewed in this way, expertise has four dimensions:

- **Autonomous** – expert acquires relevant training and accumulates experience to be able to perform at a level superior to a novice.
- **Attributed** – label of expert is afforded by relevant others.
- **Negotiated** and **contingent** – a phenomenon whose meaning and status is constantly in flux.
- **Communicated** – experts have to communicate their expertise through practice in order to be acknowledged as experts.

We also drew on Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) taxonomy, 'economies of worth', because it speaks to the ways in which expertise is shaped by the contexts in which it emerges and/or encounters: the *market* world; the *inspired* world; the *civic* world; the *domestic* world; the *fame* world; and the *industrial* world (see also Kuhn/Rennstam 2016). In other work, Thévenot, Moody, and Lafaye (2000) included a *green* world in which value relates to the criterion of sustainability criteria. We applied our reading of these ideas to two studies from different occupational fields, both of which are central to VET in many countries: a) a comparison in which I was involved of the training of aerospace engineering apprentices in England and Germany (Lahiff et al. 2019); and b) an ethnographic study of an African American hair salon in New York City (Majors 2015). Some of the insights we drew from this are:

- Communicating with a range of internal and external actors affords recognition of expertise beyond trainers/trainers
- Conversations between clients and between clients and stylists create 'participation structures that invite engagement with complex problem solving' – this informs pedagogical practices in the VET schools (Majors 2015, p. 5)
- Aerospace workplaces overturn concept of the 'novice' by developing apprentices' capacity for problem-solving through early immersion in production/project teams where apprentices are expected to contribute ideas and to solve disputes.

Throughout my career as a VET researcher and one who has had the privilege of conducting research in a wide range of workplaces, I would argue that we need to disrupt some assumptions about expertise and the nature of workplace environments, to take account of:

- The shift away from individualised towards collective conceptions of expertise.
- The need to pay constant attention to the dynamic, mysterious and evolving phenomenon of occupational. VET teachers and trainers (and policymakers) need space, time and resources to sustain and enhance their professional expertise.
- The danger that VET remains overly dependent on labour market projections based on long-standing job demarcations – e.g. craft worker, manual worker, technician, managerial, etc.
- VET evolves whilst still being anchored in shared traditions and values, but needs to draw on and collaborate with people, places, and ideas beyond its current comfort zones.

## Concluding remarks

VET institutions, employers, policymakers and VET learners face considerable challenges as they navigate the turbulent social and economic waters in which they seek to build the capacity they need to survive and prosper. They have a great deal to learn from and teach each other. John Dewey encouraged us to be bold and disruptive so in that spirit I end this brief summary of my keynote lecture with the following questions to anyone involved in some way with VET who is reading:

- What is YOUR WORKPLACE like as a learning environment?
- How much discretion do you have to organize and evaluate your own work and affect organisational change?
- Why are some workplaces more conducive to learning?
- Educational institutions are workplaces – so how does the learning culture they generate for their employees affect their approach to the curricula and pedagogical decisions affecting their learners?

If you are a policymaker and in addition to the questions above:

- Where do your policies sit on the expansive-restrictive continuum?
- What would help to move them closer to the expansive end?
- What factors are pulling you away from taking a more expansive approach?

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