

Building VET systems to advance communities: beyond responsiveness

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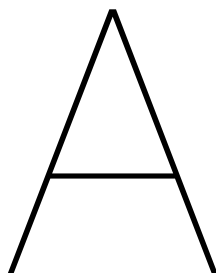
Abstract

There are five purposes that are central to vocational education and training (VET)(i.e., engaging young people, assisting them identify their preferred occupation, preparing them to practice it, ongoing development and being innovative) in the contemporary era. Yet, common across these purposes is the overall goal of VET going beyond primarily being responsive to industry needs, to also advance individuals' capacities to remain employable, communities to be resilient and enterprises to effectively meet new challenges. Realising that

advancement through those purposes needs to be understood, informed and enacted at the local level. For that to occur there needs to be educational, social and administrative infrastructure at the local level able to realise these outcomes. It is these elements that are necessary for building further VET systems now.

Keywords: *responsive education, educational infrastructure, social infrastructure, administrative infrastructure, educational purposes*

Vocational education and training beyond responsiveness: purposes and practices



Advancing the social and economic goals of the nations and communities that vocational education and training (VET) serves requires more than being responsive to their needs. Responsiveness is a necessary, but insufficient basis, for how VET systems should be directed, enacted and judged.

Instead, they should bring about change through encouraging and supporting innovations, extending existing economic activities, and building local capacities. As nation states and their communities face existential challenges with climate change, global competition, geopolitical challenges and need for greater self-reliance, it is important that VET is directed to achieving these goals.

Whilst national mandates and organisation are important, achieving such outcomes requires effective social, administrative and educational infrastructure at the local level. *Social infrastructure* includes partnerships supporting work placements, work experiences, employment opportunities and expressions of enterprises' needs. *Administrative infrastructure* includes the intentional organisation and enactment of educational provisions and their certification. *Educational infrastructure* includes the provision and alignment of experiences to achieve learning outcomes, teachers' guidance and support, and extending VET provisions beyond the educational institution. From a research program comprising many individual projects (see Table 1), five purposes for VET provisions have been identified: enhancing engagement, ii) identifying occupations; iii) initial preparation; iv) continued education and iv) aligning innovations and learning (see Table 2).

Table 1. Research projects informing VET purposes

Project	Description	References
1	Standing and status of VET (Australia)	Billett et al., (2020); Billett et al., (2022a); Billett et al., (2022b)
2	Standing and status of VET – (Australia, and European, Asia, Africa & America)	UNESCO-UNEVOC (2018a; 2018b)
3	Engaging Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people in allied health roles	Billett et al., (2022a)
4	School-industry partnerships to realise post-school pathways	Department of Education (2023)
5	Social partnerships in VET for community capacity building	Billett et al., (2007)
6	CET models and approaches	Billett et al., (2014); Billett et al., (2016)
7	Effective CET provisions – Singapore	Leow & Billett (2022); Leow et al., (2023)
8	Workplace innovations in small to medium size enterprises	Billett et al., (2022c); Billett et al., (2021)

Table 2. Case studies on enacted strategies to realise VET purposes

Purposes of VET	Case studies – examples from research projects	Project
enhancing engagement with young people and their parents to consider VET as a viable post-school option	Efforts to champion and directly support VET through actions at national, state/territory and local levels; Engaging young people as students in structured activities in workplaces, their communities, and considering how VET institutions can make VET attractive and purposive for them	1, 2, 3
assisting those young people (and not so young people) identify the occupations to which they are suited	Strategies to be premised on local engagement and access to advice and experiences: i) partnerships amongst local schools, tertiary education and enterprises; ii) prevocational and tasters programs being wider in range and availability; iii) visits to local VET institutions and enterprises, iv) local communities of engagement; and v) engagement with workplace experiences.	1,4
providing effective and adaptive initial occupational preparation	Workplace experiences and their integration realised through education institutions and workplaces collaborating, respecting each other's contributions and seek mutual goals and outcomes	3, 8
provision of effective and adaptive continuing education and training	Educational processes drawing upon and focus on adult students' interests, capacities and needs; Emphasising applicability to their current or intended work roles, finding relevance to capture their interests	6, 7
aligning workplace innovations with workers' learning	Three kinds of innovations identified: i) strategic innovations, ii) work practice innovations and iii) procedural innovations Provision of CET required to enact new processes unknown to or lack of workplace expertise	8

Table 2. presents a summary of these five purpose and illustrative examples from projects. These purposes focus on addressing student outcomes, broader societal imperatives in public and private sector enterprises, and emphasise advancing societal as well as individual goals.

Firstly, *engaging young people* and their parents/care givers and informing them impartially about VET and the occupations it serves is an important educational purpose. The low standing of VET leads

to structural challenges in developing the occupational capacities required by communities, enterprises and achieving national social and economic goals. In era of high aspiration, VET is often seen as an option for those with no other choice (Parliament of Victoria, 2018; UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2018a; UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2018b). As a consequence, governments, employers and educational systems may view VET as low priority and funded scantily. Yet, there are concerns about VET not attracting sufficient

kinds, calibres and numbers of young people, thereby failing to develop the quantum and quality of skilled workers needed by nation states (Deissinger, 2022; Wolf, 2016).

Secondly, assisting individuals *identify their preferred occupations* (i.e., their ‘calling’ – Dewey, 1916) through advising them about and aligning their interests and capacities with those occupations is an important VET purpose. Uninformed occupational choices can lead to circuitous pathways to employment that consume significant personal and institutional investment (Billett et al., 2022b) and distort the challenge of securing the skilled workers communities and nations want. Hence, young people may need guidance and assistance to identify the kinds of occupations that are aligned with their interests and capacities.

There are both personal and institutional imperatives for providing young with informed and impartial advice and assistance. These have been most explicitly stated in Germany in what is referred to as the ‘War for apprentices’ (Deissinger, 2022), the high attrition rate of apprenticeships in many countries, and Wolf’s (2016) concerns about low levels of participation in VET failing to secure the skills required for the UK. Part of developing the sense of vocations in one’s occupation is the ability to practice that occupation with confidence and competence. That assistance is perhaps best addressed locally through appropriate educational and social infrastructure.

Thirdly, *initial occupational preparation* is an important purpose of VET for employers, governments, community, and students, although approaches to it differ across nation states for historical, cultur-

al, institutional and resource related reasons. Now, many governments are requiring that VET graduates of all kinds are to be ‘job ready’, including those that do not have extensive work experience or placement components within them. Generating these outcomes requires extensive engagement in work settings, developing critical insights to understand situated and canonical occupational requirements and how these are practised, which are key concerns for VET.

For both initial occupational preparation and CET, workplace experiences and their integration are important elements of educational provisions. In essence, workplaces afford richly contextualised experiences, purposive activities, practice, episodic experiences, and monitoring progress and outcomes (Billett, 2014). However, they also have weaknesses and limitations, thus requiring deliberate guidance and pedagogic interventions. Hence, where possible it is important to provide and integrate those experiences within VET programs to optimise their contributions and redress limitations (Billett, 2007; 2011). Intentional efforts to integrate the two sets of experiences require appropriate curriculum, pedagogic and learners’ personal practices. The provision of workplace experiences and their integration can be best realised through social infrastructure in which education institutions and workplaces collaborate, respect each other’s contributions, and seek mutual goals and outcomes. Yet, within here is also an educational mandate to develop learners’ adaptability to avoid being constrained by specific and presentist needs.

Fourthly, accessible and effective *provisions of continuing education and training (CET)* are needed to support workers’ learning, particularly when they are ne-

gotiating changing work roles or new occupational practices (Leow et al., 2023). Much learning across working life arises through everyday work activities and interactions and is mediated by these workers' own efforts and agency, as well as support from other and more experienced and informed workers (Billett et al., 2014; Choy et al., 2013). That accessibility needs to account for adults often needing to reconcile three other commitments (i.e., work, family and community). Also, given the heterogeneous nature of the adult population, there will be very diverse kinds and levels of readiness to participate in CET provisions. So, catering to this diversity is important, yet education provisions should not be constrained by their current levels of knowledge and press them into extending further what they know, can do and value (Billett, 2001). Drawing upon or pressing students to consider their current work practices and issues, or areas of development required for them to remain employable may well be effective bases for fulsome participation. Common amongst most CET models and approaches is a shift in the focus away from the educator onto students' activities and interactions. It is they that need to engage in the thinking and acting, albeit guided and supported by educators, or established group/peer processes.

Fifthly, *being innovative needs to be promoted* through VET which is a necessary requirement for both workers and workplaces. Workers need to continually learn to secure their employability and advancement, and enterprises transforming their procedures and practices are both premised on innovations (Hoyrup et al., 2012). Yet, workers' learning and work innovations are often considered separately, rather than co-occurring or reciprocal. Workplace innovations are unlikely to be ini-

tiated, developed and adopted without engaging workers' capacities and their learning (Billett et al., 2021). Regardless of whether those innovations come from outside of the workplace, or initiated and enacted within it, inevitably workers will need to adapt and adjust, thereby potentially extending what they know, can do and value (Lemmetty & Billett, 2023). Consequently, VET's purposes are not just about realising personal goals, but those associated their workplaces' viability and advancement. That co-occurrence is best initiated, enacted and evaluated at the local level because of the situatedness of these dualities. Here, VET provisions of experiences and actions of educators with expertise in those fields were vital, and need to comprise an infrastructure which is available locally and accessible within work settings and accepted as such.

Enacting VET purposes: localised engagements and learner agency

These five purposes for contemporary VET go beyond the initial development of occupational capacities. Added here is the growing importance of attracting and engaging young people to participate in VET, assisting them identify and prepared for occupations to which they are suited and interested. Then, constant changes in occupational requirements and workplace practices, demand their continuing development across working life and need to support workplaces to respond to challenges necessitate both CET provisions and combining workplace innovations and workers' learning. All this represents significant challenges and tasks for VET. Yet, for these to be achieved, beyond national mandates, ordering of occupational standards, regulation and legislation, there is

a need for administrative, social and educational infrastructure to be exercised at the local level. This includes having infrastructure and expertise at that level to develop effective partnerships, identify educational needs and the organisation and enactment of experiences to achieve required outcomes. Much of what is proposed here can be optimised by engagements, interactions, and partnerships outside of VET institutions, comprising the social infrastructure that brings together partners with shared interests and abilities to make distinct contributions in securing mutually understood goals.

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