

Láscarez Smith, Daniel (2023): Political Participation of Business Organizations in the Construction of the Technical Vocational Education and Training System in Costa Rica between 1980 and 2021

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In September 2015, the Presidential Council for Innovation and Talent, chaired by the Vice President of the Republic of Costa Rica, decided to develop a National Qualifications Framework for Vocational Education and Training. Since then, the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, the Ministry of Public Education, the National Training Institute (INA), the National Council of Rectors (CONARE), the Union of Costa Rican Chambers and Associations of the Private Business Sector (UCCAEP) and the Union of Rectors of Private Universities (UNIRE) have been working on the development of a dual TVET system. Therefore, Costa Rica receives a great deal of attention, also in terms of scientific debates. Láscarez Smith's study aims to provide an understanding of the organization and development of TVET research in Costa Rica and how the perspective of enterprises and entrepreneurs has been addressed in developing the TVET system. So, it analyzes the specific role of business organizations within the framework of their own subjective configurations and in the context of the historical conditions in which they have developed TVET actions. Therefore, the text rather tries to understand the logic that underlies the participation of certain business groups in the constitution of the TVET system than to scrutinize the participation of companies in training.

The study pursues the research question: How has the organized political action of business groups been configured around the TVET system within the framework of the social, economic, and political transformations in Costa Rica from 1980 to 2021?

The text is organized into 9 chapters, with the first chapter introducing the general framework of the research topic, including its relevance and problematization.

Chapter 2 is about the literature review conducted for the research topic describing methods and briefly results. Central results of research reports are, for example, that TVET programs in Costa Rica often lack the active involvement of the business sector in training and lack the kind of dedicated vocational upper secondary colleges which can become a focus for technical specialism and excellence.

The third chapter provides a historical background of TVET in Costa Rica, discussing the social, economic, political, and educational structures that have influenced the development from 1821 to 1980. The colonial inheritance leaving a weak technological structure of the labor force at the beginning of the postcolonial period; the export of agricultural products, such as coffee and bananas, the reconfiguration of political forces after the civil war in 1948, and the “entrepreneurs-politicians” who noticed the need of a well-qualified labour force are spotlights of this development.

Chapter 4 focuses on the organization of the education system in Costa Rica; chapter 5 analyses on the structure of Costa Rica’s business park, composed of a majority of SMEs. The theoretical framework of the work is presented in chapter 6.

The 7th chapter provides the methodological approach: the text uses a configurationist method, which is a multilevel articulation between structure, subjectivity, and action to analyze the political participation of business associations in the construction of the TVET system in Costa Rica. It examines business political participation within a structural context, the actions taken by business organizations to transform or influence TVET policy, and how these business organizations give meaning to these actions.

The research approach is qualitative. Chambers and business organisations (n=8), TVET institutions (n=3) and experts in TVET of Costa Rica (n=3) were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Additionally, observations in tripartite sessions of the dialogue table that the Government of Costa Rica implemented to develop the dual apprenticeships were conducted to get to know the arguments, positions, and discussions of both business representatives and the state and unions. The interviews and observations were recorded and transcribed.

Chapter 8 provides the results, clustered in three main parts:

1. the historical-structural configuration including a synthesis of the socio-historical and cultural configuration of entrepreneurial participation in the TVET system;
2. the configuration of the organized political action of the business sector presenting frameworks and institutions that fostered to attract new foreign capital and promote exports and to strengthen the TVET system, such as the Costa Rican Coalition of Development Initiatives (CINDE) and the dual apprenticeship implementation motives and process;
3. and the configuration of the business subjectivity, including the implementation of neoliberal reforms, the role of the private sector in the system, and the impact of these changes on job creation and economic growth. It also highlights the paradox of jobless growth, where economic growth did not result in significant job creation.

The last chapter concludes the work, summarises the main findings and gives an outlook on further research desiderata.

As a main result, readers can comprehend main developments in the TVET system in the era of economic liberalization in Costa Rica during the last decades. The study concludes on critical notes: The political decision-making processes of businessmen around TVET since 1980 should be understood in terms of the economic interests of the transnational sector of the economy, and not in terms of the interests of the domestic economy. This includes that the dual apprenticeships law can be understood more as a subsidy to transnational capital than as a true TVET policy that considers pedagogical and productive aspects. Therefore, Láscarez Smith wraps up that the political participation of businesses around TVET has been subordinated to the economic project as a strategy to supply a certain labor force to transnational companies. This means that TVET has been subordinated to the political project, as it was an opportunity for entrepreneurs to participate in areas in which the state and teachers' unions have historically dominated. The struggle for the approval of the dual apprenticeships law in 2019 and the reform of the INA in 2020 are considered political or economic – not educational – victories for employers.

Another key message is that although theoretically TVET can integrate young people (regarding labor markets, economic and social participation), it has in Costa Rica not been possible to assign a structure and a solid base through the actions and through the transnational subjectivities of entrepreneurs. Establishing a strong line of TVET research in Costa Rica would help to analyze the problems of youth unemployment and its relation to TVET.

Researching the state-of-the-art literature can be particularly helpful in evaluating the relevance of the study's approach: this is the first work (in English) to systematically address the current topic of the introduction of the dual TVET system in Costa Rica, considering historical path dependency and an institutionalist view. Therefore, I regard the work as directive and fundamental research. The strength of the study are its details and synopsis (often summarized in tables) that help readers to capture the key take-aways easily.

While one learns on political participation of TVET institutions, businessmen, public (state) organizations and entrepreneurs regarding the path-dependent processes of reforming and modernizing TVET programs, it would certainly be of interest for vocational pedagogy to explore didactic-pedagogical practices and approaches in greater depth. This includes pedagogical participation of constructing and reproducing entrepreneurial subjectivities in the learning process, as well as in work processes and its analysis. For example, a need for qualified teachers who know the characteristics and specificities of TVET to respond with pedagogical and didactic competencies is in demand (Rommel & Vargas Méndez, 2023). Also, in current debates it is further argued that jobs remain vacant on the Costa Rican labour market (Maravaille & Gonzalez Pandiella, 2023), that the dual model of training needs to be contextualized and situated (Camacho Calvo, 2023) and that links between the different educational pathways as well as the Costa Rican teacher education require changes (Rommel & Vargas Méndez, 2023).

Beyond that, however, this scrutiny lacks recommendations in the sense of “what can others learn from the case Costa Rica?” in international comparative VET, also with regard to policy learning. This is also relevant in light of the fact that Costa Rica's vocational

training research is still in its infancy and greater institutionalization is desirable (Rommel et al., 2024).

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