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1 A Very Timely Book


Having worked in the past with both editors of this volume, Thomas Deissinger and Oksana Melnyk, I have great respect for them as scholars in the field of Vocational Education. Both know very well the Ukrainian landscape, before and during the Russian invasion in 2014 and more recently in 2022. Both also know many higher education institutions and universities in Ukraine, particularly those in charge of preparing vocational education teachers. The book they have edited is one of the results of the Erasmus+ action 'New mechanisms of partnership-based governance and standardization of vocational teacher education in Ukraine (PAGOSTE)'. The volume is very opportune in informing that, even despite the war going on, there are policies, initiatives and efforts taken in higher education institutions in the country to improve the quality of the education of vocational education teachers.

The book has a brief introduction and three parts, and most chapters are written by several authors. Part I has seven chapters, part II four chapters, and part III two chapters. It also has a one-page preface written by the Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine.

Part I is on theory and practice of governance in teacher training for VET, and it consists of chapters addressing VET teacher education in different countries, some of them written by well renowned academics in this field like Philipp Gonon, Kevin Orr or the editors of the volume themselves. Chapter 1, by Lena Freidorfer and Philipp Gonon covers Switzerland; chapter 2, by Erika Smith, explains the tensions across levels and sectors in

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Australia; chapter 3, by Kevin Orr and Nena Skrbic, speaks on recent history about initial teacher education in Further Education in England. Chapter 4, by Selena Chan, focuses upon reform in vocational education in New Zealand and the expected impact upon the education of VET teachers; chapter 5, written by Thomas Deissinger and Oksana Melnyk, addresses the topic of the volume, discussing governance on VET teacher education in Germany while chapter 6, by Richard Fortmüller, focuses upon standards in VET teacher education in Austria. The final chapter in this part, written by Paolo di Renzo and Giovanni Serra, switches to adult education and lifelong learning in Italy. Part I is therefore varied both in academic scope as well as in geographical terms, as some European and Pacific countries are illustrated, although both the explanation of why these countries and approaches are selected and their relevance for Ukraine are missing in this volume.

Part II makes an important shift, perhaps even a rupture, with part I, as it entails four chapters on evolving experiences changing VET teacher education in four different higher education institutions in Ukraine through the cooperation of different partners from HE institutions, the professional bodies and other social actors. It is done in such a way that part I and II can be read independently.

Chapter 8 is authored by Svitlana Tsymbaliuk, Maryna Artiushyna, Oksana Sarkisova, Tetiana Shkoda and Larysa Korvat; with some of which the author of this review has worked between 2017 and 2019. They write on institutional changes and partnership-based governance at Kyiv National Economic University (named after Vadym Hetman). Valentin Usov, Tetiana Petukhova, Volodymyr Chernykh and Viktoriia Kozak author chapter 9, on the implementation of cooperation and partnership in the training of teachers of vocational and technical education at South Ukrainian National Pedagogical University (named after K. D. Ushynsky). Chapter 10 is authored by Mykola Dmytrychenko, Nataliia Bondar, Oleksandr Hryshchuk, Khalidakhon Bakhtiyarova and Lesia Shevchuk, who address the use of new approaches based on partnership in training vocational teachers, in this case in the sector of transport, at the National Transport University. Like the previous three, chapter 11 describes and details a fourth experience of the development of partnerships in governance in the education of VET teachers, this one written by Olena Kovalenko, Nataliia Briukhanova, Liudmyla Shtefan, Tatiana Bondarenko, Hanna Korniyush and Nataliia Korolova, who explain how they have established excellence in vocational education teacher training at the Ukrainian Engineering Pedagogics Academy.

Part III in the volume consists of two chapters that provide the scope of VET teacher education in Ukraine nowadays. Chapter 12 is authored by Valentyna Radkevych, Viktoriia Kruchek, Mykola Pryhodii and Daria Voronina-Pryhodii, discussing standards in vocational teacher education in Ukraine and the problems, conflicts and debates that come with their implementation. Chapter 13 is written by Oleksandr Kupriyanov, Tetiana Bondarenko, Halyna Yelnykova, Denys Kovalenko, Roman Nesterenko and Tetiana Ruslanova, and it deals with the role of civil society and the arrangements for policy dialogue in vocational education and training. Both chapters in this section look towards future developments of VET teacher education in the country once war is over, in the expectation of VET contributing to the social and economic progress of Ukraine.

Reading a book published in 2024 on vocational education in Ukraine undergoing the Russian invasion is highly motivating and the expectations to find out how the VET

system is able to contribute to sustaining a country's production and economy as well as the education of current and future generations are also very high, even if the topics are governance of the teacher education of vocational educators and, therefore, not directly the functioning of the VET system but the preparation that takes place in different universities of teachers who have not joined the system yet.

The answer to the appeal raised by these circumstances is found mainly in section III of the book, and here it is where my review begins.

2 Landmarks in VET Teacher Education in Ukraine

Part III of the book covers Ukrainian VET teacher training 'in a broader context', entailing two chapters. The first of them deals with standards (and therefore internationalization possibilities), and it is probably the chapter where tensions and problems are mentioned in a clearer way. The final chapter of the book is on policy dialogue on VET, disguised under the title of civil society. I comment on these hereafter.

Standardization is often related to quality and governance, not necessarily to partnerships which, as addressed in part II of the book, are due to local rather than national grassroots. References to standardization in chapter 12, however, are presented in such a way as if it were a synonym of Europeanization, as if standards were required as part of the process to approach the European Union, trying to work towards recognition. No clear mention is done to the fact that education policies, including higher education, are subject to the subsidiarity principle inside the EU. Standardization is also connected to the competencies of VET teachers, though there is no reference to their identity, that is not only related to teaching practice but also to the occupational branch of their professional domain, which proves to be much harder to standardize, because professional groups and communities of practice escape the temptation of homogeneity by differentiating themselves inside and across different countries. Most of the literature employed in the chapter is mainly Ukrainian, while more use of international references might have been possible on topics such as procedures, classifications, outcomes (and competitiveness and productivity), recognition and accreditation of knowledge. The debates raised by the chapter are relevant in VET policies as well as in vocational education teachers training.

Does standardization offer the opportunity to simplify procedures, or to make existing ones more complex? Standardization is presented as something inevitable, unquestioned, as if good VET teaching practice could not be done without standards. It is also relevant that, in the conclusions, the authors point to difficulties in standardization processes due to the lack of involvement of employers, and this might be addressed as part of the central topic of the book: what are partnerships for and what are the difficulties they must face.

The final chapter draws on policy dialogue in VET, another crucial issue when it comes to governance and partnerships. There is a discussion over centralized and decentralized state intervention, but the explanation of relations among regions, municipalities and national government does not clarify whether regions take over the role of the state and recentralize educational policies, while the civil society, mentioned in

the title, remains in the backstage. The notion of civil society may be misunderstood, as the agents mentioned are in fact institutions like professional association, trade unions and the Ukrainian educational research association. The impression it gives is that these civil society representatives are in fact internal actors of the system properly organized, rather than the civil society itself – even though there is reference to international charities and funds. It cannot be easy to address the role and extent of civil society while the nation is at war, the army has mobilized a large amount of the active population and there has been a very high rate of migration into other countries. Civil society is neither only nor even mainly about funding, but rather about participation and citizenship, as well as engagement at the local level, playing a relevant role in democratization processes. Civil society does not necessarily mean private actors and market forces counteracting the role of the State. In this sense, the extent to which the support provided by international NGOs to promote the expansion of project-based learning could be explained in more detail, as well as its relevance. In a similar way, the authors position the Ukraine education system as properly aligned with the UNESCO strategy 2022–2029 and with the Ukrainian ‘Concept of the State Targeted Social Programme for the Development of Vocational Education for 2022–2027’; including attraction of international partners; however, some of these movements seem more an expansion of market driven forces than an increasing weight of civil society in the ownership and management of education.

The chapter is highly informative as well as clarifying on the current situation of education in the country under war, though not only vocational education, but also adult education, dual higher education and secondary education. Special mention deserves distant education, for which the Covid-19 lockdown and the subsequent distance education seem to have prepared the Ukrainian system for reacting to such a distressing event as the Russian invasion.

The chapter finishes with reference to two of the achievements of the PAGOSTE consortium: First, the launch of an association of vocational and lifelong education development, a public union which is very young and recent but claims to be a successful example and perhaps a valuable actor in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine, despite its limited scope so far and its composition through individual rather than institutional membership. Second, the example of the social partnership in the field of VET in the region of Kharkiv, strongly hit by the war. The questions raised by both examples are amongst the main contributions of the volume.

Having made clear that the most appealing part of the book is the final one, there is no doubt that the core of the volume remains in part II, where four examples of developmental practice resulting from the PAGOSTE Erasmus actions are described, contextualized and in some cases researched by the authors of the chapters who may also be the actors of those developments in their own universities. If this were the case, I dare to express a concern about these chapters being written as success stories where problems, obstacles, difficulties, resistances, tensions and failures are hardly mentioned, as if reform in education, also in higher education, might proceed unimpeded. Even the concluding sections of these four chapters, like in the first part of the book, are short and in some way self-referential, instead of relating the experiences of each of the universities to broader frameworks or explanatory models.

Here I find one of the major gaps in the volume, that there is no theoretical common explanation nor framework of what is understood by partnership-based governance, in a way that facilitates understanding that all experiences narrated in the volume are examples of this even if they consist of very different aims, structures, actors and scopes. The editors of the volume might have provided such a framework that remains now a task for the reader, whose challenge is to develop a joint understanding of the usefulness and desirability of partnerships in the governance of vocational education teachers training and the role of higher education institutions in promoting such partnerships. One wonders whether these will be sustainable once the PAGOSTE funding is finished.

Chapters 8 to 11 exemplify four different experiences of developments in Ukrainian higher education institutions in charge of the education of VET teachers. Each of these innovative experiences can be read independently, and they are explained in such a way that even the structure of the chapters does not share a common guideline. Although all of them refer to the PAGOSTE frame, which might have deserved a chapter of its own, they describe curriculum changes, surveys, legal developments and internal specificities of each of the universities in very descriptive ways. Some of these chapters hardly use academic references and they differ in style, structure, extension and content provided. Nevertheless, all of them provide good descriptions of the implementation of the PAGOSTE ideas, in some cases addressing partnership issues directly, like chapter 9, while in others not taking them as the axis of the experience, like chapter 8. Chapter 10 outstands in reference made to the Russian military aggression, that is left aside in the other chapters; while it is also the chapter where more information on PAGOSTE is facilitated. Again, this might have been a chapter of its own before explaining each of the innovations happening in these higher education institutions, therefore simplifying the effort of the reader, who must reframe every chapter of this section. Furthermore, this missing chapter might have also provided a theoretical background for partnerships as well as on how governance is understood.

At the end of this part of the book, the reader is clear about the great satisfaction that participants have with the Erasmus+ project 'New mechanisms of partnership-based governance and standardization of vocational teacher education in Ukraine (PAGOSTE)'. Yet there are no hints on either critical reflection of what might have been done better in the project, lessons learned from other project partners, or how to proceed to make the achievements of the project sustainable along time, once the project funding finishes.

Mentioning resistances and difficulties might also be worth when debating each of the cases, all of which seem to have been successful and productive. Implementation of changes and reforms in other VET-related contexts is often complex and faces problems of different kinds.

Several chapters in part II refer to the legal framework affecting quality in higher education, on general education and on vocational education. This might perhaps have been a good idea for another chapter of its own. Likewise, a chapter or a section with an overview of the different universities in which innovations described in section 2 happen could have provided better context for these contributions. Another additional contribution might have addressed contrast of the extent to which there have been similar developments and where there have been differences among all four higher education institutions.

3 A Kaleidoscope on VET and VET Teacher Education

This review started by commenting on part III of the book, which explains the current situation and the expectations about the contribution of an improved VET through VET teacher education, closer to the societal needs, for a post-war Ukraine; and then on part II, covering how four higher education institutions are making efforts to develop partnerships even under a war context. I now turn to an overview of part I of the volume, which focuses more on VET than on the governance of VET, perhaps assuming that partnerships improve the quality of governance. However, the manner and extent to which this occurs are not explained in the volume.

The chapters in this part of the volume present VET in Switzerland, Australia, England, New Zealand, Germany and Austria, while there is a chapter from Italy on lifelong learning rather than VET. This part of the book, being highly informative, is difficult to connect to the rest of the volume and authors seem to have enjoyed a great freedom in writing their contributions, while a greater effort on the side of the editors might have improved the coherence of the section as well as its relation to the rest of the book. The impression is that each chapter can be read independently, that there are no connections across chapters and that this part, which provides a context of international examples, is not used as a contrasting element for any of the experiments and innovations presented in part II. Even in some cases, the content of the chapter is rather on the presentation of the VET system of the country than on vocational education teachers training or the underlying governance system. One wonders what the criteria are behind the choice of countries in part I and why they are relevant or exemplary for any of the cases of the Ukrainian innovations, and why they are described and analyzed in part II, and whether these countries, that represent different collective and liberal skill formation systems, might act as a reference, reflex or appropriate contrast for the Ukrainian case. Perhaps a chapter in this part addressing specifically the case of Ukraine and its governance in vocational teacher education would have contributed to make more sense of the other chapters as well as to frame contributions in part II of the volume.

4 A Final Remark and Concern

Having read the volume, this reviewer would have appreciated a clear definition or setup of a common framework on partnership-based governance, which is the topic of the book. Such a chapter would have provided an overarching scope for the different parts of the book, that currently remain independent and separate. Such a *fil-rouge* would have also framed better the different chapters in each of the parts, particularly in part II, with a clarification of what is the role of universities and their contribution to governance of VET and to promoting partnerships among different stakeholders involved in the education of vocational education teachers in different occupational domains, those of the specialization of the Ukrainian universities.

Similarly, a justification of why the countries and the approaches in the different chapters of part I might contribute to find a clear thread in the volume, and to better understand in which ways contributions in part I enrich the foundation, understanding

and developments of the experiences in Ukrainian universities detailed in part II. That is what I miss, as well as an introduction to each part of the volume and a more thorough explanation of the relation among the three parts that shape the book and the message that the volume intends to deliver. Perhaps parts of the chapter on vocational teacher education in Germany might play this role, given the explanation provided in section 4.1 on a theoretical perspective on governance. However, in order to play that role, that chapter would deserve a more prominent position in the book. Its absence may explain why even the dimensions and modes of governance are not referred to in other chapters, neither in part I nor II of the volume.

The overall recommendation I dare to make is to read the book looking for country specific information in the case of part I and for detailed description of innovations in part II, hence looking for specific details on countries (part I) or experiences and innovation (part II) rather than for a common overview of VET (and VET teacher education, and the governance of VET teacher education, and partnerships in VET teacher education) in Ukraine and other countries of the world. My advice to the reader is also to approach the book without the expectation to go through all of the chapters; at least in my case, the volume works better as a compilation or collection of contributions than as an edited volume. In this sense it is valuable and worth reading, and, as said at the beginning of the review, with greater and particular interest in part III, where both chapters are better contextualized in a post-Covid-19 and during the Russian invasion process. Not an easy task to work on a development project and to write an academic volume while your country is suffering the aggression of a foreign empire, for which I show my appreciation for the editors and particularly authors of chapters in parts II and III.