

Editorial: History of Vocational Education and Training: Perspectives and Challenges

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Educational systems are subject to an ongoing process of change. These changes pertain to curricula, didactics, classroom settings, courses, financing mechanisms, statutory frameworks, and more. Through such changes, societies respond to an ever-changing world, shaped by megatrends such as globalization, the digital revolution, and demographic shifts.¹ First and foremost, societies tend to turn to education when confronting these challenges, calling not only for immediate practical changes but also for theoretical responses from educational scholars. Typically, vocational education and training (VET) is more closely linked to working life and gainful employment than general or higher education. As such, it interacts more directly with occupational demands and various economic interests, which are often in flux. Consequently, VET and its subsystems are particularly subject to continuous development and change, with stability and tradition arguably rarer than in general or higher education. A look at the many international variations and differing approaches to VET supports this assumption. Even within individual countries, mixed VET systems prevail, that is, diverse VET models operating concurrently and often independently.


We can observe these processes of change in the present. Current political and academic discourses influence decisions in the VET sector, either reinforcing or reforming existing structures. These debates are often future-oriented: today's decisions are meant

¹ These megatrends and their impact on different dimensions of VET are the focus of the thematic section in Volume 3, Issue 2 of IJVES. For details on the call for papers, please visit our website.

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to make VET fit for future demands. This ongoing process of change is paradigmatic – it characterizes social subsystems, including VET. Moreover, it is diverse, varying across time, regions, and cultures. Nevertheless, certain similarities and trends are also observable, and in today's globalized and internationalized world, they may be more prevalent and pronounced than in the past.

Describing, analysing, and understanding these change processes is a central objective of vocational education studies. Ultimately, such research aims to provide the knowledge base for decisions that drive these processes of change. The identification of typical patterns of change may even pave the way for the development of VET-specific theories that help explain its evolution. Importantly, this endeavour requires not only a focus on the present and future but also a thorough examination of the past. It is in historical knowledge that we find empirical evidence for the development of VET. Understanding past developments enables us to contextualize current trends and anticipate future directions. For example, insights into the historical emergence and development of apprenticeships and dual systems in specific regions can reveal the conditions and interests that allowed such models to flourish – and potentially continue to do so. Such knowledge is highly valuable for the ongoing development of similar models today.

In recent years, there has been growing international interest in the history of vocational education, resulting in a wide range of work that sheds light on its development. Much of this work emphasizes large-scale structural changes, often focusing on the formation of VET systems. These narratives are frequently organized around major historical shifts, such as the 19th century and the rise of industrialization. A recurring theme is the role of policy and institutional frameworks in shaping VET. While this body of research has deepened our understanding of how vocational education has evolved, it often approaches the subject from a narrow methodological angle, namely structural and institutional development, but leaving certain perspectives underexplored.

A predominant focus on structural and institutional developments risks neglecting the complex social, cultural, and individual dimensions that both shape and are shaped by vocational education. By concentrating on policies, reforms, and institutional trajectories, such histories may miss the lived experiences of learners, teachers, and practitioners, as well as the informal and localized practices that often define VET in practice. Understanding these micro-level dynamics is essential for constructing a more comprehensive and nuanced historical account – one that reflects not only top-down developments but also bottom-up influences, resistance, adaptation, and innovation. Furthermore, incorporating social and cultural perspectives allows us to examine how class, gender, identity, and labour market conditions have historically intersected with vocational education. Broadening the historiographical lens in this way deepens our understanding of VET and offers critical insights for shaping more inclusive and contextually informed policies and practices today.

To move beyond the limitations of structurally focused histories, it is crucial to engage with approaches rooted in the tradition of “history from below”. This perspective foregrounds the experiences, voices, and agency of ordinary individuals who have often been marginalized in dominant historical narratives. Applied to VET, this approach can illuminate how vocational education was experienced in everyday life – how it related to identity, aspiration, and resistance – and how informal knowledge and local practices

shaped educational cultures. Realizing such an approach requires expanding the source base beyond official records and policy documents. Diaries, oral histories, trade union archives, institutional photographs, student magazines, and local newspapers offer rich material for constructing alternative narratives of VET. By uncovering and incorporating these sources, historians can recover the lived texture of VET and highlight the diversity of actors and contexts involved in its evolution. This shift not only democratizes historical knowledge but also generates insights that are crucial to contemporary educational debates about inclusion, equity, and relevance, but also the abovementioned megatrends.

About This Issue

We are glad that our call for papers raised significant interest by many colleagues, and we received more submissions than expected. This is a promising indication for the future academic discourse on VET history, and we hope that this issue of *IJVES* will motivate more scholars to draw their attention to historical research questions.

Erica Smith presents a “contribution to the history of skills councils” in Australia. The text is already fascinating for its methodological input to history of vocational education as well as the providing of unpublished sources. She provides a rare insider perspective, blending historical research, policy analysis, and first-hand experience to fill a notable gap in the VET literature. In this detailed historical account, Erica Smith chronicles the complex and often turbulent evolution of sector skills councils in Australia from the early 1990s to the present. Tracing four major iterations – from Industry Training Advisory Bodies (ITABs) to the newly formed Jobs and Skills Councils – the article unpacks how political, institutional, and ideological forces have shaped the changing landscape of employer engagement in VET.

The known motion of constant evolving of VET system is subject of **Lisa Maurice-Takerei's** paper with a national focus on Aotearoa, New Zealand. She delivers a comprehensive and critical account of the country's VET landscape, highlighting its enduring structural, cultural, and political challenges. Despite decades of reforms, the sector remains fragmented, underfunded, and undervalued – symptoms of deeply rooted legacies and shifting policy agendas. The paper outlines five persistent barriers: an overreliance on immigration for skilled labour, low societal esteem for trades and technical careers, ongoing inequities in access and outcomes, inconsistent funding models, and a persistent mismatch between training content and industry needs.

Drawing on archival records and guided by activity theory, **Karmen Trasberg** examines how social expectations, political goals, and women's organizations coalesced to institutionalize home economics as a respected field in Estonia's first period of independence. This article explores the evolution of home economics education for women in interwar Estonia, revealing its dual role as both a tool for empowerment and a mechanism of gendered social control. Positioned at the intersection of educational reform, nation-building, and gender politics, the study traces how domestic skills were formalized into vocational education, providing many women their first structured access to training beyond primary school.

We are also happy to publish two thought-provoking articles in the **general section**. In their thought-provoking article, **Christiane Thole** and **Georg Tafner** argue that despite its foundational importance, the psychological and pedagogical development of vocational identity remains neglected in the current VET framework. Drawing on interdisciplinary theories the authors present a compelling case for embedding identity development into vocational curricula. Through theoretical analysis and a vivid case study, they demonstrate that fostering vocational identity not only supports individual well-being and agency but also addresses systemic issues like high dropout rates, lack of motivation, and skills mismatch.

Grounded in boundary learning theory and informed by a qualitative interview-based research method, **Monika Øgård** and **Stefanie Andrea Hillen** examine how thematic assignments function as boundary objects to support meaning-making in Norwegian vocational education. Focusing on the Sales, Service, and Tourism program, the study reveals how these assignments help students navigate the divide between school-based instruction and workplace learning by fostering reflection, dialogue, and conceptual understanding.