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Contents

Editorial:

History of Vocational Education and Training: Perspectives and Challenges

Dietmar Frommberger, Silke Lange & Christoph Porcher 5

Thematic Section

Home Economics Schools for Women

Privileged Access to Vocational Education in Estonia (1918-1940)

Karmen Trasberg 11

Change and Persistence

The Legacies for VET in Aotearoa, New Zealand

Lisa Maurice-Takerei 35

From Industry Training Advisory Bodies to Jobs and Skills Councils

A Contribution to the History of Sector Skills Councils in Australia

Erica Smith 53

General Section

Fostering Vocational Identity Development in VET

A Treasure to be Raised

Christiane Thole, Georg Tafner 95

Boundary Objects Supporting Students' Meaning-Making During Work Placement in Norwegian Vocational Education

Monika Øgård, Stefanie Andrea Hillen 133

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

Dietmar Frommberger, Silke Lange & Christoph Porcher

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.

Thematic Section

Home Economics Schools for Women

Privileged Access to Vocational Education in Estonia (1918–1940)

Karmen Trasberg

Abstract *In Estonia, the early 20th century witnessed profound societal transformations that also shaped women's education. Prior to this period, Estonian women primarily involved in household labor, with limited access to formal education. However, beginning in the 1920s, home economics emerged as a recognized academic discipline, leading to the establishment of several specialized schools throughout the country. This article focuses on the period from 1918 to 1940, a pivotal era for the development of home economics in Estonia. It explores the factors that contributed to its growth, the educational content it encompassed, and its impact on the social status of women. On one hand, the institutionalization of home economics elevated domestic tasks into a formal area of study and professional practice, aligning with broader state development and bringing private life into the public domain. On the other hand, it reinforced traditional gender roles, limiting women's influence in the public sphere and maintaining their connection to domestic responsibilities.*

Title *Home Economics Schools for Women – Privileged Access to Vocational Education in Estonia (1918–1940)*

Keywords *Home Economics Schools, History of VET, Estonia, Gender, Activity Theory*

1 Introduction

Estonia's first period of independence (1918–1940) fell within a tense and conflict-ridden era in Europe, often referred to as the truce between the two world wars. As an independent state, Estonia declared its sovereignty on February 24, 1918. Alongside the building of the young nation, efforts were made to develop an education system suited to national

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needs. This had to be done under difficult economic conditions, where ideals, demands, and responsibilities were immense, but resources remained limited.

One of the key issues was women's education and the question of how to involve women in building the state (Poska-Grünthal, 1936; Sirk, 1989). In the public discourse of interwar Estonia, a romanticized and sentimentalized image of the home – as tied to national identity – remained dominant. At the same time, a belief in science emerged, recognizing the value of women's specialized knowledge and skills. However, discussions about virtues that would lead women into a “new life” – such as diligence and perseverance – continued to be framed in a patronizing manner. The 1920s and 1930s saw contradictory interpretations of the role of the housewife, ranging from conservative to feminist perspectives (Kannike, 2021, p. 62). These tensions reflected broader societal transformations. As societies modernized, the concept of the “household economy” underwent a redefinition—shifting from a collection of everyday domestic practices to a formalized academic field (Ehrenreich & English, 2005). In many countries, this shift laid the groundwork for the establishment of specialized schools where home economics emerged as both a professional domain and educational discipline, complete with its own curriculum, teaching methods, materials, and tools (Rasmussen & Andreassen, 2023; Huhtala & Tähtinen, 2014; Benn, 2012). This development signaled not only a reconfiguration of gender roles but also reflected broader national ambitions tied to modernization.

Estonia followed a similar trajectory. The transformation brought with it a notable change in mindset: the sphere of household culture was no longer seen as a private, family-bound issue, but as something with broader social relevance. Women increasingly became the primary voices shaping this field (Kannike, 2021; Poska-Grünthal, 1936), and their knowledge began to be acknowledged as a meaningful contribution to public life. Inspired by developments in the Nordic countries, Estonia initiated the establishment of home economics schools, where female educators played a central role in promoting and institutionalizing new societal values and ways of thinking.

The 1920s were a period of urbanisation that included the development of new family patterns. In addition, an important reason to “investigate the history of women's VET, while simultaneously examining the phenomenon of women's vocational education, is that access to education played an important role in enabling women's participation in public society” (Broberg et al., 2021, p. 219). Similarly, Andreassen and Rasmussen (2022) suggest that women's agency in education was shaped by their efforts to gain recognition for their occupations and expertise, while also contributing to their social status as citizens in a modern democratic society.

Previous studies have tended to focus on the economic, legal, and administrative aspects of vocational education, while giving less attention to how it has been shaped by broader societal transformations (Broberg et al., 2021; Kennik, 1991). This study aims to explore the development of home economics education in Estonia between 1918 and 1940, analyzing the factors that influenced its growth, its educational content, and its impact on women's social status. Two research questions guide the study: (1) Which key factors influenced the establishment and expansion of home economics schools in Estonia during the 1920s and 1930s? (2) What were the primary tensions associated with the institutionalisation of home economics education?

2 Context of the Study

The priority in Estonia after gaining independence was the establishment of a democratic and native language education system from primary school to university.

By the late 1930s, Estonia's education system had become closely aligned with developments in other countries. The advancement of school curricula and teacher education curricula demonstrated an active adoption of educational reform ideas circulating in US and Western Europe (Trasberg & Heinsalu, 2025). For instance, Estonia drew inspiration from German experimental pedagogy, while concepts such as student intelligence testing and progressive pedagogy from the United States were received with enthusiasm. Finland also served as an important reference point, particularly regarding school organization, curriculum planning, and teacher preparation. There was a strong demand for secondary and higher education. According to the 1934 census, 10.1 % of Estonians had completed secondary education, with women making up 64 % of this group. University education had been attained by 2 % of the population, of whom 19.5 % were women. The most significant progress had been made in secondary education, with over one-tenth of the population having attended secondary school by 1934 (Karjahärm & Sirk, 2001, p. 21–22). To understand this development, it is important to consider the social and occupational distribution of the population. In a relatively small country with 1.1 million inhabitants, 67 % of the population was engaged in agriculture. Farming was not seen as just an economic sector but as the backbone of the nation (Kasekamp, 2010), which shaped expectations for education. From the beginning of independence, compulsory schooling was established for children aged 9–14, which was extended in 1920 to ages 7–16, forming a six-year primary school system. The second level of the unified school system consisted of a five-year secondary school (*gymnasium*), from which students could proceed to university, initially without entrance exams.

Special attention was given to secondary education, as it was considered a key factor in building the nation state. Although students could choose between different branches of study in *gymnasium*, humanities education dominated. By 1935, 68 % of Estonia's 75 *gymnasiums* focused on humanities, 9 % on sciences, and the remaining percentage was divided between economic and technical fields (Karjahärm & Sirk, 2001). Despite societal expectations, vocational education struggled to become an attractive option or to be integrated into the unified school system. Young people saw secondary school as the only viable path to higher education, leading to discussions in the late 1930s about an overproduction of intellectuals and an education crisis (Veiderma, 1938).

This led to a period of educational reform, with an increased focus on vocational education. In 1937, the Law on Vocational Education and Training Institutions was passed (Kutsehariduslikkude õppeasutiste, 1937). Under the new system, vocational schools were categorized into three types: agricultural, technical/industrial, and home economics schools. These schools were also divided into three levels: lower-level vocational schools provided only professional training, mid-level vocational schools offered both general and professional education, and higher-level vocational schools provided an education equivalent to *gymnasium* along with professional qualifications. The impact of this Law on the attractiveness of vocational education was noticeable, and within two years (1937–1939), the number of students in vocational education increased from 8,956

to 11,915, while the number of students in general secondary education declined (Elango, 1977, p. 254). Unfortunately, the full implementation of this new system was interrupted by the Soviet occupation in 1940, which halted the ongoing reforms (Kala, et al., 2019).

3 Theoretical and Methodological Framework of the Study

This research is based on activity theory. Activity theory provides a valuable framework for studying women's vocational education in Estonia during the 1920s and 1930s, a critical period following the country's independence since 1918. During this time, Estonia underwent significant social and economic transformations, including efforts to modernize education and expand opportunities for women.

Activity theory, developed from the work of Vygotsky (1997) and later expanded by Engeström (1987), is a sociocultural framework that examines human actions within their historical, cultural, and societal contexts. Using this framework, we can examine how institutional structures (new types of vocational institutions), tools (such as curricula and training programs), and societal expectations influenced women's roles (Apple & Coleman, 2003).

Additionally, activity theory helps contextualize how policy changes, such as the introduction of new forms of schooling and shifts in labor demands, impacted women's access to education and employment. The contradictions between traditional gender norms and the emerging need for skilled female labor can be explored through Engeström's (1987) concept of contradictions and expansive learning.

According to Engeström & Sannino (2010), activity theory is a dialectical theory, and the dialectical concept of contradiction plays a crucial part in it. In the Estonian context, the tension between traditional gender expectations – where women were largely confined to household responsibilities and the increasing need for skilled female labor in emerging industries created a space for learning and institutional reform. Vocational schools became sites of transformation, where women engaged in new educational practices, redefined their professional identities, and contributed to societal change. Historical analysis through this framework highlights how women navigated these systemic changes, adapted to new professional roles, and contributed to broader societal development in Estonia's early years of independence. The stages in the analytical process are adapted from Broberg et al., (2021, p. 220): identifying societal motives, the educational response to societal changes and finding points of tensions.

Sources for the research data consisted of archive documents, education acts, pedagogic literature and periodicals from the years 1918–1940. The materials studied in Estonia's National Archives included files of home economics schools that referred to activities, study programs and teaching staff of these institutions. In addition, archival materials from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Ministry of Education were studied. Secondary materials included: education laws (published in *Riigi Teataja* [State Gazette] 1918–1940), statistics related to education as well as authentic reports, for example, the 1938 review of *Vocational Education in Estonia*, published by Ministry of Education.

The development of home economics in Estonia was closely intertwined with the activities of women's organizations from the very beginning. Therefore, an important

group of sources from this period consists of archival documents from various women's associations and organizations, such as the Estonian Women's Organizations Union, founded in 1920 (renamed the Estonian Women's Union in 1930), the Estonian Rural Women's Society, established in 1928, and the Home Economics Chamber, founded in 1936. Also periodicals played a significant role, reaching many households. These included *Eesti Naine* [Estonian Woman] (published since 1924), *Taluperenaine* [Rural Woman] (since 1927), and *Naiste Häääl* [Women's Voice] (1926–1932). With the support of these magazines, by the early 1930s, an active segment of both rural and urban women had become engaged in shaping modern everyday life. The archives also contain photographs introducing the learning environment of home economics schools. In this article, the photo collections of the Estonian Pedagogical Archive Museum and National Archives were used.

4 Identifying Societal Motives

Home economics can be defined as knowledge, skills, and competences associated with running a household, including cooking, nutrition, clothing, childcare, and other aspects of homemaking (Andreasen & Rasmussen, 2022; Huhtala & Tähtinen, 2014). In the 1920s, the establishment of home economics schools in Estonia was driven by both socio-economic changes and ideological shifts in education. The government prioritized creating a national education system that aligned with the needs of a modernizing society (Trasberg & Heinsalu, 2025). The rise of home economics schools was part of this effort, aiming to provide women with vocational education while reinforcing their role in the household and society. Inspired by Nordic models, these schools sought to professionalize 'domestic' work by incorporating scientific and technical knowledge into home management, nutrition, and childcare (Kannike, 2021).

Several key factors contributed to the emergence and development of home economics schools in the 1920s. First, Estonia was still a predominantly agrarian society (Kasekamp, 2010). Rural households required efficient household management, and home economics education was seen as essential for improving rural women's skills. Second, the prevailing discourse of the interwar period emphasized women's roles as caretakers of both the family and the nation, portraying household knowledge and caregiving skills as patriotic duty. Home economics education, therefore, became a means of shaping "ideal" Estonian women who could contribute to national progress through their work in the household (Kannike, 2021; Poska-Grünthal, 1936). Periodicals aimed at women began highlighting the importance of home economics schools, emphasizing their role in enhancing everyday living standards through efficient household management, nutritious cooking, and proper hygiene practices. In 1920, *Tallinna Teataja* [Tallinn Gazette] criticized women's household skills, noting that while many believed they could weave, sew, wash, and iron, these tasks actually required formal instruction and guidance from an expert.

During the interwar period Estonian women's organizations played a pivotal role in advancing women's rights and societal reforms (Poska-Grünthal, 1936; Sirk, 1989). They became a key factor in organizing vocational education for women by arranging courses

in cooking, handicrafts, gardening, and other subjects, as well as establishing home economics schools.

The Tartu Women's Society organized the first Estonian Women's Congress in 1917, where it was decided that all women should get vocational education. To achieve this, new schools should be established and existing ones expanded. The aim was for every woman to strive for a balance between career and family life (Eesti naiste, 1917).

This congress led to the formation of the Estonian Women's Union in 1920, uniting various women's groups to collectively advocate for gender equality and social reforms. Emerging organizations and their leaders were instrumental in shaping the social and political landscape, advocating for women's rights, education, and active participation in public life. Women's unions began promoting home economics as a nationally significant field of work that should be recognized as an equal profession. For example, the chairwoman of the Estonian Women's Union, Marie Reisik, emphasized that a woman's efficient and purposeful work at home enables the family to manage economically. She argued that its value is often greater than the income earned by the husband and its purchasing power. Moreover, she highlighted that women are responsible for raising the youth, sustaining families, and ensuring the vitality of the entire nation (Reisik, 1937). Marie Reisik and other prominent figures in the Estonian women's movement Vera Poska-Grünthal (1898–1986), Minni Kurs-Olesk (1879–1940), Helmi Jansen (1908–1960) underlined the importance of education for women at both secondary and vocational schools. They emphasized the benefits of streamlining household management and safeguarding women's employment, while also drawing attention to the poor and often overlooked conditions faced by women working within the home (Kannike, 2025).

A significant qualitative leap occurred with the establishment of the Chamber of Home Economics in 1935, which meant that housework was publicly recognized as equal to other professions. In addition, one of the major achievements of the Estonian women's emancipation movement was the establishment of the Estonian Women's Union Home Economics Institute in 1935. This institution, which in modern terms offered applied higher education, provided programs in home economics, social welfare, and kindergarten teaching. Remarkably, the curriculum included not only practical subjects but also sociology, cultural and art history, and economics (Kannike, 2021, p. 73). With state support, it opened an ultra-modern school building in 1939 (see Figure 1–2). The building was equipped with central heating, good ventilation, specially commissioned furniture and teaching aids tailored to the needs of the school, and modern laboratories for studying food chemistry, as well as a 115 m² kitchen designed for mass catering instruction. As emphasized in a newspaper article introducing the opening of the school, the kitchen featured, alongside two wood-fired stoves, a modern Swedish AGA stove, heated with coke, which remained warm for 12 consecutive hours. According to the article, a similar stove was even used in the White House in Washington (Kodumajandusinstituut ajakohases, 1939)¹. The rationale behind such a significant investment was the pursuit of new vocational avenues for women—ones that would ensure the acquired knowledge would not be lost if a woman married and did not work outside

1 The opening of the Home Economics Institute building became a public event that was covered by the media, and a short film was produced (Envald, 1939).

the home, but could instead be applied within her household. The Home Economics Institute building with its contemporary learning environment, became a model for households and demonstrated the changing status of “women’s work”. The Institute was not only a center for vocational education but also a symbol of modern educational infrastructure, reflecting the elevated status of home economics as a professional field (Kodumajanduse Instituut, 1935; Veiderma, 1938).

Concluding, the adoption of a more modern lifestyle, the establishment of new farms, the introduction of updated tools and the rising European standards – all of these developments required women to acquire new skills and knowledge. Expert care for the home and family became an inseparable part and primary goal of home economics education.

Figure 1: Home Economics Institute Building in Tallinn (1939)



Note. The Estonian Women’s Union’s Home Economics Institute building (designed by architect Arthur Jürvetson) was officially opened on April 29, 1939, in a ceremony attended by the President of the Republic. The school building was considered one of the most functional and aesthetically impressive educational facilities of Estonia’s first period of independence. It featured a wide range of classrooms, laboratories, and workshops, all specially equipped to support home economics instruction. From: Eesti Naisliidu Kodumajanduse Instituut, hoone [Main building of Estonian Women’s Union Home Economics Institute, Photograph], by H. Tölpt, 1939, Estonian Pedagogical Archive Museum (File Foo07635), <http://arhmus.tlu.ee/cgi-bin/epam?oid=78173>

Figure 2: School Kitchen in Home Economics Institute in Tallinn (1939)



Note. In the newly constructed school buildings, great attention was given to modern equipment, lighting, fire safety, and ventilation. As one of the key areas of instruction was dietetics and healthy nutrition, and the overall emphasis was on developing practical skills, the presence of well-designed and fully equipped kitchens was considered especially important. From: Eesti Naisliidu Kodumajanduse Instituut, köök [Kitchen of Estonian Women's Union Home Economics Institute, Photograph], by H. Tõlpt, 1939, Estonian Pedagogical Archive Museum, (File FO007635), <http://arhmus.tlu.ee/cgi-bin/epam?oid=78173>

5 Educational Responses: Home Economics Schools in 1920/30s

This section explores the educational responses to societal transformations in interwar Estonia, focusing on the establishment and expansion of home economics schools in both rural and urban settings. It examines the development of a comprehensive and practice-oriented curriculum that combined general education with specialized vocational training. Particular emphasis is placed on the inspiring learning environment that characterized these schools and served as a model for newly established households.

5.1 Opening of Home Economics Schools

Home economics schools were established in both rural and urban areas, as women in farms and towns required different skills and knowledge. Until 1935, these educational institutions operated under two ministries, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry

of Agriculture, depending on whether they provided training for farm housewives or prepared housekeepers and maids.

The Ministry of Education emphasized the need to develop home economics schools, as rational home management was considered crucial for both national well-being and economic development (Kodumajandusliku kutsehariduse, 1935). It was recognized that Estonia should learn European models, particularly the Finnish and Swedish approach to home economics education (Kirjavahetus välismaistest, 1934). To gain experience, leaders of the women's movement and other organizations traveled abroad to observe these systems firsthand. However, Estonia did not adopt the Finnish model, where schools specialized in a single branch, such as textile work, nursing, or handicraft (Heikkilä, 2003). Instead, the Swedish model served as a greater inspiration, particularly in terms of organizational structure. In Sweden, home economics schools functioned as umbrella institutions, covering various fields such as cooking, textile work, and child care, complemented with further education for management of, for instance, cookery in institutions (Broberg et al., 2021. p. 225).

At the beginning of Estonia's independence, combined agricultural and home economics schools were primarily established under one roof. However, later, specialization took place. In the 1939/40 academic year, Estonia had 46 agricultural schools, 8 women's industrial schools, and 30 home economics schools at various levels (Lepp, 1940). The first instructors were recruited from Finnish home economics schools, as well as from among Estonian women who had studied in local handicraft schools. In exceptional cases, specialists from abroad were invited to teach (Kennik, 1991, p. 48).

Table 1: Types of Home Economics Schools, Graduates, and Specialities

| Type of School | Number of Graduates | Specialities |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|--|
| 1-year rural home economics school | 2958 | Farm housewife, Maid |
| 2-year urban home economics school | 260 | Maid, Housekeeper |
| Women's industrial school in towns | 965 | Housekeeper, Urban housewife, Maid |
| Home economics secondary school | 220 | Trained homemaker |
| Higher home economics school | 457 | Household advisers, Day care nurses, Teachers for home economics schools |

Note. The table summarizes different types of home economics schools, the number of their graduates, and related specialities. Data from A. Lepp, 1940, *Lõpetanute arv õppeasutis 1919–39* [Number of graduates in the educational institutions 1919–39]. *Eesti Statistika Kuukiri* [Estonian Statistics Monthly], 222(5), p. 226 (<https://www.digar.ee/arhiiv/et/periodika/29970>).

Between 1919 and 1939, a total of 4,860 female students graduated from home economics schools (see Table 1). By the late 1930s, the network of this type of schools formed a significant part of the entire vocational education system, with about 17 % of all vocational school graduates coming from home economics schools (Karjahärm & Sirk, 2001). As can be seen from the photos (Figure 2–7), the learning environment of the home economics schools was inspiring: the classrooms were spacious and well decorated, equipped with modern technology and teaching aids. The existence of school kitchens was particularly important from the point of view of hygiene and healthy eating. It was similar to Denmark, where the “school kitchen represented a materialisation of home economics (...) and was an important means of communicating norms and knowledge” (Rasmussen & Andreasen, 2023, p. 106). Great emphasis was placed on proper dress—students wore a school uniform and work protective clothing. All this was to become an example for households.

Figure 3: Students Weaving on Looms at the Helme Home Economics School (1936)



Note. Helme Home Economics School, established in a former manor house, offered several areas of specialization, including weaving as an integral part of the home economics curriculum. All students were required to wear a uniform dress and apron, reflecting the school's emphasis on discipline and professionalism in vocational training. From: Helme Kodunduskeskkool ja Helme Põllutöökool [Helme Home Economics School, Photograph], 1936, Estonian Pedagogical Archive Museum (File F0007475), <http://arhmus.tlu.ee/cgi-bin/epam?oid=78284>

Figure 4: Orgita Home Economics School Greenhouse (1935)



Note. Although education at Orgita Home Economics School was free, students were required to cover the costs of boarding and meals. To help meet these expenses, the school offered paid practical training opportunities – such as work in the greenhouse and other school facilities – which enabled students to earn an income and partially support themselves during their studies. From: Orgita Kodumajanduskooli kasvuhoones [Greenhouse of Orgita Home Economics School, Photograph], 1935, Estonian Pedagogical Archive Museum (File F0007479), <http://arhmus.tlu.ee/cgi-bin/epam?oid=78287>

In Estonia, the responsibility for establishing and developing home economics schools was assigned to the Ministry of Agriculture until 1935, when it was transferred to the Ministry of Education. In 1925, the Ministry of Agriculture defined the types of schools and developed an initial curriculum covering four key areas of a farm woman's responsibilities: cooking, handicrafts, horticulture and animal farming etc. Initially, one-year home economics schools were established to train farm housewives, targeting girls who had completed 6-years of primary schooling. The 1931 Vocational Education Act officially defined three forms of home economics education: (1) One or two-years home economics school following six-year primary school; (2) Two-year home economics school based on *gymnasium* education and (3) Three-year higher-level home economics schools (Kutseharidus Eestis, 1938). Those schools aimed to prevent rural girls from moving to urban schools, which could alienate them from rural life. A total of five such schools were established in different regions of Estonia. The most popular school was Kehtna Higher Home Economics School, which had high competition, and only 20–30 % of applicants were admitted. It was established with the goal of training home economics teachers and instructors. The school had departments for horticulture, home economics, and 'domestic' industries. It stood out due to its extensive teaching

resources, including well-equipped workshops, a large school garden, a tree nursery, and a beekeeping facility.

Home economics schools were also established for young women of other nationalities. For example, in 1922, the *Vinni Foundation Girls' Household School* was registered at Vinni Manor in Virumaa (Rajamäe, 2014). This school was intended for Baltic German young women, with German as the language of instruction. After the enactment of the Cultural Autonomy Act, the school came under the administration of the German Cultural Council. Many of the students were impoverished noblewomen who took advantage of the opportunity to acquire practical home economics knowledge and skills through a one-year course after completing an 11-year secondary school (*gymnasium*). In 1938, a three-year Vinni Private Specialized Home Economics School was founded, admitting students who had completed nine years of schooling (Kuum, 1998). However, in the following year, when most Baltic Germans left Estonia, German-language education at Vinni came to an end.

Estonian home economics education also served as an inspiration for foreign colleagues. Kehtna became a model school for home economics, attracting numerous educational and women's movement leaders from Finland, Sweden, Norway, and other countries. Also students from Finland, Sweden, and Latvia came to Kehtna to acquire knowledge. The school was visited by the President of Finland, members of the Finnish Parliament, and representatives of the Latvian Parliament (Soome parlamendiliikmete, 1929).

A major vocational education reform took place in 1937, further expanding the home economics school network (Vocational Education and Training Institutions Act, 1937). By 1940, those schools existed in every county, with a total of 30 schools.

Figure 5: Kehtna Higher Home Economics School, Assembly Hall (1936)



Note. Kehtna Higher Home Economics School frequently hosted guests and held formal events and receptions in its Assembly Hall. Organizing and carrying out these events formed an integral part of the students' practical training, providing them with essential skills and competencies for future professional and social responsibilities. From: Kehtna Kõrgema Kodumajanduskooli peosaal [Assembly Hall of Kehtna Higher Home Economics School, Photograph] by J. & P. Parikas 1936, National Archives' Photo Collection (File 2111.1.13808.7), <https://www.meediateek.ee/photo/view?id=456807&l=1&q=EAA.2111.1.13808>

Figure 6: Särevevere Home Economics School, Cooking Class (1936)



Note. At Särevevere Home Economics School, which offered a one-year program, students received training in animal and poultry husbandry, weaving, and cooking. The school maintained its own household with dairy cows, horses, and chickens, producing all necessary food supplies on-site. This self-sufficient household also served as an excellent practical training base, providing students with hands-on experience in various aspects of farm work. From: Särevevere Kodumajanduskooli elust (1936). [From the daily life of Särevevere Home Economics School]. [Photograph]. Estonian Pedagogical Archive Museum (File F07654), <http://arhmus.tlu.ee/cgi-bin/epam?oid=78201>

Figure 7: Kehtna Higher Home Economics School, Science Class (1936)



Note. Kehtna Higher Home Economics School offered a well-rounded education that combined practical skills with general academic subjects. Alongside specialized classrooms for canning, bread baking, weaving, ironing, and cooking, the school featured fully equipped physics and chemistry laboratories, allowing students to engage in hands-on scientific experimentation as part of their curriculum. From: Kehtna Kõrgema Kodumajanduskooli õpilased tunnis [Students of the Kehtna Higher Home Economics School in science class]. [Photograph], by J. & P. Parikas. Estonian Pedagogical Archive Museum, (File Foo07481), <http://arhmus.tlu.ee/cgi-bin/epam?oid=78196>

5.2 Curriculum of Home Economics Schools

The curriculum of home economics schools was extensive, covering a wide range of subjects, including nutrition and cooking, sewing, handicrafts, household maintenance, childcare, healthcare, social studies, family and education studies, home furnishing and decoration, gardening, and bookkeeping. In rural schools, poultry, beekeeping and livestock farming were also part of the curriculum.

In all schools, the subject with the highest number of lessons was cooking, followed by clothing production and handicrafts. The number of weekly hours varied by school type, ranging from 40 hours per week in urban schools to 48 hours per week in rural schools. Practical training played a significant role, with rural schools offering up to 28 practical hours per week, in addition to a summer internship lasting up to four weeks (Kutsehariduslikkude õppeasutiste, 1937).

Figure 8: Kehtna Higher Home Economics School, feeding calves (1936)



Note. Kehtna Higher Home Economics School was notable for its extensive material and technical resources, including around 400 hectares of farmland, 160 hectares of pasture, a large fruit and vegetable garden, a tree nursery, and a beekeeping facility. Among the various activities, caring for calves was especially favored by students, highlighting their enthusiasm for practical work and close connection with rural life. From: Kehtna Kõrgema Kodumajanduskooli õpilased noorkarja jootmas, [Students of Kehtna Higher Home Economics School feeding calves, Photograph], 1936. National Archives' Photo Collection (File EFA:38.3-381). <https://www.meediateek.ee/photo/view?id=268165&q=Kehtna+K%C3%B5rgema+Kodumajanduskooli+%C3%B5pilased+noorkarja+jootmas>

Since rural home economics schools were often housed in former manor estates, managing household tasks was integrated into practical training. Students were also responsible for cleaning duties in the school dormitories. Workshops at these schools took on external orders as part of their practical training, and students were invited to official events where they gained hands-on experience in service roles (Kuum, 1998).

Graduates of home economics schools had to pass a vocational examination to obtain their respective qualifications. Those who completed urban-type schools earned the qualification of housekeeper, and after three years of work experience, they could take an advanced exam to attain the title of trained homemaker. Graduates of rural-type schools received qualifications as farmwives and maids.

In the curriculum of home economics secondary schools, the emphasis differed from that of one-year home economics schools. A significant portion of the studies was dedicated to general education subjects (such as native language, foreign languages, and mathematics) to ensure that students' knowledge reached the same level as secondary school graduates. The longer study period allowed for a more in-depth exploration of specialized subjects, as well as the introduction of new topics, such as housing, interior design and decoration, drawing, drafting, and composition (Kennik, 1992). As a result,

graduates of home economics secondary schools were better prepared for their future roles as farmwives, equipped with a broader education that enabled them to develop and maintain both a well-managed household and a high level of rural home culture. This type of education in home economics provided opportunities for employment in paid positions or allowed women to apply their acquired knowledge and skills for the benefit of their families. Women who graduated from home economics secondary school with the title of trained homemaker were highly valued in the workforce, particularly as ma- trons in kindergartens, orphanages, and sanatoriums.

Figure 9: Kehtna Higher Home Economics School, Outdoor Activities in the School's Nursery (1938)



Note. To support practical training in childcare, Kehtna Higher Home Economics School operated its own nursery. The children, primarily orphans, came from an infant care home and lived on-site, enabling students to gain direct experience in caregiving and early childhood development. From: Kehtna Kõrgema Kodumajanduskooli elust 1935–1937 aastatel [Life of the Kehtna Higher Home Economics School during the years 1935–1937, Photograph], by J. & P. Parikas, ca 1937, Estonian Pedagogical Archive Museum, (File FO9697), <http://arhmus.tlu.ee/cgi-bin/epam?oid=79510>

In conclusion, home economics schools dominated women's vocational education in Estonia. These schools were highly popular among girls, with more applicants than available places. They stood out for their excellent learning environments – many were housed in former manor houses – and successfully integrated practical homemaking skills with intellectual and cultural values.

6 Points of Tensions

This section discusses key tensions in the development of home economics education, focusing on its dual nature, its lower status compared to academic education, and its misalignment with the unified school system and broader vocational education policy.

The dual nature of home economics education

The dual nature of home economics education was reflected on the fact that vocational training was not solely directed at salaried employment but also at enhancing women's private housekeeping skills. As in Sweden (*hushållsskola*—household school) the term *ko-dumajanduskool* (household school) was used, which reflects societal tensions regarding women's roles, as these terms carried different symbolic meanings related to 'domestic' labor and status within the household. Most graduates came from rural home economics schools, which prepared for the status of “farm hauswife” (see specialities in Table 1).

Conflict with academic education

The expansion of vocational education was a response to growing concerns over the lack of practical training opportunities for women. While gymnasium education focused mainly on the humanities, vocational schools, including household management schools, offered a more practical curriculum, making them an alternative for young women who did not pursue higher academic studies (Grüntal, 1937). Despite these advancements, home economics education remained undervalued compared to traditional secondary education, as many continued to perceive general education as the best path for social mobility.

Mismatch with the unified school system and image of VET

The principle of a unified school system was applied only selectively, and vocational school students were often seen by policymakers and educators as labor force contributors to a specific trade (Kennik, 1992). Lower-level vocational education primarily aimed to increase the number of skilled workers rather than offer pathways for further studies and self-determined career development.

For some young people, the structure of vocational schools seemed confusing, and discriminatory. For instance, graduates of agricultural secondary schools were legally entitled to enroll in home economics high school, while graduates of (regular) home economics schools did not have this right. The lack of leadership in vocational education at the government level, along with inconsistencies and disregard for the unified school principle, were major factors contributing to the low reputation of vocational education among the public.

7 Discussion and Conclusion

This study examines the development of home economics education in Estonia during interwar period, focusing on the factors that contributed to its establishment and tensions resulting from the institutionalization of home economics education. As a framework for studying women's vocational education, activity theory (Engeström, 1987) allows to explore how institutional structures, societal norms, and historical influences have shaped educational opportunities for women. In this context, the establishment and expansion of home economics education can be seen as an evolving activity system, shaped by the tensions and contradictions between societal needs, institutional structures, and ideological discourses on gender roles.

The development of home economics as an academic field of knowledge was important in professionalising and supporting increasing the social status of women. The institutionalization of home economics had a dual effect on women's social status. On one hand, the development of home economics as an academic field of knowledge was important in professionalising, supporting and increasing the social status of women (Reisik, 1927; Mäelo, 1999). It provided them with educational and professional opportunities that were previously unavailable. By turning domestic responsibilities into a structured field of knowledge, home economics allowed women to gain expertise in areas that were increasingly recognized as essential for the well-being of society (Kannike, 2021; Kannike 2025). This contributed to their professionalization in new roles such as household advisers, day care nurses, teachers for home economics schools and social workers, giving them more visibility and influence in society. In Estonia's case, the school's infrastructure also played a big role. Most of the schools were located in former manor buildings, which provided an inspiring learning environment with their physical surroundings (beautiful rooms, modern teaching equipment). The innovations experienced soon became a reality and transformed society (Rajamäe, 2014).

On the other hand, the content of the studies in home economics schools demonstrated a "gendered cultural character", emphasizing the role of women as housewives and their functions of housekeeping (Andreasen & Rasmussen, 2022, p. 80) and reinforced traditional gender roles by keeping women closely tied to the domestic sphere. Although the education system provided women with skills and knowledge, it did not significantly challenge the prevailing societal expectation that their primary role was to be homemakers. Instead of opening pathways into broader professional fields, home economics education often confined women to gendered occupations.

The community that shaped and supported home economics education was composed of multiple stakeholders, including various women's organizations and their leaders (Apple & Coleman, 2003; Kannike 2025). These groups played a crucial role in shaping educational policy, establishing new schools, and promoting home economics as a respectable profession. Furthermore, international collaboration, particularly with Finland and Sweden, created transnational learning networks that contributed to the development of home economics curricula and teacher training. Students, as active participants, were not only learners but also contributors to the system of home economics education, particularly through practical training that extended beyond the classroom

and into real-world applications, such as household management, childcare services, and community development projects (Sirk, 1989).

In conclusion, the establishment and expansion of home economics schools in Estonia during the interwar period can be understood as an evolving activity system within which multiple actors—women, educators, policymakers, and international collaborators—interacted to transform household labor into a structured field of vocational education. It becomes evident that this transformation was driven by contradictions between traditional gender roles and modernizing forces, between rural and urban educational needs, and between national priorities and international influences. These tensions not only shaped the trajectory of home economics education but also contributed to broader societal debates about women's roles, vocational training, and the professionalization of 'domestic' work.

This study primarily draws on archive documents and secondary sources to examine the development of home economics education in Estonia during the interwar period. A limitation lies in the nature of archival materials, which may reflect institutional or dominant societal perspectives while underrepresenting the voices and lived experiences of the women directly involved in these educational programs. The absence of personal narratives or oral histories limits the depth of understanding regarding how women themselves perceived and navigated the opportunities and constraints of home economics education. The future research could explore the lived experiences of students and teachers within home economics schools through personal letters, memoirs, or oral interviews, where available. Such qualitative approaches could provide deeper insight into how individuals perceived and internalized (or resisted) the gendered ideologies embedded in vocational education.

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Change and Persistence

The Legacies for VET in Aotearoa, New Zealand

Lisa Maurice-Takerei

Abstract *This paper provides a background to vocational education and training in Aotearoa New Zealand with a focus on the legacies that continue to impact the environment and conditions for a stable and viable VET system. Despite ongoing measures to reform and organise VET through legislative shifts and changes in administration and organisation, the sector continues to be unsettled and in flux. There are several embedded attitudes associated with vocational, trade and technical education that have thwarted efforts to develop a strong vocational and technical education system in Aotearoa, New Zealand over time and these have had an impact on efforts at reform. This paper examines some of the historical conditions that have led to the environment for VET as we now find it – underdeveloped, underfunded and in a constant state of reform.*

Title *Change and Persistence – The Legacies for VET in Aotearoa, New Zealand*

Keywords *Vocational Education and Training, Technical Education, Educational Reform, Educational Change*

1 A Reform Environment

There are few periods over the past 30 years in which New Zealand has not been involved in reform activities associated with Vocational Education and Training (VET). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) noted in its review of the New Zealand tertiary education system back in 1997, that the context was one of “Reforming Again and Yet Again” (McLaughlin, 2003, p.13) through significant and frequent policy change and “radical reform agendas” (p.13). Reform activities have continued over the last 20+ years. The move to merge New Zealand’s 16 polytechnics and nine Industry

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Training Organisations (ITOs) into one large entity in 2020 involved a massive restructure, which was halted in 2023 by the incoming National government. The disestablishment of Te Pūkenga, the *mega polytechnic* has been announced, and consultations continue. What is clear is that institutions and organisations need to cut costs if they are to survive as autonomous and independent organisations.

Changes to tertiary level vocational education and training in New Zealand will include a return to standalone institutions. Consultation, undertaken in 2024 is extended to 2025 as work-based learning options are explored with industry representatives. The consultation document, “Redesign of the vocational education and training system” (Ministry of Education, 2024) proposes a new structure where smaller institutions and those with financial deficits will form a federation under the Open Polytechnic. Te Pūkenga and Workforce Development Councils (WDCs), established in 2020, will be disestablished at the end of 2025. Industry Skills Boards will replace Workforce Development Councils (WDCs) in 2026 as standard-setting bodies.

Consultation documents are focussed on structural change, and the arrangement of roles for each of the key players in VET, including polytechnics, Industry Skills Boards and Private Training Establishments (PTEs). Discussion about the purpose and vision for VET is sidelined. There is an opportunity to focus on a vision for VET as a vehicle for building local skills relevant to industry, employers, individuals and communities and build a system that is responsive to a broad skills, industry and community-based vision. Commentator, Phil Kerr (2024) suggests that Vocational Education and Training in New Zealand is being provided, through the current reform, with a structure, but is in want of a system that supports a long-term plan. Phil Kerr (2024) observes that more than anything the VET sector in New Zealand needs a simple and viable system, that mandates and provides the conditions for co-operation. Acknowledging and building on the contribution of VET to the educational and employment landscape within New Zealand is essential.

2 A Disparate Sector

One feature of VET in New Zealand is that it is only relatively recently that the term VET has been used in policy and legislative documents. The term is used to refer to the range of training and education provision available including trade training, technical education, industry training, workplace learning, polytechnic education (ITPs), apprenticeships, or any post school non-university training and qualification (Maurice-Takerei & Anderson, 2021).

Only in 2020 was the concept of a VET system introduced through The Education and Training Act, 2020. The lack of a long-term national level strategy over time has supported the development of separate entities, organisations, and representations (Abbott, 2000). In fact, even in its early days technical education sprung up from a series of local initiatives rather than through any kind of national plan (Dougherty, 1999).

This is a disparate sector with a long history that has led to its current state. As different entities and organisations connected to VET developed along their own lines, they have tended to operate separately and sometimes in competition with each other

(Maurice-Takerei, 2016). By 1980, New Zealand's vocational education and training (VET) environment was extensive but fragmented: multiple qualification authorities, a proliferation of industry boards and local apprenticeship committees, and polytechnics. There were multiple qualifications provided by different entities (Abbott, 2000). The rather complicated range of offerings and organisations combined with looming economic changes, set the stage for sweeping reforms that unfolded in the late 1980s and 1990s. These reforms fundamentally changed vocationally based education and training, trade training and apprenticeships.

Much trade related education and training had disappeared by the 1990s (Abbott & Doucouliagos, 2004) when large formerly state-owned enterprises and government departments were broken up and sold off during the 1980s. An overall de-emphasis on technical training (Ross & Bamber, 2000) alongside a decline in manual and workshop-based education in schools meant that by the 2000s it was stated that New Zealand had a *skills crisis*. The skills shortage was further highlighted by the call for trade skills following the 2011 Christchurch earthquakes and the subsequent rebuild of the city. Concern was raised about the reliance on *imported* skills and the lack of *home-grown* tradespeople.

What is clear is that attempts to successfully re-organise Vocational Education and Training in New Zealand has a long history of effort held back by a legacy of attitudes and practices. The following sections identify and discuss some of the attitudes that have over time contributed to the current VET reform environment where a pre-occupation with structure and organisation trumps.

3 Persistent Challenges

Despite continued attempts to manage and promote VET, there are a range of challenges that have remained constant over the last century or more, the most persistent remain stubbornly averse to change, including a) the reliance on immigration to fill skills gaps, b) a problem of esteem for trade related training and employment, c) issues of access and equity d) the problem of costs and funding, e) contestation about the content of qualifications and training including the mix of generic and specialist skills and f) ongoing complaints about the mismatch between training and employer needs.

3.1 An Over-Reliance on Importing Skills – The Underinvestment Challenge

New Zealand's economy has long contended with skill shortages in key sectors, a challenge that has prompted a heavy reliance on immigration to fill critical gaps in the labour market. Indeed, as stated by the New Zealand Productivity Commission in 2021, "Skilled migrants are an integral part of the New Zealand economy" (NZ Productivity Commission, p.21). The reliance on immigration over many decades has seen insufficient investment in vocational education and training and contributed to a shortage of home grown, job-ready skills. The idea that skills can be easily imported has hampered a commitment to building a long-term strategy for skills development.

The reliance on immigration to provide a skilled workforce has a long history in New Zealand. From the late 19th and early 20th centuries there was little emphasis on trade

training since there was not much demand for technical skills (Abbott, 2000). For the skills that were needed employers relied on those with existing skills.

Currently, employers, facing immediate operational pressures and the high costs of internal training, are more likely to hire individuals who already possess the required skills. Companies in sectors such as construction, engineering, healthcare, education and information technology turn to international recruitment as a remedy for the shortfall in homegrown skills and expertise and immigration policies have provided mechanisms through which employers and industries can access workers.

The tendency to use immigration as a basis for relieving skill shortages was very active in the 1960s and 1970s where immigration policy provided a portion of the country's skilled workers (Kappert, 1997). Active immigration policies have a focus on skills shortage lists and there is an immigration environment that the government, sees as "fundamental to rebuilding the economy", (Erica Stanford, 2024).

Part of the reluctance of employers to engage in the training and skills development of employees is the nature of the New Zealand economy with a large proportion of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Here, investment in long-term training programs is seen as economically risky, particularly when the benefits of such investments are not immediately tangible. Consequently, hiring trained workers from abroad is seen as cost-effective and quick, providing a short-term solution.

One of the potential damaging effects of relying on immigration to fill labour and skill gaps is that the domestic employment market can see an impact on wages (New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2022). This exacerbates concerns about the status of trade-based roles and contributes to the view that training does not lead to high wage employment. Recognising the pitfalls of an immigration-dependent approach to obtaining skilled workers, successive governments have implemented various measures to strengthen VET. These measures have included an increase to public funding, the introduction of performance-based funding models, and initiatives aimed at fostering closer collaboration between educational institutions and industry. However, the effectiveness of these reforms has often been limited by the short-term way in which they have been implemented. When skills are short, and times are tough New Zealand employers and industry revert to immigration as a solution to skills needs.

According to the New Zealand Productivity Commission's report (2022), *Immigration – Fit for the Future*, "immigration has reduced the risk of labour shortages for employers in diverse sectors of the economy – from aged care to the dairy industry and the IT sector" (2022, p.2).

However, while skilled immigrants can quickly fill labour market gaps, the practice does little to address the systemic weaknesses in domestic VET. There has become an entrenched dependency on externally sourced skills and labour, inhibiting the development of a sustainable, home-grown skills-based workforce. While immigration policies have served as an effective short-term remedy, they are not a substitute for a robust domestic training system and by favouring already trained overseas workers, employers effectively reinforce the very system that has failed to cultivate home grown expertise (Maurice-Takerei, 2014).

New Zealand's reliance on immigration to solve skill shortages is intertwined with an historical underinvestment in vocational education and training. The under investment

and consequent neglect of VET has resulted in a labour market that is ill-equipped to meet the evolving demands of current and future industry.

3.2 Parity of Esteem – The Status Challenge

Vocational, technical and trade education in New Zealand has suffered from being undervalued as a viable educational and career pathway. Vocational Education and Training has been regarded as inferior to academic or university pathways and this has resulted in the problem of *parity of esteem* (Harris & Clayton, 2020). This attitude has a long history, demonstrated here in a brief overview of efforts starting in the early 1900s to develop and maintain manual, technical and vocational education provision.

Efforts to introduce manual, technical and vocational skills into schools in the early 1900s were not taken up by schools or were actively resisted (Maurice-Takerei, 2014) despite active legislation. Due to a lack of take-up, technical secondary schools were developed to sit alongside standard secondary schools, however, notwithstanding a promising start, they failed to thrive and eventually became technical institutes offering post-secondary school training. Mirrored in this early failure of secondary schools to embrace vocational and technical subjects, technical institutes, or institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs), the progeny of technical schools, embraced more academic pathways in the 1980s and the *academic drift* saw several polytechnics move into offering degree level and post-graduate programmes in the 1990s, enabled by the Education Act 1989. Some polytechnics sought university status. Vocational Education and Training has failed to find a reliable place to sit and this has exacerbated the problem of perception and identify and held back the development of a strong, viable and sustainable VET system.

Because there is not a strong vocational education culture in New Zealand educational pathways have traditionally been limited to *academic* or *other* (Tearney, 2016). The focus of secondary schools has tended to be on academic attainment as a pathway to university, and vocational education seen as an option for students deemed less capable of succeeding in academic environments.

The cultural biases inherent in an education system based on a colonial model meant that technical skills were considered secondary to the intellectual rigor of academic subjects. This early stratification laid the groundwork for a “parity of esteem” problem in New Zealand’s education system (Maurice-Takerei, 2014) and the idea that VET is inferior to an academic education. This view has been reinforced over time as vocational education and training continues to be identified as a site through which to manage social and educational problems (Maurice-Takerei, 2014) including unemployment, literacy and numeracy skills and the problem of youth characterised as NEETs (not in employment education or training). VET is often seen as a remedial pathway.

Despite the strong influence of British models in the early years, which privileged classical and academic learning over technical or practical instruction, there have been pockets of time where the need for a skilled workforce has been recognised. Technical and manual education was introduced into schools through the Manual and Technical Instruction Act of 1895 which provided for practical subjects in the curriculum and enabled the establishment of technical classes and schools.

Legislation was widened in 1900 and 1902 to provide funding incentives for schools reluctant to include manual and technical subjects. However, despite funding incentives for subjects like cooking, woodwork and agriculture, schools were slow to embrace vocational subjects. Parents wanted their children to be able to access an academic curriculum (Tearney, 2016).

The establishment of technical high schools in the early 1900s laid the groundwork for a dual education system however, by the 1920s academic high schools were seen as a pathway to high status professions and technical schools as suitable for the less able and the working classes (Guscott, 2000). As a result, technical high schools became less popular and struggled to survive (Maurice-Takerei, 2016). Technical high schools responded by keeping academic pathways open for all students and so became less distinguishable from other high schools.

The mid-20th century marked a period of reconstruction and rapid economic development. The post-World War II era saw significant government intervention in the education sector, including initiatives aimed at expanding technical education to meet the country's evolving industrial demands. However, despite these efforts, the legacy of colonial-era educational hierarchies persisted and trade and technical schools continued to be perceived as "second choice" options relative to more academically oriented institutions.

Throughout the 20th century, the status of VET remained compromised with a dual system where the academic stream was seen as the prestigious, future-oriented pathway, and technical education relegated to remedial status. However, a change was to come following the first Labour Government (elected in 1935) and their support for educational opportunity as a social right. In 1936, secondary education was made free, and from 1944, secondary schooling became compulsory until age 15.

A common, core secondary curriculum for all students was established in the late 1940s following a broad and sweeping report (known as the Thomas Report, 1944). The curriculum, blended academic and practical subjects. The aim was to provide a general education that also catered to different abilities and future educational and career choices and to unify academic and vocational education under one system. In practice, however, as with the reluctance to include technical and manual skills at the turn of the century, schools streamed students by ability and gender into different tracks: "academic" streams for those bound for university, "commercial" (office work) or "technical"/ "domestic" streams oriented towards trades or homemaking skills. The technical/domestic streams were less desirable for families seeking upward mobility and tended to be made up of a collection of young people who were not seen as destined for university.

Public concern about the social stratification of education and the reluctance by parents and industry to support a dual system (McKenzie 1992) shows a similar pattern to the experiences in the United Kingdom where a school curriculum designed to prepare students for university has prevailed (McCulloch, 1989). In New Zealand, school based vocational and technical education did not really gain traction.

By the 1950s a post-war boon in demand for technology and skills and changes to apprenticeship requiring more technical instruction meant that technical schools be-

came focussed on post-school training. In the 1960s former technical high schools became technical institutions and were set up in large urban centres (Abbott, 2000).

Through the 1960s and 1970s Technical Institutes began to offer a greater proportion of apprenticeship training (Kappert, 1997) and the traditional apprenticeship system started to come under some significant strain. An overhaul of the apprenticeship system was recommended and a 1970 government committee noted the “low status of trades and the small wages for apprentices”. The status of trades was cited as a significant reason for a shortage of skilled tradespeople. Suggestions relating to improved wages for fully skilled people were made (Murray, 2001) and changes to the apprenticeship system from a time-served model to a competency-based system was discussed.

In the meantime, the challenge of provision for manual and technical instruction in secondary schools continued. With the demise of technical high schools, it was envisaged that secondary schools would provide the common core curriculum, including access to manual and workshop classes. However, over time these resources were run-down and by the 1980s there were fewer manual classes in schools and the introduction of a technology-based curriculum (Ferguson, 2009) meant a preference for computer suites over manual workshops (Ferguson, 2009).

In another attempt to promote vocational education in schools Vocational Pathways were introduced into the education system in 2013. The goal was to align industry standards with the curriculum to provide pathways for students into further study or employment. However, a 2016 review of the programme found that schools viewed Vocational Pathways as relevant only to students who were not achieving academically (Education Review Office [ERO], 2016), and schools have tended to use the pathways as an add-on for disengaged students rather than something to be integrated into the wider curriculum.

Over the past few decades, several policy initiatives have attempted to redress the imbalance in status, uptake and availability between academic and vocational education in the secondary and tertiary sector. For the tertiary sector, the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s which introduced market-oriented changes across all post school education and training, attempts were made to align curriculum more closely to industry and employers. There have been ongoing calls to make vocational education and training more responsive and accessible, yet, despite reforms, the deep-seated cultural bias of academic over vocational education has proven difficult to overcome.

The failure to carve out a strong place for technical and vocational education through the secondary school system and echoed in the tertiary education system has been difficult to overcome. Through the Education Act, 1989 technical institutes and polytechnics became Crown entities managed by chief executives and were enabled to award degrees and to enrol international students. With this change, the differentiation between universities and polytechnics became diluted. As secondary and technical schools failed to differentiate themselves some half a century earlier, universities began offering what were traditionally vocational education programmes and technical institutes and polytechnics began offering academic degrees.

Despite increases in enrolments at post school organisations, polytechnics and universities now both provide degrees and sub-degree programmes. While polytechnics have generally focused on teaching and practical training and universities have emphasized research, this *academic drift* has seen polytechnics lose their unique position.

This overlap between universities and polytechnics has been left relatively unchecked and has prompted debates on the role and mission of ITPs. However, as was experienced in the early 20th century, the attempt to provide an institutional space dedicated to vocational education and training has not been fully successful.

The measures taken to improve the up-take and status of VET have not dismantled the historical hierarchy that privileges academic pathways. Attempts to understand and shift perceptions of VET are seen in a report on tertiary education, “Perceptions of vocational education and careers in New Zealand”, (Tertiary Education Commission 2018b), where the education system itself is highlighted as “perpetuating mistaken perceptions of VET” (p. 14).

The tensions between academic and vocational education have continued to thwart attempts to provide a strong VET environment in New Zealand. Schools, reluctant to include manual subjects have deemed vocationally based courses for the less able, and post school education organisations, concerned for economic survival, have competed for students across a vocational/academic divide. The undervaluing of vocational education exacerbates inequities. The issues of parity of esteem and equity in access are intertwined. When VET is perceived as a lower-status option, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are further stigmatized by enrolling (or being enrolled) in what is seen as non-academic programmes.

Positioning VET as a pathway to rewarding, high-skill careers will help to break down the negative stereotypes that have long marginalized these programmes. However, such a transformation requires a holistic approach that addresses the cultural narratives that have historically devalued technical education (Strathdee & Cooper, 2017).

3.3 Participation – The Access and Equity Challenge

New Zealand has a very diverse educational environment. Geographically, socially and ethnically, there are significant disparities in access and outcomes. Educational access is especially limited for Māori communities (McClelland, 2006) with Māori students in both regional or urban contexts less likely than their non-Māori counterparts to pass first-year subjects in tertiary education institutions and more at risk of non-completion. Critics (for example Bishop, 2008) argue that many reforms have been piecemeal and have failed to address the underlying structural issues that contribute to inequitable outcomes.

Successive governments have implemented a range of policies to improve equity in vocational trade and technical education. Policies have included targeted funding initiatives, frameworks, scholarships, and the development of culturally responsive curricula that better reflect the needs and experiences of Māori and Pasific students (Brownie, et al, 2024). Despite these measures, significant gaps remain. Some improvements are evident, however as stated by Brownie et al (2024), educational deserts or areas of limited tertiary education provision and continued low participation rates remain.

Ongoing debate among educators and policymakers centres on how best to organise vocational education and training to be both more inclusive and more responsive to the diverse needs of New Zealand’s population. However, Strathdee and Cooper (2017) contend that despite a focus on increasing educational equity through participation and

achievement in vocational education and training, outcomes remain structured by background factors including ethnicity, socioeconomic status and gender.

Rural communities have had challenges accessing decent educational alternatives to an academic education over time. Technical high schools and technical institutes, established in major centres, have tended to be based in areas with larger populations. However, in support of more rural communities and to encourage returning servicemen to complete apprenticeships, the technical correspondence school was established in 1946. The correspondence school increased the reach of trade and technical formal training to support and encourage veterans and others to complete trade and technical qualifications and examinations regardless of their geographical location (Abbott, 2000). The programmes and staff were reflective of the male-dominated trade and technician courses.

Apprenticeships, by the 1950s, were common in fields like building, plumbing, printing, and engineering, typically lasting 4–5 years with part-time attendance at technical classes provided by polytechnics or the technical correspondence school accompanied by block courses (Dougherty, 1999). Government provided subsidies and educational infrastructure (technical colleges and night schools), and employers and unions provided training placements and input on curricula.

Still, equity issues persisted, and Māori participation lagged. In 1953, 40 % of Māori children still attended segregated Māori primary schools, and very few transitioned to secondary technical education (TEC, 2018). The gap in educational opportunity across class and race remained a challenge. Women were also under-represented in many apprenticeships. Later, in the 1980s the Hawke Report (1989) highlighted that the trades continued to have an image problem among youth.

Targeted efforts to improve access and equity in VET were introduced in the late 1950s and 1960s. One landmark initiative was the Māori Trade Training Scheme launched in 1959 by the Department of Māori Affairs (Te Puni Kokiri, 2009). This scheme recruited young Māori (often from rural areas) and placed them into apprenticeships in the cities, initially in carpentry and later expanding to plumbing, electrical, mechanics, and other trades. Trainees were housed in hostels with pastoral support, easing their transition to urban life and work culture.

By 1966 the Māori Trade Training Scheme had an intake of 144 apprentices per year, and by 1970 over 1,100 Māori youths had participated at training centres in Auckland, Lower Hutt, and Christchurch. This program significantly increased Māori representation in skilled trades during its operation, addressing the concern that Māori were over-represented in unskilled jobs (Te Puni Kokiri, 2009). The programme was in place until the early 1980s and became a model for how culturally aware support with focussed vocational training could create more equitable outcomes. In addition to Māori trainees, increasing numbers of women began entering vocational programs beyond the traditional “female” domains. For instance, the 1960s saw women training as laboratory technicians, radiographers, and in other technical fields, although trades like carpentry or engineering remained overwhelmingly male (Dougherty, 1999).

Despite these advances, issues of equity and reach have remained. As reported by Strathdee (2012) official data showed that participation in VET remained structured by background factors including ethnicity, socio-economic status and gender. The model of tertiary and vocational education, whether centralised or regional seems to make little

difference to the numbers of successful outcomes (Brownie, et al. 2024). What is important according to the study conducted by Brownie et al (2024) is that clear governance, strong and competent leadership and regular monitoring is required for success. Morris and Jacobi (2022) make clear that supporting educational access and equity requires purposeful interventions.

For this kind of activity to lead to more equitable access and outcomes, a structured and organised system is required, one with a long-term view, a vision for VET and clear and sustainable goals for the future.

3.4 Who Pays? – The Funding Challenge

The funding of vocational education and training in New Zealand has long been a subject of debate. Reforms of the early 2020s were prompted by a financial crisis in the ITP sector including multi-million dollar *bailouts* for organisations with significant deficits.

The funding model for vocational education, focussed heavily on government subsidies sees government directly fund ITPs and pay subsidies to employers for certain apprenticeship training programs. This has reflected a policy consensus that investing in skills yields public benefits.

As the financial demands for vocational and technical education expanded in line with the expansion of New Zealand's industrial base in the early 20th century, vocational education and training became more formalised through the establishment of technical colleges and trade schools. While this was seen as necessary to support the growing manufacturing and construction sectors, the financial responsibility for these institutions continued to remain largely in the public domain. Government funding, although sporadic and often insufficient, was seen as the main driver for VET, with employers contributing minimally (Maurice-Takerei, 2014).

The late 1970s, however, brought a series of economic challenges that strained public finances and prompted the rethinking of funding and efficiency in the 1980s. Market driven reforms in the 1980s and 1990s shifted the position of education and training from its funding as a public good, to education and training as a private good (Abbott, 2000) where individuals contributed more financially to their qualifications. Views about the purpose and function of VET as either a public or private good; designed for the benefit of employers and industry or for the benefit of individuals and society may provide a basis for funding. Those who favour the idea of a strong public education system with strong state sponsorship point to improved health outcomes, broader participation in a democratic society, reduced poverty and crime and other social benefits including social and educational equity (Riddle, 2014). The neo-liberal view that education provides a private benefit where an individual reaps the rewards of their *investment* in the educational market is measured in terms of economic and social status and attainment (Riddle, 2014). A change in view about who benefits from education and training sits at the base of the neo-liberal reforms which fundamentally changed the way education and training was funded in New Zealand.

While the market-led reforms of the 1980s and 1990s created a market for vocational education and training, this encouraged competition between providers and opened the *market* to private providers who had access to state funding. This was part of the funding

crises for ITPs where the previous centralisation process via Te Pūkenga was viewed as palliative by Strathdee (2024). It is unlikely that the dismantling of the centralised system will provide for ongoing financial stability in the sector.

Unlike many continental European systems, where employers play a central role in co-funding training through levies and structured apprenticeship and dual training models, New Zealand has traditionally relied on a mix of government funding, student fees, and minimal employer contributions. High costs and time away from productive work are cited by employers as key barriers to engaging in high levels of employee training (Dalziel, 2010). The continued funding of VET in New Zealand is a dilemma which has deep historical roots and reflects broader socio-economic factors, the nature of enterprises in New Zealand, and cultural perceptions of vocational education.

From the legislative beginnings that promoted and supported vocational and technical skills development in New Zealand and the first technical school in 1885, to the current VET environment there has been a lack of sustained long-term national planning for workforce development and the development of skills. The financial model for training has been correspondingly underdeveloped. Funding, largely provided by the state and, in some cases, by local communities, demonstrated little expectation that employers would invest in the education of their potential or current workforce. This lack of employer engagement, described as a *disinclination* by Abbott (2000) is often attributed to the small-scale nature of many organisations and employers (Dalziel, 2010), often operating on thin margins, and with little incentive to bear the costs of training when the immediate returns were uncertain.

Historically, New Zealand's economy has been characterized by a significant proportion of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Unlike large corporations that might have the resources to invest in training programmes, SMEs face more financial constraints that preclude substantial investment in vocational training and consequently have lower levels of training and skills development (Dalziel, 2010). However, this lack of investment by employers in skills training is also a function of employer attitudes towards vocational education and training evidenced in a study by Dalziel (2010) where the authors state that SME employers tend to be suspicious of formal training and education and prefer to manage skill deficiencies through on-the-job unstructured training or by employing previously trained staff (Dalziel, 2010).

The lack of confidence in vocational education and training reduces the incentive for employers to invest in a system that is not highly regarded either by the public or by prospective employees and is linked to a wider societal perception that positions VET as less desirable than academic education. However, overall, employers have been content to rely on government-subsidized training designed to meet the minimum requirements of the workforce, rather than investing in high-quality, employer-led training initiatives.

Research in 2012 by James and Holmes highlighted how a cultural devaluation of vocational and technical education has led to a cycle in which low employer investment has contributed to lower overall quality and, in turn, reinforced negative perceptions. With vocational training perceived as a second choice, and vocational qualifications being perceived as inferior to academic credentials, employers have tended not to see the strategic value in sponsoring or developing local training programmes. This has further entrenched the model in which public funds, and private contributions (through student

fees) rather than industry resources, have taken responsibility for much of the financial burden and highlights how the long-standing stigma attached to VET has perpetuated a cycle of underinvestment, reinforcing employer reluctance to engage in comprehensive workforce development.

The reforms of the 1980s and 1990s did little to incentivize employers to invest in vocational training. Instead, the burden of adapting to changing economic conditions has fallen largely on the state and on individual training institutions. The government continues to shoulder the lion's share of funding, often supplemented by student fees. Indeed, despite policy initiatives that encourage partnerships between industry and education providers, structural problems persist. The result has been a persistent funding gap, where industry benefits from the trained workforce but contributes only marginally to the costs of producing that workforce (Ministry of Education, 2013) and so the skills development does not meet the needs and expectations of industry.

International comparisons highlight the challenges faced in New Zealand. In countries such as Germany and Switzerland, employers are integral to the funding and delivery of vocational training through dual education systems. In these models, significant financial and logistical support is provided by employers, which leads to a tighter alignment between training and industry needs. New Zealand's reluctance, or inability to replicate this model is partly rooted in its unique economic structure and cultural history. As a result, while these countries have enjoyed a strong correlation between employer investment and training quality, New Zealand has struggled to mobilize similar levels of commitment from the private sector (Dalziel, 2010).

The question of "who pays" for vocational education and training in New Zealand has long been a contentious issue. From its origins in the late 19th century, when much skills training was predominantly a state-funded enterprise due to both cultural and economic factors, through to contemporary debates over employer engagement, the system has struggled with underinvestment from the private sector. While the desire to increase participation was an accepted rationale for reforms in the 1990s, fiscal constraints sat behind many of the changes. How social benefits for education should be conceived remained and continue to remain in debate (Crawford, 2016). Historical economic constraints, a fragmented employer base, and cultural perceptions that devalue vocational and technical education have all contributed to a funding model that continues to rely heavily on government support.

3.5 Skills Development – The Skills Mismatch Challenge

Discussions about the funding of Vocational Education and Training in New Zealand and the legacy of public funding leads directly to the question of content and curriculum or the match between what industry and employers want and the ability of vocational education and training efforts to provide it.

There have often been criticisms that the training provided through government-funded VET programs does not align closely enough with the specific skills required by employers. This misalignment reduces the perceived value of employer contributions, since companies feel that their investment will not directly translate into better job per-

formance or competitive advantage (Dalziel, 2010). There is an overall lack of trust that the training and education initiatives will result in improved profitability.

Concerns about the mismatch between training and employer requirements are not new and are seen in a 1977 Apprenticeship Review Discussion Paper that raised concerns about mismatches between the supply and training of apprentices and industry demand, and about the quality of both on-job and off-job training. This was followed in 1989 by a Department of Labour report titled “Further Education and Training of the Labour Force” (1989) which documented the “lack of cohesion” in the apprenticeship system. Accompanied by this were concerns about *provider capture* where employers and industry organisations considered that those providing training had too much influence over what was delivered in training. Many of these concerns were addressed in legislation through the Education Act in 1989 and the Education Amendment Act in 1990 (Levin, 2001).

Attempts to manage this perceived mismatch have resulted in a range of reforms to the management of apprenticeships over the last 30 years. Apprenticeships in the traditional sense all but disappeared in the 1990s and through the Industry Training Act of 1992 Industry Training Organisations (ITOs) took over the government funded responsibility for training. The number of trainees in structured industry training fell sharply in the early years of the new system, prompting concern about skill shortages in trades (Maurice-Takerei, 2016) once again.

By 1999, New Zealand was starting to feel the effects: only a modest share of employers were training through the new ITO system, the success and completions of the system were marginal and there was public worry that the country wasn't producing enough electricians, carpenters, and plumbers to replace an aging trades workforce. The Modern Apprenticeships scheme beginning in 2002 aimed to combine ITO training with workplace-based apprenticeships. As part of the COVID-19 response, the government injected extra funding into trades training schemes and apprenticeships and numbers increased markedly.

However, an overhaul of the system and qualifications linking industry more closely with training has provided little relief and many industry-based organisations have preferred to undertake their own training rather than work alongside ITPs. The problem of public funds used to support the needs of private industry however needs to be measured and considered. There is a balance to be struck regarding the social and educational priorities that is the duty of a public institution, and the responsibilities to industry and trainees.

Overall, the more recent policy reforms have sought to improve alignment with industry needs. However, a more collaborative approach that includes enhanced incentives, public-private partnerships, and industry-specific strategies may be necessary to shift the funding paradigm. Ultimately, addressing the issue of who pays for vocational training is critical.

4 Recent Developments – Centralisation and Decentralisation

In April 2020, Te Pūkenga was established to be a unified national institute aiming to provide both on-campus programs and on-the-job training, delivering everything from

foundation level certificates to degrees and apprenticeships under one roof. This massive overhaul of vocational education and training was halted in 2023 by a new National-led government which is developing a new structure of stand-alone polytechnics with some centralisation and a reorganisation of other stakeholders involved in vocational education and training in New Zealand. This does, however, demonstrate a long term problem for VET in New Zealand – the tendency for successive governments to reform structural arrangements in response to critical periods over time, and the lack of long-term planning which sees reforms put in place by one government, undone by a subsequent government.

Current areas of discussion in the latest attempts at reform focus on structure and configuration, financial viability and cost effectiveness, the function of public and private provision and localisation. These discussions are not new. What is promised is that there will continue to be significant change and uncertainty for many educators in the sector (Ministry of Education, 2024) including ministerial signals that some polytechnics may close. Recent redundancies have impacted the sector where staffing levels have seen a steady decline since 2018 and domestic student numbers have dropped.

5 Conclusion

Vocational education and training in New Zealand has evolved in response to immediate needs, entrenched attitudes, biases and practices that have developed over time. From the first manual training classes through the creation of technical schools and polytechnics, overhauls of apprenticeship systems, to market models, the integration of ITPs under Te Pūkenga, and the current programme of planned decentralisation, VET remains unsettled and lacking in a long-term vision.

Attempts to develop a cohesive and coherent VET system in New Zealand have been thwarted by persistent attitudes and practices that have seen VET lurch from a state of neglect punctuated by short periods of intense funding and focus to try to assuage various skills concerns. This has negatively affected efforts for the development of a strong and co-operative system.

One of the problems for VET is the short-term approaches to skill development. Employers have found ways to manage skills shortages by relying on immigrant skills and immigration policy, policymakers intervene with short term ‘packages or initiatives when the *skills crisis* becomes one of national concern. Attempts at reform over the last 20 years sees changes put in place by one government and undone by the next so that the impact of reforms cannot be fully embedded or realised.

Addressing the root causes of skill shortages requires targeted planning, investment and leadership in VET, alignment of training programs with industry needs, and initiatives that incentivise employers to contribute to workforce training and growth. VET in New Zealand requires good programmes of learning and development with good access and strong links across the different functions. Vocational Education and Training depends on committed, well trained educators and trainers.

Raising the status of VET is not an easy task. It begins with the building of a trustworthy and reliable identity. A decent VET identity will acknowledge the legacies of the

past in order to avoid repeating them and will build on the common commitment to a highly skilled, future-focussed workforce. A dedicated, well-funded and legitimate VET focussed space that brings together the component parts of the system in genuine co-operation, and is informed by high quality research and provision will provide a basis for a VET identity. The provision of a long-term strategy that is immune to the constant policy lurches of the last few decades will provide sustainable long-term benefits for everyone involved.

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From Industry Training Advisory Bodies to Jobs and Skills Councils

A Contribution to the History of Sector Skills Councils in Australia

Erica Smith

Abstract *This paper throws light on the history of skills councils in Australia from their formal introduction in the 1990s to the present day. Skills councils are important elements of the vocational education and training system, providing two key, and linked, inputs into the vocational education and training (VET) system: they develop the competency standards underpinning the qualifications delivered in VET (Training Packages), and they provide information about industry needs for VET training. They are highly political, as stakeholder groups vie for control of the system; hence during the past thirty years there have been several reorganisations of the system. There has been little research on the topic. The paper describes the four main iterations of the skills council systems over time, using key documents, some no longer available publicly, as well as the author's own experience in and with the system, and her own research, some unpublished, into the topic. To illustrate the political nature of the system, a case study is provided of the interventions over time by one of the three major economy-wide employer peak bodies. The paper ends with suggestions for further research, and an Appendix documents the major reports of the 2000s and 2010s, including brief summaries, to assist future researchers.*

Title *From Industry Training Advisory Bodies to Jobs and Skills Councils: A Contribution to the History of Sector Skills Councils in Australia*

Keywords *Skills Councils, Industry Input to VET, VET Stakeholders, VET Curriculum*

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1 Introduction

This paper provides an overview of the development of sector skills councils in Australia from the 1990s to 2023. *Sector skills council* is a commonly-used term internationally to refer to entities representing industry sectors, with the primary purpose of providing advice to governments about skills need in their industries, but often with additional responsibilities. As the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2021, p. i) states, “a sectoral approach to skills development allows key stakeholders to identify the skills challenges in their sector and to collectively develop solutions. It allows greater ownership of the problems and solutions, and enables new partnerships to be formed, often amongst actors that have not worked together before on skills issues. Sectoral approaches typically require some form of institutional set-up that brings together key stakeholders”. Formalised skills council arrangements were introduced in many countries in the 1990s (ILO, 2021, p. xv); this pattern was seen in Australia, although informal arrangements existed previously. Terms for the entities vary from country to country; in Australia, over most of the period 1990 to 2025, four main terms have been used successively, as arrangements have changed, with the two iterations *Industry Training Advisory Body* (ITAB) and *Industry Skills Council* having the most longevity. The current term is Jobs and Skills Councils, named to align with a recently-formed national body Jobs and Skills Australia.

The evolution of sector skills councils in many countries (e. g. in Chile Contraras, 2023; in the UK Perryman, 2023) shows contestation and controversy. This is not surprising, considering that skills councils bring together representatives from differing stakeholder groups, with the tripartite partners – government, employers and trade unions – being the most common core; these groups have differing goals and agendas. To add to the complexity, in Australia, as in some other countries, there are skills councils at jurisdictional level as well as national level. Australia has six States and two, smaller, Territories. As States and Territories (hereafter called states for the sake of brevity) provide funding for the training taking place in their jurisdictions, VET structures differ considerably across states (Smith, 2014), and skills councils often do not align across states.

This is a complex and ever-changing field, and little is written about skills councils and their development. This paper was written as *a contribution to the history*, adopting the term used by Churchill in his books on the Second World War; he considered that they could not be described at that point as “history” (Churchill, 1948, p. vii) due to the recency of the events. Churchill had been the British Prime Minister throughout the war, and based his books largely on his own experiences and written records. In the same way, but with my experiences at a lower level, of course, I have incorporated my own experiences in and with skills councils into this otherwise “untold or neglected story” (Schrag, 2021, p. 91), which also reports, in part, on recent events.

The paper is based on a number of primary sources, published and unpublished (Neuman, 2012, p. 333): government reports, consultancy reports and other documents. Some reports are no longer publicly available, or were never published, but I had retained copies, primarily hard copies. Additionally, the paper draws on my own working experience and research. I have had experience as a manager and advisory committee member in national and State skills councils in two sectors over several points of time and worked with several skills councils as partners in a range of funded research. I have

used records of my own correspondence and notes, for example notes from meetings, in the same way as Churchill (1948) did, albeit at a different level. I have utilised my recollections (Neuman, 2012, p. 334), albeit my own and not others, as is more common. In a sense my role could be seen as that of a research 'informant' (Denzin, 1989, p. 73–74) or an 'observant participant' (Seim, 2024).

I have also included data from my own specific research into skills councils at key points over the past 25 years: for example, research in 2004 into the aftermath of the removal of national funding from ITABs, participation in a review of a State ITAB system (2007), an international comparison of skills councils (2010) and a recent comparison of State ITAB-like entities within Australia (2024).

The topic is explored here chronologically, with periodisation (Schrag, 2021, p. 77) by different iterations of skills council structures. The paper provides a complete chronical of formalised skills councils in Australia, which began in the 1990s as in other countries (ILO, 2021, p. xv). While it describes the Australian situation, from time to time international comparison (Schrag, 2021, p. 88; Neuman, 2012, p. 439) is used to help explain the significance of Australian developments.

This topic is not well-documented or researched, and policy developments have tended to become lost. A key source of VET policy history is the 'inquiries and reviews' section of the knowledge bank (VOCEDplus, n.d.) maintained by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, a government-supported body responsible for collecting VET-sector statistics and for supporting and carrying out research requested by Australian federal and States governments. But only one national review of skills councils is listed, the 2010–2011 'Inquiry into Industry Skills Councils' by the Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The other inquiries and reviews on skills councils listed in the knowledge bank are reviews carried out at State level, and only four of those are reported, two from the 1990s (Victoria and Queensland), one from the 2010s (Western Australia) and one from the 2010s (New South Wales). Reference to some of these and to other state-level reviews at other dates can be found in the literature, but copies are not publicly available. Some of the other national reports about VET in the 'knowledge bank' contain content on skills councils, which has been used to justify changes in skills councils policy and structures; the most notable of these is the 'Joyce review' of 2019. But it is not apparent from their titles that they discuss skills councils. It seems, then, that much of the history of skills councils in Australia is hidden from view, and the intent of this paper is to uncover and explain that history.

Following a literature review and a brief overview of the evolution of the Australian system of skills councils, the four major sections of the paper cover the four iterations of sector skills council history in Australia since the 1990: ITABs, Industry Skills Councils, Industry Reference Committees supported by Skills Service Organisations, and Jobs and Skills Councils. Within each section there is an overview of developments, and, where relevant, an account of the author's involvement in the field and the author's relevant research. A major theme of the history is the actions of stakeholder groups, particularly employer bodies. Following the four main sections of the paper, a case study documents key interventions of one such body, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. An Appendix to the paper provides a listing of relevant government reports and discussion papers, some of which are not publicly available

The VET system in Australia, as in other countries (Burgi & Gonon, 2022), changes constantly. It is important to state that this paper does not set out to provide a history of the VET architecture over the period covered, but only of skills councils, with other structures mentioned only where directly relevant.

2 Background and Literature

Skills councils are generally viewed as prime examples of industry-VET linkage. It is interesting to note that, although skills councils are designed to improve the supply of skills to national economies (among other features), they generally only link with VET systems, rather than with higher education systems as well. Skills councils straddle the ‘macro’ level and ‘meso’ level of industry linkage (Hoang Dang, 2016): ‘macro’ because they involve governing bodies, but ‘meso’ because they are at an industry sector level. ‘Micro-level’ involvement refers to local engagements between the VET sector and employers. Raddon and Sung (2006) argue that skills councils are the best way of engaging employers in VET, to move from a ‘supply-side’ focus for VET to a ‘demand-side’ focus.

The International Labour Organization (ILO), an agency of the United Nations, as part of its ‘decent work’ agenda advises countries on setting up skills councils systems, and has developed a 68-page resource guide (ILO, 2021), with a shorter 12-page policy note that was developed for Indonesia, but which has relevance for all countries (ILO, 2019). The ILO (2021, p. 31) states that skills councils are commonly tripartite and are formed along specific industry lines, for example construction or health. Coverage may be wide or quite narrow, and/or may focus on priority sectors, sometimes sectors that are important for economic strategy or to trial the concept before rolling it out more widely (ILO, 2021, p. 3).

The ILO (2021) discusses advantages and disadvantages of three models: ‘employer only’ models, tripartite models and also of what they call ‘tripartite plus’, where other sector stakeholders are include. The document provides examples of countries adopting the different models, with, for example Singapore and Chile utilising the employer-only model; Australia and Sri Lanka the tripartite model, and India and New Zealand the ‘tripartite plus’ model (ILO, 2021, p 31). An international comparison by Raddon and Sung (2006) identified several different models, one of which was ‘employer-involved’, including voluntary engagement of employers in skills councils, statutory engagement of employers in financing VET (presumably via a levy); and employer-owned skills councils which employers funded.

Despite their importance, skills councils have been relatively neglected in recent international literature, a similar situation to that noted in earlier Australian literature (Wooden, 1997; Butterworth, 1993). In the UK, Ashton (2006) attributes the lack of attention to the fact that sector skills councils focus on the role of employers, a factor often under-researched in scholarly literature.

While more recently there has been more literature on employer linkages with VET, a continued lack of scholarly attention to skills councils was highlighted by Smith & Somers (2024). The authors trawled the contents of five major VET journals and the proceedings/papers from four conferences, for papers on industry-VET linkages for

the ten years 2013–2023. The journals analysed were the following: *International Journal of Training Research, Vocations and Learning*, *International Journal of Training and Development*, *TVET@Asia*, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*. The four conferences were those of the International Network on Innovative Apprenticeship (INAP), the Journal of Vocational Education and Training, the Australian VET Research Association, and the Researching Work and Learning conference (only part available),

While 37 journal articles and 54 conference papers were found to be about industry-VET linkages, these focused almost entirely on local linkages (Pan, 2019) or on apprenticeship arrangements, especially in Europe (Duemmler, 2023). There were no journal articles, and only three conference papers (Contreras, 2023; Smith, 2022; Whatmore et al., 2019), specifically addressing skills councils. Contreras (2023) reported on mixed views among stakeholders about the role of skills councils and even queries whether their objectives were achievable.

While there is a lack of scholarly literature, two detailed international examples, the UK and South Africa, were provided in a 2023 international webinar on skills councils presented by the International Labour Organization to 490 government and other stakeholder. They provide insight into the ways in which skills councils may constantly evolve and change, or alternatively may have more stable histories. Simon Perryman, a former UK government official, reported on the UK. The UK had 18 Sector Skills Councils in 2023. The Sector Skills Councils had been strongest in the 2000s, with 25 in place overseen by a Sector Skills Development Agency. At that time, they were responsible for developing the then National Occupational standards. Perryman (2023) reports that there were only 18 in existence by 2023 and that they were weaker, diffuse, and no longer funded by government. They had moved towards an employer focus rather than tripartite arrangements, and relied on project funding. They had reportedly 'lost status as trusted partners' (Perryman, 2023) and employer satisfaction was uneven across industry areas and overall lukewarm.

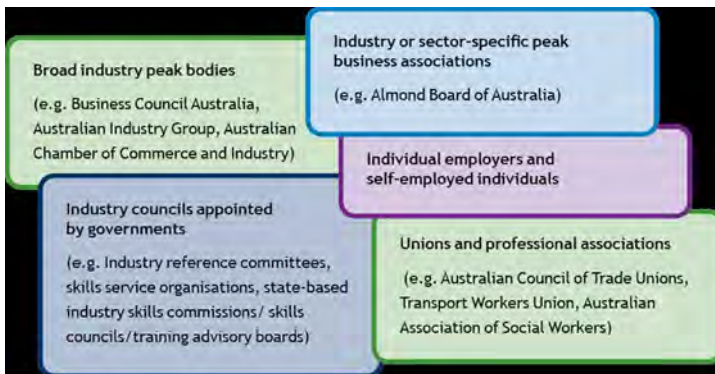
South Africa's situation was presented by Thabo Moshongoane, from the Mining Skills Authority, a skills council. In 2023 there were 21 Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETA), carrying out a range of activities, including describing industry skill needs, promoting work placements, and allocating grants to employers, training providers and workers. SETAs had been in existence since 2000, evolving from previous 'Industry Training Bodies'; there had been some changes over time, including SETA amalgamations. (Moshongoane, 2023). The SETAs were highly structured, with tripartite representation, a wide range of functions, and links to the Department of Higher Education and Training and were embedded into national skills processes (Moshongoane, 2023). They all had clear titles reflecting their industry areas. e.g. Manufacturing, Engineering and Related SETA (MERSETA), and Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA). SETAs were funded through a process introduced via a Skills Development Levies Act 1999. The levy is paid by employers to DHET, depending on industry area; 80 % was then directed to the relevant SETA and 20 % to the 'national skills forum'. It was, however, reported that the SETAs were short of funds, and that there was no specific training program for staff of the SETAs.

A recent desk-based study by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (Siekmann & Circelli, 2021), focusing on higher-level engagement of industry with VET,

helps to fill the gap in the absence of scholarly literature. The authors found differing methods of industry involvement among six countries which they investigated, selected as having relatively similar VET systems to Australia's (Siekmann & Circelli, 2021, p.11). They found that only two anglophone countries, Canada and UK, had clear skills councils systems. New Zealand's strong Industry Training Organisation system was at that time about to be restructured to a system of Workforce Development Councils. The new system has been implemented (Tertiary Education Commission, n.d.), although Industry Training Organisations still exist, and a recent change in government in New Zealand has made the future of the country's Workforce Development Councils unclear (Chan, 2024).

Siekmann and Circelli (2021) regard the network of skills councils (which at that time, Industry Reference Committees and Skills Service Organisations) as an important element of industry's links to VET as one example of their category 'industry councils appointed by government' (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Industry representation in VET in Australia



Note. From *Industry's role in VET governance: Using international insights to inform new practices* (p. 3), by G. Siekmann & M. Circelli, 2021, NCVER. Copyright 2021 by NCVER.

Figure 1 also illustrates other ways in which 'industry' can be involved with the VET system and its policy, including the direct involvement of employer associations and trade unions, and/or their peak bodies (for example, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry); and involvement of individual employers.

While many of these types of industry bodies can be seen in other countries, the authors of Figure 1 point out that differences in governance structures, and historical and socio-cultural differences mean that it is difficult to compare countries' systems (Siekmann & Circelli, 2021, p. 6); this problem, of course, applies to most aspects of VET systems.

3 Brief Overview of Australia's Skills Council History

Industry advisory arrangements had been in place before 1990 in the jurisdictions (states and territories), but they were not formalised or standardised. The advent of competency-based training, however, meant that bodies were needed to develop the CBT curriculum, which by 1997 was manifested in national Training Packages (Smith & Keating, 2003). This role was given to national ITABs, which normally involved the State entities too. The role of sector skills councils in Training Package development has continued to the present (Smith, 2023), but the skills councils have undergone many changes.

A brief timeline is provided below, followed by a short description of the changes:

- 1990: National competency-based training (CBT) began with the National Training Board developing competency standards.
- 1992: National Framework for the Recognition of Training for CBT curriculum.
- 1997: The advent of Training Packages, to be developed by Industry Training Advisory Bodies (ITABs) – Commonwealth and State – for all industry areas.
- 2002: Commonwealth Funding removed from State ITABs.
- 2003: National ITABs replaced by Industry Skills Councils (ISCs), with committees for constituent industry areas. 11 ISCs were formed, from 23 national ITABs¹.
- 2015: ISCs replaced by six Skills Service Organisations (SSOs), 'servicing' 67 Industry Reference Committees.
- 2020: The demise of Skills Service Organisations announced, ceased operations end of 2022. Three pilot 'Skills Organisations' were funded by government, and the formation of 'Industry Clusters' began.
- 2023: 10 Jobs and Skills Councils (JSCs) progressively confirmed (replacing the 'industry clusters' plan), and commenced operations.

As can be seen from this timeline, many changes occurred to these bodies. The network of national and State ITABs collapsed first, as the Commonwealth government removed funding in 2002 from State ITABs, which had been co-funded by national and State governments. Then in 2003, national ITABs were replaced by Industry Skills Councils. There were only 11 of these, replacing 29 national ITABs in existence in 2003 (Smith & Keating, 2003, p.). As the Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) necessarily covered a range of industries, each ISC established a number of industry or 'advisory' sub-committees, for example committees for training for the retail industry or the security industry. The sub-committees oversaw Industry Skills Council staff in the maintenance and review of national Training Packages, and a number of ancillary activities, including the development of what were known as 'Training Package support materials' which typically included teacher guides to assist with delivering the material, and learner workbooks.

Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) were themselves abolished after only 12 years of existence, and replaced in 2015 by a new model where Training Packages were developed by 'Industry Reference Committees' which were 'serviced' by 'Skills Service Organisations' (SSOs). As the Skills Service Organisations often lacked expertise, a 'Training Package

1 At some point the 11 Industry Skills Councils became 12, but the date of this change is unclear.

Quality Assurance Panel' of consultants was established, who could be hired to assist Skills Service Organisations in Training Package work. The reason for the change to this new system was not publicly stated, but it seems likely it was due to employer body pressure. (Later in this paper, an example is provided of a series of interventions by one such body.) The new system was quickly found to be flawed (Joyce, 2019, to be discussed in detail later in the paper) and SSO contracts were renewed only for a short period (due to COVID). After the advent of a new government in 2022, Jobs and Skills Councils were then created.

While many factors influence the changes to the systems, it is worth recording the nature of the governments over this period of recent history (Table 1). In Australia, two conservative parties – the Liberals and the Nationals – unite to form governments; the Labour party is left-leaning.

Table 1: Political parties forming government over the period 1991–2025

| Labor government (left-leaning) and relevant prime minister(s) | Liberal-National government (right-leaning) and relevant prime-minister(s) |
|--|---|
| 1991–1996 (Keating) 2007–2013 (Rudd, Gillard then Rudd) 2022-date (Albanese) | 1996–2007 (Howard) 2013–2022 (Abbott, Turnbull, then Morrison) |

It is generally accepted that trade unions have more influence in national policy under a Labor government. Differences arising from the political orientation of the government may be discernible in the 'privatisation' of the skills council system in 2015 under a Liberal-National government, and the initial formation of 'industry clusters', which were also privatised. After Labor's accession to power in 2022, the 'industry cluster' plan became 'Jobs and Skills Councils' which had mandatory trade union representation on their Boards. The name for the entities aligned with a tripartite Jobs and Skills Summit which the new Labour government held in September 2022, and with a renamed national skills body, Jobs and Skills Australia.

The paper now moves onto a detailed discussion of the four manifestations of skills councils since the 1990s: ITABs, Industry Skills Councils, Industry Reference Committees supported by Skills Service Organisations, and Jobs and Skills Councils. The Appendix lists and briefly summarises a number of government reports and discussion papers from 2000 to 2019, some of which are not publicly available. These reports provide the background to many of the changes discussed in the paper.

4 First Manifestation: Industry Training Advisory Bodies

4.1 Industry Training Advisory Bodies: Description

The origins of ITABs (industry Training Advisory Bodies) are not clear. Butterworth (1993, p. 26), at the time a senior official in the NSW TAFE Commission, described ITABs as ‘hav(ing) been with us for a considerable period at both the national and state level’ and having ‘significant input’ into the VET system. Similarly, Misko et al (2005, p. 21) refer to ITABs and similar bodies ‘that had been operating in the past’. While there is very little available literature on their prior development, Wooden (1997, p. 7) provides some insight. He refers to Industry Training Committees or Councils which had been set up, with ‘modest subsidies’ in the 1970s. He mentions overlap with existing ‘apprenticeship advisory committees’ within states, and the eventual merging into State-based ITABs by the early 1980s (Wooden, 1997, p. 7). Wooden notes that in their early days they often operated as training providers, but that this ceased by the end of the 1980s due to the removal of commonwealth funding for that activity. Wooden (1997) states that in the early 1990s there were found to be 176 industry advisory bodies but that following a review in 1993, only 18 national ITABs remained by 1995, with the State networks being rationalised.

What did ITABs do? Butterworth (1993) states that ITABs, representing sometimes one industry or sometimes a group of similar industry areas usually had industry, union and government representatives – i.e. a typical tripartite representation (Burgi & Gonon, 2022; International Labour Organization, 2021) – and that the relevant layer of government provided executive support. The relevant government provided a ‘charter’ for the spheres of operation; generally the purpose of ITABs was to determine industry’s training needs, but some had other activities, for example some delivered training.

A key feature of the national training reform agenda was the development of the Australian system of competency-based training (CBT). CBT became utilised in VET in the late 1980s in certain industries at the same time as it was being adopted in other countries, such as the U.K. CBT became more embedded in Australia when a body called the National Training Board was instituted by the Commonwealth (national) government, with the agreement of the eight state and territory governments in 1990, to oversee the development of competency standards. The development was undertaken through approved ‘Competency Standards Bodies’, who were often the ITABs (Smith & Keating, 2003, p.126). The bodies were required to be tripartite (Misko et al., 2005, p 21).

While ITABs had existed previously, they became more prominent at this point because of their role in developing competency standards. In 1997 the introduction of national Training Packages to replace the more disparate competency standards led to further consolidation and regularization of ITABs’ position. National ITABs were given the role of, and funding for, developing Training Packages (Bowman & McKenna, 2016, p. 15–16), usually with the assistance of their state counterparts. Training Packages consist of a number of qualifications and constituent units of competency, with consistent structures and content; they are generally industry-based (Smith & Keating, 2003)². By

2 Training Packages, qualifications and units of competency are publicly available on the national training register, at www.training.gov.au.

the early 2000s there were over 80 Training Packages, although a process of consolidation has since reduced the number, to 55 in 2025. Competency based training has had many opponents from the beginning, and still does; the arguments around the nature of CBT, and the system of CBT in Australia over thirty years, are described by Smith (2022).

Thus by the late 1990s the role of ITABs became clearly linked to the development of Training Packages. At this time, 23 national ITABs and six other recognised bodies covered most industry areas and were each managed by Boards which contained representatives from industry, unions and other stakeholders (Smith & Keating, 2003). By the end of the 1990s the list of ITABS was as follows (Smith & Keating, 2003, pp. 149–151):

- Australian Light Manufacturing ITAB (ALMitab)
- Australian Seafood Industry Council
- Automotive Training Australia Ltd
- Business Services Training Australia
- Community Services and Health Training Australia
- Construction Training Australia
- Culture Research Education & Training Enterprise Australia (CREATE Aust.)
- Electrocoms and Energy Utilities Qualifications Standards Body of Australia (EE-OZ)
- Forest & Forest Products Employment Skills Company Ltd
- Information Technology & Telecommunications (IT&T) ITAB
- Manufacturing Learning Australia
- Manufacturing, Engineering & Related Services ITAB
- National Finance ITAB
- National Food Industry Training Council Ltd
- National Mining ITAB
- National Training Advisory Ltd (Local Government ITAB)
- National Wholesale Retail & Personal Services Industry Training Council (National WRAPS)
- Property Services Training Australia
- Public Safety ITAB
- Rural Training Council of Australia Inc.
- Sport & Recreation Training Australia Pty Ltd
- Tourism Training Australia
- Transport & Distribution Training Australia (TDT Australia)

There were also some non-ITAB bodies which performed similar functions. After ANTA was formed they became 'ANTA Recognised Bodies'. The bodies were:

- Australian Drilling Industry Training Committee Ltd
- National Meat Industry Training Advisory Council
- National Correctional Services Advisory Committee
- Public Service Education and Training Australia
- Racing Training Australia
- National Printing Industry Training Council

At the State level, ITABs sometimes matched the industry area of the National ITABs but were sometimes aligned differently. In smaller States and Territories there were generally fewer ITABs, with wider industry coverage. Highly political organisations, and underfunded for the work they did, ITABs were constantly under threat from employer bodies keen to access the available government funding for liaison with industry, and differences between State and National ITABs in some industry areas led to inefficiencies. ANTA spent a great deal of effort on reviewing ITAB operations around the turn of the century but early in 2002 a surprise announcement as part of the Commonwealth (federal) Budget removed federal funding for State ITABs, over a transition period. As State governments only supplemented federal funding (sometimes dollar for dollar but sometimes at a lower rate) this left most State ITABs very vulnerable, and some closed down or amalgamated.

To improve industry links with Training Packages, national ITABs used strenuous efforts to involve relevant industries and enterprises as widely as possible. The State ITABs performed a different and often under-estimated role. They represented the needs of their industry areas to their State and Territory governments, advocating for funding and changes in course and module offerings, as well as promoting the value of training, and recognised training in particular, to enterprises. Moreover, State as well as national ITABs were often utilised by many stakeholders as the first point of contact with industry training, for example when carrying out research, evaluation or best practice projects. For organisations with such a pivotal role in the VET system, they were surprisingly underfunded with around \$17m AUD per annum allocated federally in 2001. State ITABs in particular found their perceived under-funding a barrier to effective performance. In other countries, such as New Zealand by contrast, Industry Training Organisations at that time were relatively well-funded and perform a wider range of functions (Williams, 2001).

Despite the pivotal role played by ITABs, there was relatively little published about their operations. Much of the literature tended to fall into three main categories:

- Description of ITAB operations and the main roles of ITABs (e.g. Butterworth, 1993, as discussed above; Fitzpatrick, 1997; Paton, 1998)
- Reports and recommendations on ITAB governance and effectiveness (Bodman, 1994; Department of Training and Industrial Relations (DETIR), Queensland, n.d.; Office of Training & Further Education (OTFE), Victoria, 1999; South Australian Training Development Group (TDG), 2000)
- Studies of employer perceptions of ITABs (Sylow, Driessen & Robertson, 1995; Wooden, 1997a, 1998)

Few major studies were carried out. The exceptions were a project which identified the major functions of ITABs through the use of 'best practice' case studies (Marson, 1995), and Wooden (1997b) the larger study on which the journal paper on employer perceptions was based. The larger study included consultations with over 20 ITAB staff as well as with a telephone employer survey of employers (n=293). The Australian National Training Authority commissioned a review of national ITABs, by the consulting group Price Waterhouse Cooper (PwC) in 2001, which is listed and discussed in the Appendix to this paper.

4.2 Author's Experience in ITABs

From late 2000 until early 2002, in a break from academic work, I was Executive Director of the Wholesale, Retail and Personal Services (WRAPS) ITAB in the state of South Australia. Retail had been my own industry area before working in VET and then universities; hence I was able to bring industry knowledge to the role. I contributed to the development and review of seven national Training Packages and their support materials, coordinated by the national WRAPS ITAB, which was a tripartite Board. The seven Training Packages were: Wholesale, Retail, Community Pharmacy, Hairdressing, Beauty, Funeral Services and Floristry. My involvement included contributions to national meetings with industry leaders and state governments.

I was employed by a management committee of industry stakeholders. The ITABs received very limited Commonwealth and State funding, and some earned additional income. In the case of my ITAB, this income was from research projects, sub-letting rooms in its leased office space, and producing manuals for certain industry sectors. At one point I needed to make my own job part-time to manage the finances until the next funding instalment. Despite having only one other staff member, I also produced a three-year industry training plan for the seven industries for the State, liaised with TAFE (the public VET provider) and other registered training organisations (RTOs) in these seven industry areas, worked closely with the state department responsible for VET, and contributed to South Australian developments in VET in Schools, industry plans, and in apprenticeships and traineeships. I was part of an active State network of ITABs in all industry areas, and a national network of State ITABs in the WRAPS area; all of the latter had similar industry coverage. The collective knowledge and expertise were immense.

4.3 Author's Research Into ITABs

4.3.1 Qualitative Research Into State ITAB Networks 2004

While the Commonwealth government ceased funding State ITABS and some closed, most States rallied and reformed their networks. I was interested in how both the closures and the rallying occurred. With a colleague from the State ITAB network, I commenced a small project, never published, to examine the situation following the withdrawal of Commonwealth funding. The interviews which I carried out, and for which I have retained notes, were with:

- A representative of the Commonwealth department at that time responsible for VET (the Department of Education, Science and Training).
- A representative of the Australian National Training Authority, a government agency at that time responsible for many national VET arrangements and structures. (ANTA was itself closed in 2005, with all of its functions transferred to the Commonwealth department.)
- Two State government representatives of the departments at that time responsible for VET (New South Wales, the most populous state, and Tasmania, the least populous State).

- The director of the Industry Skills Council for the service industries (also director of the prior national ITAB in that area).

The interviewees were asked about the purposes of ‘an ITAB-type body’, about the strengths and weaknesses of the prior system, and about what was needed for ‘ITAB type bodies’ to operate effectively. Only a small amount of the research can be reported here, and so for brevity, the findings of the two national interviews were selected. The government interviewee indicated that the government had found the state ITAB system too unwieldy to manage (“too much of a bureaucracy in its own right”) but the decision to withdraw funding was “not easy”; the Department still appreciated and utilised the expertise that existed within the remaining bodies. The ANTA interviewee said that the removal of funding had made it difficult to negotiate with state governments as there was no funding lever, and reported that the new national Industry Skills Councils were experiencing difficulties with the emerging differences among states. Both interviewees reported a preference for industry expertise rather than VET expertise among staff, while stating that the interests of employers and VET should be balanced. They saw ITAB staff needing extra skills in industry areas that had less history and culture of training.

4.3.2 Information Arising From a Western Australian Project on State ITABs 2007

As the result of an invitation to assist a consultancy firm with a review of the Western Australian ITAB systems, one of the state reviews mentioned earlier, I was provided with a useful summary document of State ITAB arrangements across Australia³. This document showed the following situation in 2007, illustrating the continuation of the ITAB network, but in different forms in different States.

- New South Wales: 20 industry advisory bodies were funded, at \$50,000 AUD each by the State government. Most had only one part-time staff member. They provide advice on industry skill needs, but did not produce an Industry Training Plan.
- Queensland: Some ITABs amalgamated and continued to operate on State funding, but those contracts expired at the end of 2006. Five Skills Alliances were funded for various broad industry areas, receiving \$250,000 AUD each per annum. Four contracts went to prior ITABS.
- South Australia created nine Industry Skills Boards in 2005, receiving \$140,000 per annum.
- Victoria had 11 ITABs and five Industry Advisory Bodies, funded to a total of \$1m per annum.
- Tasmania had no State-funded ITABs. A building and construction ITAB was funded by a levy. Three government officials performed the work previously undertaken by ITABs.
- Northern Territory had six Training Advisory Councils.
- The Australia Capital Territory had five ITABS which were funded ‘on a fee for service basis’. The contracts were due to expire in 2007.

3 Document ‘Industry Advisory Arrangements in Other States’ (As of February 2007).

At the time of the review, Western Australian ITABs were funded for \$115,000 AUD each p.a. As part of the consultancy project, there were consultations with peak industry bodies, a government Skills Taskforce, ITABs, and stakeholders. There were also two public consultations, with large numbers of attendees. I participated in six interviews, covering industry peak bodies and associations, major employers and ITAB committee members, and contributed to the main report.

The report that was produced for the steering committee for the project (Quantum Consulting, 2007) identified attributes of successful and not-so-successful ITABs. The attributes of successful ITABs included the presence of a high quality executive officer, broad industry representation on the board, with amicable relationships; they produced data that were forward-looking and which were used by government or stakeholders, and they had additional funded projects, which not only brought in extra income, but also improve relevant knowledge (Quantum Consulting 2007, pp 3–4). At the time, the state government also utilised time-limited ‘industry working groups’ which provided advice on specific matters; these were also evaluated. The report also examined the interactions of the State government’s Department of Education and Training (DET) with the ITABs, and the expressed support of stakeholders for a range of alternative models of industry advice. The conclusion reached by the consulting group was that the State Government should retain but refine the current ITAB model.

5 Second Manifestation: Industry Skills Councils

5.1 Industry Skills Councils: Developments

As noted earlier, national industry skills councils commenced in 2003 and continued until the end of 2015, when they were wound up to be replaced by the Skills Service Organisation-Industry Reference Committee system. There were only 11 Industry Skills Councils, replacing 29 national ITABs in existence in 2003 (Smith & Keating, 2003). As the smaller number of Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) meant that each necessarily covered a range of industries, each ISC established a number of industry sub-committees. Table 2 shows the Industry Skills Councils and the Training Packages which they managed.

ISCs had two main roles: one relating to Training Packages, and the other to the provision of advice about industry developments. The first role of the ISCs was to develop, maintain and review national Training Packages, and to undertake a number of ancillary activities, including the development of what were known as ‘Training Package support materials’ which typically included teacher guides to delivering the material, and learner workbooks. In addition, the national ISCs were responsible for industry advice to government. They produced ‘Environmental Scans’ for each of their industry areas each year. These covered industry developments and the associated labour market developments, workforce development needs and the implications for VET. They also included Training Package information that would be useful for stakeholder groups. The Service Skills Australia 2010 Environmental Scan, for example (Service Skills Australia, 2010), was 32 pages long, and had 23 additional pages of appendices including details of all changes to each Training Packages and detailed mapping of occupations in demand.

Table 2: Industry Skills Councils and their Training Package scope

| Industry Skills Council | No. of Training Packages | Training Package names |
|--|--------------------------|---|
| Agri-food Industry Skills Council | 5 | Food, beverages and pharmaceuticals; Rural and related industries; Meat processing; Seafood; Racing. |
| Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council | 2 | Community services; Health |
| Construction and Property Services Industry Skills Council | 2 | Property services; Construction. |
| ElectroComms and Energy Utilities Industry Skills Council (EE-Oz) | 4 | Electrotechnology; Gas sector; Generation sector; Transmission, distribution and rail. |
| Forestry, Wood, Paper and Timber Products Industry Skills Council (ForestWorks) | 2 | Pulp and paper manufacturing; Forest and forest products. |
| Government and Community Safety Industry Skills Council | 6 | Correctional services; Water industry; Public safety; Public sector; Local government; Translating & interpreting. |
| Innovation and Business Industry Skills Council (Innovation and Business Skills Australia) | 6 | Business Services: Financial Services; Information and communications technology; Printing and graphic arts; cultural and related industries; Education. |
| Manufacturing Industry Skills Council | 12 | Manufacturing; Automotive manufacturing; Automotive retail sales and repair; Aerospace; Chemicals hydrocarbons and refining; Competitive manufacturing; Furnishing; Laboratory operations; Manufactured mineral products; Metal and engineering; Plastics, rubber and cablemaking; Textiles, clothing & footwear. |
| SkillsDMC National Industry Skills Council | 4 | Drilling; Mining; Quarrying; Civil infrastructure |
| Services Industry Skills Council (Service Skills Australia) | 11 | Beauty; Community pharmacy; Floristry; Funeral services; Hairdressing; Holiday parks and resorts; Hospitality; Sport, fitness and recreation; Retail; Tourism; Wholesale. |
| Transport and Logistics Industry Skills Council | 5 | Road transport; Rail; Warehouse and storage; Maritime; Aviation. |

Initially, training providers were excluded from the governing bodies of VET and from Training Package development processes, with those responsible claiming that industry should own all processes, but this decision was reversed during the decade, with training providers allowed to participate in important committees and to comment on

Training Packages. The Boards of ISCs included employer and trade union representatives, who were sometimes at odds over the content and format of Training Packages and qualifications, with trade unions, for example, seeking to protect industrial relations privileges including preferential arrangements for apprenticeships (Smith, 2010). Even after agreement on Training Packages had been reached through Boards, further steps needed to be followed. Firstly, all State and Territory governments had to be consulted and then the new or revised Training Package was submitted to a national committee for endorsement.

While the Industry Skills Councils continued for 12 years, there were periods of uncertainty. ISCs had been set up from 2004 as private companies, receiving \$15 million AUD per annum each, to map industry skill needs and to develop Training Packages. As they were private companies they relied on the government income, and in 2006 several were on the verge of bankruptcy when the federal government threatened to withdraw funding (Morris, 2006).⁴ While the ISCs' funding was then assured for an additional 15 months, there were further periods of uncertainty.

5.2 Author's Experience With Industry Skills Councils

I worked closely with several of the Industry Skills Councils in a range of ways. For example, I was commissioned by Service Skills Australia to undertake two research projects, and incorporated several industry skills councils as industry partners or project reference group members on national research projects which I led. In addition, I frequently interviewed ISC managers and staff in other research projects. I also collaborated with the Industry Skills Council Innovation and Business Skills Australia, responsible for VET teacher qualifications *inter alia*, in another capacity.

As a detailed example, one of my research projects, about skill in occupations, included two ISCs as formal industry partners, providing a deep insight into the operations of ISCs and their benefits for the system. An extract follows from a submission to the 2014 government review 'Industry engagement in Training Package Development', submitted on behalf of the team of researchers which I managed (Federation University, 2014). As explained in the 'Third manifestation' section of this paper, the 2014 government review was seeking to remove Training Package Development from ISCs, and the submission was written to explain the expertise residing in ISCs. The extract is:

This paper argues that the system for Training Package development should be left with the Industry Skills Councils, in accordance with the current practice. The system works well on the whole, and any problems with particular Training Packages or industry areas should be addressed individually within the current system.

The paper is written on behalf of a team of researchers who have been working with Industry Skills Councils for three years on a project funded by the Australian Research Council: '*Recognising the skill in jobs traditionally considered unskilled*'. In this research project we examined, in detail, nine occupations from a range of industries that are covered in total by three Industry Skills Councils (ISCs). Two of the ISCs (Manufacturing

4 An evaluation report was undertaken by the Department of Education, Science and Training- see Appendix.

Skills Australia and Service Skills Australia) have contributed funding and staff time for three years towards the project, and the third, the Construction and Property Services Industry Skills Council, has contributed staff time as the project developed.

Our experiences working on this project have confirmed our previous experiences that ISCs form an essential part of the VET system. They possess an immense amount of knowledge and experience both about the VET system and about the industries which they serve. Staff display a passionate commitment to their industries and occupations, to attracting the right people to their industries through careers and other initiatives, and to producing qualifications that are high quality and meet the needs of industry. In this project we have seen first-hand the deep contacts that ISCs have within their industries. They have been able to gather high-level industry personnel (from small and big businesses alike, as well as employer and employee associations) to attend consultation forums on products of our research, and to consult by telephone. An example of such events was a series of consultations on the findings from our industry-level interviews and company case studies.

These consultations, arranged by the ISCs, took place in Sydney in November 2013, and up to 20 people attended each of the nine events. The ISCs have since forwarded our analyses to their internal and external Training Package expert developers for comment. They have devoted the time of their own senior managers to liaising with us and providing advice on our research so that the best possible results are obtained for their industries and for Australia.

They are open to ideas for improvement, and shared their ideas and Training Package update information with us willingly. In our visits to companies, many of which we arranged independently from the ISCs, we have learned first-hand about the engagement of those companies with their ISCs and the close relationships that exist and that have been developed over time. In short, our experience indicates close and trusting relationships between industry and ISCs (Federation University, 2014, p. 1–2).

The activities reported in this submission were typical of, if more intensive than, my other research project engagements.

5.3 Author's Research Relating to Industry Skills Councils

Based on international contacts made during international visits and research projects, I began a project, with a colleague, involving comparative desk research into Skills Councils in four countries in 2010. The research showed that there were far fewer entities in Australia than in the other countries. New Zealand, with a much smaller population than the other countries, had the greatest number of skills councils at that time.

- Australia: 11 Industry Skills Councils
- New Zealand: 39 Industry Training Organisations
- U.K.: 24 Skills Councils
- Canada: 33 Industry Skills Councils

Canada was the only country which appeared to have a peak body for Skills Councils: The Alliance of Sector Councils.

The Training Package listing for each Industry Skills Council in Australia (see Table 2) was utilised to prepare a comparison of industry areas for the skills councils across the four countries. Table 3 provides a summary of the comparison that was undertaken.

Table 3 indicates the uneven matching across countries, which of course potentially becomes more uneven each time a country re-organises its own system. International linkages by industry bodies and trade unions will inevitably be affected by the uneven matching and constant changes.

Table 3: Comparison of Skills Councils of United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand with those in Australia, 2010

| Australia | United Kingdom | Canada | New Zealand |
|---|--|---|--|
| Agri-food Industry Skills Council | Improve- Food and drink Sector Skills Council | BioTalent Canada; Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council; Canadian Council of Professional Fish Harvesters; Canadian Food Industry Council; National Seafood Sector Council | Agriculture Industry Training Organisation; New Zealand Primary Industry Training Organisation; New Zealand Seafood Industry Council Limited; NZ Equine Industry Training Organisation; New Zealand Horticulture Industry Training Organisation |
| Community Services & Health Industry Skills Council | Skills for Health; Skills for Care & Development | Child Care Human Resources Sector Council; Human Resource Council for the Voluntary/Non-Profit Sector (HRVS) | Community Support Services ITO Limited; Te Kaiawhina Ahumahi Social Services Industry Training Organisation Inc |
| Construction and Property Service Industry Skills Council | Asset + Skills; Construction Skills; Summit Skills | Construction Sector Council | Building and Construction Industry Training Organisation; Opportunity - The Training Organisation; Building Service Contractors of New Zealand Incorporated; Joinery Industry Training Organisation; REINZ (Real Estate Industry) Industry Training Organisation; InfraTrain New Zealand |

| Australia | United Kingdom | Canada | New Zealand |
|--|---|--|--|
| ElectroComms and Energy Utilities Industry Skills Council Ltd (EE-Oz Training Standards) | Energy and Utility Skills | Electricity Sector Council | Electricity Supply Industry Training Organisation; ElectroTechnology Industry Training Organisation; Plumbing, Gasfitting and Draining ITO |
| Forestry, Wood, Paper and Timber Products Industry Skills Council (Forest Works) | Lantra | Forest Products Sector Council; Environmental Careers Organization of Canada (ECO); Wood Manufacturing Council | Forest Industries Training and Education Council (FITEC) |
| Government and Community Safety Industry Skills Council | Government Skills; Skills for Justice-Developing Skills for Safer Communities | Police Sector Council | Fire and Rescue Services Industry Training Organisation; Local Government Industry Training Organisation; Public Sector Training Organisation |
| Innovation and Business Industry Skills Council (Innovation and Business Skills Australia) | Creative and Cultural Skills; E-Skills UK; Lifelong Learning-UK; Financial Services Skills Council; Skill Set | Canadian Printing Industries Sector Council (CPISC); Cultural Human Resources Council; Aboriginal Human Resources Development Council of Canada; Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC); Contact Centre Canada | Communications and Media Industry Training Organisation; Creative Trades Industry Training Organisation Incorporated; Community Support Services ITO Limited |

| Australia | United Kingdom | Canada | New Zealand |
|---|---|--|--|
| Manufacturing Industry Skills Council | Cogent Skills for Science Based Industries; Proskills-making skills work; The Institute of Motor Industry Skill Fast- UK; Semta | Apparel Human Resources Council; Canadian Automotive Repair and Service Council; Council for Automotive Human Resources; Canadian Plastics Sector Council; Canadian Steel Trade and Employment Congress; Canadian Supply Chain Sector Council (CSCSC); Petroleum Human Resources Council of Canada; Textiles Human Resources Council | Apparel and Textile Industry Training Organisation; Boating Industry Training Organisation; NZ Extractive Industries Training Organisation; NZ Flooring Industry Training Organisation; NZ Motor Industry Training Organisation Incorporated; Plastics and Materials Processing Industry Training Organisation Incorporated; Competenz |
| Services Industry Skills Council | People First; Skills Active-Shaping skills for the future; Skillsmart Retail | Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council | Aviation, Tourism and Travel Training Organisation; Hospitality Standards Institute; New Zealand Sports Turf Industry Training Organisation; NZ Hairdressing Industry Training Organisation Inc; Pharmacy Industry Training Organisation; Retail Institute; Retail Meat Industry Training Organisation Inc; Skills Active; Funeral Service Training Trust of New Zealand |
| SkillsDMC National Industry Skills Council | | Mining Industry Human Resource Council (MiHR) | NZ Extractive Industries Training Organisation |
| Transport & Logistics Industry Skills Council | Go Skills-Moving Skills Forward; Skills for Logistics | Canadian Aviation Maintenance Council; Canadian Trucking Human Resources Council; Motor Carrier Passenger Council of Canada | Tranzqual ITO; Aviation, Tourism and Travel Training Organisation |

6 Third Manifestation: Skills Service Organisations and Industry Reference Committees

6.1 Skills Service Organisations and Industry Reference Committees: Developments

Australian government discussion papers led to the abolition of Industry Skills Councils. Papers issued by the Department of Industry (2014a; 2014b) for consultation proposed a 'contestable' model for Training Package Development with more industry involvement, canvassing three different options. There was more detail about Training Package content in the second paper. These two government papers were followed by a third paper (Department of Education and Training, 2015) which outlined the new system. (See the Appendix for more detail about the papers.)

The system replacing Industry Skills Councils comprised:

- The Australian Industry and Skills Committee, consisting of industry representatives;
- Industry Reference Committees (IRCs) (n=67) for specific industry areas, established by the AISC; and
- Six Skills Service Organisations (SSOs), funded by the Australian government, which were to provide 'technical, operational and Secretariat' functions for the IRCs. (Whatmore et al., 2019).

The six Skills Service Organisation were as follows:

- SkillsIQ
- Artibus Innovation
- Skills Impact
- PwC's Skills for Australia
- Australian Industry Standards
- IBSA Manufacturing

Skills Service Organisations primarily worked on Training Package development. They were not required to produce environmental scans as Industry Skills Councils had done. Instead, Skills Service Organisations produced less comprehensive documents: 'Industry Skills Forecast and Proposed Schedule of Work', focused primarily on justifying proposed Training Package development work. For example, one with which the author was involved, covered the VET sector workforce and the Foundation Skills teaching workforce. Although the document was 46 pages long, it only included 12 pages about the industry's skills needs ('Industry Skills Forecast and proposed Schedule of Work', Education Industry, May 2018), which had previously been the main focus of the previous environmental scans.

This clearly cumbersome system was relatively short-lived. In a small-scale research study undertaken in 2018, Whatmore, Wyman and Seznov (2019) reported favourable comments from some stakeholders about the new system, for example approving of

the chance for more industry people to be directly involved in Training Package development. However, problems quickly emerged. A report commissioned to examine Australia's skill system (Joyce, 2019) found problems with the system (see Appendix for details of this report). Joyce was critical of the SSO model, citing slow development of qualifications as one problem, and recommended a new type of entity to be called 'Skills Organisations'. They were to be 'industry-owned and government registered' (Joyce, 2019, p. 2). As Siekmann and Circelli (2021) note, these proposed changes aligned with those in New Zealand which the consultant had initiated when he was Education Minister in that country in 2018. Three Skills Organisations were established as pilots and were later subsumed into the new system of Jobs and Skills Councils in the early 2020s (see below). The Skills Service Organisation contracts were renewed for only a short period of time, which, however, lengthened due to the advent of COVID-19. Their work, and that of the Industry Reference Committees, continued until 2022.

6.2 Author's Experience With SSOs and IRCs

I was appointed to the Education Industry Reference Committee in 2017 as an 'Industry Expert', serving alongside a number of VET sector stakeholders. This Industry Reference Committee was responsible for the Training and Education (TAE) Training Package (for VET teachers) and the Foundation Skills (FSK) Training Packages. The Skills Service Organisation was PwC's Skills for Australia, which looked after a number of other Industry Reference Committees as well. During the late 2010s in that role, I was a member of a national cross-industry Project Reference Group to develop national units of competency in Teamwork and Communication. I was also a member of working groups on various issues relating to approval of the Foundation Skills Training Package in 2019. I was then involved in the very intense and highly political work to redevelop the Training and Education Training Package, which had begun in early 2020 but was quickly halted due to COVID, and resumed in 2022.

The Skills Service Organisation, PwC's Skills for Australia, was a branch of PwC formed for this purpose. At that time PwC had a wide range of government business.⁵ Initially the staff resisted any substantial changes to the TAE Training Package, which were sorely needed, but eventually acceded. Compared to the skills and knowledge exhibited by the ITABs and Industry Skills Councils with which I had previously been involved, including the ISC responsible for the TAE Training package, the SSO staff mostly had very little understanding of VET, which was, of course, in this instance also the industry area with which they were dealing. They relied on Industry Reference Committee members to do most of the development work; yet, on the other hand, we were sometimes handed documents for approval which we had not contributed towards. An external Training Package expert was engaged by the Skills Service Organisation in the latter stages of the work.

5 It is interesting to note that PwC subsequently lost most of its government business following a scandal over disclosure of insider information about tax laws to companies. The matter was made public in 2022, but instances cited dated back to 2015 – the time the SSO contract was awarded.

My experiences with this Skills Service Organisation contrasted greatly with those I had experienced as a member of a quasi-ITAB, the ‘National Assessors and Workplace Trainers body’, during the period 2000–2003, in the development of the first Training Package in training and assessment, i.e. in the same industry area. In that role, I saw collective decision making, inclusion of the committee members in meetings with stakeholders, and knowledgeable staff.

My own experience of membership of an Industry Reference Committee was therefore less than satisfactory. I soon found that I was not alone. I was invited to government consultations in late 2019 for the development of the National Careers Institute, and National Skills Commission (later to become Jobs and Skills Australia). The National Skills Commission discussion included the proposal for Skills Organisations. I happened to be seated at a table where there were, including myself, three members of Industry Reference Committees, each serviced by different Skills Service Organisations (SSOs). In conversation, each person stated that his/her own SSO was dysfunctional – i.e. half of all SSOs.

7 Fourth Manifestation: Jobs and Skills Councils

7.1 Jobs and Skills Councils: Developments

This section commences with a brief description of the preliminary work which led to Jobs and Skills Councils: initial work on ‘industry clusters’ and Skills Organisations, and the transition to the new system of Jobs and Skills Councils.

7.1.1 Preliminary Work: Skills Organisation Pilots and Industry Clusters

Three Skills Organisations Pilots — in the human services care, digital technologies and mining industries — were established in 2020, in accordance with the recommendations of the Joyce review (2019). The contracts of the existing Skills Service Organisations had been extended, due to COVID, until the end of 2022. A consultants’ report on the pilots for the government department (Urbis 2022) reported that there had been confusion about their future role, but that it had been resolved with the announcement of industry clusters. The report also stated that the pilots’ projects were mainly being carried out through sub-contractors.

Work on the permanent new replacement structure commenced in late 2021. The formation of ‘Industry Clusters’ was advertised: “groups of aligned industries with a strategic leadership role to identify, forecast, and respond to the current and emerging skill needs and workforce changes of their industries”⁶. A two-stage grant application process was established, with a ‘dating website’ for organisations which might want to work together. While the tender documents suggested nine possible industry groupings, applicants could propose their own. \$292.5 million AUD was allocated for funding for the

6 This quotation is from an email sent to me in my capacity as an Industry Reference Committee member.

program over four years, and \$750,00 was available for each cluster for start-up costs. In essence, this was the same contestable model as the Skills Service Organisations.

Out of interest, I followed the tender process, signing up for email updates, and attended one of the information webinars, with permission from the government department. It was interesting that at the latter event, the department representatives were supported by a legal officer. I noted the immense amount of support offered to applicants, including a series of ‘frequently asked questions’ documents and information about very basic VET and workforce matters such as the Australian industry classification structure. 21 ‘addenda’ were added to the tender documents over a period of time. A new Labor government in 2022 continued with the Industry Clusters selection process, simply renaming the successful bodies Jobs and Skills Councils.

7.1.2 The New System: Jobs and Skills Councils

The new Jobs and Skills Councils (JSCs) were announced in late 2022/early 2023, and have contracts until the end of 2026. Their Boards are required to have equal representation from employers and unions. It is not yet clear whether all Jobs and Skills Councils have the same arrangements for industry advice. One example is the Industry Skills Australia, covering transport and logistics, which has Strategic Workforce Planning Committees for each of the constituent industry areas, which meet three times a year to direct and guide workforce development and Training Package development. Technical Committees are established to develop the various Training Package products identified, and proceed in a similar process to the previous SSO model (Industry Skills Australia, n.d.).

JSCs are responsible for the following four core functions, according to the government website (Australian Government, n.d.):

- **Workforce Planning:** Workforce Planning is the strategic centrepiece for JSCs and informs the other functions. Workforce planning will underpin intelligence-gathering for strategic priorities and will be a critical focus to guide strategic planning.
- **Training Product Development:** Training product development requires JSCs to develop training products in line with standards set by Skills Ministers to improve the quality, speed to market and responsiveness of training products.
- **Implementation, Promotion and Monitoring:** JSCs will partner with training providers and organisations to align workforce planning objectives and national training products with career advice and ‘on the ground’ training delivery.
- **Industry Stewardship:** JSCs will act as a source of intelligence on workforce issues affecting their industries and provide advice on national training system policies.

Table 4 shows the ten Jobs and Skills Councils and their scope.

Table 4: Jobs and Skills Councils, listed in order of number of Training Packages covered

| Name | No. of Training Packages | Scope, according to government web site |
|--|--------------------------|---|
| Manufacturing Industry Skills Alliance | 12 | <i>Manufacturing:</i> Covering industries of manufacturing and engineering, light manufacturing including pharmaceuticals, print, food and advanced manufacturing. Emerging industries include defence and space technologies. |
| Skills Insight | 9 | <i>Agribusiness, Fibre, Furnishing, Food, Animal and Environment Care:</i> Covering industries of primary production — plants and animals — as well as textiles, clothing and footwear, forestry, timber and furnishing. Emerging industries include natural resources security and environmental management. |
| Service and Creative Skills Australia (formerly Skills Equipped) | 6 | <i>Arts, Personal Services, Retail, Tourism and Hospitality:</i> Covering 'high street' human services such as hairdressing, floristry, travel, hospitality as well as the creative economy with fine art, ceramics, music, dance, theatre and screen. Wholesale and retail services, including emerging industries such as online sales. |
| Public Skills Australia | 6 | <i>Public Safety and Government:</i> Covering industries directly involved in public service (e.g., local government, police, corrective services, public safety). |
| Build Skills Australia | 5 | <i>Building, Construction, Property and Water:</i> Covering industries that provide property services, small or large scale construction services, traditional building as well as large scale civil infrastructure services and water infrastructure operations. |
| Powering Skills | 4 | <i>Energy, Gas and Renewables:</i> Covering the industries of electricity, gas, renewable energy and storage or the use of resources in the production of energy. Emerging industries include hydrogen. |
| Mining and Automotive Skills Alliance * | 4 | <i>Mining and Automotive:</i> Covering industries involved in mineral exploration and extraction operations, and automotive. Emerging industries include driverless automotive technologies. |
| Future Skills Organisation * | 3 | <i>Finance, Technology and Business:</i> Covering professional services or otherwise supporting the needs of a successful business including marketing, accounting, human resources, digital literacy, and information and communication technologies. Emerging industries include cyber security, financial technologies, artificial intelligence and the internet of things. |

| Name | No. of Training Packages | Scope, according to government web site |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Industry Skills Australia | 3 | <i>Transport and Logistics:</i> Covering industries involved in warehousing and distribution operations as well as transport, including rail, maritime, aviation, and logistical support and supply chains. Emerging industries include omnichannel logistics and distribution and air and space transport and logistics. |
| HumanAbility* | 3 | <i>Aged and Disability, Children's Education and Care, Health, Human Services, Sport and Recreation:</i> Covering industries that offer community services and support such as aged care, disability services, mental health, early childhood education and health, and sport and recreation services. |

Note. Adapted from <https://www.dewr.gov.au/skills-reform/jobs-and-skills-councils>. Copyright 2025 by Australian Government.

*Indicates that the JSC developed from a prior pilot Skills Organisation.

It is interesting to note that of the ten Skills Council names, only six out of ten clearly reflect the industry areas covered. Originally it was only five; Service and Creative Skills Australia, changed its name very soon after its formation; it stated this was in response to stakeholder feedback on lack of recognition and understanding of its original name, SkillsEquipped.

The only Training Packages not covered by a Jobs and Skills Council are the Training and Education Training Package and the Foundation Skills Training Package, both formerly overseen by the Industry Reference Committee (supported by PwC's Skills for Australia SSO) of which I had been a member. The federal government department overseeing VET has temporary oversight of these Training Packages, stating on its web site: "In the interim, the department has established a small time-limited TAE/FSK Training Package Technical Reference Group (TRG) to assist the department in responding to enquiries about the TAE and FSK training packages."⁷ This 'temporary' arrangement was put in place in early 2023 and still holds in mid-2025. Considerable difficulty has been caused by the lack of advice on implementation of the new version of the TAE Training Package (Smith, 2025).

7.2 Author's Experience With Jobs and Skills Councils

Since their inception, the Jobs and Skills Councils have been advertising for partner organisations and individuals to assist with their work. I noted that some actually planned to outsource Training Package development, a core function of JSCs. Out of interest I

7 In the interim, the department has established a small time-limited TAE/FSK Training Package Technical Reference Group (TRG) to assist the department with the TAE and FSK training packages.

responded to an approach from one Skills Council for potential partners, and was successful in being placed in two relevant categories. The JSC then made supplier details available (with permission) to other suppliers. This Skills Council was not seeking people to develop its Training Packages.

7.3 Author's Research Relating to Jobs and Skills Councils

As part of a project on industry links with VET (Smith & Somers, 2024), I compared the stated functions of Jobs and Skills Councils with the 16 ILO-proposed (2021) roles for sector skills bodies with the stated function of the Australian Jobs and Skills Councils (Table 5). Much of the table needed to be inferred from the stated functions, which are somewhat vague and overlapping.

Table 5: Jobs and Skills Councils' roles mapped against the ILO roles for sector skills bodies (2021)

| JSC functions (according to DEWR website) | ILO 'potential roles and responsibilities' |
|---|---|
| <p><u>Workforce Planning</u> Workforce Planning is the strategic centrepiece for JSCs and informs the other functions. Workforce planning will underpin intelligence-gathering for strategic priorities and will be a critical focus to guide strategic planning.</p> | <p>Providing policy advice and feedback Generating and/or interpreting skills and labour market information</p> |
| <p><u>Implementation, Promotion and Monitoring</u> JSCs will partner with training providers and organisations to align workforce planning objectives and national training products with career advice and 'on the ground' training delivery.</p> | <p>Promoting the benefits of training Promoting careers information, advice and guidance Supporting quality assurance of training providers, courses and assessors (unclear) Managing government training initiatives and programmes (to some extent)</p> |
| <p><u>Training Product Development</u> Training product development requires JSCs to develop training products in line with standards set by Skills Ministers to improve the quality, speed to market and responsiveness of training products.</p> | <p>Developing and maintaining skill standards Developing qualifications Developing curriculum and learning resources (unclear)</p> |
| <p><u>Industry Stewardship</u> JSCs will act as a source of intelligence on workforce issues affecting their industries and provide advice on national training system policies.'</p> | <p>Generating and/or interpreting skills and labour market information (repeated from 'Workforce Planning') Co-ordinating training in the sector (unclear)</p> |

The following potential roles and responsibilities listed by the ILO (2021), are not covered by JSCs:

1. Developing apprenticeship pathways
2. Contributing to training delivery and assessment

3. Supporting the professional development of teachers, trainers and assessors
4. Managing and promoting apprenticeships
5. Ministering levy funds
6. Managing assessment

This discrepancy indicates possible misalignment with skills councils in other countries, although it could be argued that the missing functions are not part of the Australian skills council tradition.

In the same research project, we mapped current Australian State networks of current ITAB-like ‘entities’ (Table 6).

Table 6: State ITAB-like entities in 2024

| State/Territory | Network of ITAB like entities? | Number and names of entities |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|--|
| NSW | Yes | 10 ITABs |
| Victoria | Yes | 10 Industry Advisory Groups established 2022 |
| WA | Yes | 8 Industry Training Councils |
| QLD | Yes | 12 Industry Skills Advisors. (Contracts run 2020–2023) |
| SA | Yes | Ten Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) set up during Feb. 2024, aligning ‘largely’ with the JSCs. |
| TAS | No | |
| NT | No | Industry Skills Advisory Council NT. formed in 2015 after earlier entities disbanded. |
| ACT | No | Skills Industry Advisory Group. Established 2021, meets biannually. |

These show incomplete and inconsistent industry coverage. The Northern Territory has one entity covering all industries, with staff specialising in particular industry areas, and the Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania appear to have no industry engagement mechanism at all. Inspection of the coverage of the entities showed that only South Australia appeared to have deliberately matched its Industry Skills Councils with Jobs and Skills Councils.

8 A Case Study of Industry Influence on the Skills Council System: Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry

As explained earlier, and as evidenced in the reports described in the Appendix, a range of bodies have an interest in influencing the skills council system. In Australia, there

are many industry-specific employer associations, which often provide submissions and other representations to governments on the topic. There are also three industry peak bodies, operating across the economy and with membership from sectoral employer associations. One of these, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), was selected for this case study as being the most diverse, covering small businesses as well as large companies. The other two major peak industry bodies in Australia are the Australian Industry Group and the Business Council of Australia.

ACCI makes formal submissions to government inquiries and reviews on VET, as well as informal representations directly to Ministers and their advisers. While its web site displays only formal submissions since 2023, I have copies of several of ACCI's submissions and other representations about skills councils from 2001 to 2016, which are briefly summarised here as an example of direct employer influence on skills council developments.

ACCI's web site states that its purpose is to 'provide a voice for Australian businesses at national and global levels' (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, n.d.). Its membership comprises the state and territory 'Chambers', a large number of industry associations, from 'Accommodation Australia' and over 30 of 'business leaders' from individual companies including large organisations such as Amazon. ACCI is active in the VET area, with a director responsible for 'skills, employment and small business.' The web site states: "Skilled workers are the product of well-resourced education and training institutions and on-the-job learning. Both require government support."

In March 2001 ACCI wrote to the CEO of the Australian National Training Authority reporting an increase of 'disquiet' among its members, with a number of members 'considering withdrawing support from the industry advisory arrangements', particularly at State level. The letter claimed, *inter alia*, that State ITABs served governments rather than industry; that industry did not have 'ownership' of ITABs; that 'alternate models' should be considered for Training Package development and industry plans, and that employer organisations rather than ITAB staff, should be recognised as crucial sources of industry advice. The letter referred to the development of an ACCI 'position' on ITABs

Accordingly, in August 2002 a paper was produced ('ACCI Review no. 90'). The paper supported National ITABs, while stating that they needed "clear and measurable performance indicators" and stating that their only role should be the development and promotion of Training Packages, and that they should not be funded to offer industry advice. ACCI advocated for a pool of "industry champions". At this point, the Commonwealth had already announced the cessation of federal financial support for State ITABs. ACCI considered that the continuation of State ITABs should be the decision of each jurisdiction, noting that only two States at that time (2000–2001 figures) provided more funding for their ITABs than the federal government did.

In 2007 an ACCI 'issues paper' on the Industry Skills Council (ISC) model raised a number of concerns. It claimed that some ISCS had too broad a coverage, citing Service Skills Australia as an example, advocating separate ISCs for retail and hospitality. The paper stated that the structures were too inflexible and needed to be able to evolve. On process issues, ACCI claimed that sometimes its members were not properly consulted during Training Package development and that direct industry advice would be better. An Industry Panel model was proposed, instead, to oversee Training Package development

and to provide Industry Chairs for that purpose. Peak organisations would nominate *ad hoc* steering committees for individual Training Packages rather than having standing industry advisory committees. The paper advocated open and transparent declaration of ISC funding, assets, and other sources of income, implying a mistrust of ISCS expanding operations into non-Training Package matters.

In August 2010 ACCI wrote a lengthy submission to the Senate Inquiry into Industry Skills Councils (ACCI, 2010). (See the Appendix for the 2011 report of that Inquiry.) While supporting the existence of ISCs, a number of criticisms were raised, including the ways in which industry voice was represented, the composition of ISCs, and the engagement processes with industry. Concern was raised about variable performance across ISCs, and variability in the ways in which national ISCs worked with their state counterparts and in which the range of industries were appropriately represented on ISC Boards. ACCI stated that ISCs were successful “where there is genuine industry, engagement, support and ownership” (p. 6). They referred to some ITABs and ISCs only consulting with the “usual suspects”.

ACCI also criticised the dominant role of government, stating that an ‘industry-led’ system should be bipartite (employer and union organisations) not tripartite. This implied a perception that government saw ISCs as the ‘voice of industry’ and was referred to as “unplanned creep” in the role of ISCs (ACCI, 2010, p.11). The submission stated that the environmental scans were too generalised to be useful. Finally ACCI criticised the configuration of industry coverage in ISCs and stated there should be more, citing the greater numbers in the UK and New Zealand. examples. Three recommendations were made:

1. An evaluation of ISCs to look at how effectively they met the needs of industry and expended the funding provided.
2. Development of a new way of gathering industry negligence.
3. An evaluation of the industry configurations of ISCs.

In 2016 a TVET forum in Seoul, Korea, organised by the ILO and the Korean government, contained a session of keynote speakers on sector skills councils. I was also an invited speaker at this event, on a different topic. ACCI’s director, at that time, of employment, education and training presented on the Australian skills council system (Lambert, 2016). The presentation was highly critical of the Australian Industry Skills Council system prior to 2015, in contrast to other countries’ presentations which were more factual, although providing measured critiques. The presentation claimed that skills councils had become “masters rather than servants of industry”, that some were self-interested, and that some had become “very union dominated”; there were also claims that the sector advisory committees developing Training Packages “could be overruled” by ISC Boards. The presentation discussed the new arrangements (Skill Service Organisation-Industry Reference Committee model) approvingly, explaining that the new model meant that the SSOs provided a service to the industry committee rather than overseeing its operations.

These documents indicate a prolonged campaign by ACCI to move power away from skills councils (particularly, but not only, in their industry advice role) towards ‘industry’ (or more accurately, towards industry representative bodies. Underlying the submis-

sions and other documents appears to be a fear that governments were listening to other voices, apart from the industry bodies, in the evaluation of industry needs. There are also indications of conflict on the Boards of ITABs and ISCs; and a fear of trade union influence. The 2016 international presentation signalled clearly that ACCI had been a major driver in the move from Industry Skills Councils to the Skill Service Organisation-Industry Reference Committee model. There are also possible indications that ACCI may have also been a prime mover in the earlier dismantling of the State ITAB network.

9 Conclusion

Skills councils have been under-researched, although they are important features of the VET policy and practice landscape. It is unclear why this is so. As noted earlier, Ashton (2006) suggests that it may be because the role of employers is under-researched in VET, but in fact there is literature on many employer engagements in VET, but not specifically on skills councils. The answer is perhaps that skills council research requires an understanding of policy environments, layers of government, and the important role of individual actors; it is fraught with sensitive issues. It is also rarely 'visited' by outsiders.

As reported earlier, the ILO (2021) discusses advantages and disadvantages of three models: 'employer only' models, tripartite models (employers, trade unions and governments) and also of what they call 'tripartite plus', where other sector stakeholders are involved.

This may seem straightforward, but one problematic factor is the bodies represented on skills councils. It is common to ask 'Who speaks for industry?' Do employers only (or their associations) represent 'industry'? As Wolf (2002) points out, it may be convenient for governments to 'consult' by speaking to peak bodies, or to individual industry associations, and as in the Jobs and Skills Summit in Australia, that includes trade unions as well as employer associations, but such associations have their own agendas and may or may not represent the views of 'industry' as a whole. It is less common to ask 'Who speaks for trade unions?' It is also appropriate to ask which extra voices, if any, should be heard; for example workers in industry (as opposed to trade unionists) or students in VET. These 'extra voices' are referred to in the 'tripartite plus' model of the ILO (2021). Such fundamental questions are not asked in Australia.

Another fundamental policy issue is that the functions of skills councils in Australia are narrower than those in many other countries, as shown in the comparison of Jobs and Skills Council functions with those suggested by the ILO (2021). Essentially Skills Councils produce Training Packages, and feed information about industry developments and skill needs to governments. A potential expansion of their role does not seem to have been considered in successive policy developments.

The turbulent 30-year history of skills councils in Australia does, however, display many features of skills councils across the world. As bodies providing a link for governments between industry and the VET system, they are prone to rapid changes in government and changes in government policy, as reported for the UK by Perryman (2023). In Australia, the skill council system has moved between the ILO classifications of employer-only and tripartite (ILO, 2021) in an uncertain and rather messy way, and has also

moved between a more government-run model and a privatised model, a categorisation not fully covered in the literature.

Since the time of the regularisation of the system, with the allocation of Training Packages to ITABs, the Australian government has always funded national skills councils, unlike the Raddon and Sung (2006) 'employer-funded model'. However, it provides no funding to state skills councils, leaving that role to state governments. It has displayed a predominantly 'hands-off' approach to skill council operations, meaning that the only response to problems has been either to threaten to withdraw funding (as happened in 2006) or to reorganise the system. This difficulty has some resonance with comment by Contreras (2023), writing about Chile, about whether skills councils' objectives are actually achievable. The problems are compounded by aggressive interventions by powerful interest groups, as documented in the case study above. These interest groups expect training systems, including employer-based components, to be funded by governments, as evidenced in the case study.

These difficulties suggest that a satisficing solution is all that can be expected unless governments become more involved. Butterworth (1993) reported that in the early days of ITABs, the relevant layer of government (national or state) provided executive support to ITABs. Involvement of this nature would ensure that the skills council system would become truly tripartite instead of bipartite and would also educate relevant government officials about the skills council system, enabling problems to be recognised and better policy decisions to be made. For example, the lack of expertise that followed the dismantling of the Industry Skills Councils, that had been warned by many writing submissions to the 2010 inquiry into ISCs, may have been recognised earlier. However, more government engagement may be a false hope. A direct involvement by governments in skills councils would be at odds with a policy environment where privatisation is routine (Cahill & Toner, 2018) and consultants are used for most policy development (Howlet & Migone, 2013). Both major changes to the skills council system since 2015 have essentially involved privatisation and the entry of consultancy firms to the skills council market; and as noted above, Jobs and Skills Councils are themselves contracting out core functions.

While the recent formation of Jobs and Skills Councils (JSCs) appear to offer some stability after a period of disarray in Australian skills councils history. There are some similarities between JSCs and the former Industry Skills Councils (2003–2015), but Jobs and Skills Councils, having arisen through a tendering process commenced by the previous government, were not appointed by government to manage pre-determined entities, but arose from bodies forming alliances to win a tender. While not so overtly privatised as the intervening 'Skills Service Organisations', this degree of privatisation may detract from the 'trustworthiness' of the Jobs and Skills Councils, a feature of skills councils regarded as vital by Perryman (2023). It should be emphasised, also, that Jobs and Skills Councils need to work with strong state-based entities, but it is clearly shown in this paper (see Table 6) that the situation across the states is uneven and patchy. In previous decades, policy attention has been paid to the relationships between national and state bodies but there seems to be no interest in this matter currently.

The paper therefore implies some potential considerations for policy development: the potential involvement of government staff in skills council operations, a wider pool

of people with input into skill councils, and a consideration of a wider remit for skills councils, which could have the added bonus of potentially increasing the expertise and knowledge base of skills council staff (a need identified, for example, in South Africa). Minor (but still important) issues arising from the research include the importance of descriptive names for skills councils, to increase recognition among stakeholders. Again, South Africa provides a good exemplar on this matter.

As noted, this is a neglected area for research, with key documents not available publicly. The Appendix to this paper provides information about a number of such documents. Arrangements have been made to provide the author's copies of the unpublished reports to the National Centre for Vocational Education Research for safekeeping, for potential policy development and to assist future researchers.

This paper has provided a detailed case study of one employer organisation's interventions into skills council policy development. The role of other employer organisations besides ACCI, and the role of trade unions, also need to be researched. The nature and role of State ITABs also needs investigation, with a view to regularising the situation across the country to improve practice.

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Appendix: Hidden and Little-Known Australian Government Reports on Skills Councils

Three phases of reports are listed and briefly described here. Unfortunately there are no pre-2000 Commonwealth (federal) reports. A report, referenced by Wooden (1997a, p. 3–4), of a working party on the National ITAB network in 1993, is missing from the record. That report, according to Wooden (1997a) was undertaken by the Australian National Training Authority and a body called VEETAC (the Vocational Education Employment and Training Advisory Committee).

Phase 1: 2000–2011 – From ITABs to Industry Skills Councils

These reports relate to the period leading up to the replacement of ITABs with Industry Skills Councils, and the scrutiny of ISCs during their existence.

2000. *Aspiring to Excellence: Report into the quality of vocational education and training in Australia* Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education Committee. Contains a section on consultation with industry. *Publicly available.*

A summary of comments received about ITAB was that there was sometimes lack of co-operation between national and state ITABS, that ITABs focused on larger rather than smaller employers, that the voice of VET educators was not heard, and, from the ITAB point of view, that ITABs were often bypassed with ANTA directly consulting industry, and that Training Package development timelines were too short. The report recommended the inclusion of people with VET experience in all VET bodies.

2001. *PwC (Price Waterhouse Cooper) Review of National ITABs.* *Not publicly available.*

While the full report is not publicly available, an appendix with examples of good practice in National ITABs was made available to the ITAB sector. The examples were gathered under the headings: Industry relationships; Ability to deliver goods and services; and Future capability. A short summary of good practices among the ‘Recognised Bodies’ was also provided.

2003. *National strategic planning and industry advisory arrangements for vocational education and training. Confidential discussion paper, ANTA.* *Not publicly available.*

This is the paper which proposed the setting up of Industry Skills Councils. The paper stresses the importance of industry leadership of VET. Chairs of their Boards, rather than the CEOs of the Industry Skills Councils, would be involved in national decision-making. Funding would be provided on a three-yearly basis. The roles and responsibilities clearly covered the twin pillars of development of ‘training products’ (a term used in Australia VET to describe Training Packages, accredited qualifications and ‘skill sets’ comprised of individual units of competency), and the provision of industry intelligence to government and the VET sector, and also advice to industry. Eight industry skills councils were

proposed in this paper, with a mapping of employer bodies, employee bodies and regulatory bodies for each.

2006. Evaluation of Industry Skills Councils. Department of Education, Science and Training. *Not publicly available.*

This 81-page evaluation by department staff, with advice from a consulting group on governance and finance issues, found that 'overall the ISCs have achieved considerable progress'. The report grouped the Industry Skills Councils into three groups: higher performing (n=4), medium performing (n=4) and lower performing (n=2). The lower-performing ISCs were 'ElectroComms and EnergyUtilities', and 'Transport and Logistics'. The evaluation process included analysis of ISC reports against the performance indicators for ISCs; discussions with Boards and staff of all ISCs; consultation with all state training authorities and with peak bodies of employers, unions and VET providers. The report included funding provided for the 2005/2006 financial year, showing that funding ranged from just over \$1million AUD to \$2million AUD, appearing to vary with the number of Training Packages covered. It was suggested that the lower performing Industry Skills Councils could have their next funding period reduced, or their Training Packages could be reallocated.

2011. Industry Skills Council, Final report. Senate Education, Employment and Workplace relations References Committee. *Publicly available.* Report listed on NCVER's VOCED database, with a link to the Parliamentary page with the full report, at <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv:45628>

The inquiry examined, *inter alia*, (1) the role and effectiveness of Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) in the operation of the national training system particularly as it relates to states and territories and rural and regional Australia; (2) accountability mechanisms in relation to Commonwealth funding for the general operation and specific projects and programs of each ISC; (3) corporate governance arrangements of ISCs; (4) Commonwealth Government processes to prioritise funding allocations across all ISCs; and (5) ISC network arrangements and co-operative mechanisms implemented between relevant boards. 119 submissions were received, and are listed on – but not linked from – the web site. The largest groups were government departments, employer groups, industry skills councils themselves, with smaller numbers from trade unions, individuals and training providers.

The report made 10 recommendations. Six related to general funding, governance and accountability matters, with one additional point explicitly recommending the inclusion of a clause in ISC contracts giving the government the right to renegotiate coverage during the lifetime of the contract if necessary. The others were: ISCs should collectively develop templates for environmental scan documents; ISCs should undertake regular reviews of consultation processes, especially relating to small businesses; and that the relevant government department should develop best practice principles for consultations and incorporate them into the next round of funding contracts.

Phase 2: 2014 -2015 – Beyond Industry Skills Councils

This second tranche of discussion papers relate to the transition from Industry Skills Councils. The reports note that they stem from the six objectives for reform of the vocational education and training (VET) system, agreed in April 2014 by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Industry and Skills Council (national and state ministers for skills). In these documents references to the future of work including digital technology, advanced manufacturing, and the growth of the care sector appear for the first time in skills council papers.

2014: Industry Engagement in Training Package Development. Discussion Paper: Towards a contestable model. *Publicly available* via NCVER's VOCEdplus database <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A65950>

The introduction states that the purpose of a 'contestable' model is to ensure that representatives of industry have avenues to contribute to the development of VET qualifications. In the paper, it is explained that the Australian Industry Skills committee (AISC) will be set up to oversee industry advice and will be operational by the end of 2014. The paper proposed that industry could directly approach this committee to make a case for new Training Packages. Three 'approaches' are suggested: One, that there are no bodies to develop Training Packages, with the AISC simply determining needs and engaging people from a panel of 'technical writers' to develop them; Two, that 'industry sector committees are set up, which would access the same panel; and Three, that that 'designated VET sector bodies' would be appointed for contract periods, with six being suggested.

The discussion paper received 300 submissions in response. A submission from the Australian Council of Trade Unions (2014), the peak union body, pointed out that these proposals were confused and there was no case for not continuing with Industry Skills Councils, which they considered to be effective, although not without room for improvement.

2014: Review of Training Packages and Accredited Courses Discussion Paper. *Publicly available* via NCVER's VOCEdplus database <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A65949>

This paper was released at the same time as the 'contestability' discussion paper. As the paper states, 'The two papers are linked, but have a different purpose. The move to a more contestable funding model is about the "how" of training packages and this paper is about the "what".' A number of issues relating to the content of training packages and their implementation are canvassed, but no clear suggestions are put forward for discussion, apart from an increased focus on assessment.

2015: New Arrangements for Training Product Development for Australian Industry. Publicly available via NCVER's VOCEDplus database <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A68337>

This paper sets out the decisions about the changes to Training Packages which, it states, 'industry has told us' are needed. It refers to a 'revitalisation' of industry engagement. The paper sets out the arrangements for Industry Reference Committees, supported by 'Skills Service Organisations' to support the development of Training Packages. This appears to be a mixture of Approaches Two and Three which were proposed in the 'Contestability' paper. There is an implication in the paper that industry reference committees already existed within ISCs, although in fact those advisory committees had different names and functions. The paper states that the Skills Service Organisations' do not need to represent industry sectors; the industry reference committees would provide that expertise. A new Australian Industry and Skills Committee would oversee the operations.

Phase 3: Towards Jobs and Skills Councils

Post-2015 changes to the skills council system have not generally been accompanied by specific government reports or discussion papers on skills councils. The 'Joyce review' on VET contains one relevant section, and there was a short discussion paper on skills organisations.

2019. Strengthening skills: Expert review of Australia's vocational education and training system [Joyce review]. Section on 'Speeding up qualification development.' Publicly available.

The report's major concern about the skills council system appeared to be the length of time to develop qualifications and the cumbersome approval processes. It proposed "Industry-owned and government-registered Skills Organisations to be set up to take responsibility for the qualification development process for their industries and to control their training packages." (Joyce, 2019, p. 58). The emphasis was on industry agency.

2019. Skills Organisations: National Co-design Discussion Paper. Not publicly available

This paper provides more detail about the proposed Skills Organisations and was used as the basis for consultation with stakeholder groups in late 2019. However, in the end only three pilot Skills Organisations were established, which themselves became Jobs and Skills Councils in the next evolution of the skills council system.

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General Section

Fostering Vocational Identity Development in VET

A Treasure to be Raised

Christiane Thole, Georg Tafner

Abstract *This paper draws attention to a need for action revealed by empirical evidence indicating that vocational identity development is neglected in German vocational education and training (VET), despite the acknowledged significance of identity for vocational success and well-being. The authors argue that understanding and fostering the psychological processes underlying vocational identity development can enable VET schools and educators to improve connectivity between school and workplace, fulfill the normative objective of Bildung and tackle current challenges in the German VET system. The paper presents an (inter)action-based concept of identity development comprising a vocational ethos that guides daily action and an individualized vocational self-concept giving orientation for personal development. An exemplary case study illustrates the need for support and the pedagogical implications. To strengthen subject orientation in VET didactics the authors suggest a simple model using the categories meaning, responsibility, and productivity. Finally, the implications for VET practice are discussed.*

Title *Fostering Vocational Identity Development in VET: A Treasure to be Raised*

Keywords *Vocational Identity, Agency, Business and Economic Education, Reflexivity, Experiential Learning*

1 Introduction

For individuals, the world of work is replete with challenges: economic constraints, ecological troubles, digitalization, crises, globalization, career choices, precarity, and dynamic change (Beck, 1986; Giddens, 1991; Rosa, 2013; Stiglitz, 2002; Tafner, 2019). The hu-

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man need for security and personal development encounters the market's demand for flexibility and efficiency. As well as threats and ambiguities, new opportunities in terms of jobs, markets, technologies, lifestyle etc. emerge (Giddens, 1991; Holzkamp, 1995). To find their place in society and pursue their goals, people have to shape the relationship between themselves and their environment, in order to find a balance between personal needs and society's demands. This activity is called *identity development* and people often find that a perfect fit is impossible to achieve (Biesta 2017, pp. 13–17; Erikson, 1966; Krappmann, 1969; Mead, 1934/1967).

In addition, the relevance of employees' subjectivity in the world of work increases. Unforeseeable disturbances, complex and ambiguous circumstances, disruptive incidents, risky but promising applications of new technologies, and agile work processes require spontaneous, creative idiosyncratic solutions based on professional expertise and experience (Thole, 2023b). Job profiles become more and more specialized, fluid, and variable, and allow employees to shape their workplace and work biographies according to their personal aspirations and preferences. Also, there is extensive evidence that *identification* with a job, company, or profession improves a person's performance, engagement, and motivation (Donovan, Brown & Mowen, 2004; Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser & Schlesinger, 1994; Klotz, Billett & Winther, 2014; Nerdinger, 2011; Thole, 2021, pp. 104–109).

Simultaneously, German vocational education and training (VET) faces numerous challenges: the rigidity of formalized occupations, the need to adapt apprenticeship formats quickly to new labor market demands, the need to include refugees and migrants, the problem of exclusion of large numbers of young people who fail to thrive in the dual-track VET system, declining interest of potential applicants in the VET system, difficulties matching supply of and demand for apprenticeships, high rates of mental illness among young people, dropping out etc. (Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung [BIBB], 2024). The bottom line is that there are discrepancies between individual learners' needs and the VET system's presuppositions. So far, no convincing solutions for these challenges have been found. Work-based learning is considered to be crucial to deal with these problems, but it requires accompanying concepts to unfold its potential. Connecting school and work-based learning is therefore an important challenge (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training [Cedefop], 2021).

While *identity development* is crucial to surviving and thriving in society and the world of work, previous research indicates that German VET didactics often fail to meaningfully support this process (Beicht, Krewerth, Eberhard & Granato, 2009; Fischer & Hantke, 2019; Heinemann, Maurer & Rauner, 2009; Lewalter, Krapp & Wild, 2001; Thole, 2021; see section 3.2).

In this paper, we aim to show that fostering learners' vocational *identity development* is key to dealing with the discrepancies, conflicts, paradoxes, and ambiguities that arise in alternating learning environments (school and workplace). In order to support this claim, we seek to answer the following questions: What does it mean to foster *identity development*? Why is fostering *identity development* an urgent need in VET? What added value would this produce regarding learners' development, the requirements of the world of work, and the VET system?

In section 2.1 the paper starts by describing the features of subjects as they exist in the world (Biesta, 2017) because the subject is central to theories of *Bildung*.¹ Then it explains in section 2.2 why this human condition forces subjects to reflect on their identity. The term *identity* will be defined and underlying psychological processes will be explained in section 2.3. In section 2.4, relating *identity development* to the normative mandate of *Bildung* (as indicated in German VET curricula) will reveal substantial overlaps that show that vocational *identity development* is key to achieving an encompassing vocational action competence including the responsibility and capacity to participate in ongoing transformations. Vocational action competence is the willingness and capacity of the individual to behave in an adequately reflected, individually and socially responsible way in vocational, societal, and private situations. (Kultusministerkonferenz [KMK], 2021, pp. 14–16). The subsequent sections 3.1 and 3.2 will explain how a specific objective understanding of action orientation contributes to the neglect of vocational *identity development*. Then a case study in section 3.3 will illustrate the need for support and identify untapped potential which could be met and explored by fostering vocational *identity*. In section 4 the authors suggest a simple model using the categories meaning, responsibility, and productivity to strengthen the subject orientation in VET didactics. Finally, the authors will discuss in section 5 if and how fostering vocational *identity development* is feasible in VET schools.

2 The Human Condition of the Subject and *Identity Development*

In this section we lay out how the subject is both social and individual, material and immaterial, the starting point and end of *Bildung* (2.1). For the individual and social subject, *identity development* – finding a meaningful place in society – is a life-long activity (2.2). In section 2.3 we describe the psychological functions of *identity development*, before discussing in section 2.4 how *identity development* relates to Humboldt's ideas about *Bildung*.

2.1 The Subject as Beginning and End of *Bildung*

As Arnold writes (1997, p. 21), pedagogics focuses on the personal pedagogical orientation. Subject orientation, he argues, is the dominant substance of theory of *Bildung*, with *Bildung* representing the subject's entire interaction with the world. Humboldt (1792/2000, p. 58) believed that *Bildung* can succeed “only by the linking of the self to the world to achieve the most general, most animated, and most unrestrained interplay”. As in humanistic psychology, we are talking about the subject's relationship with the world (Fromm, 1941/2020b, p. 15), where the subject is part and parcel of culture, society, and the natural world, and expresses themselves in different dimensions. The subject is simultaneously an individual and a social being, as well as a mental and a material being (Klafki, 1996, p. 276; Nell-Breuning, 1985, pp. 39 and 153) (see table 1). As Frankl puts it: It

1 *Bildung* is the German concept of a broad education encompassing both knowledge and personal development.

is the mental aspect that underpins the wholeness and unity of the human being. That is what makes the wholeness physical, spiritual, and intellectual (2023, p. 18).

Table 1: Dimensions of the subject and their occurrence

| | Individual being | Social being |
|----------------|------------------|--------------|
| Mental being | Consciousness | Language |
| Material being | Psychophysical | Provision |

The *individual and mental* being has a consciousness that is only accessible to itself. Perception of the external world is always mediated, and the inner world – the consciousness – is accessible only to the subject itself. The individual is unique and indivisible – in Latin *in-dividuum* – because it cannot be subsumed into other orders: not the community, not the mass, not the class (Frankl, 2017, p. 330).

The *individual and material* being requires a physical body if it is to maintain and employ its consciousness. Without a body it cannot exist, act, or think. The body is dependent on the natural world. It requires air to breathe and nutrition for energy. Unlike the subject or person, the body is to some extent divisible and fusible. Indeed, fusion is the precondition for reproduction; without it the subject cannot reproduce (Frankl, 2017, p. 331). Material being encompasses the psychophysical, the entirety of psychological and physical. It has an instrumental purpose, but dignity is a property of the subject or person (Frankl, 2017, pp. 331–332). The subject requires means to maintain the body: food, shelter, and mobility are material necessities.

The *social and material* being recognizes the necessity of provision. They are unable to produce all they need themselves and must rely on others. Thus, subjects are both providers and provided for. Economic activity is a social phenomenon that serves to provide means to self and others. In other words both professionalism and economy are inherent to the subject. The process of choosing which means to procure and how to do so can be described as economy, which is thus part of the human condition (Tafner, 2024a).

The *social and mental* being is embedded in culture and society, and thus in work and economy. The thinking that occurs in the consciousness is autonomous but not isolated from the world. Instead, the subject participates in the world through communication, which is a social phenomenon. In fact, language is *the* social phenomenon that enables communication with others. People use language to communicate their ideas and influence the thoughts and actions of others. Thus, the subject's thoughts are not separate from the world; instead, the thoughts and ideas of others play a huge role in the origination of the subject's own ideas, which arise through the interplay of sensory perceptions on the one side and interpretation and evaluation of existing thoughts and ideas on the other (Tafner, 2024a). This is why subjects within a given culture and society share similarities: because they absorb, share, and internalize thoughts, ideas, and expectations. And so the subject also grows into their vocational training as part of a community of

practice in vocational training. As a social being the subject learns that there are also other subjects, and learns to act responsibly toward self, others, and the environment.

If we are to meet the demands of *Bildung* and understand why *identity* matters, it is essential to understand the human condition of existing as a subject in the world. Being subject has a twofold sense: grammatically the subject is an actor, and the term subject literally means to be controlled by something else. Both meanings are true, because as an *individual* and *social* being the subject relies on others' responsiveness to exist in the world (Biesta, 2017, pp. 9–16). This understanding of subjectivity is a core idea of interactionist understandings of *identity* (Mead, 1934/1967, see section 2.2 and 2.3). Reflecting on one's *identity* serves to shape the relationship between the individual and his/her environment. The aim is to satisfy the basic human needs for "competence, autonomy, and relatedness" (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The individual apprehends the world.

VET learners come into contact with the lifeworld economy and the science of economics at their workplace, at VET school, and in their private life. Economics as science – especially the neo-classical school – influences real-life economy and vice versa. Lifeworld economy and scientific economics come together as learners reflect their experience. The subject constructs reality not only (a posteriori) through empirical impressions and experience, but also (a priori) through internalized thoughts and theories (regardless of their objective quality).

Consciousness, which is accessible only to the subject (learner), represents the limit to scientific objectivity. Metaphorically speaking, theories in our brain are like glasses worn to see and understand the world. So it matters which kind of glasses you wear. In other words, the kind of theories the subjects encounter is important, as is the way they experience them. That is the context in which vocational *identity* forms (Tafner, 2024a). Given the different dimensions of the subject and the multiple ways of interacting with the world, the relationship between the subject and the world is complex and fluid. To become and remain part of the world, this relationship needs to be reflected and shaped thoughtfully. This activity is called *identity development*.

2.2 Definitions: Identification, *Identity*, and *Identity Development*

As Frey and Hausser (1987), Keupp et al. (2013), and Straub (2000) confirm, most *identity* theories agree that *identity development* ("identity work") consists in the *individual's reflection on their relationship with their environment*. This is a vital and lifelong activity that serves to find an adequate place in society (Erikson, 1966) and represents an *essential prerequisite for action* (Bandura, 1989; Krappmann, 1969; Simons, 2021). The complexity of the notion of *identity* requires an interdisciplinary approach (Erikson, 1966; Klotz et al., 2014; Straub, 2000). The psychoanalyst Erikson (1966) draws on fields such as social anthropology and comparative education, the sociologist Krappmann (1969) explicitly mentions Erikson's concept of *ego-identity* for identifying sociological dimensions of identity, and the sociologist Giddens (1991) explains the concept of a reflexive self-project in psychotherapeutic terms.

As VET aims for *vocational action competence* as the overall learning outcome, the authors choose an interactionist (Hausser, 1995; Mead, 1934/1967) and pragmatic approach (Dewey, 1938/1997). This means that *identity* is socially constructed and the interface be-

tween the individual and society represents the heart of *identity development*. This paper conceptualizes *identity* as a complex mental concept of a person's self, which is constructed by meta-reflection of sequential situational experiences and forms an integral part of action-regulating memory representations (Thole, 2021, p. 309). As such, it is a result of learning processes about the self and the world, and their interactions, and represents an important prerequisite, constituent, and outcome of *agency* (Bandura, 1989).

Vice versa, agency provides interaction between the individual and the world as the underlying context for *identity development* (Mead, 1934/1967). Agency represents the idea that people are neither completely autonomous nor simply determined by external factors, but act intentionally within a given framework. This enables them to exert partial influence on their environment and life course (Farau & Cohn, 1984, p. 359; Giddens, 1984/2017, p. 15). *Identity development* is the ongoing process of meta-reflection that continuously confirms or updates the current state of *identity* depending on the current experience of the subject.

*Identification*² is a statement about the *state* of certain facets of a person's *identity* (e.g. expertise, community of practice, socio-cultural origin, religion, values, interests). *Identification* describes the fit between a facet of a person's self-concept and a social entity serving as self-reference (for example group, organization, or vocation) (Heinrichs, Wuttke & Kögler, 2022; Klotz et al., 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1986/2004), in other words the degree to which a person internalizes characteristic features of the social entity into their self-concept.

The self-concept is the individual's perception of self. It is formed through interaction with the person's environment and influences the way he/she acts (Shavelson, Hubner & Stanton, 1976). A vocational self-concept is a professional profile resulting from experience and self-reflection. It includes personal talents, aspirations, and strengths in relation to respective societal demands. In Germany, a standardized occupation as social *identity* will often be the starting point of a future more individualized vocational *identity* (Thole, 2021, pp. 317–318).

A person's *identity* consists of a *social identity* – deriving from *identification* with social entities such as a community of practice (Erikson, 1966; Tajfel & Turner, 1986/2004) – and a *personal identity* representing the individual's uniqueness and difference from others. Vocational *identity* is a decisive part of overall identity, because career has a major influence on income, status, and social milieu (Beck, 1986). Heinemann et al. (2009), Klotz et al. (2014) and Rauner, Frenzel, Piening & Bachmann (2016), found evidence of a close correlation between competence development and *identification* in the vocational domain. A research programme on learning motivation based on Ryan and Deci's theory of self-determination (2000) found evidence that learning processes that allow for experience of competence, autonomy, and social embedding promote interest, which is a prerequisite for *identification* (Lewalter et al., 2001; Prenzel, Kramer & Drechsel, 2001).

2 In some studies, the term *identity* is used as a synonym for *identification* (Heinemann et al., 2009; Klotz, Billet & Winther, 2014; Rauner et al., 2016). In this paper *identification* will be treated as a certain state of a person's *identity*.

2.3 The Psychological Functions of *Identity Development*

Overall, the reflection of social interactions serves several psychological functions of *identity development*:

1. To construct a continuous thread of meaning throughout the individual's biography (Erikson, 1966; Giddens, 1991; Hausser, 1995; Straub, 2000);
2. To generate a reflexive self-project that provides orientation for personal development (Giddens, 1991; Gini, 1998, p. 714; Mollenhauer, 1983, pp. 115–130);
3. To balance inner and outer reality (Cohn, 1975/2013; Erikson, 1966; Goffman, 1959; Krappmann 1969; Mead, 1934/1967);
4. To create coherence among diverse areas of life and aspects of *identity* (Erikson, 1966; Hausser, 1995; Keupp et al., 2013; Straub, 2000);
5. To define personal singularity (perceived difference) and/or *identification* with social groups (perceived similarity) (Erikson, 1966; Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1959; Tajfel & Turner, 1986/2004).

Identity development has a diachronic (biographical) and a synchronic (situational) perspective. While functions 1 and 2 address the biographical vision and functions 3 and 4 the situational, function 5 is relevant to both. Figure 1 visualizes how these two perspectives are related. A *biographical* thread of meaning is constructed by sequential reflection of *situational* experience (Hausser, 1995; function 1). In a situation that requires action an individual will reflect and compare the present situation to others experienced earlier, in order to generate insights that help to solve the problem at hand. He/she will also project the resulting thread into the future to shape a meaningful goal that serves as intention for agency. Giddens (1991), Gini (1998), and Mollenhauer (1983) all argue that people not only want to find out who they are, but also what they want to be. They believe that people want to do something meaningful with their lives. By projecting a biographical thread of meaning into the future, individuals design a reflexive self-project that supplies orientation for developmental goals and represents a major source of motivation (function 2). For VET purposes this self-project involves the development of a *vocational self-concept* (see figure 1) that should include aspects of both social and personal identity.

Figure 1: Diachronic and synchronic perspectives of identity development



Note. From *Berufliche Identitätsarbeit als Bildungsauftrag der Berufsschule – am Beispiel der dualen Ausbildung im Einzelhandel* (p. 285), by C. Thole, 2021, wbv. Copyright 2021 by Christiane Thole. Reprinted with permission.

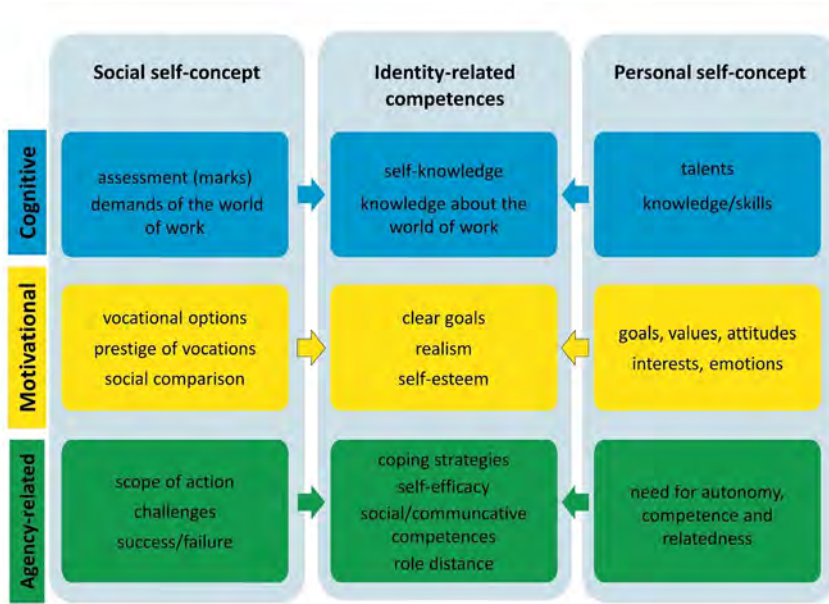
Kolb (1984) describes the process of meta-situational reflection as an experiential learning cycle with four iterative stages: *concrete experience*, *reflective observation*, *abstract conceptualization*, and *active experimentation* (the central element in figure 1). In fact this is nothing other than experiential learning, which is already well-established in German VET. We learn by doing, provided that we comprehend and reflect on what we do (Dewey, 1938/1997). Agency exhibits the same structure as the experiential learning cycle (Bandura, 1989).

Identity development relates to the aspects of learning processes that are directed toward the *self* rather than the objective task. Learning about the self in the world takes place in all interactions and learning processes in VET even if they are not explicitly fostered. Self-reflection usually occurs during the action and is often unconscious; explicit reflection sometimes follows (Schön, 1983). Reflection has a decisive impact on the outcome of an action (Bandura, 1989; Simons, 2021). If the situation is considered to be significant for the self, the individual will decide whether to internalize or resist received feedback (Mead, 1934/1967, p. 168).

Figure 2 visualizes what happens internally when the subject is required to act in a certain situation. When disparities between personal aspirations and social demands arise, it becomes necessary to balance inner and outer reality (function 3). In the world of work, this applies especially during transitions in work biographies (Busshoff, 2001) and conflicts in the workplace (Goffman, 1959; Krappmann, 1969). Symbolic interactionism (Mead/1967, 1934) posits that where discrepancies arise between societal demands and personal needs, individuals have to mediate between a social self-concept and an inner personal self-concept. The social self-concept seeks to satisfy and internalize societal demands (left-hand column), the personal self-concept comprises the person's interests, values, and aspirations (right-hand column). In addition, the demands arising in differ-

ent areas of life – such as family, work, peer group, religious community, etc. – may be contradictory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Keupp et al., 2013). Consequently, the subject also has to establish coherence among diverging societal expectations (function 4).

Figure 2: Balance of social and personal self-concept



Note. From *Berufliche Identitätsarbeit als Bildungsauftrag der Berufsschule – am Beispiel der dualen Ausbildung im Einzelhandel* (p. 282), by C. Thole, 2021, wbv. Copyright 2021 by Christiane Thole. Reprinted with permission.

To achieve personal fulfilment, individuals strive to reconcile both parts of the self-concept (Keupp et al., 2013; Straub, 2000). It is important to note that self-reflection is not only cognitive, but motivational aspects and agency-related competences also play a major role (Bandura, 1989; Hausser, 1995; Kaak, Kracke, Driesel-Lange & Hany, 2013). The middle column shows competences that are required to reconcile social and personal self-concept (Busshoff, 2001; Kaak et al., 2013; Savickas & Hartung, 1996; Super, 1990). The cognitive dimension comprises knowledge about the self and the world of work; the motivational dimension involves goal-setting, realism, and self-esteem; agency-related competences comprise coping strategies and self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1989; Hausser, 1995). Because this process takes place in social interaction, the individual also needs a set of social and communicative competences – one of which is role distance (Goffman, 1959; Krappmann, 1969) – to remain true to themselves while gaining the counterpart’s acceptance.

When a young person starts an apprenticeship, roles and other aspects of life change. Initially, there is a large discrepancy between the demands of the world of work (social self-concept) and the learner's abilities and dispositions (personal self-concept) (Duemmler, Caprani & Felder, 2017; Kutscha, Besener & Debie, 2009; Lange, 2019; Thole, 2021). Helping learners to reconfigure their social and personal self-concept by developing the *identity*-related competences is a major goal for VET courses and teachers. This needs to be done not only at the cognitive level, but also at the motivational and agency-related levels. It is important to note that this does not necessarily require the learners to adapt unilaterally to demands. They may also find idiosyncratic ways of coping or to persuade others to be responsive to their aspirations, needs, or wishes (Giddens 1984/2017, p.15; Goffman, 1959; Holzkamp, 1995; Krappmann, 1969).

German VET curricula explicitly state that *vocational action competence* implies the capacity to participate in the transformation of the world of work and society. As this should be done with a sense of social, individual, ecological, and economic responsibility (KMK, 2021), VET learners need not only a *vocational self-concept* but also a *vocational ethos* (cf. figure 1) in the sense of a bundle of norms, rules, and guiding moral principles that are in line with their *identity*, facilitate decision-making, and ensure authentic, responsible agency in daily life. Standardized social identities like occupations and roles give orientation, but in a complex, challenging, and subjectivized world of work more individualized solutions may be required to achieve consistency and coherence by tapping individual potentials (function 5).

Role distance is one way to live a unique self in a standardized role, by playing it in a specific way that best fits the self-concept of the subject (Goffman, 1959; Moreno, 1961; Petzold & Mathias, 1982). Roles are a bundle of attitudes, values, patterns of activity, and behavioral norms connected with a certain position in society (Linton, 1936). We are all holders of multiple roles – as learners, teachers, friends, parents, children, neighbours, colleagues, superiors – that can conflict with each other or with the personal self-concept. The more consistent these roles are and the closer they are to the subject's aspirations, the more authentic, happy, healthy, and successful the subject will be (Donovan et al., 2004; Heskett et al., 1994; Klotz et al., 2014; Nerding, 2011; Thole, 2021, pp. 104–109).

Although roles are standardized, subjects play them in individual ways and as such create scope for shaping their self-concept. The overall aim is to act in an authentic way, because *identification* with a role is a prerequisite for performing it well (Giddens, 1991, p. 78). The diversity deriving from role distance also enriches the world of work, as it has the potential to produce a multitude of problem-solving strategies (Goffman, 1959; Handayani, Suharnomo, Yuniawan, Wahyudi & Wikaningrum, 2017).

Apprenticeship is a setting where young people have the opportunity to explore different interpretations of their role. They receive the opportunity to experiment with their feelings and the feedback they receive for different behaviors, which is a prerequisite for shaping a vocational self-concept and ethos.

Although these theoretical approaches seem useful for understanding the relevance of *identity development* to agency and *vocational action competence*, the term *identity* is not mentioned once in the guidelines for preparing VET curricula issued by the Conference of Ministers of Culture (KMK, 2021). Instead, the term *Kompetenz* (competence) predominates (96 mentions). This does not exclude using *identity* theories to interpret action

orientation. Indeed, this section has shown that *identity development* requires exactly the competences described by the Conference of Ministers of Culture (KMK, 2021): professional, self-, social, methodological, learning, and communicative competences, as well as personal and structural reflection and lifelong learning.

In this context, it is important to note that the connotation of the German term *Kompetenz* deviates from the use of the term *competence* in English. While the latter refers to the *proven* ability to perform *certain* tasks the German term *Kompetenz* describes a person's *assumed* capacity to cope with a *wide range of unknown* tasks (Sloane & Dilger, 2005). So the German term represents an intrinsic characteristic of the subject and is therefore part of his/her identity, while the English term indicates an objective requirement linked to a task. The following section demonstrates how *identity development* is associated with the notion of *Bildung* in German VET curricula (KMK, 2021).

2.4 The Normative Goal of *Bildung* as the Essence of *Identity Development*

The term *Bildung* can be traced back to Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), who outlines the concept in his *Theory of Bildung* (1792/2000). It was influential in universities and humanistic grammar schools. In the past scholars debated whether *Bildung* had a place in VET – which primarily aims to qualify learners for the work of world (Blankertz, 1963; Kutscha, 2011). Today there is a broad consensus that work and vocation are an important source of subjective meaning (Beck & Brater, 1977; Klotz et al., 2014; Kutscha, 2015; Meyer, 2014). It is also widely accepted that action competence, autonomy, and solidarity should be educational goals of equal importance (KMK, 2021). However, the question of how this can be achieved under contemporary societal, and economic conditions remains unresolved and marginal to VET research. We suggest that analyzing Humboldt's text will supply productive pointers.

Humboldt (1792/2000, p. 62) argues that *Bildung* implies “*deep reflection and unceasing observation*” and that this gives man a “*fresh view of the world and through this its own, fresh self-determination*” (p. 60). So, like *identity development*, *Bildung* involves reflecting on the relationship between the individual and his/her environment to build a self-concept (Humboldt, 1792/2000, p. 58). Humboldt's statements can be matched to the five psychological functions of *identity development* (see section 2.3):

First of all, Humboldt (1792/2000, p. 58) states that “man” strives for *meaning*: this is the ultimate purpose of existence. Concerning the world of work, Humboldt asserts that people no longer want “*only to prepare knowledge and tools for men's use*” (p. 60). Today, Gini (1998) argues that we are identified by the work we do, and that we have to choose our vocation consciously. Depending on his/her interests, motives, values, or sense of responsibility, the individual decides what he/she wants to be in the world and thus contributes to shaping the world around them (Giddens 1984/2017, p. 15; Hausser, 1995, pp. 49–53). By narrating a life story by means of retrospective reflection, individuals construct a unique central thread that reduces complexity and organizes the individual's perception of the world in a coherent way (Petzold & Matthias, 1982; Straub, 2000).

Second, Humboldt (1792/2000) asserts that “man” strives “*for greater signification*”, “*inner improvement and elevation*” towards an “*ultimate goal*” (pp. 58–60). This idea of a reflexive life project is also found in contemporary *identity* theories: Mollenhauer (1983, pp.

115–130) emphasizes that *identity* – understood as a treatment of complexity and diversity that makes sense to the individual – is a fragile, fictitious draft of the self that is never actually achievable, because a perfect *identity* does not exist. However, this idea of self does drive the process of *Bildung*. Giddens (1991) describes modernity as the industrialized, globalized capitalist world characterized by a reflexivity based on a methodological principle of doubt that undermines the certainty of knowledge typical of Enlightenment thought. Consequently, the fate of individuals is no longer predetermined by tradition and instead requires clarification and active reflection by the subject. Although the influence of tradition on the individual was still predominant during Humboldt's time, his concept resembles Giddens' modern concept of the reflexive self.

Third, Humboldt (1792/2000, p. 59) also addresses the issue of balance of inner and outer reality and answers it rather optimistically, calling on the individual to assume responsibility. He argues that “man” must “*bring the mass of objects closer*” and increase the resemblance between the world and the individual. In our time, the critical psychologist Holzkamp (1995, p. 190) stresses that the possibility to expand competence and quality of life can be a major motivation of learning. Giddens (1984/2017, p. 15) notes that agency always involves some form of power to change the world. Our ideas depend on our sensing as well as our intellect. So, changes within our mind also change our view of the external world. Experience itself requires comprehension. In other words, thinking influences perception, including the perception of the scope for action (transcendental idealism). This is especially the case in a society of transformation which depends on creativity and innovation.

Fourth, according to Humboldt (1792/2000, pp. 58–60), *Bildung* also seeks to create coherence in a person's life: “man” aims to transform scattered knowledge into a closed system. Contemporary psychologists Keupp et al. (2013) and Straub (2000) confirm that – even though our society offers a growing multitude of options and lifestyles with new gender constellations, cultural influences, and (discontinuous) career paths – there is still a basic psychological need for coherence of areas of life that offer orientation and relief from complexity.

Finally, Humboldt (1792/2000) considers individuality to be an important resource for society. He appreciates “*the difference between minds*” and “*the variety of ways in which the world is reflected in different individuals*” (p. 62). Humboldt's observation that people carry out the same tasks in different ways was extensively explored by Goffman (1959), who investigated how individuals maintain their individuality and authenticity by interpreting their roles in different ways. This is known as *role distance* (Moreno, 1961; Petzold & Mathias, 1982).

In light of Humboldt's understanding of *Bildung*, fostering *identity development* can be considered an official mandate of German VET schools, even if this is not explicitly stated. However, VET teachers are probably not aware of this. Without clarification, the term *Bildung* remains vague. Conceiving *Bildung* as *identity development* may help to substantiate the idea in a contemporary way (Thole 2021, p. 177). However, common concepts of action-orientated didactics may impede this. The following section will explain why this is the case.

3 A Neglect of Vocational *Identity Development* in German VET

Section 3.1 opens with a discussion of two approaches to integrating action orientation in VET: objective and subjective understanding. In section 3.2 we show that an objective understanding – as predominates in VET in Germany – neglects vocational *identity development*. The case study described in section 3.3 shows the kind of *identity* conflicts that can arise and require support.

3.1 Objective and Subjective Understandings of Action Orientation

Ever since the introduction of action-orientated didactics in German VET in the 1990s, there have been concerns that subjective aspects had been disregarded (Backes-Haase & Klinkisch, 2015; Dörig, 2003, pp. 354–377; Zabeck, 2004). The status quo reported above demonstrates these worries to be justified. This section explains why action orientation can lead to a neglect of subjectivity – but must not automatically do so.

Action orientation as a didactic principle can be interpreted in different ways (Dörig, 2003; Thole, 2021, pp. 222–224). In German VET, two groups of theories were influential: action regulation theories (Hacker, 1994; Miller et al., 1960; Volpert, 1980) and cognitive learning theories (Aebli, 2006; Piaget, 1970).

Action regulation theories were developed by psychologists and labour researchers who analyzed work processes in industry from the 1960s to the 1980s. The aim was to optimize and humanize work processes by analyzing how actors plan actions to achieve predefined goals. One core idea is an iterative action cycle incurring feedback. Experiencing an action influences the actor's mental prerequisites; for example, she/he will learn to avoid certain mistakes and to optimize the work process.

Cognitive and experiential learning theories (Aebli, 2006; Piaget, 1970) analyze the psychological processes generated by the interactions between learners and their environment. Aebli (2006) describes the psychological processes involved in action and learning cycles, while Piaget (1970) explains how individuals align inner and outer reality by means of mechanisms such as assimilation and accommodation. Dewey's experiential learning approach (1938/1997) is a well-known example that strives to expand learners' participation, motivation, and self-determination.

Both these strands of theory are useful for overcoming the dualism of thinking and action (Tramm, 1994), which is a primary objective of action-orientated didactics. However, it is important to note that action regulation theories tend to neglect subjective aspects such as individuality, role distance, social interaction, and actors' biographies, desires, and emotions – even though these factors are highly relevant under contemporary conditions in a tertiarized world of work (Beck, 1986; Giddens, 1991; Hacker, 2009; Thole, 2021, pp. 222–227). Action regulation theories are therefore inappropriate when it comes to producing transformative changes, tapping individuals' potential, or resolving inner conflicts. Cognitive learning theories could be useful but have rarely been applied to support *identity development* in VET (Holzkamp, 1995).

Because identity-related reflection is closely linked to agency (Bandura, 1989; Simons, 2021), one justification for action orientation could lie in *identity* theories. However, in German VET in general, action orientation tends to be based on action

regulation theory and German VET curricula currently focus on objective model work processes (KMK, 2021; Thole 2021, pp. 190–203). This leads to a neglect of subjective aspects.

Another important barrier is that there is as yet no common understanding of the concept of *identity development*. Scholars focus on different aspects depending on their discipline. While sociologists analyze the interface between the individual and his/her social environment (Goffman, 1959; Krappmann, 1969; Mead/1967, 1934), psychologists and psychoanalysts examine the mental processes involved (Erikson 1966; Keupp et al, 2013).

The existence of a multitude of theories does not necessarily indicate confusion or unclarity, but rather different perspectives, aspects and priorities (Frey & Hausser, 1987; Keupp et al., 2013; Straub, 2000). It is important to note that in VET practice, one cannot dice *identity* analytically as science does; rather, all aspects of *identity* are simultaneously and indissolubly interconnected and present. In other words, VET stakeholders who want to foster *identity development* must necessarily deal with complexity.

3.2 Objective Understanding Leads to a Neglect of Vocational Identity Development

While *identification* with a vocation is desirable due to the aforementioned positive effects, there are many signs of a need for action in VET: high drop-out and turnover rates, a shortage of applicants, evidence of poor-quality training, drug consumption and mental illness, and generalized malaise among young people (Beicht et al., 2009; BIBB, 2024; Hanewinkel, Hansen & Neumann, 2024; Kaman & Ravens-Sieberer, 2024; Moor, Weber & Richter, 2024; Uhly & Neises, 2023).

Furthermore, there is consistent empirical evidence that vocational *identity development* is neglected in VET. A study on the quality of VET training by the German Federal Institute of Vocational Training (Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung) (Beicht et al., 2009) found that apprentices frequently experience conflicts around *identity* and tend to seek support from family and friends, but rarely approach their VET teachers in this context (Krewerth, 2010).

Empirical studies in the retail sector show that *competence* development – on which VET didactics focus – is only one of four relevant developmental tasks (Havighurst, 1974). The other three – *identification* (with a job or profession), *recognition* (in the workplace), and *shaping* (the workplace and biography) – are crucial for apprentices, but hardly addressed in VET didactics (Duemmler et al., 2017; Kutscha et al., 2009; Thole, 2020, 2021). Corresponding developmental tasks have also been reported in other VET contexts by Casper-Kroll (2011), Gruschka (1985) and Hericks (2006).

As further studies show, retail is not the only sector where problems concerning *identification* exist. Heinemann et al. (2009) found that many other occupations face even greater *identification* problems than the retail sector. Additionally, several studies have found *identification* in fact declining during the course of training (Heinzer & Reichenbach, 2013; Lewalter et al., 2001; Rauner et al., 2016).

Researchers have criticized the persistent predominance of externally directed forms of learning in VET schools (Prenzel et al., 2001). The overall impression is that apprentices have to solve their *identity* conflicts on their own (Duemmler et al., 2017; Kutscha

et al., 2009; Thole, 2020, 2021). VET pays little attention to the questions of enhancing learners' *identification* with their vocation, supporting the process of gaining recognition, or shaping their workplace and work biography. This is the case even where the school's own curriculum explicitly addresses vocational *identity development* (Tramm et al., 2009; Thole, 2021).

The empirical evidence indicates that the current action-orientated didactic approach in German VET is inadequate, even though curricula stipulate a mandate of *Bildung* for VET schools in the sense that *vocational action competence* should also include the ability to participate in shaping society and the world of work with a sense of social, economic, ecological, and individual responsibility (KMK, 2021, pp. 14–16). Handling work and business processes from an interdisciplinary perspective that takes account of their full complexity can promote practical application and help to avoid the accumulation of inert knowledge (Gramlinger & Tramm, 2003; Tramm, Kremer, & Tenberg, 2011).

However, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (KMK, 2021)³ did not spell out the possible implications of the mandate of *Bildung* for the respective learning situations (Fischer & Hantke, 2019; Thole, 2021, pp. 189–193). Therefore, it is within the competence and responsibility of the teachers to implement education concretely according to the mandate (Tramm et al., 2009).

It is also noteworthy that the German labour market and VET system are based on formal occupations.⁴ These constitute standardized bundles of qualifications and skills that are recognized by all relevant stakeholders as the basis for employability and job mobility. Because learning situations in German VET curricula align with typical work and business processes representing an occupation, they are suitable to foster *social identity* (Beck & Brater, 1977; Heinrichs et al. 2022; Klotz et al., 2014).

However, occupations in the formalized sense are standardized and rigid while job profiles and biographies tend to be individualized, discontinuous, and fluid (Baethge, 2020; Voss, 2001; Bretschneider & Schwarz, 2015). As a result, occupations do not reflect the variety of workplaces and holders of vocational roles – not to mention individual characteristics. The established didactic approach therefore fails to provide concepts to foster an *individualized* vocational self-concept on top of the occupational social identity. The latter is more self-evident in the Anglo-Saxon world, where occupations tend to be less standardized (Billett & Somerville, 2004; Gini, 1998; Kirpal, Brown & Dif, 2007; Savickas, 2012). It is also supported by well-established career choice theories (Holland, 1985; Savickas, 2012; Super, 1990).

Another important aspect is that the core disciplines of VET – pedagogy and business economics – do not take vocational *identity development* sufficiently into account. Given

3 In Germany, education is the responsibility of the Federal States. The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Federal States coordinates education policy at the national level.

4 In this paper the term *occupation* is used to describe formal (often codified) professions, while the term *vocation* refers to a professional self-concept as an important part of a person's *identity* (Klotz et al., 2014).

that the world of work is part of the economy, business and economics are highly relevant disciplines. However, the neo-classical school with its famous model of economic self-interest and perfect information excludes many aspects of real life (Friedrich, 2015; Etzioni 1988; Graupe, 2012, 2014; Ötsch & Kapeller, Tafner, 2019; Tafner & Casper, 2022; 2010; Ulrich 2001). If we are to deal with learners' real-life problems, it is therefore crucial to apply an interdisciplinary approach including business ethics, ecology, politics, sociology, and psychology. Although this is the explicit intention of the German didactic approach, the predominance of neo-classical thinking in schools and in introductory courses at universities may stand in its way.

Furthermore, certain educationalists view the very concept of *identity* with skepticism. One reason for this is that researchers usually strive for objectivity and intersubjectivity while *identity* deals with subjectivity. In addition, its abstract character and complexity make it hard to operationalize *identity* for empirical research (Keupp et al., 2013; Krappmann, 1969, pp.199–206; Straus & Höfer, 1997; Thole, 2023a). In certain circles the concept is rejected as fictional and ideological (Helsper, 1991; Hoffmann & Neuner, 1997; Keupp et al., 2013; Lenzen, 1991; Mollenhauer, 1983; Straub, 2000).

German VET curricula do acknowledge that VET must integrate three perspectives: relevant situations, the learners' point of view, and scholarship (Reetz, 1984; Tafner, 2020). Unintentionally and unconsciously, however, the subject is often lost in an objectified action-orientated approach. The following section illustrates these gaps by means of a case study and reveals the need for support for *identity development*.

3.3 Case Study: Hendrik's Need for Support

In this sub-section we turn to the case study of an apprentice, who we refer to as Hendrik. In sub-section 3.3.1 we describe our methodology and outline the theory of developmental tasks. In sub-section 3.3.2 we explore the *identity* problems Hendrik experienced in association with his developmental tasks. Potential pedagogical interventions are discussed in sub-section 3.3.3, and in sub-section 3.3.4 we describe how this can contribute to improving quality in vocational education.

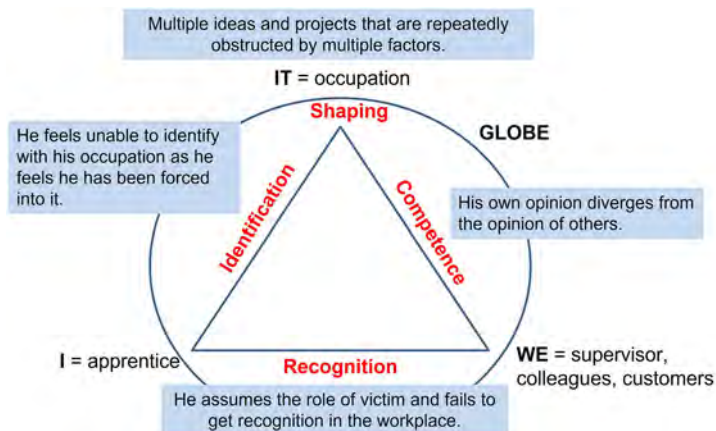
3.3.1 Methodology and Developmental Tasks in VET

Hendrik's case was chosen because it provides insights into multiple problems associated with *identity*. Hendrik has few social resources, but he is not mentally ill. As a consequence, his need for support is strong, but will not be satisfied by the health system (or any other institution). Hendrik was one of fourteen participants in the first author's empirical research in the retail sector (Thole, 2020, 2021). As the aim of the study was also theory building, longitudinal qualitative case studies were carried out according to Eisenhardt's recommendations (1989; for detailed methodology see Thole, 2023a). The cross-case analysis and a literature review identified the four developmental tasks (Havighurst, 1974) mentioned in chapter 3.2: *competence* development for the respective field, *recognition* by stakeholders in the workplace, *identification* with the occupation, and the *shaping* of the workplace and work biography (for more details see Thole, 2020, 2023a). It was noticeable that most apprentices identified only weakly with their occupation and suffered from a lack of recognition in the workplace. In addition, they showed a tendency

to cope with challenges in defensive or avoidant ways instead of choosing problem-solving approaches with the potential to enlarge their scope for self-actualization and recognition of their needs (Fuller & Unwin, 2003; Holzkamp, 1995; Thole, 2018; Thole, 2021, pp. 443–481). VET should therefore encourage apprentices to identify and explore their existing scope of action.

For within-case analysis the researcher applied a theme-centered process analysis according to Lotz (2012). This is based on Cohn's theme-centered interaction (TCI) (1975/2013), which is a pedagogical concept based on humanistic values that seeks to promote a balance between the individual learner (I), the learning group (WE) and the theme (IT), taking into account external restrictions and influences (GLOBE). As such it is suitable for dealing with discrepancies between the individual and his/her environment, such as *identity* problems. The four-factor model is visualized by a triangle within a circle and can also serve to analyze an individual's situation in his/her world (cf. Hendrik's example in fig. 3).

Figure 3: Hendrik's developmental tasks



Note. From *Berufliche Identitätsarbeit als Bildungsauftrag der Berufsschule – am Beispiel der dualen Ausbildung im Einzelhandel* (p. 92), by C. Thole, 2021, wbv. Copyright 2021 by Christiane Thole. Amended and reprinted with permission.

In theme-centered process analysis the sides of the triangle are labeled – in this case with the above-mentioned developmental tasks. These within-case analyses revealed that – despite common developmental tasks – the constellations of challenges and the individual problem-solving approaches were very specific (Thole 2021, 2020, 2023a). This means that VET teachers face the challenge of analyzing learners' *identity* problems on a case-by-case basis. Hendrik's case shows how this can be done.

3.3.2 Hendrik's Developmental Tasks

In the following we investigate the extent to which Hendrik is able to accomplish his development tasks. The problems involved are illustrated in figure 3.

3.3.2.1 A Lack of *Identification* with the Retail Business

Due to a series of strokes of fate Hendrik was unable to pursue his goal of becoming a teacher. Instead, he was obliged to start an apprenticeship at a supermarket in a socially deprived neighborhood, as there was no alternative. That is why he has difficulty identifying with his occupation, as quotes A and B show. However, he does enjoy certain aspects of his job (cf. quote C).

Quote A: Ordinary family. Parents severely ill. Brother died. Taken seriously sick myself. Left school. I was good enough to have stayed at school in fact. (...) (Thole, 2021, p. 463, all quotes translated from German)

Quote B: I never wanted to work there. [...] (Thole, 2021, p. 463) It [retail] was not my dream job. (...) Actually, I wanted to study to become a teacher. (...) (Thole, 2021, Hendrik Ia, 64–76)

Quote C: (...) In fact, it's a great vocation. (...) Sometimes I enjoy my job when I get a feeling of success because I am becoming faster. (Thole, 2021, p. 462)

3.3.2.2 A Lack of Recognition at the Workplace

Hendrik also has little positive to say about his customers (quote D), peers at VET school (quote E, G), and superiors (quote G). In return, he feels excluded as he has difficulty finding a job and is refused a third year of apprenticeship without plausible reasons.

Quote D: [Researcher: What would you say if you were asked what your job is?] Hanging around with ape-men. Customers are horrible. (...) (Thole, 2021, p. 462)

Quote E: Then I had to attend a VET preparation course together with a bunch of idiots. (...) (Thole, 2021, p. 463)

Quote F: Nobody wanted me. (...) Applying for a job is difficult. Nobody will hire me. (Thole, 2021, p. 463)

Quote G: I could talk about others who were accepted for a third year, who sleep during the lessons. I lose my temper. (...) They say that I am not ready for it [a third year]. I really think they must be complete idiots. (Thole, 2021, Hendrik II, 26–28)

3.3.2.3 Contradictory Assessments of Competence

One possible reason for the experienced rejection may be the discrepancy between his own assessment of his competence and what others think (quote H, I). His self-assessment was often more positive than the external feedback he received, while he also oscillated between feeling inferior and superior. On the one hand, he feels overwhelmed (quote J), on the other hand he feels more qualified than the others (quote I). It is difficult to judge whether Hendrik's self-assessment was justified or exaggerated. At any rate, his externalizing style of attributing failure to others may have provoked rejection and at the same time prevented him from understanding his own contribution to the outcome.

Quote H: My shift leader and managers from other stores come and say: Oh my god, why did you not get it? (...) The others who get the third year are not better than me. [Researcher: What could make the difference?] My boss. (Thole, 2021, Hendrik II, 26–28)

Quote I: I don't know, if I am the only one who knows how to alter the prices in the back office, then she [manager] can't tell me that I'm not qualified for my job. (...) And then I go to my boss and ask her something and she doesn't know. (Thole, 2021, Hendrik II, 56, 62)

Quote J: When they [the manager and colleagues] say to me: You do it once with assistance and then you have to be able to do it on your own. Then I am perplexed and think: How am I going to manage to do this on my own? (Thole, 2021, Hendrik Ib, 52)

3.3.2.4 Feeling Other-directed

Hendrik's repeated experience of setbacks and failure leaves him feeling other-directed. He tends to blame others for his situation (cf. quote K, L). He has ideas and options for his career, but no idea how to realize them. He can even imagine remaining in the retail business (quote M).

Quote K: Thanks to the education authority's rules about the eleventh grade I have wound up at [supermarket]. (Thole, 2021, p. 463)

Quote L: After six months on social benefits they [the job center] said that I have to do an apprenticeship or lose benefits. And if I don't I'll get taken to court. (Thole, 2021, Hendrik Ia, 52)

Quote M (second interview): I would like to do something with real estate. You can do it if you have the capital. (...) Then I would be independent. (...) Because I like cars and have already owned many, I am thinking about changing track [toward the automobile trade]. (...) [Researcher: Could you imagine settling for the retail business?] Definitely if I had my own place, my own business. It is really fun, what we learn at school. (Thole, 2021, Hendrik II, 86–124)

3.3.3 Pedagogical Implications Regarding Hendrik's *Identity Development*

The analysis suggests that Hendrik may also have contributed to his troubles through his interactions with others, but he does not seem to be aware of this. His tendency to feel victimized and blame others prevents him from building a consistent self-concept and sustainable relationships with others. The silver lining is that a change in subjective assessment or attitude could have substantially improved Hendrik's situation even if his environment did not change at all. This is what Hendrik required support for. Hendrik's narrative suggests a string of issues that explain his situation and subjectivity much better than competence: social problems (illness, lack of recognition, lack of independence), legal problems (being forced to continue in education, penalties, juvenile court), lifeworld economic problems (rejected applications, unpleasant customers, problems with man-

ager, time pressure, simultaneously overstretched and bored), and ethical problems (disrespecting others).

With respect to the five functions of *identity development* (see 2.3), Hendrik required the following support:

1. To support him in constructing a continuous thread of meaning it is necessary to enhance his ability to build a *positive* self-concept. Otherwise, his *identification* with the victim role risked becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy and preventing him from taking charge of his life. As Hendrik's personal self-concept was contradictory it would have been crucial to identify and correct dysfunctional elements. Small successes can improve confidence for future tasks. As Dewey (1938/1997) points out, there are harmful and productive experiences, and it is the teacher's task to make sure learners have the latter. Even a setback can be productive for *identity development* if it is reflected upon and conclusions for future agency are drawn.
2. To generate a reflexive self-project that provides orientation for personal development he needs support in focusing and prioritizing his personal objectives. Hendrik's case shows that choosing a job is *not* the same as taking charge of one's life. That is why it is important for the vocational orientation that starts in secondary school to be continued during VET (Meyer, 2014). The vocation needs to be consistent with other elements of the self-concept. Additionally, in times of uncertainty it makes sense to keep flexible alternatives open. The reflexive project cannot simply replicate the models of the past: it needs to be both stable and flexible. Choosing pathways that permit a change of direction if necessary is a plausible strategy for remaining flexible. The vision does *not* need to be realistic in the short run. As long as it aligns with the individual's talents, values, needs, and motives, the project will produce the motivation needed to set and pursue developmental goals (Mollenhauer, 1983, pp. 115–130). Striving for an authentic and coherent vocational *identity* is key, rather than unconsciously internalizing external demands that interfere with the personal self-concept (cf. organized self-realization by Honneth, 2002).
3. In order to learn to balance inner and outer reality, Hendrik would have required regular reflected feedback from others. In this respect, it would have been helpful to encourage self-criticism by consistently asking him what impact his behaviour had on others. This would have permitted him to find an empathetic form of self-presentation (Krappmann, 1969) that allowed others to save face. In this context, criticism becomes a valuable learning opportunity. To support Hendrik's positive self-image it would also have been desirable to create settings that allowed him to receive positive feedback and gain a realistic assessment of his strengths.
4. To create coherence among the different areas of life and aspects of *identity*, Hendrik would have required mentoring to offer positive alternative interpretations. He does manage to give the different areas of his life a coherent meaning – but a negative one. He is convinced he is unlucky and that others treat him unfairly. Seeing himself as a person who does not give up and is able to cope with challenges could create a positive thread of meaning (function 1). This would also allow him to discover that he has a realistic chance of becoming a VET teacher, which is very close to his original vocational goal.

5. To define personal singularity and/or identification with social groups, Hendrik would have to be encouraged to identify the strengths that characterize him as an individual and integrate him socially. For this purpose, he should be encouraged to experiment with other interpretations of his role – for instance interpreting his work in a discount supermarket as providing affordable goods to needy people and/or (in light of his ambition to become a teacher) teaching his commercial expertise to less experienced colleagues. Others would probably have responded more positively to him if he had tried to show a positive attitude, and he would also have developed useful skills for his future vocation – whether as a teacher or in any other profession.

3.3.4 The Potential Added Value of Vocational *Identity Support*

The case analysis shows that solving *identity* problems is key to success in the world of work and for personal well-being (cf. empirical evidence quoted in the introduction). Thus, support for *identity development* could boost Hendrik's personal development, but could also contribute to tackling a number of problems in the VET system and the world of work. It could prevent Hendrik from becoming mentally ill, thus reducing absenteeism. Hendrik might be more motivated – despite feeling forced to make compromises – and offer better customer service and performance at work. He could also become more confident and capable of coping with challenges, ambiguities, and contradictions in the workplace, and more flexible and creative. Being aware that he can shape his own vocational self-concept might enable him to respond quickly to new requirements, whereas it takes a long time to alter the VET system. It might even contribute to reducing the shortage of teachers by helping Hendrik to pursue that vocational goal. Altogether, fostering *identity development* could contribute to VET courses acquiring a better public image and help to include more young people in the VET system. These potential positive outcomes of fostering *identity development* in VET suggest that it is worth the effort. However, this begs the question if and how this can be implemented. The first step will be to draw VET teachers' attention to the subject's point of view. To support this process the authors suggest a simple didactic model with three categories.

4 Categories for Subject-oriented Economic *Bildung*

As outlined above, German VET curricula start from typical work and business situations and systematically define the competences individuals require (see section 3.2). In contrast, *Reflexive Business and Economic Education* as described by Tafner (2015, 2019, 2020, 2024a, 2024b) and Tafner and Casper (2022) turns the tables and puts the individual – the subject – as a social being at the center of its didactics. The underlying model is described briefly below.

The starting point and end of this approach is *Bildung*, which consists of maturity and *identity development* of the subject, who is embedded in society, culture, and nature (see section 2.1). Maturity means rejecting any form of paternalism, exploitation, or instrumentalization, in order to avoid the subject being sucked into the trap of other-direction (Zabeck, 2004, p. 9). *Bildung* and economic and business education seek to empower learners to comprehend the world and find a balance between their own and others' aspi-

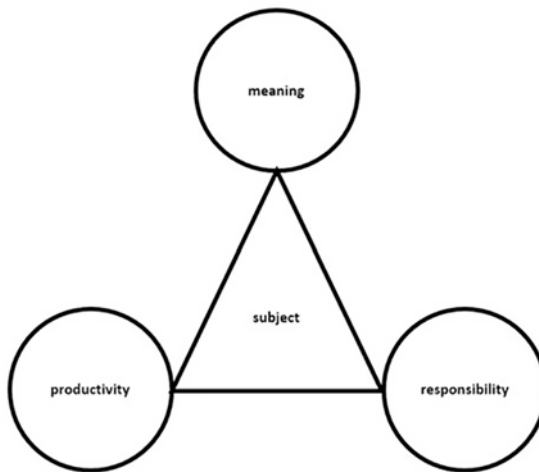
rations. Although consciousness is accessible solely to the subject, it is influenced by social interactions (Mead, 1934/1967; functions 1 and 3 in section 2.3). *Bildung* aims to open up a pluralistic world with diverging thoughts and theories. According to Biesta (2017, p. 8) “the challenge is to exist in the world without considering oneself as center, origin, or ground of the world”. Both theory and experience are relevant for our descriptive and normative understanding of the world (Keynes, 1936/1997, p. 383). In contrast to mainstream economics, *Bildung* does not claim to be value-free but will strive for three equal goals: solidarity (because the subject is a social being), autonomy (because the subject is an individual being), and participation (because the subject is both individual and social) (Klafki, 1996; KMK, 2021, mandate of *Bildung* in section 2.4). Individuals and society have to develop an idea of a meaningful life worth living and make their choices accordingly.

The underlying model is based on ideas from humanistic psychology and Catholic social teachings, and can be understood as a subject-oriented refinement of the TCI model (see figure 3): Here the I (subject) is in the center. It must balance inner and outer reality (Cohn, 1975/2013; Erikson, 1966; Goffman, 1959; Krappmann, 1969; Mead, 1934/1967; see section 2.3). Because the subject is taken as the starting point, IT (theme) is replaced by *productivity* – the perspective is now subject-oriented (*Bildung*) (see section 2.4) – to generate a reflexive self-project for personal development towards self-actualization (self-realization) (Giddens, 1991; Gini, 1998; Mollenhauer, 1983; see section 2.3). In this perspective WE becomes *responsibility* to oneself, others, and the environment and defines personal singularity and/or *identification* with social groups (Erikson, 1966; Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1959; Tajfel & Turner, 1986/2004; see section 2.3). The TCI model also includes *meaning* because the subject ultimately wants to find *meaning* in their life – to construct a continuous thread of meaning throughout their biography (Erikson, 1966; Giddens, 1991; Hausser, 1995; Straub, 2000; see section 2.3). The triangle indicates that the three objectives must be brought into equilibrium, to reconcile both parts of the self-concept – the subject and the society – and to achieve personal fulfilment (Keupp et al, 2013; Straub, 2000; see figure 2). If these three objectives are pursued reflexively then the descriptive, normative, and emotional elements merge and personal, social, economic, and ecological responsibility can be pursued pedagogically and didactically (KMK, 2021).

Figure 4 illustrates this pedagogical-didactic proposal: *Bildung* requires the subject to balance *productivity*, *responsibility*, and *meaning*. Human nature is characterized by contradictions that the subject must reconcile. The biggest contradiction is that between life and death, which requires us to learn to live with our own mortality yet still find meaning in life (Frankl, 2017, pp. 118–123; Fromm, 1947/2020a, pp. 54–66). The second contradiction is that life is too short to realize all our potentials. We feel the pressure of time, especially at work; we know that we are unable to achieve all we would wish to. At the same time that finality is also what lends value and meaning to our lives and our vocational choices. Ultimately, as human beings, we have to learn to cope with being alone. The subject may be a socially embedded being, but his or her consciousness is his or hers alone. As autonomous beings we are alone yet we cannot bear to be alone (Fromm, 1947/2020a, pp. 54–59). On top of these inherent contradictions, others arise through our embedding in the relentlessly calculating world of work and economy. Both in the role of provider and provided-for, the subject experiences the self as embedded between self-determination and other-direction, self-actualization and instrumentalization, liberty and justice,

power and powerlessness. Under the pressure of objectifying efficiency and rationalization, this can lead to a self-objectification divorced from experienced *identity*. The subject can be overwhelmed by such expectations. But the subject should be enabled to unfold their own subjective potential, in order to deal productively, responsibly, and meaningfully with the available and unavailable. The pedagogical task is to reflexively integrate the three levels into teaching. They are described briefly below.

Figure 4: Objectives of reflexive business and economic education



4.1 Productivity

Productivity is essential, because the subject is a physical being. The individual needs means to survive – and this is just as true for the community and the society. In this respect, real-life economy – considered to be a cultural phenomenon – determines the conditions under which those means are procured (Tafner, 2019). Productivity in the sense used here should not be confused with the economic productivity (efficiency of production) discussed in mainstream economics (Robbins, 1932, p. 16). In general, economic and business education one-sidedly emphasizes efficiency and economic productivity. Efficiency can be a helpful objective – but can be misunderstood as the only or most important goal of vocational education. It can lead to better performance but also to exploitation, it can avoid waste but accelerate the consumption of resources.

Being productive in the humanist sense – which is the point here – means employing one's own powers in such a way as to realize one's own potential. Productivity is an attitude rather than an activity. So, the point is to develop an attitude that allows one to employ one's powers freely, autonomously, and responsibly (Fromm, 1947/2020a, pp. 98–107). Fromm (1950, p. 91) states: "While it is true that man's productiveness can create

material things, works of art, and systems of thought, by far the most important object of productiveness is man himself.” (see also Fromm, 1947/2020a, p. 107). In other words, productivity means employing one’s own intellect and emotions in such a way that one’s own possibilities are realized. This is not ultimately about work, but about an attitude that is also reflected in work. The meaning of work is found less in the profession itself than in the way the work is done. The central thing is how the uniqueness of the subject is expressed – and that is independent of the type of work. Instead, it is the existence of the subject that grants the work validity (Frankl, 2017, p. 167). In his encyclical, Pope John Paul II writes: “The sources of the dignity of work are to be sought primarily in the subjective dimension, not in the objective one” (IOANNES PAULUS PP. II, 1981). That stands in clear contradiction to the human capital theory of mainstream economics, which treats the human as means and object rather than end and subject. The Pope continues: “It only means that the primary basis of the value of work is man himself, who is its subject” (IOANNES PAULUS PP. II, 1981). Enjoyment can also generate efficiency if the subject recognizes that the work is accomplished better and more quickly. But if efficiency is ordered from above it can become a burden and lead to exploitation of the working person if ever more output is demanded in order to meet targets. Efficiency has no intrinsic value of its own. We must always ask why and for whom the work is efficient. Efficiency must always be paired with responsibility (Tafner, 2023, 2024; Ulrich, 2008).

Humanistic psychology points out that our competitive society has negative effects on productivity, for example in the idea that one must accumulate as much knowledge and ability as possible. Competency becomes a commodity to accumulate in order to sell oneself as well as possible (Biesta, 2017, p. 90; Fromm, 1947/2020a, p. 92). That which can be marketed is developed, at the expense of other potential within the subject. Alongside this “Marketing Orientation” (Fromm, 1950, p. 67) duty paradoxically plays a central role in our culture. Self-actualization is denigrated and suppressed as self-seeking (Fromm, 1947/2020a, p. 143). Two ideas predominate: “I am what I have” and “I am as you desire me” (Fromm, 1950, p. 136). Here, success, material affluence, career, and status become expectations to be fulfilled. It is striking that these two contradictory principles appear together in one and the same culture. This can lead to confusion and prevent the subject from realizing their potential (Fromm 1947/2020a, p. 144).

4.2 Responsibility

As the individual is always socially embedded, he/she also has to answer the question of *responsibility* (cf. figure 4). Klafki (1996, p. 245) argues that *the meaning of performance can never be entirely inherent*. The subject is legally and morally responsible for their actions (and non-actions) to themselves, to others, and to the environment. Responsible action seeks to resolve this threefold challenge, and therefore shaping a vocational ethos must also be a crucial goal of VET (cf. functions 3 and 4 in section 2.3). This normative setting influences the ethical reasoning, with certain ethical theories failing to satisfy these normative requirements (Tafner, 2020). Tafner turns to Ulrich’s integrative business ethics (2008) and McCloskey’s (2011) virtue ethics. Ulrich argues, in the sense of Kant’s categorical imperative, that *humanity* must always be the means as well as the end. The meaning of this end needs to be reflected both individually and in public discourse. Humanistic

productivity, meaning, and responsibility are interconnected and always have to be addressed simultaneously.

Responsibility and being belong together, because being always relates to others (Biesta, 2017, p. 8; Frankl, 2017, p. 31; 2023, pp. 11–13). As the founder of socio-economics, Amitai Etzioni (1988, p. 9), puts it: “The I’s need a We to be.” Responsibility relates to life, which is always presenting us with problems to solve (Frankl, 2017, p. 66–78). *Identity* also means establishing self-love, a positive relationship to oneself. This is also found in the Judeo-Christian commandment to “Love thy neighbour as thyself!” (Leviticus 19:18 and Matthew 22:37–39). Self-love is not egotism, but the precondition for personal development and love of others. This is not a demand for altruism: one is not required to love others more than oneself. Herein lies a significant departure from the neo-classical principle of maximization. The subject is required to reconcile the moral imperatives with their own need for self-actualization. The subject has a fundamental moral sense because they have learned – through upbringing, socialization, and enculturation – what the dos and don’ts are in a particular culture and society. But if the subject wants to listen to their conscience they must listen to themselves, and that is often difficult in our culture. People like to listen to others, but not to themselves (Fromm, 1947/2020a, pp. 161–176).

4.3 Meaning

Life is both a question and an answer. The meaning of life is to answer the stream of questions that life poses. And these may indeed be answered in and through action. The answers are always concrete within the here and now of a unique specific person: responsibility *ad personam* and *ad situationem* (Frankl, 2023, p. 13). So the question of the meaning of life is meaningless. Instead it is life itself that asks the questions. The subject must find answers to them (Frankl, 2017, p. 107). These are situations where morality and self-actualization need to be reconciled. That is no easy matter in an individualized society, where, as Honneth puts it, self-actualization has become the ideology and productive force of a deregulated economic system (Honneth, 2002, p. 154). Here we see emancipation and maturity transformed from ideals into compulsion, from aspiration to demand (p. 155). That is difficult for young people, especially when they compare themselves with others or with idols – and find themselves to be inadequate, not pretty enough, not successful enough. Comparison distracts from the subject’s own unique existence. But the value of the subject is absolute in its uniqueness.

5 Feasibility of Fostering *Identity Development* in VET Schools

This paper explores how *identity development* can be fostered in VET, on the basis that the learning subject is a material, mental, social, and individual being – and as such must reflect upon and shape their relationship to the world. The latter activity is the heart of *identity development*. In the world of work, a vocational self-concept and ethos are required, in order to ensure both agency and coherence and continuity of the social and individual components of *identity*. As Humboldt’s concept of *Bildung* shows, *Bildung* can be understood as fostering vocational *identity development*. On the basis of empirical studies and

VET curricula, the contribution demonstrates that vocational *identity development* is neglected at German VET schools despite their mandate to pursue *Bildung*. A case study illustrates the need for support in multiple everyday *identity* conflicts. Provision of support could potentially boost apprentices' motivation and performance and improve the attractiveness of VET. To deal with *identity* issues in VET practice, the author suggested a simple model building on the categories of meaning, productivity, and responsibility.

Once VET teachers have adopted a didactic way of thinking that takes the subject's point of view into account, they may ask whether dealing with all this is their task at all, and if it is, how it could be implemented. This also implies questions: Which didactic methods are adequate? And what training is required for VET teachers?

First of all, everyone – be they employees, self-employed, or unemployed – needs to be able to balance and shape their (vocational) *identity*. This is especially true of VET teachers, who have a very complex and challenging workplace. So balancing and shaping *identity* is a basic psychological capacity we all require for our daily life, but it may be insufficiently developed or unconscious. To enable (student) teachers to support others to develop *identity*-related competences it is necessary to promote these competences explicitly in (student) teacher training. This is also likely to reduce (student) teacher dropouts due to mental illness. Professional psychological expertise can be helpful especially when severe chronic difficulties persist, but it is not the health system's task to coach us in our daily lives. However, statistics show that prevalence of mental illness is rising and that the health system is overloaded (Hanewinkel et. al., 2024; Moor et al., 2024). It is therefore positive if VET schools can prevent young people from becoming mentally ill and unable to work in the first place.

Second, the German VET curricula do not need to be revised because the mandate of *Bildung* already covers the objective of *identity development* (see section 2.4). Learners will try to shape and balance their *identity* even without the support of VET, but in that case the VET school will not be able to influence the process in a pedagogically desirable way. Furthermore, because *identity development* is closely related to agency, it is essential to foster it to achieve the overall goal of *vocational action competence*. For this purpose, the curricula need to be interpreted through the lens of *identity* theory. In the German VET system it is assumed that the work and business processes included in the curricula (KMK, 2021) deal with all the central practical workplace requirements. As Hendrik's case demonstrates, however, many challenges are not in fact covered. This could be overcome by using learners' narratives about the challenges they experience in the workplace instead of modeled ideal-typical situations. This would also boost connectivity between learning environments.

Empirical evidence shows that VET schools and teachers need support in these processes. One important starting point is to understand action orientation as subjective agency rather than action regulation. That is a necessary precondition for supporting the psychological functions of *identity* work. Theory-driven analysis of cases and situations can contribute to achieving this goal. A holistic understanding of the theoretical concept of *identity development* would allow VET teachers to address the individual implications at micro level and encourage learners to discover their subjectivity. The case study demonstrates that the concept of *identity* is complex but comprehensible.

Concerning the question of adequate didactic approaches, it is important to note that the subject is responsible for the process of *identity development*. The teacher's task is to arrange interactions and reflection that allow learners to enhance their self-awareness (Thole, 2021, pp. 263–307; Thole, 2020). Group discussions and individual reflection are both crucial, and should alternate. For group settings, theme-centered interaction (TCI) is a proven concept that is suited to deal with *identity* problems. In many VET schools self-directed and individualized learning is already moving forward. More *identity*-specific educational trials under scientific guidance and evaluation would be helpful to develop them further.

Concerning VET teacher training, the authors believe that it will not be sufficient to train teachers and adapt school-specific curricula, because teaching and its traditions are deeply entrenched and hard to change. However, deep and quick cultural turns are possible, especially in times of disruption. Teachers and heads will only change their internalized vocational self-concept through external pressures, for instance because of high drop-out rates, mental illness (among learners or teachers themselves), or a lack of appropriate applicants for apprenticeship. Currently, more and more employers are discovering that retaining staff by supporting their personal development is a means to overcome a shortage of skilled labor. The required change can be brought about in social interaction with relevant stakeholders (Mead, 1934/1967). Evolution of the VET system and educators' and trainers' skills will thus go hand in hand. It is therefore crucial to intensify the discourse about vocational *identity development* among VET stakeholders.

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Boundary Objects Supporting Students' Meaning-Making During Work Placement in Norwegian Vocational Education

Monika Øgård, Stefanie Andrea Hillen

Abstract *This study investigates the use of boundary objects in vocational education and training (VET) as an approach to address the challenge of meaning making of VET concepts, often experienced by pupils at school just as 'definitions' to be learnt by heart or to be memorized, hence becoming isolated knowledge instead of contextual applicable and meaningful. A problem that is well known in international dual VET education and research. As well it turns the focus on, for instance pupils, to potentially become co-brokers between the boundary of school and workplace, using boundary objects, reified as thematic assignments in and for both learning sites. In the interplay between boundary objects, advisors, students and teachers, affordances can be created helping to construct meaning and motivation in and for the pupils' VET education.*

Title *Boundary Objects Supporting Students' Meaning-making During Work Placement in Norwegian Vocational Education*

Keywords *Vocational Didactics, Vocational Education, Boundary object, Brokers, Meaning-Making*

1 Introduction

This section introduces firstly two interrelated parts that establish the foundation for this article, both conceptually and contextually. It addresses the concept of meaning-making and its significance in vocational education and training (VET) learning processes. It introduces a theoretical understanding of how individuals create meaning through interaction with their social and physical environment, peers, and vocational tasks. This theo-

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retical grounding is necessary because it frames the study's core interest in understanding how students interpret and are able to make use of vocational knowledge. This leads to the research question: How do students perceive the use of thematic assignments, and how do the thematic assignments contribute to students' meaning-making and understanding of vocational concepts?

As well, the introductory section addresses 'Vocational Specialisation' (YFF) within the Norwegian VET system. Vocational specialisation is a subject offered during the first two years of the 2+2 model in Norway. It is intended to provide students with practical insight into vocational fields through work placements and school-based activities. This contextualisation is important for understanding the study's empirical setting, particularly within the Sales, Service, and Tourism programme, where students often have limited access to workplace experiences. The section emphasises the importance of vocational specialisation in promoting early career exploration, motivation, and retention, particularly for students entering VET with limited prior knowledge or missing skills. The section also outlines systemic challenges, such as the coordination between schools and workplaces, that are relevant to understanding the potential role of thematic assignments as boundary objects.

1.1 Meaning-Making - Its Importance in VET Learning Processes

Individuals can understand and interact in a world when they are able to make meaning of their environment. This includes the challenge of purposefully interacting with the objects and subjects they face. Some of these objects and subjects are met in a more abstract approach, described with and expressed by concepts they must deal with. This happens as well in the context of classroom-based learning in vocational education. The subject vocational specialisation offers VET-students the opportunity to become acquainted and introduced into a vocational field by interacting with, for instance, supervisors, colleagues, peers, and vocational teachers. These interactions serve as valuable sources of vocational knowledge (Fuller & Unwin, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991) and facilitate the meaning-making of specific vocational concepts. Through these engagements, students gain a more in-depth understanding of underlying principles and perspectives (Edwards, 2005; Schaap et al., 2009) and develop a common frame of reference. This shared understanding includes both tacit and explicit knowledge, values and beliefs present in the workplace (Bourdieu, 1998).

As students become more involved in their vocational activities, they begin to internalise the norms and perspectives of their chosen field, thus engaging in a process of meaning-making (Aarkrog, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Increased participation enables individuals to make meaning through their experiences and of the knowledge they acquire. This, in turn, fosters a deeper connection to their vocation and encourages conscious reflection on how their experiences shape their understanding. It also allows them to examine how these factors influence their beliefs and values. Bijlsma et al. (2016) discuss meaning-making as a process in which VET students explore and clarify vocational knowledge in dialogue with others, which enhances their ability to interpret and internalise it. Bruner (1960) similarly emphasises that development is an activity that fosters personal meaning, including both interactions with others and with themselves.

Understanding that VET students frequently shift between classroom and workplace communities, they face varying expectations in each context, leading to a sense of discontinuity in their learning experience. The concept of a “third space” is introduced within third-generation activity theory and explains moments in the classroom where the perspectives of teachers and students intersect (Gutierrez, 1995; Gutiérrez et al., 1999). In these interactions, the separate worlds come together, creating opportunities for new meanings and understandings that surpass the apparent boundaries of each perspective.

This study will address thematic assignments, functioning as boundary objects, and their contribution to students' meaning-making. These assignments were developed by vocational teachers, and continuously refined through feedback and practical use from the supervisors and students. The vocational teachers who created these assignments are independent from the researchers conducting this study. The assignments consist of work-based tasks built on the learning objectives of the programme Sales, Service, and Tourism (Udir, 2020a) and the core curricula (Udir, 2017). Analysing the interviews, particular attention is given to the following research question: How do the students perceive the use of thematic assignments, and how do the thematic assignments contribute to students' meaning-making and understanding of vocational concepts?

1.2 The Subject Vocational Specialisation in the Norwegian VET-System Used for Work Placement

The Norwegian Vocational Education and Training (VET) system is designed to prepare students for future opportunities in both life and work (Udir, 2017). Two years of school-based learning by vocational teachers, followed by two years of apprenticeship, is the general model for VET in Norway. The Norwegian Vocational Education and Training programmes (VET) aim to create pathways to future opportunities in life, including work-life. These are key points stressed by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (Udir). During the first two years of a VET-student's education in Norway, students are taught a subject known as vocational specialisation (YFF). This subject allows students to gain their first experiences in private or public sector enterprises. This is considered a prerequisite for work choices and later work-life (Udir, 2020b). Hence, school-based and work-based learning should complement each other.

As learners move between learning communities, an ongoing coordination between VET teachers and workplace supervisors would be beneficial. Despite this well-known importance of coordination, establishing close collaboration between these parties has proven to be challenging (Dahlback et al., 2018; Nyen & Tønder, 2012; Tynjälä et al., 2022). Research indicates that collaboration between schools and workplaces can provide students with opportunities for better mastery, leading to increased motivation (Helms Jørgensen et al., 2019).

Through the subject vocational specialisation, students can be provided with workshops and work placement opportunities, but these opportunities can vary. Due to limited access to work placements or workshops, Norwegian sales, service, and tourism students often spend more time in the classroom than in other VET programmes (Aakernes et al., 2022). In addition, according to Aakernes et al. (2022, p. 81), 14 % of the 2021 stu-

dents enrolled in this programme started without certified knowledge and with insufficient skills requirements. This indicates an even stronger focus on this student group to keep them motivated and prevent dropout. We assume providing students' the opportunity of meaning-making contributes to their motivation and hence to increase retention.

2 Workplace Learning and Boundary Learning

Hiim (2013) discusses how "experience and language are seen as a process where concepts are developed through participation in practice-based contexts" (p. 313). The benefits of practice-based learning environments are positively acknowledged by Billett (2014), although he stresses that just providing students with a work environment is insufficient.

Students often fail to see the connection between school and work (Aarkrog & Wahlgren, 2022; Gessler, 2017; Schaap et al., 2012). These school-work transitions are seen as a process of boundary-crossing (Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003). Through this perspective of boundary learning, the differences between the two learning contexts are potential sources of learning (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011a). An advantage of the boundary-learning metaphor is that it directs attention specifically to the back-and-forth movements joining different situations and learning communities (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011a).

The issue of integrating learning is also examined from an educational design perspective at the boundary of work and school (Wesselink & Zitter, 2017), e.g., learning activities, resources available, and assessment. It stresses the benefit of educational design strategies when supporting the learning potential at the boundary (Bakker & Akkerman, 2019; Johannesen et al., 2022). The educational design perspective is essential in this study. It aims to explore the role of thematic assignments (Table 1) from the students' perspective when they switch between school and work, and how the distinct phases (Figure 1) could contribute to their meaning-making and understanding. Within the paradigms of workplace and boundary learning, the concepts and roles of boundary objects (2.1), brokers (2.2), and affordances (2.3) needs to be explored in detail.

2.1 Boundary Objects

To facilitate boundary crossing, different 'boundary objects' have been considered as a bridge between learning at school and work (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011a; Berner, 2010). In vocational education, a boundary object refers to an object used by teachers, students, and supervisors at work (Akkerman & Bakker, 2012). Boundary objects include physical objects such as tools, equipment, and materials and abstract objects such as concepts, models, and frameworks. Boundary objects derive their significance from the interaction of diverse viewpoints, emphasising the importance of various perspectives converging. These moments of convergence can be considered a 'third space' (Gutiérrez, 1995; Gutiérrez et al., 1999), and the use of boundary objects, like thematic assignments, can facilitate these interactions.

Assigning responsibilities to actors, like supervisors and teachers, in different contexts and using boundary objects to illustrate agreements between them is beneficial (Bakker & Akkerman, 2013; Bouw et al., 2021). In this study, in the different contexts of school and work, the actors are the students, supervisors and teachers. These three actors, each with their unique approaches and responsibilities, can and have to coordinate their activities around a shared object, such as thematic assignments, to support meaning-making across different contexts. Boundary objects are frequently introduced as support in vocational education to facilitate boundary learning. According to Star and Griesemer (1989), boundary objects are defined as follows:

Objects which both inhabit several intersecting worlds and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them. Boundary objects should be adaptable to local needs and the constraints of the parties using them yet strong enough to maintain a common identity across different sites. Hence, they should be loosely organised in general use and become more structured when used on individual sites and adjusted accordingly (p. 393).

Research has shown (Akkerman & Bakker, 2012) that boundary objects can facilitate learning through communication and collaboration in vocational education. However, one needs to emphasise the necessity to systemise this learning to reach the full potential of dual education. Johannesen et al. (2022) investigated vocational teachers' use of thematic assignments to improve boundary learning for students in work placements. Their study found that vocational teachers can use these boundary objects to re-connect work-based learning from the workplace to school-based learning, and that systematic development of vocational didactics is possible. Riis and Brodersen (2021) also underscore the potential of such boundary objects, hence, the necessity for dialogue and scaffolding when students cross boundaries.

Boundary objects are meant to be supportive tools, but they can also be hindrances. On the one hand, the study by Stoffels et al. (2022) indicates that interaction with other peers and supervisors can contribute to the student's development and reflection. On the other hand, they say a portfolio may establish an additional barrier to overcome; "Thus, the use of boundary objects may become a goal in itself that takes energy away from 'true' learning, suggesting a deconstructive struggle" (Stoffels et al., 2022, p. 1435). An example is if students struggle with writing and experiencing working on the thematic assignments as an additional burden. In this context, the diary can serve as a boundary object that initiates reflection and reduces the emphasis on writing, thus alleviating the burden (Øgård, 2024).

In this study, thematic assignments are chosen to support students moving between different learning communities, thus supporting students' learning. In the thematic assignments, the students are encouraged to ask questions to their supervisor or colleagues during work placement. Ferm et al. (2018) found that students used questions to expand their vocational knowledge and seemed engaged in their vocations, but the downside was that the students were afraid of appearing incompetent by asking questions. Hence, this student's engagement alone was insufficient during a work placement; students would

have needed more support and improved structured learning chances (Evans et al., 2010; Ferm et al., 2018; Fuller & Unwin, 2003).

2.2 Brokers

Brokers are described as individuals who move between contexts, such as school and work (Tuomi-Gröhn et al., 2003), facilitating boundary crossing. Brokers connect learning communities, coordinate activities, and introduce new opportunities for understanding. Brokers act as mediators, meeting various expectations and facing different ways of solving tasks (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011b). Vocational teachers bridge the gap between workplace and school, using boundary objects to support this role. Brokers introduce elements from one practice into another and participate in both. Vocational teachers and students, equipped with the boundary object, can act as brokers during work placement, and may “(...) face a difficult position because they are easily seen as being at the periphery, with the risk of never fully belonging to or being acknowledged as a participant in any one practice”. (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011a, p. 140).

As mentioned, boundary objects act as a bridge between different groups, facilitating collaboration despite varying perspectives or expertise (Riis et al., 2019). However, it is vital to know the limitations of each boundary object and to acknowledge the role of, e.g. the teacher (Riis & Brodersen, 2021). Wenger (1998) explains that boundary objects are essential in bringing together different perspectives and contributing to meaning-making (p. 108). In this study, the students interacted with teachers, supervisors and peers, who all contributed with different perspectives.

Brokers are involved in different aspects of the workplace and act as translators (Tuomi-Gröhn et al., 2003). By taking the role of a broker, the vocational teacher supports students' learning related to their work placement: “If learners cannot connect what they learn in different settings, it is very likely that what they have learned in educational settings remains inert” (Bakker & Akkerman, 2019, p. 351).

2.3 Affordances

Affordance is a concept borrowed and designed from psychology (Gibson, 1977), referring to potential qualities or features that suggest its possible uses or users and how it can be interacted with. Hence, the concept of affordance is also relevant to boundary learning and the role of brokers, as it refers to the potential actions or uses that the boundary object facilitates across different social worlds or communities. Oelesen (2016) describes affordance in detail:

Affordances are not properties of an object or of an agent; they are both. They are neither primarily physical nor primarily phenomenological. Affordances arise in the interactive relationship between an agent and an object or its environment. They must be perceived by an agent. When we look at objects, we see their affordances, not their (objective) qualities (p. 38).

Affordance becomes apparent through an individual's interaction with an object or its environment, and Shien and Billett (2024) discuss the importance of identifying the affordances to be able to adjust them over time. When considering affordances in the context of boundary objects like thematic assignments, the affordances of these thematic assignments can be shaped by the practices and needs of the different groups interacting with them. Related to the use of the thematic assignments, the teachers' practice differs from the students. The practice also varies among different teachers. Boundary objects' affordances are not static; they evolve based on the interactions and practices of the communities that use them, hence, the brokers. An example of this could be how the vocational teacher decides to use the thematic assignments as a starting point for reflection at the workplace (Øgård et al., 2025), while maybe another teacher decides to discuss the students' work in general. How the teachers see an affordance of the boundary object, like a thematic assignment, affects how they work with the assignment and the students. Thus, one teacher may better support students' meaning-making of vocational concepts than others.

3 Methodological Approach

This section comprises the setting, design and data analysis of the study on the students' perceptions of thematic assignments. In detail, it will explain the context of the study, the development and structure of the thematic assignments, their use and place in the overall research design. The related content analysis of the interviews, teacher focus group, and individual interviews with students will be presented. Finally, exemplified datasets will show how the coding process led to the results discussed and presented later in the findings.

3.1 The Context and Thematic Assignments

Vocational teachers in an upper secondary school's Sales, Service and Tourism programme initiated a development project on 'vocational specialisation' supported by the funding through the Centre of Vocational Education and Training (University of Agder, 2021). The purpose was to increase student understanding and motivation through the subject of vocational specialisation. Their focus was on the integration of students' experiences from the two learning communities, school and work, through a structured use of thematic assignments.

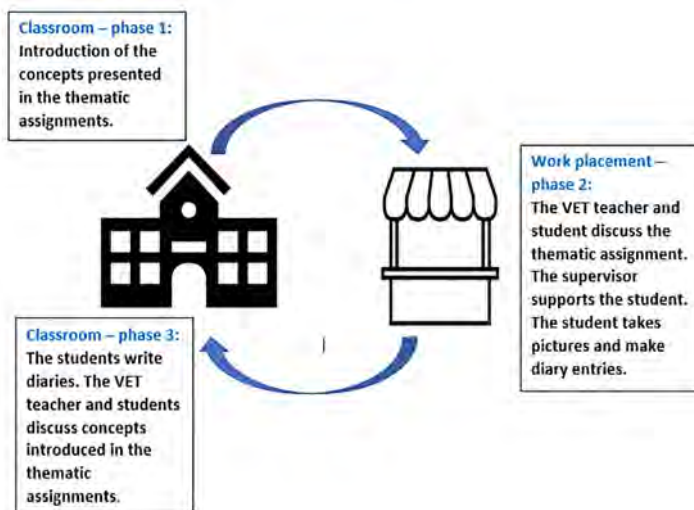
The thematic assignments consisted of vocational concepts from work life, for instance, In-store sales environment (Table 1), that the students face during their work placement through the subject of *vocational specialisation*, as well they were given through the school's subject's curriculum described as learning outcomes in the Sales, Service, and Tourism programme's and the core curriculum (Udir, 2017, 2020a)

Table 1: Example of a Thematic Assignment

| Thematic assignment year 2: In-store sales environment In-store sales environment influences customers' purchasing behaviours. Describe the in-store sales environment at your workplace and provide examples | | | | |
|--|---|--|---|---|
| Theme | Novice | Advanced Beginner | Competent | Proficient |
| In-store sales environment | Takes pictures that show examples of the in-store sales environment ... | ... and has explanatory text with the pictures ... | .. and explains with examples and pictures how "space" and "influence" together create the in-store sales environment ... | ... and explains why the in-store sales environment is important for the business with suggestions for improvements |
| Suggestions for questions students can ask the contact person at work: · "This week's task is about the in-store sales environment. What do you think is important here in this store?" · "Do you have time to show me some of the things you think are important for the in-store sales environment?" · "Why is the in-store sales environment important?" · "Can you show me a sign or poster that is placed somewhere intentionally?" · "What is the company trying to achieve by having it here?" · "Could it have been placed somewhere else?" · "How do you think the in-store sales environment can affect sales?" | | | | |

The vocational teachers established a three-phase plan for utilising thematic assignments (Figure 1). Firstly (phase 1), students were introduced to the concepts before their work placement. Secondly, during the placement (phase 2), the concepts were discussed through dialogue. In the third phase, the concepts were reviewed back at school (phase 3).

Figure 1: Three phases of the Use of Thematic Assignment



Note. From “Boundary objects as a starting point for reflective learning in vocational education and training classrooms,” by M. Øgård, 2024, *Nordic Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 14(4), p. 49. Copyright 2024 by M. Øgård.

3.2 Data Sources

To obtain an overarching and complementary understanding, data were collected through a combination of interviews, teacher focus group, and individual interviews with students. These methods provided diverse perspectives and allowed for triangulation of findings. The combination of group and individual interviews ensured that both collective-reflective insights and individual experiences were captured in the study.

3.2.1 Teacher Focus Group

Two vocational teachers, who designed and developed 32 thematic assignments, were invited to participate in a semi-structured focus group (FG) which took place at their school. The FG aimed to examine the vocational teachers' thoughts and allow them to reflect through interaction with each other (Wilkinson, 2015), to supplement the data from the personal interviews with the students. FG was chosen to enable the two teachers to listen, discuss, and comment on each other's responses to improve the quality of the data (Patton, 2002). To stimulate a discussion (Wilkinson, 2015), the FG was based on one of the thematic assignments both teachers had used in their classes (see Table 1).

While the study primarily analyses students' meaning-making, the teachers are also asked about their intentions with the thematic assignments to understand how they supported students' intended meaning-making. The teachers were asked to explain the structure and content of the thematic assignments, their goals, and their experiences

using them. The FG lasted approximately 75 minutes and was recorded and transcribed before conducting student interviews.

3.2.2 Student Interviews

Following the teacher focus group, 19 semi-structured individual student interviews were carried out (Table 2). In advance, all first- and second-year students were informed about the study and were asked by their vocational teacher if they wanted to participate. Four out of 24 students in year one agreed to participate, and 15 out of 18 students in year two. Of this group, eight preferred to participate in pairs, while seven chose to participate individually.

Table 2: Overview Interview with students

| Number of students | Year in VET | Individual/or in pairs |
|--------------------|---|------------------------|
| 4 | First-year students (11 th grade) | Individual |
| 8 | Second-year students (12 th grade) | In pairs |
| 7 | Second-year students (12 th grade) | Individual |

During the interviews at school, the students were first shown a familiar thematic assignment (see Table 1). Then they were interviewed applying a semi-structured interview guide. It was the same thematic assignment that the teachers were asked about in the focus group. The interview guide comprised some but not too many keywords such as ‘the use’, ‘work placement’, ‘at school’, ‘vocational teacher’, ‘supervisor’, and ‘understanding of concepts’. The aim was not to miss important information by using a fully structured interview guide (Dalland, 2020). Through these individual interviews, the students were able to convey their perception of the use of thematic assignments in their own words and descriptions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The individual interviews lasted approximately 10–15 minutes, were recorded and transcribed right after all the interviews took place. To ensure the participants felt comfortable, the interviews were conducted face-to-face at the students’ own schools. Ethical guidelines for research were followed, and the project was reported to SIKT – the Norwegian agency for shared services in education and research (2025).

3.3 Analysis of Data – Directed Content Analysis

This research applies a directed, qualitative content analysis (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which uses already well-known and developed theories to be able to prepare, organize, and to report findings related to a particular phenomenon (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Polit & Beck, 2018). The analysis was guided by Star and Griesemer’s definition of a boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989). In addition, Akkerman and Bakker’s (2011a) theoretical framework of boundary learning was used.

Acknowledging vocational teachers' intention to use thematic assignments to enhance student understanding, it was a coherent necessity to analyse the contributions of the thematic assignments to students' learning. The analysis process is divided into two consecutive parts A and B. First, the analysis aimed to figure out (A) how and whether the thematic assignments can function as a boundary object (Table 3). The FG interview provided specific insight into the development and the use of the thematic assignments. Their following analysis provided an overview of the variety of intentions and experiences by the teachers. Secondly, MAXQDA (VERBI software, 2022) was used to analyse the individual interview data, and the definition of a boundary object first led the coding. The key-elements of boundary objects, seen in Table 3, are based on Star and Griesemer (1989) definition, and the research by Akkerman and Bakker (2011a).

Table 3: Analysis (A): Data coding on boundary objects

| Vocational teacher | Student | Key-elements of Boundary Objects |
|---|---|--|
| "We wanted to combine the two learning contexts" "It is a way of finding practical examples of theory" "It is the dialogue; we find out the tasks together with common goals" | "It is, in a way, a merging of all subjects" | Various perspectives merging |
| "It is a way of systemising it all" "We walk around in the shop, looking for visible signs" | "When we discussed 'customer service' with a peer who is placed in a similar type of workplace, it was surprising to learn that they have different approaches" | Standardised form: can be used by different groups, yet adaptable and flexible |

| Vocational teacher | Student | Key-elements of Boundary Objects |
|--|--|---|
| "Discussing the thematic assignments with the supervisor fosters a learning dialogue" | "When we discussed 'customer service' with a peer who is placed in a similar type of workplace, it was surprising to learn that they have different approaches" | Meeting and addressing of similar or different perspectives |
| "The thematic assignments set an agenda for my visit to the workplace, both with the student and the supervisor" | "I discuss the assignment with the teacher and the supervisor" "The teacher and my supervisor discuss the theme with me when I am at work, and they help me find good answers" | |
| "Through the diaries, photographs and dialogue, I get a good understanding of their level and development" | "By using the assignment to evaluate myself, I can set goals for further development" "When I discuss the assignment with my teacher, they know how much I understand and the level of support" | |

The deductive content analysis of thematic assignments applied as boundary objects showed that if teachers and supervisors support and facilitate them, they can function as boundary objects. This result is based on the student interviews, where they discussed the different aspects of the thematic assignment. As presented in Table 3, the vocational teachers also confirmed this as intended and experienced when using the thematic assignments. After the first analysis of the key-elements (Table 3), further analysis (part B) was conducted regarding the main research question, which was to explore how the students perceive using thematic assignments. The deductive content analysis was based on research into boundary-learning presented above. During this analysis, meaningful units were identified (see example in Table 4).

Table 4: Analysis (B): Perception of the thematic assignments (examples)

| Meaningful units | Condensations | Codes | Categories |
|---|--|--|------------------------|
| "It gives us teachers better insight into the students' work placement and tasks" (teacher) | The teachers see the students' work | Insight into another world | The brokers matter |
| "It is easier to see the connection between work and school when exploring the questions" (student) | Students explore the relationship between theory and practice | Connecting and seeing the relationship between school and work | Overcoming differences |
| "We discuss the concepts in class, and listening to each other's experiences is so interesting! We compare. It is like we connect it all" student | Reflection makes the students to connect own and other's experiences | | Making the connection |
| "The assignments make me think more, and work seems more meaningful" (student) | The students experience their work more meaningful | Meaning-making | Making the connection |

3.4 Data Sources, Choices Made and Limitations

From the beginning of the study, we carefully considered the data collection methods and potential sources, ultimately deciding to rely on students, and on how and where they were willing to share their experiences. We focused on situations where they could demonstrate and explain their workplace tasks. They showed signs of proudness to show themselves in their working environment. Anticipating limited handwritten feedback in their diaries, we encouraged students to also capture photographs. This was based on our own experience as vocational educators and the collaboration with the VET teachers. While this method limited the data we had at our disposal, it represented a compromise between gaining actual insight and ensuring students felt less disturbed, thereby fostering openness and engagement in participating and sharing their ideas.

In qualitative research, the emphasis is placed on transferability rather than generalisability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings can be applicable in other contexts or with different groups. As such, it is not the responsibility of the researcher to claim generalisability, but rather to provide sufficient contextual detail so that readers can determine whether the findings are transferable to their own settings. In line with this, we have included a detailed description of the participants and the context in which the study was conducted, as recommended by Polit and

Beck (2022). This allows for a more informed assessment of the study's relevance beyond its original setting.

4 Findings

This section addresses the students' perception using thematic assignments related to the subject of vocational specialisation.

The analysis in Table 3 shows how the thematic assignments worked as boundary objects when students moved back and forth between school and work. Table 4 contains an example of the analysis. Based on these processes of analysis, three main themes were identified. These capture the essence of the data material related to the research question, condensed as: "Overcoming differences", "Making the connection", and "The brokers matter".

4.1 Overcoming Differences

The thematic assignments required students to identify various aspects of their work and to become acquainted to their workplace. Students and vocational teachers described how the concepts of the thematic assignments were introduced at school. They also described how the students were guided to explore these concepts in the workplace to expand their understanding, with the support of the questions, the supervisor, and the VET teacher. A student said, "The learning is quite similar, but also quite different. I can see more sides of the [same] concept discussed before." Another student expressed, "I am becoming increasingly curious about my workplace, and the questions help me to explore, and it is also an excuse to ask questions". This coincides with the teacher's statement about the purpose of the thematic assignments: "to explore and find out more about their workplace and tasks". This allowed students to elaborate on their existing understanding of the concept. It was also evident that the students valued the questions in the thematic assignments as support when 'interrupting' their supervisor or colleagues.

The findings also showed that the diary notes were not sufficient to provide the teacher and supervisor with insights into the students' work; hence, many students mentioned that they did not consistently maintain entries in the diary. Nevertheless, teachers stated that the thematic assignments contributed to coordinate their work. "It gives us a better insight into the students' work placement and tasks," one of the teachers claimed. A student expressed a similar meaning within the same theme: "When the teacher comes to work, they help me to see the different ways of communicating. Help me understand what they expect at my work." Both the teacher and the student seemed to recognize the benefit of this coordination and how this insight contributed to the students' understanding. The three phases (see Figure 1) seemed to be part of this coordination: a planned time, place, and agenda in which the teachers collaborated with the supervisors and students. Teachers gained insight into the students' understanding of the concepts in the thematic assignments, their work tasks, and their development, which helped them to learn how to better support their learning better and help them to overcome the differences between learning communities.

4.2 Making Connections

The questions in the thematic assignments supported the students to identify different aspects of their work placement and to connect the two contexts: "It is easier to see the connection between work and school when you explore the questions." The questions helped the students to link learning from the different learning environments. The teachers explained how "the idea is to make the students to connect everything". In addition, it appears that the vocational teachers identified different aspects of the workplace, which enabled them to make and add meaning and to support the students. Both by supporting the students when they saw them during their work placement and by having enough insight to discuss different aspects of the concept in the classroom.

During the FG, the vocational teachers discussed the important role of the teacher and supervisor to identify different aspects of the workplace to support the students in reflecting on their experiences. Several students discussed that they found it inspiring to learn about their peers' experiences on work placement: "I thought they solved it similarly in every store, but they do it differently even within the same chain." This student appreciated the sharing of experiences, which gave her an additional, alternative, and viable perspective on the concept by discussing her and other students' experiences.

The students' increased understanding became evident as they discussed the different concepts. "There were so many tasks that I used to think were unnecessary. Now I can see why we do them; it makes more sense." This student explained how the questions in the thematic assignments made her explore more in the shop and ask more questions, and in consequence that she could make meaning out of it. She linked theory to work tasks, which motivated her to complete the former perceived meaningless, 'boring' tasks at work. The student's understanding of work changed and contributed to the change in attitude.

In addition, the students were encouraged to make diary entries by uploading photographs and answering questions based on their work placement experiences. The teacher discussed how they did the walk around to support individual reflection on the concepts in the classroom. The intention was for students to see how their experiences related to their school-based learning. The students' responses varied; some appreciated working with the diaries, and others tried to avoid it.

4.3 The Broker Matters

When the thematic assignments involved the students exploring different aspects of the concepts, it was evident that this helped them and gave them a reason to ask the supervisor at work. Still, one of the students said, "I do not see the point of these thematic assignments (...) I just want to work. My teacher understands that, so I do not do much work on the thematic assignments—at least not the writing part. But I do take photographs for my diary". In this situation, the thematic assignments seemed to be a barrier to overcome rather than support, leading to frustration. Despite this, the teacher did mention how she solved this:

If the students are demotivated to work on the thematic assignments, we discuss the concepts mentioned there, without focusing on them 'solving an assignment'. We try to support and motivate them and give them a chance to show us how much they understand. Instead of asking them to write a lot, we encourage them to take photographs to illustrate.

Both teachers discussed their role in dealing with disengaged students and that meetings between the vocational teachers and students in the workplace were even more important to address them.

The VET teachers mentioned how their intentions in developing the thematic assignments were to 'train' the students in reflection and to support their reflection at work and at school, and therefore to discuss the concepts further in class (see figure 1). These three phases in the pedagogical design showed how the vocational teacher planned and prioritised time for these reflections. One of the students claimed, "It was better last year when we discussed the concept in the class. Not all teachers do that." A few students mentioned this during the interviews, and one of the vocational teachers said similarly, "It all depends on how the different teachers solve it; we only suggest how to use the thematic assignments". The findings illustrate how the affordances of thematic assignments are shaped by the individual teachers' interactions with them. The thematic assignments are not self-propelled; activating students' reflection depends on the teachers taking the opportunity to facilitate learning experiences in the classroom.

Students were also varied in their discussion of the supervisor's support of their work on the assignments. Some supervisors 'walked the talk' with the students, discussing the concepts, showing interest in the thematic assignments, supporting both the writing and finding good examples. Unfortunately, some supervisors left all the responsibility to the students. Despite this variety, other supervisors have adapted the support to the individual student; the students had different levels of understanding and independence. Some students seemed to manage the 'transition' between different actors and contexts without the support of the supervisors, taking on the role of brokers.

5 Discussion

This study explores students' perception of the use of thematic assignments and their contribution to meaning-making and understanding of vocational concepts. These findings illustrate that students perceive the thematic assignment as supportive during their work placement and emphasise the decisive role of the vocational teacher because thematic assignments are not self-running but depend on individual use. Furthermore, as highlighted by teachers and students (Table 3), thematic assignments need certain key elements, for instance merging various perspectives and be both standardised and flexible to become valuable tools and act as boundary objects.

Star and Griesemer (1989) emphasise that boundary objects should be adaptable to local needs. Teachers seem to manage this adaptation in collaboration with students and supervisors, visible through the questions asked and by the support they receive during the work placement. Students report that teachers manage most of the adapta-

tions; teachers adapt to the context and students' understanding and motivation through their visits and discussions with supervisors. This adaptation can lead to mastery and increased understanding, as seen in statements like "the teacher helps me to understand", contributing to increased motivation for work among students.

Students, supported by the vocational teachers, discuss their teachers' help to clarify what is expected of them during the work placement and how the teachers support them in working on the thematic assignments. The students intend to ask questions to the supervisor; however, many need teachers' support (Evans et al., 2010; Ferm et al., 2018; Fuller & Unwin, 2003). With the thematic assignment, the teachers have an agenda for their visit (Johannesen et al., 2022), using thematic assignments as tools to facilitate learning. When the teacher and the student collaborate through the thematic assignments, they gain insight into each other's knowledge, using them as a bridge (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011a) and gain insight into their work lives. Recognising students' discontinuity, caused by the distinct learning sites, helps teachers to better support and plan their learning.

The students need to integrate and enhance different types of knowledge (Billett, 2009, 2014; Bouw et al., 2019, 2020; Stenström & Tynjälä, 2008) to consider multiple perspectives and form a comprehensive understanding. Vocational teachers intend thematic assignments to support this integration, but students have different motivations for completing them. However, students understand why the thematic assignments are beneficial and how they support learning integration. They develop an awareness of why and how. This can be seen in how the thematic assignments, particularly their use, contribute to link the two learning communities. The importance of a deliberate educational design is emphasised by Akkerman and Bakker (2012) who state that this is necessary to reach the full potential of dual education. When the students discuss the thematic assignments, they refer to how they 'connect' what they learn at school with the work tasks. It is visible that the interaction, through the thematic assignments, contributes to the students' meaning-making (Aarkrog, 2005; Bijlsma et al., 2016; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The findings show that the affordances of the thematic assignments are managed differently. An agent needs to perceive the affordances of an object (Olesen, 2016); this emphasises the critical role of the VET teacher in supporting the students to cross boundaries and re-establish continuity. Boundary objects with *clear affordances* can help different groups understand how to use them, facilitating better communication and collaboration. Johannesen et al. (2022) found that systematic development of vocational didactics related to the integration of learning from two learning communities is feasible. If a boundary object has easily identifiable affordances, different groups can use it more effectively. However, this study indicates that a systematic approach with boundary objects that inherit recognisable affordances still depends on individual choices. The student interviews show how the vocational teachers vary in their approach to work on the thematic assignments, and how some students are confused about what is expected. Even though boundary objects should be 'adaptable to local needs' (Star & Griesemer, 1989), challenges remain in following all three phases (Figure 1). Berner (2010) discusses the importance of school-based learning; in this study, the students perceive that teachers emphasise school-based learning differently.

The students also need support to take on the role of brokers for the transition of experiences from work to school. To prevent that students become stand-alone brokers, it is beneficial for teachers and supervisors to acknowledge and use the boundary object as a link between both worlds. This collaboration can enhance students' mastery and increase their motivation (Helms Jørgensen et al., 2019). By taking the role of brokers, teachers, and supervisors can better support students in their meaning-making process. Allocating and assigning responsibilities in different contexts and utilising a boundary object, such as thematic assignments, can serve as an agreement between them (Bakker & Akkerman, 2013; Bouw et al., 2021). Riis and Brodersen (2021) argue that teachers should be aware of the limitations of a boundary object and acknowledge the role of the brokers. When the students discuss the diary, their feelings about writing vary greatly. Even though the students know the answers, the burden associated with writing is visible for some (Stoffels et al., 2022). However, the vocational teachers seem aware of these feelings and discuss how they try to adapt their guidance and expectations to each student.

6 Conclusion

In this study, the students have different pre-knowledge, skills and capabilities when attending the work placements. The work placements as well take place in distinct companies, which result in various experiences students can potentially make. Hence, there is a need for a magnitude of approaches from the teachers' or supervisors' perspective to help students detect, identify, and unfold the vocational concepts at the workplace to finally make meaning of them.

Boundary objects have an inherent dynamic nature and a kind of flexibility because they are not constructed or meant as self-instructing and self-running tools. The dynamic nature of boundary objects makes them particularly valuable in collaborative environments where multiple perspectives need to be integrated. The collaboration between the parties could be improved by increasing insight into each other's worlds and leading to the linking of learning in school and the workplace (Etzkowitz, 2012). However, the students highlight the importance of teacher support; understanding the affordances of boundary objects can enhance their effectiveness in bridging gaps between different communities, making them more valuable and accessible to all parties involved. Many are involved in the meaning-making process: peers, supervisors, and teachers. However, it is ultimately the students themselves who can find meaning in a concept.

The development of sustainable learning practices by students to 'make meaning' of their experiences is presumably under-researched. This study suggests that learning from practice is enhanced through intersubjectivity, defined as "the shared understanding of meaning by two or more persons either directly in relationship or over distance or time through language" (Cody, 1996, p. 52), facilitated by brokers. Vocational teachers, in relation to boundary objects, support meaning-making during students' work placement. However, the lack of teachers using thematic assignments to support students' learning may suggest that, for some teachers, these thematic assignments function as boundary objects in the absence of teacher involvement, mistakenly perceived as self-

fulfilling. The use of thematic assignments can contribute to the students' understanding of concepts; however, it is important to remember the value of 'immediate' learning and the contribution of pedagogically rich activities (Köhler & Goller, 2024).

The theoretical contributions of this study can provide a framework for future research in boundary learning VET. Future research could explore the roles of students and companies, as well as the co-determination of the curriculum in the school-based part of VET. Additionally, it would be valuable to examine how changes in societal competence needs, influence boundary learning in relation to students' work-life experiences on a broader scale.

The analysis was conducted just within one specific vocational education context, the sales and service programme, and on a process (3 phases; Figure 1.) over all participants to show change or growth and meaning making. A rather specific analysis and deeper insight can be gained if the investigation would follow the individual student and their individual concept development and meaning-making process to enhance the evidence for the usefulness of using the thematic assignment as boundary object. This as well can support even stronger the claim that the boundary objects need to be applied didactically adaptive regarding the students' prerequisites and needs. Hence, future research should aim on the one hand to include more samples across various vocational programmes and, on the other hand to give evidence by following individual students over time to strengthen the robustness and applicability of the results. Nevertheless, it contributes to the question of 'how' to facilitate boundary learning through the use of boundary objects and enriches the discussion by raising the students' perspectives. It shows the potential of specific boundary objects to support students' meaning-making and how teachers' individual choices influence learning opportunities and outcomes.

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