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Higher Level Vocational Education: The Route to High Skills and Productivity as well as Greater Equity? An International Comparative Analysis

Ann-Marie Bathmaker*

University of Birmingham a.m.bathmaker@bham.ac.uk

Lukas Graf

Hertie School of Governance, graf@hertie-school.org

Kevin Orr

University of Huddersfield, k.orr@hud.ac.uk

Justin Powell

University of Luxembourg, justin.powell@uni.lu

Sue Webb

Monash University, susan.webb@monash.edu

Leesa Wheelahan

University of Toronto, leesa.wheelahan@utoronto.ca

Abstract

This international comparative analysis of higher level vocational education examines developments across five countries: England, Germany, Australia, Canada, and the USA. The authors consider how current developments address two key policy concerns: an emphasis on high skills as a means of achieving economic competitiveness and raising productivity; and the promise of increasing access for students hitherto excluded from higher education. We address these questions in relation to specific country contexts, in order to highlight similarities and differences in developments within the European arena and in a wider global context. We locate our analyses in an understanding of the different political and socio-economic conditions within different countries, which render particular reforms and innovations both possible and realizable in one context, but almost unthinkable in another. We argue for the need to recognize and embrace diversity in provision, while using comparison across countries as a means of challenging taken-for-granted assumptions of how things are and what is possible within individual country contexts. Such comparative analysis is a prerequisite for answering questions of policy transfer and learning from others.

* Corresponding author

Keywords

higher vocational education, equity, higher level skills, comparison

1 Introduction

New, distinctive forms of higher vocational education are growing rapidly across a range of countries, as demonstrated in the 2014 OECD Review *Skills Beyond School*. They respond to two key policy concerns: an emphasis on high skills as a means to achieve economic competitiveness and raise productivity, and the promise of open access for students hitherto excluded from higher education. In specific country contexts, both within the European arena and in a wider global context, there are both similarities and differences in developments, for different political and socio-economic conditions within countries render particular reforms and innovations both possible and realizable in one context, but almost unthinkable in another. Undertaking an international comparative analysis of current reforms provides the opportunity for policy learning through a critical understanding of differently evolving provision of higher vocational education, that refuses assumptions that policy borrowing from apparently successful countries offers a straightforward model for others to adopt. In the contributions to this paper, we emphasise the impossibility of imposing uniformity across European countries and argue that there is a need to recognize and embrace diversity while using comparison across countries as a means of challenging taken-for-granted assumptions of how things are and what is possible within individual country contexts.

The paper brings together the work of researchers who have undertaken research in five different countries: England, Germany, Australia, Canada and the USA. This work is brought together through a focus on the following key questions:

- What (if anything) is distinctive about evolving forms of higher vocational education?
- How are these forms of provision positioned in relation to existing university HE?
- How do questions of distinction and status play out in different country contexts?
- Whose interests are served by higher vocational education?
- What are the implications for equity and inequality in new and evolving forms of provision?
- What can be learned in the European arena from this international comparison of higher vocational education?

The next four sub-sections offer a summary of key arguments put forward in the different contributions to the symposium.

2 Developments in higher level vocational education in different country contexts

2.1 ‘Keeping them in their place’? The limited growth of applied degrees in colleges in liberal market economies

Applied degrees in colleges emerged as a distinct form of provision in many Anglophone countries around the turn of the 21st century. This includes foundation degrees and vocational degrees in England, applied baccalaureates in Canada and the United States, and vocational degrees in Australia. There are three rationales put forward for this provision. Firstly, it can expand access to higher education (HE) for disadvantaged students; secondly, it can result in HE aligned with the needs of the workplace; and, thirdly, it is cheaper for governments and individuals compared to university provision (Wheelahan, 2016). Those of us researching the emergence of this provision thought that it had the potential to grow and be a key mechanism to

underpin universal systems of higher education (Bathmaker et al., 2008; Skolnik, 2012; Wheelahan et al., 2009). However, instead, growth has occurred through expansion of enrolments in universities. Two research projects led by Wheelahan in Australia (Wheelahan et al., 2012, Wheelahan et al., 2009) and one project in Ontario, Canada (Wheelahan et al., 2017), as well as research by other colleagues in Australia (Webb et al. 2017), Canada and the US (Skolnik, 2012), and the UK (Bathmaker, 2016) have led to theoretical reflections on what have been the limitations on the growth of college HE. Two key limitations can be identified: first, government ambivalence and intermittent aspirations for differentiation; and second, government marketisation policies that compel colleges to compete with universities in a stratified and hierarchical market structured by positional goods. Trow's (1974) framework of elite, mass and universal HE and Marginson's (2016) framework of high participation systems provide useful tools to explore the emergence of universal HE systems. These frameworks are complemented by neo-institutional theory to explore pressures towards isomorphism and credentialism in these countries (Scott 2014), along with Clark's (1983) 'triangle of coordination' which allow an exploration of the roles of the state, the market and academic coordination of HE. What is found, is that the hierarchical nature of HE systems keeps college-based HE in its place as a lower status route for disadvantaged students. In universal systems, starting positions are unequal and different forms of participation in HE confer different levels of social and economic advantage. HE systems in Anglophone liberal market economies are structured as a positional good in a partly zero-sum game. Government structured HE markets elicit pressures towards isomorphism and credentialism with college degrees compared to university degrees and are found wanting, while government accreditation requirements contribute to imposing 'university models' of the degree on colleges.

2.2 A distinct and separate future or a distinctive part of HE provision: the future of college-based higher education in England

While there is no coherent vocational tertiary sector (Wolf, 2016) in England, unlike many European counterparts, England's further education (FE) colleges are not only the place where most initial vocational education and training occurs, but also a location for Higher Education (HE) courses, mostly vocational (degrees in childcare, diplomas in engineering), which have been provided for over a century (Bailey & Unwin, 2014). The proportion of college-based HE (CBHE) within overall HE in England has remained stable at close to 10% for decades (Avis & Orr, 2016), whether CBHE has been actively promoted by government or not. Despite this, CBHE in England is in a contradictory position. Colleges claim that their courses are authentic HE, comparable to those offered in universities (Lea & Simmons, 2012), while at the same time claiming their courses are distinctive from university provision because CBHE widens participation to HE for local people and provides high-skilled workers for the local economy (Widdowson, 2017). These claims, moreover, are often repeated by national policymakers (Parry, 2016). This is an important moment to review such claims, with new policy proposals encouraging on the one hand, a key role for colleges in promoting a highly competitive market in the HE arena (DBIS, 2016), whilst alternative policy proposals are intent on creating a binary divide between academic and vocational education pathways (DBIS & DfE, 2016).

Marginson's (2016, 413) concept of "vertical 'stretching' of stratification in competitive [high participation systems of HE]" provides a basis for analysing current statistics, policy and research, and considering the implications for the future. The available evidence indicates that students on CBHE courses are more likely to be mature, part-time and to live in areas that have lower participation in HE than students on university courses (ETF, 2016, 22-23), suggesting a distinctive widening participation role. There is, however, much less evidence of the connection between CBHE and the local economy, despite the vocational focus of most of these courses. Nevertheless, that vocational CBHE courses have persisted for so long, suggests that they have

an important role to play as part of a wider tertiary education system, but this role may not be one that centres on a distinctive vocational and labour-market oriented focus.

2.3 What does Higher Vocational Education bring to HE that is distinctive in Australia?

In Australia, demand-led growth of higher vocational education in non-university college providers of vocational education (VET) has allowed non-university college providers to enter the higher education system and offer Bachelor degrees normally associated with universities (Kemp and Norton 2014). As the growth of vocational institutions providing higher education is a major international development in the field of higher education (HE) (Trow, 2006) answering questions about the effects of this growth on social mobility through the case of Australia has increasing wider relevance to the growing European field of scholarship on college based higher education (Kuhlee & Laczik, 2015) because policy in Australia frequently refers to and draws on European systems. Bourdieu (1977/1990) and Bernstein (1990) have each developed understandings of education as fields or sites of cultural and structural mechanisms that mediate the maintenance and reproduction of social inequality, which inform the research that has been conducted in Australia in a current project of HE in vocational institutions (Wheehahan et al., 2016).

Thematic and critical discourse analysis is used to uncover the messages associated with the marketing of undergraduate degrees and the presentation of teaching, curriculum and assessment to students in the three largest publicly owned non-university providers. Data analysed from three case studies include: semi-structured interviews with senior college staff, curriculum leaders and marketing managers; media/marketing materials, institutional strategy and curriculum documents and government-collected enrolments data. The analysis explores how providers position themselves to support social mobility and who participates on their programs and whether the position these providers play is different from Anglophone or German-speaking country models (Graf, 2013; Powell et al., 2012). The analysis shows tensions and ambiguities in institutional missions and effects. New government owned non-university providers of Bachelor degrees present mixed messages by claiming to provide a distinctive form of applied higher technical knowledge and a mission to redress system inequalities for those from low-income families without experience of higher education. Participation data reveal a different account; the majority of students recruited are from a wider range of social groups, including international students and those from more affluent backgrounds trying to maintain their social advantages. This analysis of how vocational institutions are seeking to be distinctive providers in higher education provides a further significant contribution to understanding whether the system is becoming increasingly vertically stratified and stretched between providers in different global contexts (Marginson, 2016; Wheelahan 2016).

2.4 Work-based Higher Education in Germany at the nexus of employer interests and university standards

In contrast to the market-oriented higher-education systems in the sections above, Continental European states have maintained their considerable investments in a range of opportunities in vocational and higher education (Powell et al., 2012). However, tensions have deepened over who should pay for rising costs and who can access learning opportunities in higher (vocational) education, exacerbated in an era of increasing status competition via educational attainment, as education has become the key positional good for labour market integration as well as status attainment and reproduction.

In the face of such challenges, which alternatives exist to combine accessibility and support and secure transitions from education and training into employment? One prominent possibility, pioneered in Germany in the 1970s, are “dual-study” programs. These hybrid programs fully integrate phases of higher education study and paid work in firms; students are

simultaneously trainees, often in larger firms with possibilities for internal advancement (Graf, 2016). In the short term, firms receive inexpensive labour, they also benefit from personnel trained in the relevant organizational and technological context. Yet, firms invest not only in recruiting and training motivated future full-fledged employees. They also collaborate with higher education institutions to develop specific curricula and meet university academic standards. Employers and educators cooperate to provide coursework in “dual”-learning settings: on campus and in the workplace to shape a labour force oriented toward current challenges and opportunities in specific sectors, such as engineering and economics or business. Dual-study programs manifest ways in which employer interests and investments reshape advanced skill formation, producing new skills.

The example of contemporary developments in Germany provides an innovative approach to simultaneously strengthen education and the economy (Graf et al., 2017). Co-developed and co-financed by employers, these programs have many advantages. Benefits include encouraging employers to at least partially fund their own skill supply; the burden of financing higher education is shared by the state and firms.

Who gains access to this innovative form of vocationally-oriented higher education, especially within stratified education systems? Grounded in neo-institutional analysis and on the basis of expert interviews and document analysis, the relationship between higher (vocational and professional) education and firms in Germany has been subjected to detailed analysis, focusing on the rapid expansion of dual-study programs, and emphasizing the importance of employer interests and university standards and distributional conflicts in the politics of skill investment. The analysis provides an opportunity to present lessons that other countries might learn from these hybrid programs that have developed in Germany over the past several decades.

3 Discussion and concluding points

Across the different country contexts discussed above, current policies and practices contain the traces of the historical differences in the structures of each system. The ways in which Marginson’s (2016) notion of the vertical stretching of higher education systems plays out across these different national spaces depends in part on their historical antecedents. The analysis of different systems offered here indicates clear differences between the Anglophone liberal market economies and the more organised markets of the DACH models (Germany, Austria, Switzerland) (see for example Verdier, 2017). However, this is not to suggest that current developments involve a simple binary. The developments in Germany illustrate the increasing pressures of competitive marketisation whilst still engaging employers in shaping advanced skill formation. In England there is the persistence of a wider educational and widening participation role for VET in spite of government policy pressures on the sector to respond more to vocational needs, and in Australia and Canada regulatory changes have enabled market expansion, but there are tensions with other policies, such as student funding, which have privileged university expansion. All these have had unintended consequences on who has taken up the new opportunities in higher vocational or college-based higher education. Yet, across all countries discussed here, there are elements of increased liberal marketisation, as well as evidence of government shaping markets with a significant role for employers, albeit often in a tertiary system that retains distinctions between vocational and academic pathways.

In relation to how providers present and articulate the value of higher vocational education in contexts of increased credentialism, claims to distinction often appear as chimeras, with idealised rather than realised claims to distinctiveness in terms of new and different students, different relationships with industry compared with universities, and different forms of learning. What is also evident from the work presented here, is that this is an emerging field for research and international comparison and more is needed. In particular, theoretically driven research

that explores the trajectories of different systems, by conceptualising the opportunities for expansion of higher vocational education within understandings of the practices of different providers, employers, governments and students, would provide insights that can inform the development of future policy and practice.

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Biographical notes

Ann-Marie Bathmaker is a Professor of Vocational and Higher Education, University of Birmingham, UK, and visiting Professor, University of the Free State, South Africa. She is editor of the *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*. Her research focuses on equity and inequalities in vocational and higher education. Recent research includes: HE, social mobility and social class (Paired Peers project), South African rural and township youth participation in HE (Miratho project), governance in UK further education, young people’s experience of University Technical Colleges in England, and constructions of knowledge in English general vocational qualifications. She was a specialist advisor to the House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility School to Work (2015-2016).

Lukas Graf is an Assistant Professor of Educational Governance at the Hertie School of Governance. At the nexus of sociology, political economy, and educational science, his research combines comparative and historical institutional and organisational approaches to analyse current questions of educational governance and labour markets, as well as of social inequality, in Europe and beyond. His book *The Hybridization of Vocational Training and Higher Education in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland* (Budrich UniPress 2013) received the Best Dissertation Award from the Comparative and International Education Society (Higher Education Section) and the Ulrich-Teichler-Prize of the German Society for Research on Higher Education (GfHf).

Kevin Orr is a Professor of Work and Learning at the University of Huddersfield, UK. He researches vocational education and training, including college-based higher education, and he is currently leading a three-year project on vocational pedagogy in Further Education colleges in England, funded by the Gatsby Foundation. He is a member of the Academy of Finland's Education Panel and an advisor to the EU-funded project Integrating Cultural Diversity in Higher Education (HE4U2). He is co-editor of *Studies in the Education of Adults* and associate editor of the *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*.

Justin J.W. Powell is a Professor of Sociology of Education in the Institute of Education & Society at the University of Luxembourg. His comparative institutional analyses of education systems chart persistence and change in special and inclusive education, vocational training and higher education, and science and research policy. Recent books include the co-edited volume *The Century of Science: The Global Triumph of the Research University* (Bingley: Emerald, 2017) and the co-authored volume *European Educational Research (Re)Constructed: Institutional Change in Germany, the United Kingdom, Norway, and the European Union* (Oxford: Symposium Books, 2018).

Sue Webb is a Professor of Education at Monash University, Australia and was previously Professor of Continuing Education at the University of Sheffield, UK. She has researched the policy effects and practices related to access and participation of students from under-represented groups in the field of further and higher education, including the experiences of migrants and refugees. Currently, she leads a project funded by the Australian Research Council Discovery Project DP170101885 2017-2020 entitled - Vocational institutions, undergraduate degrees: distinction or inequality? She is also Co-Editor of the *International Journal of Lifelong Education*.

Leesa Wheelahan is a Professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto where she holds the William G. Davis Chair in Community College Leadership. Her research focuses on social justice and educational and occupational pathways, and the role of theoretical knowledge in vocational education and training. She leads the Pathways to Education and Work research group at OISE, and an associate editor of the *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*. She is currently leading several research projects which are examining how the capabilities approach can be used to support social justice in VET.