International Journal of Educational Development 32 (2012) 643–653

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

International Journal of Educational Development

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedudev

Reimagining the purpose of VET – Expanding the capability to aspire in South African Further Education and Training students

Lesley Powell *

University of Nottingham, Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, Nottingham NG8 1BB, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Vocational education and training
Capability approach
Capabilities approach
Further Education and Training
South Africa
Capability to aspire

ABSTRACT

This paper applies the capabilities approach to the broader debate of the role of vocational education and training (VET) in poverty alleviation. The capabilities approach provides an approach for conceptualising and evaluating VET which differs in orientation from dominant productivist conceptions. It does so by shifting the focus from economic development to human development. By placing the well-being of VET students at the centre of our concern it shifts the lens from income generation and with it employability to a lens on capability expansion which includes but is not limited to the capability to work. The paper is based on interviews with 20 South African Further Education and Training (FET) college students. The central argument is that VET has an important role to play in poverty alleviation, but only if located in a multi-dimensional view of poverty which understands poverty as capability deprivation across multiple human functionings. In this broader notion of poverty, the role that VET plays includes training for employability, but also includes the expansion of other important capabilities such as, and in the voice of a FET student interviewed in this study, 'the ability to dream', or in the language of the capabilities approach, the capability to aspire.

1. Introduction

In an essay providing hints for Vocational Education planners published in this journal in 1991, Psacharopoulos argues against vocational education and training (VET) as a viable policy option for social and economic development in Africa (Psacharopoulos, 1991). Supporting the argument made almost three decades earlier by Foster (1965a,b), he provides the key reason for this as being the divide that exists between the aspirations of policy makers for increased participation in VET and the aspirations of young people for academic rather than vocational education (Psacharopoulos, 1991; Foster, 1965a,b). The argument being that young people avoid VET in favour of an academic education, as they regard VET as preparing them for unemployment or for work that is repetitive, boring and underpaid (Psacharopoulos, 1991; Oketch, 2007).

Sociological concerns regarding student aspirations together with concerns about the rates of return of investments in VET (Psacharopoulos, 1985) resulted in a dilemma in Africa over whether to invest in VET or in general education (Oketch, 2007). The outcome was a decline in donor and political commitment to VET. Basic and primary education rather than vocational education were seen as the route to poverty reduction and economic growth, culminating in the non-inclusion of VET in the Millennium Development Goals which emphasised Education For All (EFA) through basic education (King, 2009a,b; Palmer, 2007).

Notwithstanding the strong views of Psacharopoulos (1991) and the decline in policy and donor support for VET over the past half century, the last decade has seen VET moving to the centre of policies that aim to solve unemployment and reduce poverty in Africa (see McGrath, 2012). This new wave, as it has begun to be viewed, of interest and optimism in VET in Africa is underpinned by a shared paradigm. Most notable in this shared paradigm is the assumption that education and training holds the key to economic competitiveness and the answer to addressing social inequities and increasing levels of unemployment, particularly youth unemployment. In these policy frameworks VET has a dual role to play. On the one hand, it is to contribute to economic development by providing the skills required to compete in challenging and changing global and national economic contexts. Simultaneously, and on the other hand, it is to contribute to poverty alleviation and social justice by widening participation in education and training targeted at employability and most particularly at the employability of those communities most affected by unemployment and poverty.

Recent policy aspirations have renewed hopes in VET to contribute to social and economic development in Africa (McGrath, 2011). The key question is whether VET and the policy frameworks within which it is constituted can rise to the challenge. According

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 788 902 1893.
E-mail address: lesleyjpowell@gmail.com.

0738-0593/$ – see front matter © 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.ijedudev.2012.01.008

to McGrath (2011), to do so must include addressing concerns raised about VET in Africa over the past half century. This is particularly so as many of these new policies stipulate goals that appear to "mirror some of the debates of the late 1960s" through their emphasis on VET as an instrument for addressing unemployment and skills shortages in the public and private sectors (McGrath, 2011, p. 38). The renewed interest in vocational education has prompted increased debate and questioning about the role that VET should and can play in developing contexts and the policy frameworks that best enable success. Cutting across these debates are the questions asked by Palmer in 2007, "Training for what?" and "what kind of training for whom?" (Palmer, 2007, p. 405) and more recently by King (2011), "now that TVET has the floor – what is the storyline?". There has been serious grappling with these questions over the past few years (see Winch, 2000; Lewis, 2009) and increasingly so as we progress towards the *EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2012* and the Third International Congress on TVET which is to be held in Shanghai in 2012.

A key contribution is made by McGrath (2011) who highlights the contradiction that exists between the "current policy trajectory and the research orthodoxy" (2011, p. 35). Drawing on literatures about VET in Africa, he demonstrates that the dominant conception is that VET is "neither an efficient nor an effective policy response to Africa's educational development challenges" (McGrath, 2011, p. 35). He warns that the new wave of optimism which sees VET as a solution to Africa's development challenges is certain to suffer if the concerns raised over the past half century are not adequately dealt with (McGrath, 2011). His central argument is that the success of this new wave is dependent on a reconceptualisation of the role and purpose of VET – there is, as he states, a need to "*reimagine the purpose*" of vocational education in Africa (McGrath, 2011, p. 36). McGrath (2012) takes the argument further by suggesting that this 'reimag[ing]' needs to take place within revised developmental paradigms which, and to various degrees, oppose and supersede the 'productivist' frameworks in which VET is currently located. The focus of these 'productivist' frameworks is the development of human capital for economic advancement and employability as a solution for unemployment (McGrath, 2011).

It is here, in this 'reimagin[ing of] the purpose' of VET, that this paper is located. Although the empirical focus is the South African context, specifically the South African public Further Education and Training (FET) colleges, the paper is situated within the broader debate on the role that VET plays and can play in developing contexts and specifically, the role that VET plays in poverty alleviation. The paper brings two aspects to the debate. First is the application of the capabilities approach.[1] Embodied in the Human Development Index, the capabilities approach allows for a paradigm shift from a focus on economic growth and national income to a focus on human well-being (Tikly and Barrett, 2011). While neither Amartya Sen nor Martha Nussbaum seek to link the capabilities approach directly to educational processes and outcomes an emerging body of literature has developed which applies the capabilities approach to the theorising of schooling and higher education. This paper draws from this body of literature and provides an exploratory attempt at applying the framework and concepts of the capabilities approach to the study of VET.

The second, and in line with the emphasis on agency in the capabilities approach, is that it brings to the discussion the voice and perspectives of students. Much of the debate about the role and location of VET in Africa has been between academics, donors and policy makers with learners and the perspective of learners largely excluded. When student perspectives have been included it has generally been through the findings of quantitative studies such as that undertaken by Foster (1965a,b) in his study of learner aspirations in Ghana.

This is similarly so in South Africa. An exception is the technical college situational analyses undertaken in the period 1998–2004 which included in the institutional studies a small number of group interviews with students. The student interviews were only marginally reported in the final reports and then only to highlight concerns or complaints with the then technical colleges (Fisher et al., 1998, 1999; Jaff, 2000a,b,c,d). Another exception is the letters received by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) during a study surveying student destinations (Cosser et al., 2003). A few students took it upon themselves to include in their returned survey a letter providing further explanation of their experience of FET (then technical colleges). "I am writing you this letter", writes one of these students, "because I feel there's a few things you need to know! (That I would like to share with you)" (Cosser, 2003, p. 102). And another, "please help us to be heard because we are just whispering and searching in the dark" (Cosser, 2003, p. 90). The letters submitted by these students were not a designed aspect of the project, but an unintended consequence thereof. Nonetheless, they express poignantly the deep desire expressed by the learners 'to be heard' which the HSRC acknowledged in a chapter of the book devoted to the study. Another and more recent exception is the City and Guilds (2011) study which explores the attitudes of young people in South Africa, the Netherlands and England towards VET.

There is, however, and as argued by Cook-Sather (2002), "something fundamentally amiss about building and rebuilding an entire system without consulting at any point those it is ostensibly designed to serve" (2002, p. 3).

The central question of the paper relates to the role that VET plays and can play in the lives of students from low socio-economic communities. It does so by drawing on the perspective of a sample of students with the aim of determining the benefit of FET (VET) for their lives.

It is necessary at the outset to signal a caveat. The paper draws from the first of two phases of my doctoral study in which the emphasis is on determining the capabilities that students value for their lives and the extent to which FET has either enabled the expansion or the contraction of these capabilities. The first phase focussed on the reasons for enrolling at the college and the college experience. The second phase is focussed on tracking the students, over 75% of whom were scheduled to have completed their final examination. In keeping with much of the education capabilities tradition, this paper is based on in-depth interviews undertaken with a relatively small sample of 20 students located at one South African FET college. In light of this, it should be noted that while the paper provides an argument for re-conceptualising the role of VET in poverty alleviation, it does not provide and nor does it aim to provide a plan for practice or policy. Rather, and within the context of this new wave of optimism and interest in VET in Africa, it aims to broaden the debate and open discussion in this quest to 'reimagine the purpose' of VET.

Before discussing the role that VET can play in poverty alleviation, we move to the context of this study: South African FET colleges and the socio-economic context within which they are located.

1.1. The South African FET colleges

South Africa's skills development approach is well discussed by Akojee et al. (2007), Allais (2003), Kraak (2007), Lewis (2009), McGrath et al. (2004), McGrath and Akoojee (2007, 2009) and many others. So too is the development and the role of the South

[1] The capabilities approach is also called the human development approach and the capability approach. In line with Nussbaum (2011), the term capabilities is used in this paper to denote the multidimensional capabilities required to live a flourishing life.