Technical and vocational skills and post-2015: Avoiding another vague skills goal?

Robert Palmer

Independent Education Advisor, 59 Exeter Gardens, Stamford, Lincolnshire PE9 2RN, UK

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ABSTRACT

Education appears to be receiving quite a lot of attention in post-2015 discussions, but how this will translate into goals and targets remains to be seen. Meanwhile, despite increased global recognition and awareness of the importance of technical and vocational skills development (TVSD) – as evidenced in the bumper year of reports on TVSD in 2012, TVSD does not appear to be getting as much focus in post-2015 discussions. It is known that the EFA 'skills' goal never got any traction: no one could even agree on what 'life-skills' meant, let alone how it should be measured or tracked. Are we in danger of a re-run? What's the alternative? How will TVSD feature in the post-MDG framework and the post-EFA framework, if at all? This paper will take a look at some lessons from history and then explore the current state of affairs to analyse the latest post-2015 suggestions and the way they cover TVSD.

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1. Introduction[1]

Education appears to be receiving quite a lot of attention in post-2015 discussions (Bergh and Couturier, 2013), but how this will translate into implementable goals and targets is now the key issue. There have been a wide range of official and unofficial reports, consultations, workshops and panels convened around education post-2015, especially since the start of 2012 (see King and Palmer, 2013a,b, 2012a for a round up). Meanwhile, despite increased global recognition and awareness of the importance of technical and vocational skills development (TVSD)[2] – as evidenced in the bumper year of reports on TVSD in 2012 (NORRAG, 2013) and by increased global interest in TVSD as a result of the global employment crisis, TVSD does not appear to be getting as *much* attention as general education in post-2015 discussions (Palmer, 2013a,b).

However, all of the key institutional proposals related to education post-2015 have included some kind of (vocational) skills to work target or else identified this as a priority concern to be addressed (King and Palmer, 2013b); these include the UN High Level Panel Report in May 2013 (HLP, 2013), the UN Sustainable

Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Report in October[3] 2013 (SDSN, 2013), the UN Global Compact Report in July 2013 (UN Global Compact, 2013) and the UN Secretary-General's Report of September 2013 (UN, 2013). The most common justification for there needing to be a post-2015 target on skills for work was that better work skills are needed as one part of countries' approach to tackle rising (youth) unemployment rates (King and Palmer, 2013b). However, while this interest has been clearly flagged in target proposals, it is still far from certain that such a TVSD target will make it into the final post-2015 goal framework and, if it does, the issue of how 'skills' will appear is anything but clear.

We know that the way that 'skills' appeared in the Education for All (EFA) Dakar Goals of 2000 was unhelpful. The 'life skills' terminology used was so vague that it got no traction and TVSD was seemingly forgotten; how do we avoid another vague skills goal? The TVSD community now has another chance to come up with something that will help push the global TVSD agenda in the right direction for the next 15 years. Many of course are sceptical about the whole post-2015 education goal-setting exercise in general (IJED, 2005), while others highlight 'the immense difficulty' in crafting wording around a skills goal (McGrath, 2013a). However, the UN post-2015 process towards 2015 goal setting is going on regardless, with member-state mechanisms are in place, such as the intergovernmental Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will help define a

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[3] The first draft was made public in June 2013.

new set of post-2015 development goals. In this regard, it would appear sensible to contribute to this (albeit politicised) goal-setting process, rather than to sit on the side-lines and let it take shape anyway. No-one in the TVSD community can want to have another vague goal or target that relates to their sector; we have seen that once a 'sacred text' (King, 2011) is developed, it can become harder for some constituencies to buy into. The TVSD community must really 'take the bull by the horns' (Palmer, 2013a) and get more involved in post-2015 discussions.

This paper is one attempt to do this. First, it will look at the skills goal suggestions made in 1990 and 2000 at Jomtien and Dakar, respectively, and see what we can learn from them. Second, it will look at TVSD in the current post-2015 debates, and explore the current goal and target suggestions.

The paper will not cover the key challenges regarding the difficulty of measuring and monitoring TVSD. A lot has already been written on this, and on the various recent uses of the term 'skills', including by this author (e.g. see, King and Palmer, 2008, 2010a,b, 2012b; Palmer, 2009).[4]

The current paper will try to draw on three red threads of discussion throughout, focusing on technical and vocational skills.

- *The meaning.* What concept and definition of 'skills' are used? (How) are technical and vocational skills included? How does this affect the development of skills goals? Does the concept/definition of skills used make it hard for some agencies and governments to relate to?
- *The timing.* What is the extent of policy and political interest in skills (and which 'skills')? Who is involved in the skills goal lobbying and setting; and who is not?
- *The evidence.* What is the information and data on skills available to the goal craft smiths? What evidence is (will be) used/misused/unused? What rationale/evidence used to justify TVSD goal/target?

2. "Skills" from Jomtien to Dakar

This section of the paper will review the skills goal suggestions made in 1990 and 2000 at Jomtien and Dakar, respectively, and look at the meaning of 'skills' used, the policy timing of each conference, and the evidence available at the time.

2.1. The construction of EFA Goal 5 – Jomtien, 1990

2.1.1. The meaning of 'skills' at Jomtien
One of the six original EFA dimensions set in Jomtien in 1990 referred to the:

> Expansion of provisions of basic education and training in other essential skills required by youth and adults, with programme effectiveness assessed in terms of behavioural changes and impacts on health, employment and productivity (WCEFA, 1990a: 53)[5]

The wording of the Jomtien EFA skills target made it quite clear that there were at least three different domains of 'skill' being referred to; skills for 'behavioural change', skills to impact on health, and skills for employment and productivity.

This suggested target of course, was only part of the 'expanded vision' of basic Education for All (WCEFA, 1990a).[6] This term covered all the other suggested targets including expansion of

early childhood care and development (with an equity focus), universal access to and completion of primary education ('or whatever higher level of education is considered "basic"' (WCEFA, 1990a: 53)), improvement in learning outcomes, and reduction in adult illiteracy rates.

'Skills' in Jomtien not only referred to 'literacy, numeracy and related cognitive skills' (WCEFA, 1990a: 24), but also to 'problem-solving skills', 'learn how to learn' skills (p. 35) and, as we just noted, skills for behavioural change, for health and for employment and productivity. For those interested in technical and vocational skills, it is noteworthy that the word 'vocational' did not appear once in the final report from Jomtien (WCEFA, 1990a).

In addition to there being a separate suggested target on improving school-based learning outcomes, it is also clear in the wording of the Jomtien EFA skills target that there was a lot of focus on learning outcomes from a range of skills. However, given the wide domain of skill providers and types – from formal, nonformal, informal provision; from public and private providers; from kindergartens, schools, training centres, universities and work-places – it would soon become apparent that this focus on learning outcomes and assessments would be 'a good deal easier to write than to enact' (NORRAG, 1990b: 44).

2.1.2. The timing of Jomtien: actors and policy interest in skills
Of course, the 1990 WCEFA at Jomtien did not take place in a policy vacuum. It existed in a time of specific dominant views about education and development, and of the primacy of primary education.

The agency (UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, UNDP) priorities at the time of Jomtien were very much towards primary education and literacy. In contrast, as NORRAG NEWS noted in 1990:

> in general the area of other skills received little concentrated attention at Jomtien. This was perhaps understandable given the enormity of the challenge involved in primary schooling and literacy. But it did contribute perhaps to a tendency within the Conference not to pay attention to the work and employment relations of schooling or literacy for all (NORRAG, 1990b: 15)

The Psacharopolous rate of return studies (for example Psacharopoulos, 1985) – that showed the highest private returns accruing to those with primary education – were finding their way to the right eyes and ears, and technical and vocational skills had lost agency favour following the studies on diversified secondary education in the 1980s (see King and Palmer, 2006). Even though in the years leading up to Jomtien, the World Bank had been preparing its own policy paper on TVET (Middleton et al., 1991), the primary education lobbyists were apparently so strong at Jomtien that there was no real shift in course; the primary school boat had sailed.

The "experts" that attended Jomtien, therefore were very much focussed on primary education and literacy. There were a couple of people from the ILO participating in 'roundtables' at Jomtein, including the director of training and the chief of the training policies branch (WCEFA, 1990a), but clearly they did not get much of a chance to speak (or were not listened to).

2.1.3. The skills evidence at Jomtien
We have noted above the high aspirations of the Jomtien suggested targets related to monitoring and assessing learning outcomes (for literacy skills, numeracy skills, cognitive skills, skills for behavioural change, skills for health and skills for employment and productivity); and we commented that this was a lot easier said than done. The main reason for this was quite simple; the skills data and metrics available then hardly allowed analysis to monitor or assess anything. We know full well that even over

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[4] Readers wanting more background on these key conceptual, measurement and monitoring challenges are encouraged to review these papers.

[5] For a review of how this wording came about through the various earlier drafts (WCEFA, 1989a,b, 1990b), see (King, 1990; NORRAG, 1990a, 1990b).

[6] WCEFA, *Framework for Action*, 1990.