

Re-conceptualising VET: Responses to Covid-19

Abstract:

The paper addresses the impact of Covid-19 on vocational education and training, seeking to discern the outline of possible directions for its future development within the debates about VET responses to the pandemic. The discussion is set in its socio-economic context, considering debates that engage with the social relations of care and neo-liberalism. The paper analyses discourses that have developed around VET across the world during the pandemic, illustrating both possible continuities and ruptures that may emerge in this field, as the health crisis becomes overshadowed in public policy by the prioritisation of economic recovery and social restoration. The paper concludes that, alongside the possibility of a narrowing of VET to its most prosaic aims and practices, the health crisis could also lead to a re-conceptualisation that develops its radical and emancipatory possibilities in both the global south and north.

Key words

Neo-liberalism, pandemic, social relations of care, vocational education and training, global South, Global North

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted vocational education and training (VET) around the world through the effect of lockdown measures on economic activity and schooling. The planned resumption of full-scale production and educational practice has led policymakers in some countries to suggest an enhanced role for VET, characteristic of earlier social and economic emergencies. However, this leaves unanswered the question of what forms VET might take in a post-pandemic (or late pandemic) world.

The last 20 years have seen a strengthening of neo-liberalism that has not only shaped VET in liberal economies such as the UK and US but in more historically collectivist European economies and the global South. Neo-liberalism has impacted on educational and social practices across Europe (Chrysochou, 2018), most strikingly in Nordic (Rosvall and Nylund, 2019) and Germanic societies (Thelen and Busemeyer, 2011). In several countries this has meant employers becoming less willing to 'over-train' by enabling workers to acquire broader portable skills, leading to a narrower focus on firm-specific skills. In the South, beginning with radical reforms to Latin American VET systems as part of structural adjustment (Ducci, 1991) and spreading through Africa in the 1990s, neo-liberalism led to a 'VET toolkit' of new public management reforms (McGrath and Lugg, 2012) that sought to rebalance systems away from state-led to market-led models. In much of the global South, neo-liberalisation led to the privatisation of parastatal enterprises, which were major 'over-producers' of skilled labour (McGrath, 1996; Rao et al., 2014). A period of economic

‘emergency’ following lockdown measures may lead to an increased demand for training and retraining programmes but can also strengthen pressure from organisations like the OECD for a further narrowing of the scope and possibilities of access to VET, enhancing its already profoundly unequal outcomes.

Yet the crisis has also provided glimpses of different ways that economy, education and society might be organised. The health crisis started in the developmental states of East Asia but was also most effectively tackled there initially, with large levels of state intervention grounded in technological innovation, the disciplinary power of the state, and large-scale societal acceptance of a duty to protect others. Correspondingly, the credo of austerity has been pushed to one side in market economies with the emergence of an interventionist state that seeks to shore-up the nations’ economy, whether this be in the global North or South, the latter recalling earlier ‘developmental states’ (Rajan and Gopalan, 2020; South China Morning Post, 2020; Pepinsky, 2020). The size of the fiscal stimulus or support for the economy will be shaped by local conditions as well as, in the case of the emerging economies, the finance provided by supranational organisations. In the North, accumulated reserves of capital have enabled the temporary shoring-up of economies, with government incursions into economic and social life only formerly seen in wartime. Ironically, comparisons with such state interventions have enabled the UK’s Conservative government to draw on a Churchillian rhetoric (Giordano, 2020). Yet state interventions following post-war upheaval led directly to sharp falls in the share of wealth held by elites, alongside the emergence of welfare regimes and social democratic forms of government (Piketty 2020; Esping-Andersen 1990). Several progressive features of VET, particularly in northern Europe, have their origins in this period before the unleashing of neoliberalism.

Discourses in the VET policy sphere have so far paid little attention to possibilities of going beyond the continuity of existing arrangements and creating more democratic forms of and access to VET. By contrast, the liberalising discourses of the OECD have already begun to conjure visions of a narrower, atomised VET of short courses focused on specific skills, mainly offered online. Our purpose here is to emphasise the range of possible alternatives.

Acemoglu (2020) suggests we are at a critical juncture facing a number of possible futures, one of which is pertinent here and represents a renewed social democratic welfare state. He suggests ‘welfare state 1.0’ represented the adoption of a Keynesian model in response to the 1920/30s depression and the Second World War and sought to hold in check the excesses of capitalism. ‘Welfare state 2.0’ was a retreat from its predecessor orchestrated by Thatcher and Reagan and could be seen as a restorative project seeking to reclaim the concessions won by labour in favour of capital and its logic of accumulation. In the current conjuncture ‘Welfare state 3.0’ anticipates the development of a green and sustainable economy with a flatter distribution of income and wealth that recognises our civic responsibilities as well as our social obligations. The possibilities of further advances and retreats (represented by Acemoglu’s Welfare states 2.0 and 3.0) are equally inherent in late

and post-pandemic VET: our purpose here is to make them explicit from within current discourses around the field.

In the following section, we provide a theoretical engagement with the socio-economic context of the health crisis and consider the social relations of care. This provides the basis to explore the discussions emerging in policy circles about the impact of covid-19 upon VET across the globe. We analyse the significance of these discourses in concluding sections that examine the progressive possibilities that flow from the current situation.

Social and economic context

In this section we consider the broader context in which VET and Covid-19 are placed. Our starting point is neo-liberalism, with the health crisis deepening and increasing the visibility of its failings. Prior to the pandemic it was becoming apparent that the rhetoric underpinning neo-liberalism was fraudulent. Its emphasis on the 'free' market, the privatisation of public services, the commodification of education and labour and the claim that this would lead to a competitive economy able to compete effectively in world markets to the benefit of all members of society was increasingly seen as specious. Following the financial crisis of 2008, it became clear that the free market was anything but free, being shaped by the interests of capital. The privatisation of the institutions of the welfare state, from hospitals to schools, rather than enhancing 'efficiency' for the benefit of all provided an opportunity for capital to create new markets in the pursuit of profitability. Technological developments that are always socially located have contributed towards the hollowing out of labour markets which in turn led to an increasingly polarised social formation in terms of income and wealth. Importantly, the current conjuncture is characterised by the decoupling of wages from productivity and growth, serving to question the claims of those who celebrate the operation of the market. Bloom and Sancino, (2019:19-22) describe neo-liberalism with its doctrine of market fundamentalism, the minimalist state and meritocratic social order, as a fantasy. Perhaps more importantly, as Mason (2019:xii) suggests, 'the free market system has imploded' and its mantra of consumerism, selfishness and hierarchy has lost its persuasiveness (Avis,2021a). There are two important caveats. Firstly, to the extent that neo-liberalism won popular consent and a wider hegemony, this was based on the idea that there was no realistic alternative. Secondly, the present conjuncture poses the question of alternatives in terms of its development towards a post neo-liberalism as well as the impact of Covid-19, both of which challenge a number of its tenets.

Post neo-liberalism is characterised by a deep-set cynicism in which the neo-liberal subject is no longer held in check by social constraints in the pursuit of individual self-interest. This is particularly a feature of what Dorling (2020:181) describes as a rampant capitalism best illustrated by those involved with financialisation and rentier capitalism as well as senior executives who pay themselves large bonuses whilst their companies fail. This sits alongside the monopolistic and oligarchic tendencies of capitalist organisations that question the illusion of the free market. We could reflect on the activities of platform capitalists such as

Uber, Facebook and Amazon that give rise to cynicism and dissent (Srnicek 2017). Writers such as Streek (2016:35-44) and Fraser (2019) would suggest, drawing on Gramsci (1971), that at this conjunctural moment we are entering an interregnum in which 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born' (Gramsci, 1971:276). An interregnum in which the tenets of neo-liberalism have been debunked and its practices shown to exacerbate inequality.

If immediately prior to the pandemic neo-liberalism was reaching its limits, Covid-19 served to debunk many of its shibboleths. Drawing from experiences across time and space, the pandemic could presage a rethinking of the relationship of the state to the economy and more broadly, its role. This could serve to revitalise democratic forms of social and economic life freed from the shackles of neo-liberalism. Such a possibility is not preordained but the outcome of struggle and will encounter those economic and political interests that seek a restoration of the preceding economic relations. Fraser (2019:38) calls for, 'a new way of relating economy to polity, production to reproduction, human society to nonhuman nature. Neoliberalism in any guise is not the solution but the problem'. Fraser (2019) and Streek (2016) draw our attention to an interregnum in which the tenets of neo-liberalism have been debunked. Covid-19 brings to our notice another set of issues that similarly question the viability of both neo-liberalism and the current organisation of the social relations of care. In this sense the crisis surrounding Covid-19 deepens the hiatus or interregnum in which we find ourselves and where the new is yet to be born. However, caution needs to be exercised. Klein's (2007) conceptualisation of the 'the shock doctrine' and 'disaster capitalism' draws our attention to the manner in which crises have been used to secure the interests of the elites and systematically deepen inequality (see Solis, 2020).

More hopefully, might the wave of positive sentiment about the nursing and social care workforce, evidenced in the UK by the weekly applause given to such workers, point to a more sustainable re-evaluation of who 'key workers' are and what is 'really useful labour'? Such workers play a vital role in societal and individual well-being. Care workers in particular are often on the minimum wage and their labour has historically been disparaged as low skill (the Guardian, 2020a). These workers have been recast as heroes engaged in what may be described as 'really useful' but also life-threatening labour. This encourages a rethinking of the notion of skill. We need only reflect on the social and cognitive skills required in caring for a dying patient.

Covid-19 poses the question as of what constitutes 'really useful' as against 'really useless' labour. The former represents productive labour in the sense that it embodies use value contributing to societal and individual well-being. Here, perhaps, the pandemic has led to a wider sympathy with key arguments from feminist economics about social provisioning and care work (e.g., Donath, 2000; Power, 2004).

We should not however overlook the commercialisation of social care and its privatisation. The pandemic has provided opportunities for acts of solidarity and generosity but also for the acquisition of profit. At the time of writing the US has acquired the world stock of

Remdesivir, a key Covid drug (The Guardian, 2020a). Butler (2020:online), echoing Klein, comments,

the arrival of entrepreneurs eager to capitalize on global suffering, all testify to the rapidity with which radical inequality, which includes nationalism, white supremacy, violence against women, queer, and trans people, and capitalist exploitation find ways to reproduce and strengthen their powers within the pandemic zones.

It is notable that in the UK and US, ethnic minorities are more likely to die from the virus than their white peers (Seibt, 2020), mirroring the patterns of inequality present in these societies. Nor should we overlook the way these processes map onto class structures. Reich (2020) mobilises a fourfold description of the current US class divide, distinguishing between the remotes, the essentials, the unpaid and the forgotten. The remotes are members of the professional middle classes who are locked-in and are relatively safe working on their laptops. We are reminded of Graeber's (2018) notion of 'bullshit' jobs and Fleming's (2014) discussion of the intensification of labour – whereby all of life revolves around paid employment. At the current moment we could question the use-value of such labour when set against that of the 'essentials' who are described as key workers in the UK. These workers together with the unpaid and the forgotten are disproportionately poor, female, black and latino/a and are amongst the most susceptible to infection. In other settings, migrants, the undocumented, informal workers and refugees are particularly vulnerable, facing disproportionately 'indecent' work and the worst living conditions. Whilst local specificities vary, it is clear that the rhetoric that the virus does not discriminate on the basis of social position is cruelly overstated and that the social and economic conditions in which we are placed renders us more or less vulnerable to infection (Seibt, 2020; Public Health England, 2020). Globally, it will be important also to see how, coming out of lockdown (and possibly oscillating between 'normal' and 'lockdown' over the next period) is experienced differently across sectors and occupations, and how these are overlaid by the existing patterns of inequality described above.

Prior to the pandemic, writers were discussing the crisis of care which reflected that of social reproduction (Hester and Srnicek, 2019). Fraser commented (2016:99),

The 'crisis of care' is currently a major topic of public debate. Often linked to ideas of 'time poverty', 'family-work balance', and 'social depletion', it refers to the pressures from several directions that are currently squeezing a key set of social capacities: those available for birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally.

Fraser points to a number of issues that have been reshaped during the pandemic, referring to time poverty, issues of family-work balance and so on. For those living in two income

families the necessity to engage in waged labour is all pervasive. This is the case not only for those who face economic poverty but also for members of the professional middle class who seek to maintain a particular standard of living, and more importantly their position in the labour market. In cities such as New York, child care for the professional middle class has been provided by those who are disproportionately poor, black, or Latina. If these workers themselves have children they are cared for in the broader communities from which they are drawn, whether at home or abroad. Covid-19 has interrupted these patterns of care resulting in deepening poverty for those formerly employed as nannies, child care workers and so on. In addition, many people will have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic which in turn will have an impact upon domestic relations and patterns of abuse (The Guardian, 2020b; UNICEF, 2020).

Fraser calls for the inversion of the subjugation of reproduction to production as well as a re-imagining of the gender order. The pandemic could serve to raise questions about the nature of waged labour, domestic relations as well as the wider society and sustainable development. It brings to our attention the importance of care, our social obligations to one another and could prefigure an alternative way of ordering society, albeit a contested one. Dorling's (2020; Reisz, 2020) recent writings presage a more sustainable and slower world with Gambuto (2020:online) writing,

What the trauma has shown us, though, cannot be unseen. A carless Los Angeles has clear blue skies as pollution has simply stopped. In a quiet New York, you can hear the birds chirp in the middle of Madison Avenue. Coyotes have been spotted on the Golden Gate Bridge. These are the postcard images of what the world might be like if we could find a way to have a less deadly daily effect on the planet.

Such experiences offer a glimpse of a greener, environmentally sustainable and more equitable politics and could revive or provide added impetus to 'green new deals' (Galvin and Healy, 2020; The Green New Deal Group, 2008; Sierra Club, undated a, b) or more radical accounts about just transitions (Swilling, 2020) or post-growth sustainability (Jackson, 2017). Such a politics would seek to address environmental issues but would also aim to rectify the excesses of inequality that occur in capitalist states, recognising that sustainability must be just or it is not sustainable. Some have looked to the UNGA's (2015) sustainable development goals as a positive force in this regard. However, Hickel (2015) argues that the SDGs focus on poverty reduction and sustainable economic growth avoids the question of inequality as well as that of ensuring a fairer and more equitable distribution of resources, income and wealth. McGrath (2020) focuses on SDG8 for VET and highlights the unsustainability at its heart. SDG8 reads,

Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. (UNGA, 2015:14)

“Sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth” under capitalism is simply impossible. The language of the resulting targets about the need for sustained growth above 7% in less developed economies (8.1); accelerated productivity (8.2); and the formalisation of the informal economy (8.3), makes clear that the rhetorical move in this SDG is to argue that we can both accelerate growth and reduce its environmental impact.

In any case, the mainstreaming of green new deal arguments that emerged at the time of the beginning of the pandemic has subsequently retreated from popular debate. This leads us to recall Klein’s arguments, but also links to Gambuto’s concerns that we will experience a wave of ‘gaslighting’ once the virus is under control, as the state and capital will spend vast sums of money to encourage a collective forgetting of the progressive possibilities that were intimated at during the pandemic. The worry is that this will be followed by a period of austerity that mobilises the language of sacrifice seeking to establish a re-formed post neo-liberalism.

Though we are stressing a focus on an expansive view of VET, which helps the formation of active, critical citizens and integrated members of society, as well as rebalancing attention towards ‘really useful labour’, it is important to revisit pre-Covid arguments about the future of work (Avis, 2018, 2021a,b; Avent 2017; Livingston, 2016; Rifkin, 1995; Ross 2016). These have been Northern-dominated largely focusing on skill-biased technological change and its relationship with a polarised labour market and income structure. However, there are a number of authors who argue that this is overstated given the large number of middle level jobs requiring situational adaptability and personal interaction (Holzer, 2015). Such labour has been brought into stark relief by Covid-19, as we note above. There appear to be major structural changes underway in Northern labour markets that will see large scale processes both of job creation and destruction. A key policy challenge is that these processes should be managed to protect the most vulnerable. In much of the South, the likelihood of increasing offshoring of manufacturing jobs appears unlikely (Rodrik, 2006). In any case, these processes are limited in scale and geographically focused. In much of the South, neither schooling nor VET, in spite of the policy rhetoric, is preparing young people for formal labour market roles. Rather, the challenge lies in building decent work that is less articulated with a global economy that looks set to continue its centuries-long tradition of profit extraction (McGrath, 2020).

What Covid-19 does to shape these changes and responses will be crucial. Currently, it appears to be having a very serious negative effect on the youth labour market in the global North, and particularly in regions that were already “left behind” (Pérez et al., 2020; Adams-Prassl et al., 2020). In the South, those operating microenterprises, particularly in the informal sector, appear to be the most affected (ILO Monitor, 2020a).

International VET response to pandemic and lockdown

As the pandemic has moved to different countries, the response of education and VET systems has progressed on broadly similar lines. The severity of the lockdown has varied. In much of Europe, hit early in the pandemic, the lockdowns were rigidly enforced. Australian borders closed in March 2020 and will remain so until at least December (Australian Government, 2020). Many African countries, recognising that poverty and weak health systems meant early preventive action if a major public health crisis was to be avoided, saw strong and pre-emptive lockdowns noticeably strongly enforced (e.g. military deployments in South Africa, prison sentences for failure to wear a mask in Zimbabwe). A more liberal approach with a commensurate death toll was adopted in the US, UK and several Latin American countries, most notably Brazil. The spread and partial ebbing of the pandemic across different regions has successively raised different questions of educational and economic disruption and continuity.

The lockdown and immediate closure of schools, colleges and many workplaces employing young people on apprenticeships has affected millions of VET students. A scramble to online learning preserved elements of continuity, although the extent to which this has been feasible has inevitably varied. Evidence quickly emerged of uneven effects both across and within jurisdictions, with young people – particularly those whose lives are already characterized by ‘multi-dimensional poverty’ (Powell and McGrath, 2019b) being disproportionately impacted in economic terms (Majumdar and Araiztegui, 2020; World Bank, 2020; Gustafsson and McCurdy, 2020, WEF 2020, see also Mascherini and Sándor 2020). Cedefop’s ‘apprenticeship experts’ (2020) detailed public responses that guaranteed continuity of apprenticeships but some countries report lacunae in contracts and financial support. In countries experiencing the earliest national outbreaks of COVID-19, the continuity of work-based elements appears to have proved less easy to substitute: in Spain 92% of apprentices were reported to work in sectors that are closed (2020:11). In northern Europe where VET is most firmly established, disadvantaged youth appear to have suffered the most extensive disruption, finding it harder to access online alternatives and experiencing the greatest disruption to apprenticeships. The complex stratification of apprenticeship opportunities in DACH (Germany, Austria, Switzerland) countries, with hi-tech employers working directly with universities outside VET and migrants concentrated in routinised service occupations, is likely to be reinstated as economic and educational activity rises. The position of VET’s many migrants and other disadvantaged youth reliant on work placements may become even less secure and it remains to be seen how VET practices respond to underlying issues of racism which have become increasingly salient internationally (Imdorf 2017; Chadderton and Edmonds 2015; Gronborg 2015).

Disruptions to apprenticeships have been extensive and complex. Learning in the “traditional apprenticeship” system within the informal economy is a far larger system than the formal, public one in many Latin American and African countries, especially West Africa

(e.g. Ahadzie, 2009). However, there appears to have been little policy attention to this. In West Africa, apprentices would traditionally have been considered part of their master or mistress's household. However, this is increasingly rare. Whilst some, inevitably, will have squatted in workshops, lacking other options, the slowdown of work, and loss of income and accommodation makes this already vulnerable group even more precarious (e.g. see ILO Monitor, 2020b). In the global North, many apprentices have similarly seen their learning sites closed, and their employment become precarious or redundant (Cedefop, 2020); implying that in these contexts, young people are more likely to move to welfare dependency or short term, precarious employment as youth unemployment rises. In Australia, despite the limited public health impact, the youth unemployment (seasonally adjusted) rate for May 2020 rose to 16.1% whilst youth labour force participation fell to 59.9% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). The UK, where one-third of 18-24-year-old employees (excluding students) either lost their jobs or were furloughed (UK Parliament, 2020) has also seen a significant rise in youth unemployment.

Differential mitigation measures, as well as the extent of formal and informal VET are also impacting on young people. Public vocational schools and colleges closed early in many countries. In the developed economies, these have largely been sustained by interventionist measures such as funding guarantees (Cedefop, 2020). However, in Africa these are a relatively small part of national vocational "systems" consequently the overall picture is harder to judge (SADC/UNESCO, 2013). The picture with private-for-profit and not-for-profit providers globally is more complicated. In Africa, most are likely to have closed down due to social distancing. The threat for the former category is that many are small and relatively fragile and may struggle to reopen. In England, policy responses differentiated between educational institutions with early funding guarantees to Further Education Colleges, but not to Private Training Providers who were directed to the general business support packages introduced by the Chancellor. Some of these support packages have proved difficult to access. A recent survey found that less than 4% of training providers had obtained a Treasury backed Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan, with another 21% still waiting to hear and a further 28% were ineligible. 31% of providers anticipated losing between a quarter to a half of their apprenticeship business, while nearly four out of five (78%) expected a decrease of some degree (AELP, 2020).

Globally, most countries are now moving to mitigation measures in terms of addressing learning loss (Majumdar and Araiztegui, 2020; World Bank, 2020; UNESCO-IIEP, 2020) and responding to exponential increases in youth unemployment. Whilst some students in the wealthiest countries have benefitted from access to online educational platforms such provision is less accessible in low-income countries and Europe's periphery. Participants in the UNESCO International Institute of Educational Planning's Virtual Education and COVID-19 Learning Forum, uniformly called for putting as much of the curriculum as possible online. In Africa, for example, very large numbers of learners are limited to mobile phone

use, with paying for data a very real limitation as they try to navigate learning and work (cf. Powell and McGrath, 2019a). Even in wealthier countries, much VET caters for more disadvantaged students, for whom access to technology, and thus online learning provision, is similarly limited. These limitations are apparent for VET's theoretical elements but are far worse for practical programmes (Majumdar and Araiztegui, 2020; World Bank, 2020; UNESCO-IIEP, 2020). Formal industry placements are a major problem across both the global North (e.g. Esmond and Atkins, 2020) and South (e.g. Powell and McGrath, 2018; Allais, 2020), with the pandemic exacerbating this problem.

Against this negative scenario caused and exacerbated by the pandemic, there are some examples of promising practices from VET providers regarding its contribution to wider human flourishing and not simply to human capital development. There are some examples of additional training for community health workers in Sierra Leone where lessons have been learnt from the response to Ebola (World Bank, 2020). In several countries public VET institutions have contributed to the production of personal protective equipment (Majumdar and Araiztegui, 2020; World Bank, 2020; UNESCO-IIEP, 2020). However, the most innovative responses tend to lie in community-based programmes, which are able to harness existing networks and knowledges to share pandemic-related information and practices quickly (Facer et al., 2020). Alongside such local examples and initiatives, major developments are now beginning to unfold at national and international level.

Emerging policy directions: a restoration of liberalisation?

Against this background of epidemic and educational crisis, international policy responses have moved from questions of continuity to the renewal of debates over the future of VET. The most explicit statement of future intentions for VET has emerged from the OECD (2020) which calls for a 'resilient VET' in the wake of the pandemic. This proposes building on emergency responses to strengthen such elements as digitisation, short-term training, and recognition of prior learning and other tools to support the mobility of labour. Whatever the contributions of these practices as emergency measures, they serve temporarily to provide hollowed-out forms of VET for an atomised workforce and can become areas of contestation over future modes of VET.

Digitisation of learning was central to policy responses during lockdowns: the French labour ministry for example offered 220 online courses for learning a trade at home (Ministere du Travail 2020), notwithstanding the absence of work context or the support of experienced workers and VET professionals. Moving beyond the crisis, VET investments in emerging technologies such as Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and automation can of course facilitate easier labour market entry. However, online learning is now proposed as a significant contributor to recovery, with the OECD (2020) calling for recognition of online

'micro-credentials' gained during the pandemic. However, further digitisation proposals, extending to online teacher education can suggest a hollowing out of VET to continue indefinitely. Majumdar and Araiztegui (2020) stress the importance of developing learners' capabilities to be autonomous and active, supported by learner-centred tools, rather than placing new modes of transmission of knowledge at the centre of any digitisation strategy.

More significant than modes of participation are the content and scope of education and training following the recovery. OECD (2020) hopes of focused training for 'more resilient and future-oriented' occupations raise the spectre of historically narrow approaches to training during high unemployment such as the Youth Opportunities Programme and Youth Training in England during the 1980s (e.g. Education Group II, 1991; McCulloch, 1987). More recently, short-cycle adult training has been a strong feature of industry-responsive but state-facilitated VET in the Netherlands, alongside a rise in fixed-term employment from 15% to 22% (Westerhuis and van der Meer 2017). In Denmark, short-cycle programmes at adult centres have the highest adult participation rates in Europe (Cedefop 2012). In Australia emergency funding was brought forward for 're-training' for the newly unemployed, whilst in the UK the National Skills Fund, originally conceived as match funding for individuals and SMEs (Conservative Party Manifesto, 2019:36) is now emerging as strategic funding to support 'employers and particularly SMEs post-COVID. UK Prime Minister Johnson earlier floated the idea of an apprenticeship guarantee, although capacity for such placements (and for the imminent Technical Levels) appears sparse (Education Select Committee 2020) and recovery packages have centred instead on shorter 'traineeships'.

Finally, issues of labour mobility that have been submerged in periods of lockdown are likely to re-emerge as restrictions ease. OECD (2020) calls for recognition of prior learning acquired through online activity clearly support Europeanisation policies centred on qualifications frameworks and comparability of qualifications. Looking to the future, the crisis appears likely to intensify such tensions in VET, not least the conflict between national VET systems, constructed around varying and contested forms of social partnership, and the liberalising forces associated with Europeanisation (Ante 2014). It is perhaps significant that ideas of 'social partnership' which feature far more strongly in European VET appear to have experienced erosion during emergency legislation, as EU sources note:

While the level and quality of social partner involvement is influenced by historically determined national industrial relations and policymaking structures (Eurofound, 2019), it is striking that over 50% of legislative measures contained in the Eurofound COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch database are reported to have been passed with no agreement or involvement from the social partners (other than being informed). Indeed, social partners in a number of countries have reported a decline in their involvement as measures are rushed through the legislative processes (Eurofound 2020, 13).

The stage, then, appears to be set for a resumption of attempts to liberalise VET that will affect countries both in Europe and Latin America, such as Brazil, that have seen a shift to liberalised VET policies (Leite 2019). Demands for ‘flexible’ measures are likely to reference the depth of economic crisis as a rationale for diminished forms of VET provision. This will put further pressure on the most extensive forms of VET, such as in Germany, that have already come under strains of ‘segmentalisation’ and reduced coverage. Thelen (2014) has suggested that liberalised VET systems in Holland and Denmark, **where unions for the unskilled play** a central role in CVET, make greater contributions to equity and social solidarity.

The pandemic has intensified and accelerated existing socio-economic tendencies. Prior to Covid-19 ‘progressive’ apologists for capital were arguing for a new social contract that sought to mitigate the excesses of neo-liberalism and institute a renewed social democracy (Avis, 2021a chapter2, 2021). Schwab of the World Economic Forum calls for a ‘great reset’ in favour of stakeholding capitalism (Schwab, 2020). This stance provides an opportunity to push capitalism to its limits.

VET has been called upon to adapt to the pandemic, not least in seeking to address the educative needs of the most vulnerable. ILO Brief (2020:3) argues that special attention needs to be given to:

- Women, who hold 70 per cent of jobs in the health and social care sectors and are therefore often on the front line of the response to the crisis (they are also over-represented in the informal service sector and in the labour-intensive manufacturing sector);
- Informal economy workers, casual and temporary workers, workers in new forms of employment, including those in the “gig economy”;
- Young workers, whose employment prospects are more sensitive to fluctuations in demand;
- Older workers, who even in normal times face difficulties in finding decent work opportunities and are now burdened with an additional health risk;
- Refugees and migrant workers, especially those engaged as domestic workers and those working in construction, manufacturing and agriculture [and we could add undocumented workers];
- Micro-entrepreneurs and the self-employed – particularly those operating in the informal economy, who may be disproportionately affected and are less resilient.

Regardless of societal location the most vulnerable will be those on the lowest wages who have minimal financial resources, many of whom in the emerging economies will be ‘own account’ workers. This reflects the structural relations of the societies in which they are placed in terms of race/ethnicity, class, gender and age. For all workers occupational health

and safety is pivotal and extends beyond the narrow confines of VET to wider society. In particular it applies to ‘informal economy workers, casual and temporary workers, workers in new forms of employment, including those in the “gig economy”’. In this instance VET stands as a public pedagogy that refuses a narrow instrumentalism and exclusionary association with waged employment. It would be able to address the needs of the unpaid and those excluded from waged employment but who are nevertheless engaged in really useful labour. That is to say, labour that creates use-value and contributes towards community, societal and individual well-being. Such an expansive understanding of VET and labour becomes increasingly important in societies where there is a surplus of labour and lack of meaningful paid employment and in the case of the latter refers to the individual’s definition of the use-value of their labour. There is an overlap between an expansive construction of VET and adult community learning and education, whereby both can address really useful knowledge and labour.

Yet, as Majumdar and Araiztegui (2020) note, the pandemic offers an opportunity for reimagining VET, which they see in terms of greening skills (reflecting Majumdar’s formal role as UNESCO-UNEVOC Director). However, the vision of most African states, donors and the African Development Bank, amounts to little more than greenwashing (McGrath and Powell, 2016), a belief that growth can continue, and indeed increase, but that technological innovations (often explicitly linked to the “Fourth Industrial Revolution”) and more recycling and waste reduction can ensure this is done with fewer emissions. Indeed, this is the vision of SDG8, which talks of “sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth” and which has targets about the need for sustained growth above 7% in less developed economies (8.1) and accelerated productivity (8.2) (UNGA, 2015). In more developed economies, questions are likely to arise over how far any ‘green new deal’ will lead to a revival of traditional forms of VET, to accelerated training packages focused on specific skills, or to a substantial rethink of its contribution to economy and society. Yet so far notions of a broader activism emerge mainly in a development context: the German international development agency Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) (2020) proposes VET providers enter into dialogue with workplaces, ‘to prepare for alternating vocational training during and after the pandemic and develop a corresponding concept’ (2020, p.7). In Europe and Latin America such dialogue, extending to those displaced by lockdown, could lay the basis for a radical transformation of VET practices and concepts.

Conclusions and possibilities

Public and policy responses to the crisis raise a number of questions, alternative possibilities and more socially just conceptualisations of both labour and VET. These include, for example, ‘hopeful discourses’ (Freire, 2007:89) around which occupations and what aspects of work should be valued, and by implication, what educational preparation they require.

The global ferment over racial inequality and the ways in which consumerism has contributed to environmental degradation as well as the implications of this for future pandemics, has offered greater momentum to environmental and anti-capitalist movements.

The pandemic has served to undermine the tenets of neo-liberalism and the political economy of austerity. Vast amounts of money have been injected into the economy to secure the on-going reproduction of labour power. This has in effect instituted a guaranteed social income, increased free-time and reduced the working week for at least some workers. It is likely that these responses will be clawed back and will not outlive the pandemic, yet they suggest the possibility of alternative ways of organising the economy and social relations as well as conceptions of VET. Such a re-conceptualisation would build on responses to Covid-19 as well as preceding progressive practices discussed earlier.

In VET terms, there have been global calls for more radical approaches to both policy and practice over an extensive period and emanating from a variety of traditions. For example, a generation has passed since Bloomer called for an 'education for studentship' (1996: 140). Others (e.g. Avis 2007; 2016; Atkins, 2009, Avis and Atkins 2017) have argued that particularly in Anglophone liberal systems, current conceptions of VET are contrary to social justice, acting as forms of class and labour reproduction (also see Colley, 2006). Others focusing, on the curriculum, have critiqued the deficit-model competency based approach (e.g. Wheelahan and Moodie, 2011; Hodge and Harris, 2012; Hodge, 2016; and see Avis, 1991; Hyland, 1995, for early critiques).

Relatedly, Keep (2009), Ecclestone (2011), Bathmaker (2013) and Wheelahan (2015) have all questioned the use and value of the knowledge conferred by the contemporary VET curriculum. Ecclestone (2004; 2007) and Ecclestone and Hayes (2019) have also critiqued the 'therapisation' of the VET curriculum, arguing that this too, is contrary to conceptions of social justice. In this instance the educative role of VET is distorted by a concern that learners feel good about themselves rather than developing really useful knowledge and skills. It is also important to note that the students engaging with many forms of VET are situated within deficit-model discourses associated with disadvantage, disengagement, and the 'non-academic' (e.g. see Atkins, 2010; 2017; Billett et al, 2010). Others (e.g. McGrath, 2012; McGrath and Powell, 2015; Moodie et al., 2018) have called for forms of VET more closely associated with human development, that are 'human-centred', having a greater focus on and respect for individual human capabilities.

At a moment of profound social change, the possibilities both of a 'rising curve of inequality in VET' (Esmond and Atkins 2020, p. 209) and of a more socially just re-conceptualisation are both inherent in global developments following the pandemic. Limited policy responses raise immediate concerns that opportunities will be missed. Allman et al's (2003:149-150) acerbic comment that,

Education plays a key role in the perpetuation of the capital relation; this is the skeleton in capitalist education's dank basement. It is just one of the many reasons why, in contemporary capitalist society, education [*and we might add Vocational Education and Training*] assumes a grotesque and perverted form. It links the chains that bind our souls to capital.

This reminds us of the relationship between education and VET in capitalist societies. However, in a struggle for alternative conceptualisations of VET the aim is to support positive aspects of this relationship and of policy developments. This becomes increasingly important in moments of crisis when the purveyors of progressive capitalism seek to promulgate a fairer version of capital that aims to domesticate re-conceptualisations of VET. Such a position serves as a starting point for struggle. In this respect the pandemic has created a turning point where emerging changes in public values and understanding on a global scale have become more visible, accelerated by the social disruption caused by the pandemic. More radically, there is an emerging account of skills for sustainable futures (McGrath, DeJaeghere and Gelb, 2020; Rosenberg, Ramsarup and Lotz-Sisitka, 2020). These authors are calling for VET to make a double transformation (UNESCO, 2012): to transform its practices to a more inclusive, democratic, postcolonial educational practice that is socially and environmentally just and capability-generating in itself and to contribute to a wider process of building sustainable futures. Consequently, they focus on skills needs of the near future and how to bring together stakeholders to ensure these needs are met inclusively, sustainably and through the creation of decent jobs and livelihoods.

In this paper we have argued for an expansive understanding that relates VET to the formation of labour power within and outside waged work and have drawn on the notion of really useful labour to flag this possibility. Although we acknowledge VET's historical and contemporary purposes, we wish to go beyond these and reconfigure VET as having a significant role to play for the unpaid, the excluded, informal and undocumented workers, and of course the poor. The current crisis has provided the opportunity to imagine such ideas in practice, potentially building on emerging practices and movements which reflect these values and philosophies. These changes are indicative of a more critical awareness of the impact of consumerism, poverty and other in/equalities together with a recognition that the hegemony of capitalism is neither inevitable nor without alternative.

Any outline of how VET might build on the social possibilities revealed by the crisis is necessarily provisional and conditional. Socio-economic and national contexts have offered different affordances to VET, with Nordic provision having been more attuned to questions of social justice than that in the US or England; and, in addition to the reforms of welfarist governments, European VET owes its more socially just features to the engagement of trade unions and in several countries to youth movements against exploitative aspects of training regimes (Giraud 2019; Juul and Jorgensen 2011). Broader political economy features also influence responses in the South, with stark contrasts between countries with continuing

collectivist views and those most influenced by neoliberalism. A politics that challenges existing social and economic relations, starting by pushing the re-emerging notion of stakeholder capitalism to its limits, would set its own agendas for reform, engaging with concerns over racial injustice and climate change, as manifest in Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion and other anti-capitalist and anti-neocolonialist movements. Such movements would take their own course and the detailed shape of a socially just VET lies beyond the scope of any research paper.

We can however state that the above perspectives on VET imply a form of education in which philosophies around human rather than economic value, social and environmental justice, are integral rather than antithetical to its purpose and practice. An agenda based on entitlement to VET would replace the imperative to meet employers' needs with curricula designed to enhance the social, economic and political capacities of participants. This agenda would put aside the performative litanies that delineate the narrow pedagogies of competence, in favour of a public pedagogy in which VET contributes towards societal, community and individual well-being and a post-COVID renewal that facilitates the development of all of society, particularly the excluded, and addresses the climate emergency.

Such a broad conceptualisation of VET would rethink its relationship to waged labour and employment entailing its revisioning. It would acknowledge the importance of what we have described as really useful knowledge/labour that extends beyond the workplace and in some senses the dichotomy between VET and community learning and education would be transcended. Nevertheless, VET's concern to address the world of work and waged labour is clearly of importance as it offers affordances whereby learners could develop understanding and skill that impacts not only upon work but life in general. In addition, we have called for the development of VET that addresses those who are not engaged in waged employment but who seek to develop skills that contribute to human flourishing. Society and its institutions also have a responsibility towards those who have been expelled from the work force and who are 'surplus' to labour market requirements. Importantly a progressive VET needs to move beyond capitalist relations if it is to seriously address questions of social justice.

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