



Editorial

The debate on the need for vocational education and training systems to change has been settled and has moved on to what, not whether, changes need to be made.

This issue of the European journal looks at some of the key policy questions about the direction that reform of vocational education and training should take. But to contribute to the debate, in this issue, policy questions are set alongside the history of the development of vocational education and training policy in Europe and against the emergent findings of some important research on future skills needs.

The widespread consensus on the need for change - which incorporates policy-makers, practitioners and researchers from across the EU - is significant and valuable. It facilitates debate and the exchange of ideas and, importantly, encourages an openness to ideas.

But change is not new for vocational education and training systems and to think so is a misconception. Vocational education and training systems have proved very dynamic over the last decades as shown in the article (the first in a two-part series) "Political and legal framework for the development of training policy in the European Union" by Steve Bainbridge and Julie Murray. The article maps out the development of vocational education and training policy from the Treaty of Rome in 1957, to the introduction of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. It shows how, in response to the challenges of rising unemployment, social exclusion and technological change, vocational education and training became an important tool of economic and social policy. The historical perspective the article gives, can provide useful insights and lessons for future policy development.

After examining the past the journal looks at the policy questions under consideration today in the face of ever quickening economic, social and technological change, by reproducing the "Berlin Memorandum on the Modernisation of Vocational Education and Training Guidelines

for the creation of a dual, plural and modular (DPM) system of lifelong learning" by the advisory committee of the Berlin Senate's Department of Labour Vocational Education and Training and Women's Affairs. The memorandum shows that even the widely admired and respected German vocational education and training system must change if it is to preserve its tradition for excellence and high standards. But the memorandum points out that the dilemma lies in retaining the strengths of the system while introducing necessary reforms.

The memorandum is followed by a contribution by an international working group of employers organisations from seven EU countries, "In search of quality in schools". It is interesting for a number of reasons. It reflects the consensus across the EU on the need for reform and the strong measure of concern felt by employers - as one of the major investors in the development and use of skills - about the direction that reform should take. And although its focus is on the general education system, the issues raised underline the importance of not treating vocational education and training in isolation from other parts of the learning framework. This is a point brought out in another interesting policy paper (not reproduced here) by the employers group UNICE¹. The journal has invited the European Trade Union Congress (ETUC) to express their views.

The article by Senker et al "Working to learn: a holistic approach to young people's education and training" proposes a direction for vocational education and training in the UK. It examines the experience of a system that has undergone enormous transition in recent years. Despite the scope of change undertaken in the UK, the article points to some of the fundamental weaknesses that still remain. In doing so, the article illustrates some of the differences between the stated aims and intentions of reforms and the reality of the results. This underlines the importance of the effectiveness of institutions and instruments for implementing policy. It emphasises that the dimension of how,

1) UNICE (2000): For education and training policies which foster competitiveness and employment, UNICE's seven priorities, Brussels.



not only what, change is needed has to be integrated into the debate.

Finally the journal looks at a contribution to vocational education and training for the low-skilled with a collection of three articles, by Eugenia Kazamaki Ottersten and Hilary Steedman “Low-skilled people on the European Labour market: towards a minimum learning platform?”, Arthur Schneeberger “The concept of a minimum learning platform educational contents and methods for improving the low-skilled” and Roberto Carneiro “Achieving a minimum learning platform for all”. These articles debate the initial findings of the New job skills and the low-skilled (Newskills) project, which suggests that the best policy to help low-skilled workers might be to reduce the number of them

entering the labour market. The project also explores the idea of a ‘minimum learning platform’ - a range of skills including qualities required to be effective in the workplace and to learn there and elsewhere to develop in employment and society - whose core might be adopted in Europe as a goal for all its citizens.

The debate on the direction of vocational education training policy is an important one. It must be an informed debate so that the decisions taken can be soundly-based and be understood. It is hoped that this issue of the journal will be seen as a contribution to that process.

Steve Bainbridge
Editor in chief