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Book Review: India: preparation for the world of work: education system and school to work transition

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**India: Preparation for the World of Work: Education System and School to Work Transition**, edited by Matthias Pilz, Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2016 £41.99 (hardback) ISBN 978-3-658-08501-8 £32.99 (eBook) ISBN 978-3-658-08502-5 pp361

A concern with competitiveness is as apparent in India as it is elsewhere in the global economy. This interest rests alongside the oft repeated argument that calls for up-skilling and the on-going enhancement of vocational education and training (VET) so as to meet the needs of industry. Pilz, in this edited book, has brought together a number of papers that address Indian VET and its role in the preparation for work. The book is encyclopaedic in its coverage of VET, both formal and informal, and its various manifestations in India. Pilz invited each of his contributors to address seventeen key questions (figure 2 p21): these ranged from programme aims, institutional location, curriculum (compulsory as well as elective components), responsibility for design and implementation, the prescribed and enacted curriculum, pedagogy, through to learner expectations and so on. In addition contributors were asked to comment on the cultural aspects of VET programmes as well as the understanding of society embedded within them. These latter questions addressed the status of VET in comparison with general academic education, the relationship of employers to the curriculum and the mandatory content of VET programmes. Authors were also asked to anticipate future needs with respect to the preparation for work. The questions concerned with the cultural and societal aspects of VET could have been pushed further to consider the broader socio-economic and political context in which VET was located. The result would have been a more fulsome discussion of neo-liberalism, social justice and the specificity of the Indian social formation. To be fair a number of contributors touched on these issues, as did Pilz in the concluding chapter (see for example, Gupta, et al; Palanithurai; Gengaiyah; Badrinath; Sodhi and Wessels). The consequence of attempting to address Pilz's seventeen key questions resulted in many of the chapters being overly descriptive. Contributors were also invited to consider the strengths and challenges encountered in terms of preparation for work, the skills gap, future developments and so on.

The book contains sixteen chapters with a foreword by Shyamal Majumdar. Pilz wrote the introductory and concluding chapters, with the remaining contributions examining VET and the preparation for work in various contexts. Contributors considered provision in primary, upper primary, secondary and higher secondary education; Industrial Training Institutes / Industrial Training Centres; Higher Education / University; Government Initiatives; Initial In-Company Vocational Training; Training of VET Teachers; NGO Initiatives; Further Education, Training and Retraining; Informal Learning; Skill Development under the National Skills Qualifications; Education and Employability in relation to Information Technology and Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES); and finally the socio-economic impact of VET. A number of chapters drew on empirical work to secure their claims. As can be seen the book addresses an impressive range of contexts in order to explore VET and the preparation for work, its close-in discussion providing a very complex picture of Indian VET. In his conclusion Pilz valuably brings together a number of themes that emerged in the book. For those readers unfamiliar with the Indian context Pilz's conclusion and introduction provide a useful entry to the book.

One of the striking features of this edited collection is the similarity of the themes raised with those found in other social formations. Mention has already been made of the interest in competitiveness and the on-going development of labour power to add value to production. In India this is related to

concerns about the skills gap and the shortfall in the development of labour to meet this, leading to the increased significance attached to VET and the preparation for work. In India there is an imperative to take full advantage of the 'demographic dividend' of its youthful population. This has led to an increased proportion of those of working age in the population as against that found in competitor nations such as China and Germany. If this 'demographic dividend' were to be fully mobilised the Indian economy would have a comparative advantage over its competitors. However, this would be dependent on a fully developed and inclusive VET system that was able to overcome the low employability of graduates and address the shortfall of middle level technicians and those with supervisory skills (Majumdar, p9). As one would expect in an edited collection contributors adopt slightly different positions towards VET. The dominant focus is on the development of human capital - an individualistic conceptualisation that mirrors the neo-liberal subject. However, this position is in some tension with those contributors who draw on Gandhian and more collective positions (see for example, Tara and Kumar; Palanithurai; Gengaiyah; Badrinath).

As is the case with many other nations, VET in India is frequently accorded lower status than academic and general education, despite attempts by the state to enhance its prestige. In Indian VET the over valuation of theory can lead to a marginalisation of practice which is detrimental to employability and a smooth transition to work for graduates. These issues are exacerbated by supply side processes that neglect local needs and the requirements of employers. In addition, for those learners who experience multiple disadvantages, the cost of education, even when free, can result in high drop-out rates. These costs include travel, loss of income, purchase of educational materials and so on. There is also a gendered aspect to these processes, with girls being more likely to drop out (Gengaiyah, p224). These processes are also related to rural / urban divisions as well as to the conditions pertaining to a particular state. VET has a significant role to play in informal 'unorganised' labour markets, which comprise something like 95% of the population (Pilz, p348). This has led to a social justice interest in recognising and credentialising informally acquired skills which are seen to facilitate educational progression, the development of additional skills as well as serving to dignify manual and practical labour.

Pilz provides a succinct description of the Indian education system and its pathways leading to a hierarchy of occupational positions from scientists to 'craftsmen', with those having solely elementary education (age 6-14) being described as workers without specific skills (figure 1, p19). Despite there being a clear hierarchy of institutions and provision, once comparisons are made between VET providers and other educational institutions of comparable level, marked discrepancies emerge in terms of facilities and teacher quality in relation to pedagogic competence, theoretical skills and workplace knowledge, often manifested in outdated curricular. These are some of the challenges facing the Indian state which it is seeking to address.

Whilst reading the book I found myself thinking about a number of issues. The discourse of up-skilling allied to the development of competitiveness seems to be embedded in a global policy rhetoric. For many of the contributors to this edited collection, the development of human capital leads to the creation of a vibrant and dynamic economy that benefits society and contributes to the furtherance of social justice. It seems to me that such claims are based upon a particular reading of India's economic future. However, writers such as Davis (2006) suggest the increasing significance of labour surplus to the requirements of capital that has fed into the growth of the informal economy in emerging nations. Such an analysis would pose a rather different future for India. Brown et al

(2011, p64) in *The Global Auction* discuss the manner in which companies can develop “oasis operations” - locating hi-tech factories, offices and research facilities - in low spec neighbourhoods that leave the rest of society largely untouched by their existence’. Such processes could be mapped onto the regional discrepancies that exist between urban and rural India as well as the uneven development of particular states. I guess the point I am trying to make concerns the way in which we understand the development of capitalism and in particular its neo-liberal variant. I think the book would have been strengthened had these and similar arguments been discussed, if only to dismiss them. In addition the book would have benefitted from a debate about the provision of basic income (Davala, et al, 2015). The relevance of this lies in its potential contribution towards the education of girls and women, as well as that of marginalised groups. The point is that such a strategy could offer greater access to VET and in this way contribute to social justice.

I have three quibbles with the book. It would have benefitted from a glossary and index given its extensive coverage of VET across different sectors and providers and the multiplicity of abbreviations used. The contents page would have been improved by the insertion of chapter numbers - readers are frequently referred to chapter numbers and it was somewhat frustrating to have to count these out. Finally, the book would have been significantly improved had it been subject to another round of close-in proof reading. Nevertheless, this is a valuable and encyclopaedic book that covers a vast amount of ground concerning VET and the preparation for work in India. It draws our attention not only to the strengths of the system, but more importantly to the challenges that need to be addressed if India is to narrow the skills gap and maximise its demographic dividend.

*Pilz's India: Preparation for the World of Work*, will be of value to those who have a general interest in VET, comparative education, education and social policy as well as questions of social justice, skill and workplace learning.

## References

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