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Vocational Education: Is There a “Best” Model in the New Global Economy?

Vocational education and training, or education and training intended to prepare individuals directly for particular types of jobs, has been an integral part of the education discussion since the 19th century. The main concepts underlying vocational education are two: (1) an important contribution of public education to society is preparing young people with work skills that—on one hand—help promote industrial and other production and—on the other—increase employability of labor (see, for example, Offe, 1973), and (2) many young people are not sufficiently academically inclined to prepare for more intellectually-based professional jobs requiring university education, hence would do better to take more practical education and training associated with lower level technical, skilled trade, or semi-skilled service work. All societies use VET to develop labor for the workplace, but there are big differences among countries in the role that VET plays and how it is organized.

In this paper, I argue that social conditions in a country are a major factor influencing this role, and that the main conditions are the attitude of young people and employers toward taking risks in the labor market, and values regarding social stability versus mobility. I also argue that there are both positive and negative aspects of systems that rely heavily on highly organized VET systems like Switzerland's, and positive and negative aspects of more loosely coupled (flexible and risk oriented) and less pervasive systems such as in the United States.

Finally, I try to make the case that changes in the world economy are increasing the benefits to more flexible education and training and are thus reducing the benefits to highly structured VET systems. A major issue remains whether risk-averting societies are willing to give up the greater efficiency of more flexible systems in order to maintain collectivized risk.

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Dr. Carnoy is a labor economist with a special interest in the relation between the economy and the educational system. To this end, he studies the US labor market, including the role in that relation of race, ethnicity, and gender, the US educational system, and systems in many other countries. He has studied extensively the impact of vouchers and charter schools on educational quality, and has recently focused on differences in teacher preparation and teacher salaries across countries as well as larger issues of the impact of economic inequality on educational quality.