



Vocational education and training: just transitions in the global south and north

James Avis

To cite this article: James Avis (03 Mar 2025): Vocational education and training: just transitions in the global south and north, Journal of Education and Work, DOI: [10.1080/13639080.2025.2472147](https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2025.2472147)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2025.2472147>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 03 Mar 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Vocational education and training: just transitions in the global south and north

James Avis ^{a,b}

^aThe University of Huddersfield, UK; ^bThe University of Derby, UK

ABSTRACT

The paper calls for an expansive conceptualisation of VET that moves beyond instrumentalism, stressing the needs of employers and labour market. The global south has been marginalised in VET, as have climate emergency, race and ethnicity. These concerns rest alongside a literature addressing 'just transitions'. The paper is framed by a series of conceptual steps, initially engaging with the social construction of VET in the global north, specifically Europe. It relates these to policy science and scholarship arguing doxic constructions have difficulty in accommodating wagelessness and those labouring in informal economies of the global south. Discussions of just transitioning serve to challenge doxic constructions of VET rooted in waged labour. The section *Anthropocene* and *Capitalocene* argues that dominant constructions are complicit in unsustainable practices but could be more than this. The next section engages with the World Economic Forum (WEF) focusing on debates about education, sustainability and green agendas. This is followed by an examination of speeches of leading English politicians that reprise previous themes but also reflect realpolitik and the pursuit of political advantage. *The Complexity that is VET* concludes the paper, noting that VET is both a resource and site of struggle set within a specific socio-economic context.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 May 2024

Accepted 7 February 2025

KEYWORDS

Neo-liberalism; just transitions; capitalocene; supranational organisations

This paper calls for an expansive conceptualisation of vocational education and training (VET) that moves beyond a narrow instrumentalism lodged within a redundant neo-liberalism that stresses the needs of employers and the labour market. Monk et al. (2023) draw our attention to the increasing presence of VET research and researchers from the global south in leading journals.¹ In much the same way as the salience of the global south has previously been played down in VET², so too have questions of race and ethnicity, and the climate emergency. These currents rest alongside a literature that addresses 'just transitions' (Spours and Grainger 2023). It is only recently that such questions have come to the fore in VET journals located in the global north (Avis 2023a; Avis et al. 2023; Avis, Mirchandani, and Warmington 2017; Monk et al. 2023; VET4. 2023). Stomporowski (2023) calls for a revival of VET analyses and for the development of a critical-ecological theory of VET. The paper is framed through a series of conceptual steps. Initially engaging with the social construction of VET in the global north, specifically Europe, it relates these to the notion of policy science and scholarship arguing that doxic constructions have difficulty in accommodating wagelessness as well as those labouring in informal economies in the global south. It is at this juncture that writers such as the VET Africa 4.00 collective and Spours & Grainger's discussion of just transitioning move the analysis forward and challenge

CONTACT James Avis  j.avis@hud.ac.uk

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

doxic constructions of VET rooted in waged labour (and see Spours 2023). The following section discusses Anthropocene and Capitalocene and makes two points arguing that doxic constructions of VET are complicit in unsustainable practices and secondly that VET could be so much more than this. The next section engages with the World Economic Forum (WEF) focusing on debates about education, sustainability and the green agenda. This is followed by an examination of speeches of leading English politicians that reprise many of the previous themes but also reflect *realpolitik* and the pursuit of political advantage. The final section, *The complexity that is VET* concludes the paper, noting that VET is both a resource and site of struggle set within a specific socio-economic context that frames the terrain in which it is placed and the affordances it offers.

Vocational education and training

VET is a contested term which rests on contradictory terrains. There are numerous models of vocational education and pedagogy that encompass notions of competence, socially situated workplace processes, as well as various conceptualisations of expansive learning (Engeström 2010; Fuller and Unwin 2003). These conceptions are related to one another by their interest in the labour market and the role of VET in the development of waged labour. Echoing these ideas The *Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning* (CAVTL 2013, 15) argues that vocational teaching and learning should have a 'clear line of sight to work', that is to say waged labour and relatedly the labour market. Analyses rooted in the global south have much to contribute to this debate through their focus on the conditions VET encounters in the south.

In this section I explore differing conceptualisations of VET and their ideological significance. It is however important that whilst recognising that VET is a contested term, it would be overstretching the argument to claim that a particular construction should be preferred. Rather, the point is that VET is a site of struggle with the particular words used being less important than the manner in which they are mobilised. VET can embody deeply conservative notions whilst simultaneously drawing on progressive themes. For example, an interest in sustainability, the provision of decent waged work, a concern with social mobility as well as an ecological sensitivity, can both rhetorically and materially sit comfortably with progressive and specific currents within capitalism (JVET special issues 2024). In this instance we could think of Mazzucato's *Mission Economy* (Mazzucato 2022) or Schwab's *Stakeholder Capitalism* (with Schwab and Vanham 2021; and see Hutton 1998). This is, of course, presuming that capitalism has the capacity to move beyond the close alignment of capital accumulation with the appropriation of fossil fuels (Camfield 2023; Huber 2022; Malm and Carton 2024; Moore 2015, 2022).

Gonon and Bonoli (2023, 14) from a European perspective describe DACH (German Austrian and Swiss) VET research as a fragmented field characterised by different theoretical approaches which has led them to call for the development of a middle range theory (and see Avis 2023a). They define VET:

as the learning of an occupation or profession, understood not only as the acquisition of technical-practical skills, but also as personal development and socio-professional integration. (my emboldening)

This definition preserves the specificities of the concepts of *Beruf* (occupation which includes a moral/educative dimensions) and *Bildung* (general education) which are set within a notion of *Berufsbildung* (vocational education that encompasses civic education), whilst recontextualising them in a more open theoretical framework (Kuhlee, Steib, and Winch 2022, 384, 391). This allows for the integration of other disciplinary perspectives which go beyond the German pedagogic tradition.

In addition, Gonon and Bonoli (2023, 14) reformulate the general aims of VET:

- (1) **Economic aims** include a wide range of purposes: improving competitiveness and/or providing enterprises with a skilled workforce and thus supporting economic growth.
- (2) **Educational aims** cover among other things safeguarding and supplementing the basic knowledge of compulsory education, furthermore civic education and the promotion of vocational knowledge and skills and encouraging and providing access to higher levels of learning and training.
- (3) **Social policy aims** comprise inter alia the integration into the labour market and society, including disadvantaged groups thereby contributing to the reduction of social inequalities. [my emboldening]

Gonon and Bonoli (2023) conceptualisation of a middle range theory and the aims of VET sit comfortably alongside DACH³ (German, Austrian, Swiss) models of the dual system. They associate VET with 'improving competitiveness and/or providing enterprises with a skilled workforce and thus supporting economic growth' as well as 'the integration into the labour market and society ... [of] disadvantaged groups thereby contributing to the reduction of social inequalities'. In addition, they highlight the civic concerns of VET whose 'Educational aims cover among other things safeguarding and supplementing the basic knowledge of compulsory education, furthermore civic education and the promotion of vocational knowledge and skills and encouraging and providing access to higher levels of learning and training'. Their description of VET is Eurocentric and expresses the current doxa surrounding the field which at best reflects social democratic and meritocratic sensibilities. In a number of respects this approach to VET construes it as applied educational research concerned with the improvement of practice that could be described as a perspective rooted in policy science. Grace (1991) draws upon Fay's (1975) distinction between policy science and policy scholarship.

[policy science] is seductive in its concreteness, its apparently value-free and objective stance, and its direct relation to action. However, what gets lost in this perspective is the examination of the politics and ideologies and interest groups of policy making-process; the making visible of internal contradictions within policy formulations, and the wider structuring and constraining effects of the social and economic relations within which policy making is taking place. All of this is the proper concern of policy scholarship. (Grace 1991, 26)

There are at least two points to be made. Firstly, analyses rooted in policy scholarship can be seen as distanced from the immediacy of practice and the concerns of policy science, being rather more focused on disciplinary discussions in sociology, psychology, political science and philosophy. Secondly, the dichotomy between policy science and scholarship may be overdrawn but is nevertheless suggestive. Much research that describes itself as VET would echo the goal of policy science to engage with and improve practice but would locate itself in what could be described as a left liberalism having asocial democratic orientation. This can be seen in a focus on the inclusion of disadvantaged and marginalised young people together with an acknowledgement of the importance of diversity in terms of opening-up opportunities in education and the labour market. However, left liberalism whilst presenting itself otherwise, would not necessarily go beyond the status quo (Avis 2023c). Zoellner (2022a, 2022b) in his Australian research has explored these questions from a post-structuralist stance examining the ongoing construction of disadvantaged groups. He points out that over the last 50 years the groups designated as disadvantaged have hardly changed (see Zoellner, 2022a, 4–5). However, having said this it is necessary to avoid deterministic analyses and to recognise the salience of agency and struggle.

Elsewhere (Avis 2023b) I have suggested that doxic conceptualisations of VET have difficulty in accommodating wagelessness and those labouring in the informal economy who have limited access to a wage. In addition, it sidesteps VET's potential contribution to 'living' - that is to individual, community and societal wellbeing as well as to the development of 'really useful' labour that produces use-value but which is external to waged and employment relations. There is nothing necessarily about Gonon & Bonoli's conceptualisation of VET that precludes a more expansive and progressive understanding although its articulation with social democracy and its economic aims would seem to constrain such a project.

Fuller and Unwin (2003) explore the significance of workplace cultures for learning, noting that these may be set within a more restrictive or expansive context. In the case of the former there is an affinity with narrow Anglo-Saxon competency constructions of VET and in the latter with the more expansive German notion of,

Kompetenzen [which] is more than a bundle of skills, but is unified through a conception of agency which involves planning, control, co-ordination, self-monitoring and evaluation, as well as the performance of a variety of tasks requiring specific skills. It also includes the ability to appreciate the broader economic and civic implications of occupational action'. (Winch 2012, 179)

In addition, Clarke and Winch (2007, 1) point out that VET addresses 'the social development of labour' implicitly referring to its role in the production and reproduction of labour power and social relations. Consequently, it could develop an 'ability to appreciate the broader economic and civic implications of occupational [and one might add professional] action' (Winch 2012, 179) with such processes being mediated by learner agency. Whilst we may relate expansive cultures of learning to communities of practice external to employment and waged relations these are of a different order to a consideration of the way in which VET contributes to community well-being and so forth. The important point is that VET is a site of struggle and contestation that can be bent to secure interests that go beyond a narrow, or indeed more expansive focus on the needs of employers and the labour market. In the case of the latter such an orientation is embodied in Gonon & Bonoli's (2023, 14) description of VET and to reiterate, its concern with '*the learning of an occupation ... the acquisition of technical-practical skills, but also ... **personal development and socio-professional integration***'. (my emboldening). Whilst expansive learning may be present in much of our lives outside waged employment, can the same be said about the affordances of VET and its doxic construction of the kind proposed by Gonon & Bonoli. I would suggest there is a tension surrounding the manner in which we define VET as a field of theorised practices in which the needs of employers and those of the labour market are prioritised. This can be set against a construction of VET as a set of practices that can be mobilised in the pursuit of social justice and community well-being. However, this may be too stark a dichotomy in as much as there is a pull towards waged labour in the latter construction. Wolf (2022) provides a caution surrounding a finding that is applicable not only to the UK but also to (continental) Europe more generally. She notes a paradox arguing that higher vocational education (HIVE) has become increasingly important whereas 'lower-level' VET is marginalised, engaged in by disadvantaged groups and has little occupational purchase undermining its claim to offer social justice, instead pointing towards its warehousing function as a form of social containment.

I am not convinced that the doxic or Eurocentric definition of VET would be applicable to the constituencies addressed by the VET Africa 4.0 collective and their research in Sub-Saharan Africa. It could be suggested that such a critique is unfair, if directed towards Gonon & Bonoli's analysis as their paper was not concerned with these broader questions but addressed the DACH/European context in which VET constitutes a recognisable and definable field of education research. However, if we considered papers published in journals such as *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, *Journal of Education and Work*, *International Journal for Research in Vocational Education and Training* (see footnote 2), we can see an affinity with Gonon and Bonoli's paper and their construction of VET. It is against this context that VET4 (2023) argues for a reimagining or reframing of VET to incorporate a political-economy-ecology lens, as do Spours and Grainger (2023). These authors argue that in the context of the climate emergency mainstream VET has failed to adequately respond to these 'new' conditions and develop an ecological sensibility as well as an appropriate conceptualisation of the field. For the most part the relationship of VET to ecology has been lukewarm often ignored and marked by an absence in dedicated VET journals (Lotz-Sisitka, McGrath, and Ramsarup 2024). VET4 has similarly argued that the wider literature that addresses political economy and political ecology has had little to say about VET, in for example education for sustainable development. The current work of the collective seeks to rectify this failing exploring the intersections between political

economy and ecology arguing for a VET that moves beyond a concern with developing skills for extractive and polluting industries towards one that serves a more positive social and environmental impact. It is at this juncture that their value position comes to the fore as can be seen in subsequent discussions of the notion of ‘just transitioning’ and ‘transformation’ (and see Spours and Grainger 2023). This stance seeks to include those engaged in the informal economy who labour outside the mainstream, calling for an expanded version of VET that moves beyond doxic constructions rooted in the global North. VET4’s arguments are firmly rooted in the global south and in particular Sub-Saharan Africa and make an important contribution to emerging debates that call for a rethinking and reframing of VET. This is set within a commitment to ‘just transitioning’ and the existential crisis of the climate emergency.

Just transitioning and transformation

In a similar manner to VET4, Spours and Grainger (2023) grapple with the existential threat that the climate emergency poses for humanity. In an important paper they examine just transitioning and just transformation. They write (Spours and Grainger 2023, 1)

The Just Transition (JT) can be understood as a combinational strategic concept (transition to net zero combined with climate justice) to support the transitioning to a more sustainable, socially just and peaceful world.

This discussion is closely aligned with Spours (2019) examination of inclusive social ecosystems, that can be contrasted with elite entrepreneurial and high skills ecosystems (see Spours 2019, figure 1). Inclusive ecosystems point towards an expansive conceptualisation of VET, necessitating a significant role for institutions such as colleges and universities to serve as anchor institutions supporting such projects. Skills ecosystems, though seeking to move beyond skills supply orthodoxies are nevertheless primarily orientated towards the world of work and waged labour. For Spour’s Social Ecology Model (SEM) there is a,

recognition of the relationship between economic and urban development [which] has introduced **‘living’ as an explicit and integral feature of human ecosystems**. Through a critique of the inequalities and urban displacement effects of the entrepreneurial ecosystem model, **a central concern of the SEM is how economic, social and educational development can become more inclusive**. (my emboldening Spours 2019, 14)

Note this is an aspirational historical project that coheres around a sense of fairness born of the existential ecological crises facing humanity. Spours comments,

*A social ecosystem is conceived as an evolving, **place-based** social formation that connects the worlds of **working, living and learning** with the purpose of nurturing inclusive, sustainable economic, social and educational development in diverse communities, localities and sub-regions.* (Italics in the original, my emboldening Spours 2019, 15)

There are several points to be made. Firstly, JT places at its heart a concern with sustainable living. Secondly, the examination of high skill ecosystems is based on retrospective analyses whereas the analysis of SEM is prospective. Because SEM looks towards the future it becomes a site of struggle, one addressing just transitions and transformations which seeks to include the excluded. Finally, JT is for Spours and Grainger (2023, 4) ‘a combinational, multi-actor and coalition-based’ concept which calls for the development of a settlement or coalition that brings together a range of constituencies who are able to ‘manage’ the tensions that may arise. There is an affinity here with arguments about decolonisation and the call for reparation for the harms visited upon the global south by the north) as well as those that address the foundational economy⁴ (Arday and Mirza 2018; Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancioğlu 2018; Foundational Economy Collective 2022; Sriprakash et al. 2021). Spours and Grainger (2023, 3) point out that since the 1990s JT has gained increasing support from ‘trade unions and the labour movement, climate activists, national governments and international institutions and certain business organisations’. These developments also align with Compass’s New Settlement Project that brings together a range of constituents committed to radical change which would include progressive elements of capital (Goss 2024). It should be noted here that there is an echo

here of pluralism and stakeholding analyses, the dangers of which are discussed in subsequent sections. Spours and Grainger also note that there are different interpretations of JT ranging from the 'pragmatic to the transformative' but what these have in common is a concern with the climate crisis, the inclusion of marginal groups and the well-being of all members of society. That is to say, we share a common cause to transcend our dependence on fossil fuels thereby shifting towards a sustainable and environmentally just economy. Underpinning these arguments is a focus on the socio-economic context and the manner in which this may or may not facilitate the JT project. As Spours and Grainger (2023, 3) point out certain business organisations have aligned themselves with JT, a concern with sustainability and the pursuit of Net Zero having an affinity with the New Settlement. It should be noted capital is not all of a piece and could include adaptive capitalism which may or may not be able to transcend its erstwhile dependence on fossil fuels (Malm and Carton 2024).

Anthropocene and Capitalocene

At the risk of being accused of dichotomous and over-simplified thinking the notion of the anthropocene implies that the climate crisis is a result of our actions and importantly that we share a common cause in attempting to resolve it. Clearly, and as the discussion of JT implies, those in the global north have a responsibility towards the global south, that is to say to the excluded, in much the same way as the privileged in any society have a responsibility towards the disenfranchised of their own communities. However, and this is crucial, we should not forget the agency of the excluded as illustrated in the work of VET 4, and must avoid pathologising them as deficient. The capitalocene sets the climate emergency in the context of class society and the pursuit of accumulation by capital. As with the anthropocene, the capitalocene is characterised by divergent interpretations as to its periodicity and the processes involved. For Moore (2015) the origins of the capitalocene lie in the 15th century following the embryonic emergence of class society. Whereas for Huber (2022) the use of coal and steam in the early years of the industrial revolution is the point which marked the shift from the Holocene to the anthropocene. Notably, Soriano (2022) argues that conceptualisations of the capitalocene and anthropocene fail to go much beyond Marx's theory of value. Nevertheless, he along with writers such as Huber and Moore suggest the climate crisis is irrecoverably associated with capitalism, its accumulation strategies and the declining rate of profit (and see Callinicos 2023). Within this context there are two points which are relevant to VET. Firstly, and as McGrath (2023, 132) notes,

Mainstream, formal VET is complicit in unsustainable practices that were integral to industrialisation and the emergence of the Capitalocene. In colonised parts of the South ... a combination of the negative effects of global industrialised capitalism ... produced a form of vocationalism that was tied to the extractive logic of colonial capitalism.

Secondly, and as already argued VET is so much more than its public provision. Some years ago, Anderson (2009) pointed out that VET is embroiled in a productivist paradigm orientated towards economic growth and waged work rooted in neo-liberalism. Such a stance silences the way in which VET could serve alternative conceptualisations of labour. McGrath argues that in the global south and in particular Sub-Saharan Africa, vocationalism was tied to the logic of colonial capitalism. However, in the period following the end of the 2nd World War (1945) forms of social democracy were developed in the global north which served to soften and constrain the excesses of capitalism with capital adapting to these conditions. However, it is important to recognise that such constraints failed to overcome the antagonisms surrounding capitalist relations. Concessions were won as a result of working-class struggle but were subsequently withdrawn when the balance of power between labour and capital shifted in favour of the latter. It is important not to homogenise the neo-colonial experiences of the global south and those of social democracy in the global north. We could

for example contrast the neo-colonial experiences of South Africa with that of India, or of social democracy in Sweden compared with England. It is necessary to acknowledge the distinctiveness of the specific social formation and the manner in which neo-colonialist and neo-liberalist relations are played out. We need to be attentive to both specificity and mediation as well as the way in which specific capitals adapt to the conditions encountered. In the next section I consider the relationship of WEF as an example of a supranational organisations to the current socio-economic context.

World economic forum

Elsewhere I have considered the forms of engagement that supranational institutions have and are making in the current conjuncture.⁵ In this section I engage with WEF which in numerous publications draw our attention to the polycrises facing the world. WEF's [2023a](#) *Global Risk Report* which derives from data collected from 1200 'experts' recruited from 'academia, business, government, the international community and civil society' (WEF [2023a](#), 5). The report highlights a number of well-known risks including: the erosion of social cohesion, societal polarisation, rising inequality, the cost-of-living crisis, the climate emergency and so on. All these crises require societal intervention to ameliorate their impact. WEF calls for the development of a socially just society in which the excesses of neo-liberalism are addressed as well as an engagement with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁶ Echoing these concerns the European Green Deal describes itself as being 'about improving the well-being of people. Making Europe climate-neutral and protecting our natural habitat will be good for people, planet and economy. No one will be left behind (European Commission [2019](#) online)'. In a similar vein WEF envisages an inclusive society in which no one is left behind and all talents are mobilised but at the same time is irrecoverably linked to the status quo and existing forms of capitalist relations. A sense of this affinity can be gleaned from Liaz and Strauss' forward to *Green Returns* (WEF [2023b](#), 3) they write.

The transition to a sustainable food system represents an incredible opportunity to drive progress against **climate change . . . Given the growing amount of capital for sustainability investments to reduce portfolio carbon intensity and climate risk exposure, now is a critical time to invest.** Together, as we align efforts and pool resources towards supporting farmers and consumers in a transformation of food systems, we offer the world time to achieve climate action now. Embracing bold collaboration, fit-for-purpose innovation and public-private investment, we can secure a healthier, more resilient planet. The economic and social dividends of investing in our farmers, and in our plates will be far-reaching, ensuring a sustainable, thriving and equitable world for all. (my emboldening)

I guess I should qualify my earlier statement that WEF is aligned with existing forms of capitalist relations though more correctly their position rests with a model of stakeholder capitalism or what could be described as adaptive capitalism. This model is softer and less abrasive having some sort of commitment to sustainability and green agendas. However, it carries with it the antagonisms that surround capitalist relations. This is not to forget that this is an ideological construction developed by capital's organic intellectuals (Schwab with Vanham [2021](#)). The full title of Schwab⁷ with Vanham's book '*Stakeholder capitalism: a global economy that works for progress, people and planet*' reflects the pluralistic and corporatist stance of this orientation to capital. There is one more caveat. These relations are sites of struggle that reflect not only the balance of power between labour and capital but also the distribution of power within these constituencies. We could, for example, think about fossil fuel capitalism being set against green capitalism, or finance against manufacturing. Notably, green agendas are becoming ubiquitous as can be seen in the interventions made by various supranational organisations such as the ILO ([undated](#)) WEF, the UN's 17 SDG, and in numerous green new deals. In the case of the latter, we could consider the EU's Green New Deal which seeks 'to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy with zero net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050' (CEDEFOP [2021](#), 26). The implication here is that a successful economy is one in which growth is pursued and is echoed in the

European Commission's press release of the 15 November⁸ (2023) which notes that 'growth has lost momentum, but a rebound is still expected'.

The English socio-political context as a case in point

Green agendas are a feature of the socio-political context in many social formations in the global north, frequently committing to the pursuit of Net Zero, seen as a social good which in turn is underpinned by the pursuit of economic growth (European Commission 2019, 2023; Sunak 2023). Yet this commitment is mediated by realpolitik and the pursuit of political advantage. To illustrate this I draw on English examples. In 2023 the governing Conservative party fought and won a by-election by opposing the extension of London's Ultra Low Emission Zone. This has led at least some commentators to question the party's green credentials (Scott 2023). This policy seems to be a retreat from the then conservative government's, 2020 *Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution* and in particular its commitment to accelerate the shift to zero emission vehicles (HM 2020). This can be set against the Labour Party's (2023) adoption of a slogan echoing Mazzucato's 'mission economy' (Mazzucato 2022) which called for A 'Mission-Driven' Government to end 'Sticking Plaster' politics (and see Starmer 2024). This sought to,

Secure the highest sustained growth in the G7, with good jobs and productivity growth in every part of the country making everyone, not just a few, better off.

Make Britain a clean energy superpower to create jobs, cut bills and boost energy security with zero-carbon electricity by 2030, accelerating to net zero. (Party 2023, 3)

Rachel Reeves (2023) the then shadow and now chancellor of the exchequer in her speech to the annual Labour Party conference asserted that,

The lifeblood of a growing economy is business investment. It is investment that allows businesses to expand, create jobs and compete with international rivals, with new plants, factories and research labs coming to Britain – not Germany, France or America.

In less flamboyant terms Ed Davey, the leader of the Liberal Democrats in his conference speech (2023) pointed out that 'We need to get our economy growing strongly again'. Davey called for a plan that not only supports entrepreneurs to build small businesses and create worthwhile, well-paid jobs in their communities but also to be able to address the climate crisis and reach net zero.

It could be suggested that I have cherry picked these quotations and whilst they are somewhat arbitrary, they serve to illustrate a common interest in the pursuit of economic growth. This is set within what may be described as a restricted environmentalism, or at least a pragmatism that echoes pluralism as well as stakeholder capitalism as argued for by WEF. That is to say, the necessity to balance the 'conflicting' and 'antagonistic' interests of stakeholders in order to establish some sort of workable consensus (see Avis 2021b). Such a process can easily lead to a form of domestication where capitalist interests are secured. Yet at the same time, if this process is pushed to its limit it could open up a space for more radical interventions. This is a potential that lies within Spours and Grainger's and Compass' call for a new settlement (Goss 2024).

The complexity that is VET

At this stage in the paper, it is necessary to raise two caveats. Firstly, I have been writing somewhat abstractly about VET and have skirted around the vastness of its disciplinary field, which ranges from forms of craft work through to veterinary nurses, etc. Secondly, I have not seriously considered the political role of VET in the warehousing of young people and its relationship to the reproduction of inequality and class structure. Rather, this paper has argued for an expansive conceptualisation of VET that goes beyond a narrow instrumentalism lodged within neo-liberalism. To that end it notes a number of contributions to the wider debates that

address VET. Amongst these are the contribution of academics and practitioners that are associated with VET4 who have argued for an expansive understanding that is suited to the Sub-Saharan African context. In some respects, this aligns with an emerging debate in the global north about race and ethnicity. This embryonic discussion can be articulated with wider concerns about decolonisation as well as the demand for reparation from north to south. This issue is clearly present and partially addressed in Higher Education and school-based education but has tended to be overlooked in relation to VET and raises the question of how it should respond. At this juncture doxic understandings come into play – the dominant European tradition that emphasises occupational preparation, the acquisition of technical skills and personal development. Here, I draw on Gonon and Bonali to illustrate this trajectory, but it can easily be discerned by a quick scan of the papers published in the field's journals. The question then becomes how should the field respond? Stomporowski's answer is to call for the development of a critical-ecological theory of VET, which resonates with the discussion of just transition (JT) combining an aspiration to net zero with climate justice. The orientation here is towards the inclusion of those who are at the margins of society with VET being adjusted to 'support the transitioning to a more sustainable, socially just and peaceful world' (Spours and Grainger 2023, 1).

During December 2023, the UN's COP28 was in full flow and there was a clarion call for environmental justice and the development of responses to the climate emergency. Notably, environmental and climate justice are both contestable terms. This then raises the question about the broader context in which these issues are set – the anthropocene and capitalocene. In some versions, and to be somewhat crude, the former term attributes the ecological crisis to human action. We share collective responsibility and have a duty to resolve it. Whereas the latter term attributes blame to the accumulation strategies of capital, consequently class struggle that seeks to overthrow capitalism is at the same time a struggle for environmental justice. In effect the concerns of JT with a sustainable and socially just and peaceful world articulates with such an anticapitalist project. The demand of Supranational organisations for action to address the climate emergency support various versions of green new deals and validate the pursuit of economic growth, thereby aligning themselves with what could be described as green capitalism. This is inevitably a flawed strategy in that it fails to address the antagonisms surrounding capitalist relations. However, we should not forget that these relations are a site of struggle and contestation (Huber 2022; Malm and Carton 2024).

It may seem slightly odd to have ended this paper with a brief discussion of the English socio-political and economic context, where I draw on the speeches of leading politicians. The point is that these share a common framework; a commitment to green new deals, the pursuit of Net Zero and economic growth that broadly accepts the economic status quo. There is a direct continuity between these approaches and those of supranational organisations such as WEF, the UN with its 17 SDGs and the ILO. There are of course exceptions to this orientation which are found in various green social movements such as Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil, the Green party and Compass⁹ all of whom seek to shape a new common sense that transcends capitalist relations. These operate with a more expansive conceptualisation of VET that sits alongside the politics of just transformations. Compass for example, calls for the building of a new settlement that goes beyond the limitations of stakeholder capitalism. This project 'seeks to establish the guiding principles and building blocks of a New Settlement that is much more equal, democratic and sustainable' (Goss 2024, 3). Its proponents are aware of the dangers of co-optation – it becomes a site of contestation and struggle in the pursuit of a fairer and Juster society, one that encompasses climate justice, the commitment to Net Zero and a secular commitment to radical democracy.¹⁰ A shift towards what could be described as adaptive capitalism that engages with the new settlements could be part of this trajectory.

I would like to close with a quote from Ramsarup, McGrath, and Lotz-Sisitka's (2023, 1) '*Reframing skills ecosystems for sustainable and just futures*' which serves as a provocation to subsequent analyses.

The current dominant approach to vocational education and training (VET) does not work in theory, policy or practice in current contexts of unsustainability and global inequality. Nor is it fit for future purpose. This particularly relates both to the environmental crisis and to the inclusion of all those who are excluded from formal VET systems ...

VET approaches have been largely inadequate in responding to the multidimensional nature of the contemporary social and ecological sustainability crises, partly because these issues have been treated as externalities to mainstream economic activity and work practices, a problem that results from separating economy from ecology and society (VET Africa 4.0 Collective, 2023). These problems with VET and development are global but can perhaps be seen most clearly from vantage points and experiences of people in the global South. [Sub-Saharan Africa]

In this paper I have touched on a number of conceptualisations of VET. These have ranged from narrow employment-based understandings rooted in neo-liberalism that emphasise competitive and marketised relations to more expansive notions that are reflected in the discussion of just transitions. In addition, we could consider the relationship of VET to the reproduction of social and economic relations, that is to say, the reproduction of inequality and its role in warehousing young people. It is important to recognise that VET is both a resource and site of struggle set within a specific socio-economic context which frames the terrain in which it is placed and the affordances it offers. It is easy enough to criticise the narrow version of VET as being deeply conservative. The point is that we should be cautious about attributing an inherently progressive politics to expansive versions of JT and VET. This is after all an empirical question that cannot be determined by theoretical fiat being a site of contestation and struggle shaped by the balance of power between capital and labour.

Notes

1. For the purpose of this paper Journal of Vocational Education and Training, Journal of Education and Work, International Journal for Research in Vocational Education and Training.
2. But note the significant body of work that addresses India in the page of IJRVT and JVET.
3. DACH German, Austrian, Swiss.
4. 'the well-being of Europe's citizens depends less on individual consumption and more on their social consumption of essential goods and services – from water and retail banking, to schools and care homes – in what we call the foundational economy... if the aim is citizen well-being and flourishing for the many not the few... politics needs to be refocused on foundational consumption and securing universal minimum access and quality' (Foundational Economy Collective 2022 1).
5. see for example and especially chapter 2 Socio-Technical Imaginaries and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, 24ff in Avis 2021a and see Avis 2018.
6. see for 17 SDGs <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>
UN Sustainable Development Goals

Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere

Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries

Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development. (UN 2015: 18)

for Sustainable Development. (UN 2015: 18)

7. Klaus Schwab is the founder and executive chair of the World Economic Forum which aims to 'bring[s] together government, businesses and civil society to improve the state of the world' (undated <https://www.weforum.org/>).
8. European Commission press release 2023, Autumn 2023 economic forecast: A modest recovery ahead after a challenging year. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_5743. Writes online "The European economy has lost momentum this year against the background of a high cost of living, weak external demand and monetary tightening. While economic activity is expected to gradually recover going forward, the European Commission's Autumn Forecast revises EU GDP growth down compared to its summer projections. Inflation is estimated to have dropped to a two-year low in the euro area in October and is set to continue declining over the forecast horizon.
9. Extinction Rebellion Extinction Rebellion is an international movement that uses non-violent civil disobedience in an attempt to halt mass extinction and minimise the risk of social collapse, <https://extinctionrebellion.uk>, Just Stop Oil is a nonviolent civil resistance group demanding the UK Government stop licensing all new oil, gas and coal projects. <https://juststopoil.org/>, Green Party, <https://greenparty.org.uk>, Compass is a democratic left pressure group, think tank and an alliance-based organisation that spans the Labour Left, Social Liberals, Greens, progressive nationalists SNP/ Plaid and non-aligned activists. Its membership is committed to building a popular democratic movement for change across the UK and internationally informed by a vision of The Good Society. compassonline.org.uk
10. A Note on Methodology Although the paper is not strictly speaking a literature review I was invited to comment on this by my reviewers. In contradistinction to systematic reviews which can rest on a quasi-technicist and positivist approaches to empirical research the paper represents a particular type of review that seeks to engage with debates in the field. Inevitably I am positioned as a participant in these discussions having selected the particular themes and issues to be explored. They also questioned the selection of politicians in the section The English Socio-Political context. The ambition here was to note the similar orientation to economic growth, green agendas and commitment to the development of a competitive economy.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the reviewers for their helpful and challenging comments on an earlier version of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

James Avis is an emeritus professor at the University of Huddersfield and Professor of post-compulsory education at the University of Derby.

ORCID

James Avis  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7404-938X>

References

- Anderson, D. 2009. "Productivism and Ecologism: Changing Dis/Courses in TVET." In *Work, Learning and Sustainable Development*, edited by J. Fien, R. Maclean, and Man-Gon Park, 35–57. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Arday, J., and H. Mirza Eds. 2018. *Dismantling Race in Higher Education*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Avis, J. 2018. "Socio-Technical Imaginary of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and Its Implications for Vocational Education and Training: A Literature Review." *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 70 (3): 337–363. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2018.1498907>.

- Avis, J. 2021a. *Vocational Education in the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Education and Employment in a Post-Work Age*. London: Palgrave.
- Avis, J. 2021b. "Beyond Neo-Liberalism a New Settlement - Three Crises and Post-Secondary Education." *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 19 (1): 158–183. <http://www.jceps.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/19-1-6.pdf>.
- Avis, J. 2023a. "Reflections on Bwp@ Special Issue 19. In: Bwp@ Spezial 19: Retrieving and Recontextualising VET Theory". Edited by Esmond, B./Ketschau, T. J. Schmees, J. K./Steib, C./Wedekind, 1–11. Online: 30.08.2023. https://www.bwpat.de/spezial19/avis_spezial19.pdf.
- Avis, J. 2023b. "A Critical Review of Debates Surrounding Race/Ethnicity and TVET." *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 75 (1): 175–184. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2022.2158360>.
- Avis, J. 2023c. "In Pursuit of Equity Vocational Education and Training and Social Justice." *Research in Post Compulsory Education* 28 (3): 439–459. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2023.2221119>.
- Avis, J., K. Mirchandani, and P. Warmington. 2017. "Editorial." *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 69 (3): 287–291. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2017.1304613>.
- Avis, J., K. Orr, J. Papier, and P. Warmington. 2023. "Editorial: Special Issue TVET Race and Ethnicity in the Global South and North." *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 75 (1): 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2023.2156660>.
- Bhambra, G., D. Gebrial, and K. Nişancioğlu Eds. 2018. *Decolonising the University*. London: Pluto.
- Callinicos, A. 2023. *The New Age of Catastrophe*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Camfield, D. 2023. *Future on Fire*. Oakland: PM Press.
- CAVTL. 2013. *It's About Work . . . Excellent Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning: The Summary Report of the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning*, Coventry LSIS. Accessed November 6, 2013. <http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/content/eg5937>.
- Cedefop. 2021. *Digital, Greener and More Resilient. Insights from Cedefop's European Skills Forecast*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/154094>.
- Clarke, L., and C. Winch Eds. 2007. Introduction. Clarke, L. Winch, C. *Vocational Education*, 1–18. London: Routledge.
- Davey. 2023. *Speech to Conference*. <https://www.libdems.org.uk/news/article/ed-davey-a23>.
- Engeström, Y. 2010. *From Teams to Knots: Activity-Theoretical Studies of Collaboration and Learning at Work*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, paperback edition.
- European Commission. 2019. *What is the European Green New Deal*. https://www.google.com/search?q=eu+new+green+deal+pdf&rlz=1C1GCFX_enGB1062GB1062&oq=&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUqBggDEEUYOzIGCAAQRRg5MgYIARBFGEAYBgGCEEUYOzIGCAMQRRg7MgYIBBBFGDwyBgGFEEUYPDI GCAYQRRg8MgYIBxBFGDzSAQg4MTkzajBqNKgCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8.
- European Commission press release. 2023. "Autumn 2023 Economic Forecast: A Modest Recovery Ahead After a Challenging Year." https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_5743.
- Fay, B. 1975. *Social Theory and Political Practice*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Foundational Economy Collective. 2022. *Foundational Economy*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Fuller, A., and L. Unwin. 2003. "Learning as Apprentices in the Contemporary UK Workplace: Creating and Managing Expansive and Restrictive Participation." *Journal of Education & Work* 16 (4): 407–426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1363908032000093012>.
- Gonon, P., and E. Bonoli. 2023. "The Concepts of Vocational Competence and Competency: False Friends in International Policy Learning." In *Bwp@ Spezial 19: Retrieving and Recontextualising VET Theory*, edited by B. Esmond/T. J. Ketschau/J. K. Schmees/C. Steib/V. Wedekind, 1–20. Accessed August 30 2023. https://www.bwpat.de/spezial19/gonon_bonoli_spezial19.pdf.
- Goss, S. 2024. *The New Settlement for a Better Society*. <https://www.compassonline.org.uk/publications/the-new-settlement-for-a-better-society>.
- Grace, G. 1991. "Welfare Labourism versus the New Right: The Struggle in New Zealand's Education Policy." *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 1 (1–2): 25–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0962021910010103>.
- HM government. 2020. *The Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution: Building Back Better, Supporting Green Jobs, and Accelerating Our Path to Net Zero*. November 2020. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fb5513de90e0720978b1a6f/10_POINT_PLAN_BOOKLET.pdf.
- Huber, M, T. 2022. *Climate Change as Class War*. London: Verso.
- Hutton, W. 1998. *The Stakeholding Society: Writings on Politics and Economics*. Oxford: Polity.
- ILO. undated. *Decent Work and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/sdg-2030/lang-en/index.htm>.
- Journal of Vocational Education and Training. 2024. *Special Issue, Towards Vocational Education and Training and Skills Development for Sustainable Futures*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13636820.2024.2317574>.
- Kuhlee, D., C. Steib, and C. Winch. 2022. "Founding German Vocational Education: Kerschensteiner, Spranger and Fischer as Key Figures in the Classical German VET." *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 56 (3): 383–398. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12669>.
- Lotz-Sisitka, H., S. McGrath, and P. Ramsarup. 2024. "Oil, Transport, Water and Food: A Political-Economy-Ecology Lens on VET in a Climate Changing World *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*", online *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 76 (2): 281–306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2024.2320910>.

- Malm, A., and W. Carton. 2024. *Overshoot*. London: Verso.
- Mazzucato, M. 2022. *Mission Economy*. London: Penguin books.
- McGrath, S. 2023. "Education for the Great Socio-Ecological Transition." *Religion and Development* 2 (1): 126–145. <https://doi.org/10.30965/27507955-20230019>.
- Monk, D., P. Molebatsi, S. McGrath, L. Metelerkamp, S. Adrupio, G. Openjuru, G. Robbins, and T. Tshabalala. 2023. "Revisiting VET research paradigms: Critical perspectives from the South." *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2023.2280972>.
- Moore, J. W. 2015. *Capitalism in the Web of Life*. London: Verso.
- Moore, J. W. 2022. *Work, Energy, and the Value of Nature*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOR3Rd7CUwI>.
- Party, Labour. 2023. A 'Mission-Driven' Government to End 'Sticking Plaster' Politics. <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/5-Missions-for-a-Better-Britain.pdf>.
- Ramsarup, P., S. McGrath, and H. Lotz-Sisitka. 2023. "Reframing skills ecosystems for sustainable and just futures." *International Journal of Educational Development* 101:1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2023.102836>.
- Reeves, R. 2023. "Conference Speech 'Labour is Ready to Rebuild Britain'." <https://labourlist.org/2023/10/rachel-reeves-labour-conference-2023-speech-economy-fiscal-rules-waste-housing/>.
- Schwab, K., and P. Vanham. 2021. *Stakeholder Capitalism: A Global Economy That Works for Progress, People and Planet*. London: Wiley.
- Scott, J. 2023. *What are Rishi Sunak's Policies on Net Zero and the Green Agenda - and What Could Be scrapped?*. <https://news.sky.com/story/what-are-the-conservatives-green-policies-and-what-could-be-scrapped-12927047#:~:text=or%20the%20axe%3F,Reaching%20net%20zero%20by%202050,from%201990%20levels%20by%202050>.
- Soriano, C. 2022. "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and Other "-Cenes": Why a Correct Understanding of Marx's Theory of Value is Necessary to Leave the Planetary Crisis." *Monthly Review*: 1–29. Accessed November 1 2022. <https://monthlyreview.org/2022/11/01/anthropocene-capitalocene-and-other-cenes-why-a-correct-understanding-of-marxs-theory-of-value-is-necessary-to-leave-the-planetary-crisis/>.
- Spours, K. 2019. A Social Ecosystem Model: Conceptual Developments and Implications for VET. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10082170/3/Spours_Social%20ecosystems%20Final.pdf.
- Spours, K. 2023. "BOOK REVIEW Transitioning Vocational Education and Training in Africa: A Social Skills Ecosystem Perspective, VET Africa 4.0" Collective, Bristol University Press, ISBN: 978-1-5292-2463-4 1-9 *Journal of vocational education and training*, online 1-12 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13636820.2023.2258521?src=>.
- Spours, K., and P. Grainger. 2023. "The Mediating Role of Further and Higher Education in a Just Transition Social Ecosystem, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*" online 1-15 *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 76 (2): 307–330. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13636820.2023.2258521>.
- Sriprakash, A., D. Nally, K. Myers, and P. Ramos-Pinto. 2021. "Learning with the Past: Racism, Education and Reparative Futures". Paper commissioned for the UNESCO Futures of Education Report.
- Starmer, K. 2024. *PM Speech on Plan for Change*. Accessed December 5 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-on-plan-for-change-5-december-2024>.
- Stomporowski, S. 2023. "Vocational Training Theory Footprints in Times of Climate Change – Aspects of a Critical Ecological Position." In *Bwp@ Spezial 19: Retrieving and Recontextualising VET Theory*, edited by B. Esmond/ T. J. Ketschau/ J. K. Schmees/ C. Steib/ V. Wedekind, 1–35. Accessed August 30 2023. https://www.bwpat.de/spezial19/stomporowski_en_spezial19.pdf.
- Sunak, R. 2023. "Conservative Party Annual Conference Speech". Manchester October www.walesonline.co.uk/news/uk-news/rishi-sunaks-full-speech-conservative-27843617.
- VET 4 VET Africa 4.0 Collective. 2023. *Transitioning Vocational Education and Training in Africa: A Social Skills Ecosystem Perspective*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- WEF. 2023a. *Global Risks Report*. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risks_Report_2023.pdf.
- WEF. 2023b. *Green Returns: Unleashing the Power of Finance for Sustainable Food Systems*. <https://www.weforum.org/publications/green-returns-unleashing-the-power-of-finance-for-sustainable-food-systems/>.
- Winch, C. 2012. *Dimensions of Expertise*. London: Continuum.
- Wolf, A. 2022. *The Paradox of Vocational Education, Why is Academic Education Triumphant in a Skills Hungry Labour Market*. December 7. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbMnn0fWVBc>.
- Zoellner, D. 2022a. "Fashioning Groups That Inhabit society's Fringes: The Work of Australian VET Research into Disadvantage." *Journal of Education Policy* 39 (1): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2022.2156621>.
- Zoellner, D. 2022b. "Applying Discourse Analysis to Australian National VET Policy: More Than One, Less Than Many." *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, online, 76 (4): 776–794. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2022.2088605>.