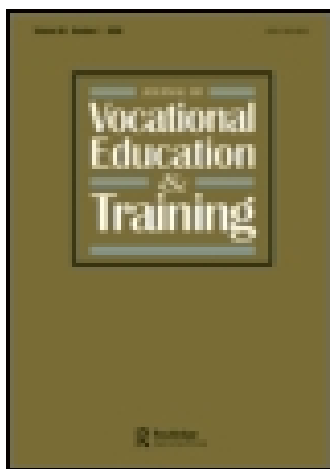


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### A world of difference? Research on higher and vocational education in Germany and England

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## BOOK REVIEW

**A world of difference? Research on higher and vocational education in Germany and England**, by Hubert Ertl, Munich, Herbert Utz Verlag, 2014, 234 pp., €42 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-8316-4368-4

Few scholars, even among those that devote attention to issues of learning beyond schooling, can command in-depth knowledge of multiple countries over time, in particular those with different national languages. Even fewer can do so providing insights into institutional change in two educational sectors on equal terms. This is especially so in research on higher education (HE) and vocational education and training (VET) because the academic and policy discussions have rarely been integrated. This reflects largely separate scientific communities, despite the rising importance of addressing this nexus, especially with regard to questions of permeability and social inequality. Hubert Ertl is well placed to contribute precisely to this all-too-rare brand of scholarship. He was educated (and has taught) at prestigious universities in Germany and England, led numerous research projects on students and their transitions between these sectors, and been embedded in transnational education research networks for decades now, including the Anglo-German Educational Research Group. In *A world of difference? Research on higher and vocational education in Germany and England*, Ertl draws on diverse pieces of his own scholarship (and those of his research collaborators) on both national contexts to offer a contemporary picture of developments in vocational and HE and the impact of these reforms on individual education pathways and, ultimately, educational and social inequalities. Structured in five substantive chapters and brief introductory and concluding chapters, the monograph collects and builds on a considerable body of work published over roughly a dozen years (more than twenty sole- and co-authored contributions are cited).

The book's overarching argument is that recent reforms have strengthened intranational heterogeneity in terms of institutional frameworks and governance due to culturally specific policy formation and reception processes – and in contrast to the frequently postulated homogenising impact of internationalisation. While this claim may reflect conventional wisdom in comparative and international education, empirically the emphasis on England (one nation within the UK) in comparison with a non-disaggregated Federal Republic of Germany reduces the volume's explanatory scope. Here, links to the Varieties of Capitalism approach that compares these two countries as liberal market vs. coordinated market economies could have leveraged insights from the burgeoning political economy of skills literature. While the analyses cover two decades, readers seeking an explicitly comparative analysis of vocational and HE systems in Germany and the UK will find few conclusive answers, but much food for thought. Indeed, the individual chapters focus mainly on the within-case analysis of crucial – and increasingly researched – specific topics in education research, such as marketisation and tuition fees, student

learning experiences, transitions between vocational and HE, or perceptions, attractiveness and evaluations relating to courses of study, qualifications and diplomas.

Creatively, the introduction provides a model of the institutional framework proposed and the various levels of context and types of scientific teamwork in which the research was conducted (Figure 0.1). The author's interpretation of Bronfenbrenner's model of collaboration is paired with a largely Germanic hermeneutic approach to research production and findings. Further elaboration of the cultural conditions, intellectual styles and methodological premises shared in the various research projects would have been helpful for the reader to grasp the diversity represented and distilled in the volume.

In a mixed methods approach, the first chapter thoroughly analyses not only the debates in English HE relating to the impact of vastly risen tuition fees on universities, but also how this has changed students' perceptions and decision-making processes. In an era of expansion and marketisation of HE, credentials are viewed more than ever in terms of a necessary individual investment; post-secondary education is considered primarily a private good – in distinct contrast to Germany. If the English discourse has been full of equity issues in access, survival and outcomes, empirical studies have rarely asked (potential) students themselves about the effects of this policy-driven massive increase in tuition fees. (Interestingly, most HEIs quickly increased their tuition fees to the maximum of £9000, regardless of where they stand in the university rankings). Continuous monitoring is needed to show the extent to which the government's market-oriented strategy exacerbates social disadvantages.

The second chapter, too, focuses on recent policy-driven changes. It examines whether growing participation in VET facilitates individuals' progression into HE and their success once there – and thereafter. Exploring these 'transition landscapes', 'learning experiences', 'transitional frictions', the Degrees of Success project confirmed earlier studies and uncovered some surprises. Attempts to strengthen linkages between VET and HE or outreach to change potential applicants' perceptions could not equalise access to HE. Interventions would be necessary much earlier in the life course as well as on organisational level in shifting HEI goals and their provision of (transition) supports. Questions of redistribution are, especially given the inequalities exemplified in the first chapter, particularly trenchant here.

Turning to Germany, the third chapter discusses numerous changes in HE. These include heightened stratification within HE (via the 'Excellence Initiative'), new degrees (due to the Bologna process facilitating Europeanisation), and a shifting relationship between the Federal and the 16 *Länder* governments in HE policy-making, albeit with more sectoral self-regulation, external accreditation and competition between organisational forms (e.g. the rapid expansion of dual study programmes as a hybrid form at the nexus of VET and HE that employers and highly qualified school-leavers alike seem to favour). The English focus on tuition fees has an astonishing contrast in Germany: If many *Länder* had introduced (very modest) tuition fees in recent years, all have since, under student protest, abolished this marketisation move in favour of bolstering the traditional Continental state-funded HE model.

Returning to England, chapter four discusses the construction of a new type of qualification (Diploma) for 14–19 year-olds – as an alternative to traditional vocational qualifications – and its demolition under the Cameron government. This case study of new governance in England exemplifies the challenge government faces in

maintaining school-based vocational education, in adequately representing employers in VET governance and in achieving its goals by (too) quickly and repeatedly reforming complex education system structures.

After a final Channel crossing, the next chapter discusses Germany's variety of initial VET programmes, all considered important for their contribution to economic competitiveness (with very low youth unemployment putting Germany in an enviable position). To gauge this system's attractiveness, Eurostat and Eurobarometer data are combined with country case studies. Policy measures such as 'educational chains', and transition (career entry) supports, such as Initial Training Plus (*AusbildungPlus*) and the rise of dual study programmes, are discussed in detail.

In sum, the chosen examples of research on these two sectors provide insights into the variable impact of education policy agendas and programmes in England and Germany, including pan-European and international developments over the past two decades that emphasise both continuity and change. This book, with its wide-ranging and specific analyses presented by an expert on both countries, will be of interest to scholars and students who hope to make sense of contemporary transitions of and within VET and HE systems in the Bologna era. This volume is most innovative in combining these two sectors, far too often treated singly although, as Ertl shows, they have developed complex relationships to each other and to schooling and the labour market.

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