

Preface

TVET@Asia Issue 10: Informal Learning of Vocational Competences and Skills: Theoretical and practical perspectives

Formation of vocational competencies and skills is an important economic, political, and educational issue in many countries. Beside the formal TVET-system, informal learning takes place in many forms and has an important impact. In some countries, informal learning covers entirely the major part of vocational learning activities. In other countries, informal learning is being integrated into formal TVET-systems or being enriched by non-formal learning. Furthermore, the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) and validation of informal learning is a field of continuous development, especially for highly formal TVET-systems and in Higher Education.

Very often informal learning takes place in the so called ‘informal sector’. This ‘informal sector’ is defined by the ILO thus: “informal units comprise small enterprises with hired workers, household enterprises using mostly family labour, and self-employed. Production processes involve relatively high levels of working capital as against fixed capital, which in turn reflects the relatively low level of technology and skill involved” (ILO 1998). The last aspect – the low skill level – is of particular interest to educationalists.

In this context, we understand skill development as “acquisition of practical competencies, know-how, and attitudes to perform a trade or occupation in the labour market, either through formal public or private schools, institutions or centres, informal, traditional apprenticeships, or non-formal semi-structured training.” (King & Palmer, 2010). This definition shows clearly that skills development need not be confined to formal, structured courses of training but may also take place in unstructured and unplanned contexts.

However, we shall be supplementing this approach with a third dimension – non-formal learning – which was first introduced as far back as during the 1960s (Coombs 1968) and is now promoted with minor differences in detail, for example, by the European Commission (2000) or UNESCO (2012):

“Formal learning takes place in education and training institutions, leading to recognised diplomas and qualifications. Non-formal learning takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training and does not typically lead to formalised certificates. Non-formal learning may be provided in the workplace and through the activities of civil society organisations and groups (such as in youth organisations, trades unions and political parties). It can also be provided through organisations or services that have been set up to complement formal systems (such as arts, music and sports classes or private tutoring to prepare for examinations). Informal learning is a natural accompaniment to everyday life. Unlike formal and non-formal learning, informal learning is not necessarily intentional learning, and so may well not be recognised even by individuals themselves as contributing to their knowledge and skills.”

We shall not be exploring discrepancies in definitions and approaches here (see OECD 2007) but can use the distinction to understand the papers in this special issue much better. Our aim here is also to represent a broad understanding of skill development so that by considering the socio-economic framework, it becomes possible to make a rich and meaningful analysis of different data. For example, an ILO-study in South-India (Mitra 2002) shows clearly that, in a context that is typical of the informal economy, informal learning cannot be understood solely by analysing opportunities for learning or by assessing the skills that individuals acquire as a result. Rather, these findings need to be seen in a broader context that takes account of the socio-economic background and of the relationships between actors.

It is striking that even though informal learning is so important the number of researchers in the field is quite small, especially when it comes to country specific approaches in Asia. We do not know a lot about how learning takes place in different working situations, long-term results, or how learning conditions and surroundings influences informal learning in private life, the local labour market, and the national economy in Asian countries. In addition, the interaction between the formal education system and the procedures of informal learning is widely unknown.

In order to fill this important gap in understanding informal learning in Asian economies, this special issue was initiated. A call for papers was sent out inviting scholars to contribute their research. The final papers selected for inclusion in this special issue, cover between them, a diverse set of research questions and help us to get a better understanding of the informal learning in the Asian economies.

UMA, LI, SIRILAK, PRONTADAVIT and PILZ analyse the skills among population in informal sector with special reference to street food vending in China, Thailand and India. Using case study method, the authors address the following questions: Where do individuals acquire their knowledge of the skills required in the informal sector? How does informal learning take place in informal settings? What kind of skills do individuals have, and to what level? How are individuals running their businesses? The findings of the research indicate that informal learning is of major importance and that socio-economic background and education level interact with informal learning. The paper also discusses possible changes in VET-policy to support street food vendors learning processes in all three countries.

HAASLER, ANSLINGER and LAUDENBACH compare VPL (validation and recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning) approaches and practice in Denmark, Germany, Poland and Turkey, with the particular focus on if and how VPL initiatives support individuals' labour market inclusion and further learning. The first part of the paper sketches the national approaches of VPL in the four countries against European guidelines, the second part analyses the role of institutions in the validation process, reverting to practical examples from Denmark and Germany to illustrate when and how institutions and institutional support structures may come into play to support effective validation processes.

OANH reveals the status of assessing pedagogical competence in training students to become TVET teachers at higher education institutions of technology and education in Vietnam. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, the author gathers data associated with CBA

(Competence-Based Assessment) in general and the application of this approach in assessing pedagogical competence of students. The paper gives minor suggestions to strengthen the quality of applying CBA in assessing pedagogical competence of students in higher education institutions of technology and education in Vietnam.

XUAN TIEN, VO's paper is the research findings from two-months-field-trip through 4 companies with different sizes, various levels of automation and complexness of job activities. Using qualitative interview and case study, some factors of informal learning are clarified. The paper gives some suggestions concerning the development of professional profile, role of centre of professional competencies, solutions for bridging gap between vocational schools and companies, it also brings some lessons learned from countries, where competencies of informal learning are recognized.

PRUSTY proposes a model for developing a sustainable TVET system that would integrate the source of knowledge and skill from the community, certification from existing formal professional institutions, and a third party which is to manage the production-distribution chain to the market generating self-sustaining revenue in his paper. The proposed model has a holistic view of not only producing community specific skilled manpower but also employing them for production, and avoiding the overdependence on the saturated market for employment through linking to targeted consumers through an integrated production-distribution value chain. The paper follows an open ended interviewing of the related stakeholders of horticulture farming community of Shillong, Meghalaya, India and the model hypotheses were tested through the interview content analysis.

VENKATRAM and SAKTHIRAMA carry out an empirical study focusing on the type of trainings undergone by farmers in a region in India to acquire the technologies and measure the degree of informal learnings took place after formal trainings. The study finds out that some fine-tunings or tinkering of the technologies through the informal and traditional knowledge already possessed by the farmers becomes essential and this could lead to further specialization and improve the adaptability. The study also reveals that the farmers with their own experience and self-learning are found to improvise these practices better.

PALANITHURAI and SEERANGARAJAN investigate the structure and process of the informal learning of a particular weavers group in Chinnalapatti, a cluster in southern India which is known for the preparation of a special art silk sarees. The study focuses on how these weavers change to new skills through informal skilling process, the associated structures and the individuals' motivation to acquire the needed skill. This empirical study covering a district weavers' group could offer some interesting suggestion concerning the model for other weavers groups. We hope that these papers together will contribute to a highly important topic and help to fill the existing research gap.

References

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