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Vocational Education and Training for a Global Economy: Lessons from Four Countries

In-Depth Case Studies Show Different Approaches to Preparing Young People for an Increasingly Complex Economy

Washington, DC - Although vocational education and training (VET) systems are often an afterthought in education policy, they can play a critical role in economic development, a new book that examines four countries' VET systems concludes. The book, [*Vocational Education and Training for a Global Economy: Lessons from Four Countries*](#), published by Harvard Education Press and edited by Marc S. Tucker, founder and senior fellow of the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), provides in-depth case studies of the VET systems of Switzerland, Singapore, China, and the United States. The case studies show in detail how their VET systems evolved over time and how the systems relate to the countries' economies.

In her endorsement of the book, Anne-Marie Slaughter, CEO of New America wrote: "Workers must be able to move easily between learning and earning over the course of their lives. Governments must respond to those needs by reinventing their educational systems, creating pathways to shared prosperity for all their citizens. Policymakers, legislators, and business leaders ready to meet that challenge could find no better starting point than this book."

Tucker notes that the design of a VET system is particularly critical now that technologies such as artificial intelligence will transform the kinds of skills that will be needed in a workforce composed of both humans and intelligent machines, and he suggests the principles that could underlie a well-designed VET system for a rapidly changing economy. These include:

- A first-rate primary and secondary education system that provides a strong academic foundation for *all* students, whether they want to pursue a primarily academic education or a more applied form of technical education;
- A "T-shaped curriculum" that includes both the kind of liberal-arts curriculum that is needed to support life-long learning and mastery of a technical subject at a high enough level to launch a rewarding career;
- A forward-looking, constantly adapting, skills standards system that assures employers that prospective employees have the knowledge and skills they are looking for, focuses the curriculum offered by education and training organizations on that knowledge and gives students of all ages confidence that, if they invest in the knowledge and skills on offer, they will be rewarded in the labor market by the employers;

- Work-based learning that provides opportunities for students to acquire strong, transferrable technical and social skills of the kind spelled out in the skills standards in places that are like those in which they are seeking employment.

In its thirty-year history, NCEE has studied the policies and practices of high-performing systems to draw lessons for the United States and other countries, notes Robert B. Schwartz, senior research fellow at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Nancy Hoffman, senior advisor at Jobs for the Future. “It is now incontrovertibly clear that there are in fact lessons to be learned from higher-performing systems,” they write in a foreword.

The four countries profiled in the book represent very different approaches to VET:

- Switzerland, “the gold standard” for *employer-based* VET systems based on the medieval guild system, in which employers play the key role in designing curricula and providing learning opportunities for students (written by Hoffman and Schwartz);
- Singapore, which has created a “gold-standard” *school-based* system that uses employer-like settings in schools to enable young people to achieve a very high level of technical skills valued by employers (written by Tucker);
- China, which found a way to build a labor force that enabled it to become the “workshop of the world” and is now transitioning to an economy in which its workers—no longer low wage—will have to add much more value to the products they make and the services they render (written by Vivien Stewart, senior advisor for education and former vice president at the Asia Society); and
- The United States, which has struggled with a system often considered a low-status destination for students not cut out for higher education, but is building promising new models of VET (written by Schwartz and Hoffman).

Tucker concludes that, while VET has often not received the attention it deserves in national education systems, a well-functioning VET system is vital to strong economies. “It is precisely because VET sits at the intersection of the workings of the education system and the real economy that it could play such an important role in determining the fate of individuals and nations,” he writes.

Reporters interested in speaking with Marc Tucker and any of the authors of the case studies may contact NCEE Communications Officer Julia Banks at jbanks@ncee.org or 202-888-2536.

Please hold the date—11/7/2019: New America will be hosting an event with Marc Tucker to discuss the book’s findings and its implication for policymakers and practitioners, the evening of November 7 at New America’s headquarters in Washington, DC. Details to follow.

For more information on NCEE's international comparative education research, read [*The Nine Building Blocks for a World-Class Education System.*](#)

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The National Center on Education and the Economy was created in 1988 to analyze the implications of changes in the international economy for American education, formulate an agenda for American education based on that analysis and seek wherever possible to accomplish that agenda through policy change and development of the resources educators would need to carry it out. For more information visit www.ncee.org.