Rethinking apprenticeships, edited by Tony Dolphin and Tess Lanning, London, Institute for Public Policy Research, 2011, 137 pp., free for download at: <http://www.ippr.org/publications/55/8028/rethinking-apprenticeships>

Regardless of attempts to modernise, societies cannot ignore the historical character of their respective education and training systems. It is above all the

vocational education and training (VET) systems that are much more than simply 'constructed' or politically regulated entities because, as David Raffe has argued, they need to be understood 'in relation to other societal institutions' (Raffe 1998, 391) including the labour market, the economy, the system of industrial relations and, of course, also the political system. Therefore, 'apprenticeship cultures' and specific learning arrangements in the area of vocational training remain a central issue of national and international training policies as they cannot be assembled as homogeneous entities under one European umbrella. This becomes especially visible if one looks at the UK where apprenticeships have been revitalised or reframed in recent years due to dissatisfaction with both school-based skill formation as well as traditional on-the-job training. On the other hand, German-speaking countries can still place their efforts in the area of VET strongly (though with diverging intensity) on the so-called Dual System, which, at its core, is a traditional apprenticeship system (Deissinger, Heine, and Ott 2011).

The topic of the publication reviewed here, a compilation of 12 papers, is 'rethinking apprenticeships' from the perspective of different authors, both from educational research and politics, and it deals primarily with apprenticeships in England. Two chapters, however, are devoted to other countries and the differences here could not be stronger: The contributions by Hilary Steedman, Brian Knight and Tom Karmel illustrate the different paradigms of apprenticeships in Germany, Austria and Switzerland on one side, and Australia on the other, with the latter, quite unsurprisingly, resembling England in many respects, both structurally and politically. Therefore, the problems articulated in the various papers, are clearly identifiable as culturally determined. It is in the contribution of Knight and Karmel, however, that the future of apprenticeships is seen in a rather pessimistic light when they end up concluding that, 'in the longer term, the role of apprenticeships and traineeships in skills acquisition is likely to diminish, despite their outward appeal and strong support' (117).

What is remarkable in this publication is that the reader finds research orientated contributions, which are mainly critical, but also proactive in terms of suggestions which could not only lead to a more effective and socially respected apprenticeship system in England, but also bear the potential for a more pedagogical approach: Here, when compared to the German-speaking countries, the problems inherent to the English apprenticeship system can be mainly associated with the lack of theoretical underpinning of workplace learning, the absence of general education, the lack of a mandatory part-time role of schools/colleges and a still strongly visible lack of firm legal arrangements to which employers and trainees have to stick, while at the same time relying on a framework which is accepted by all stakeholders and the government alike.

These elements of apprenticeships are, at least partially, outlined in the introductory chapter by Tess Lanning as constituting the present character of the English apprenticeship system, but they have not disappeared from the critical focus of both scientific reflection and political debate. Especially in the contributions by Lorna Unwin and Alison Fuller, John Bynner, and Ewart Keep and Susan James, the 'building sites' of the English apprenticeship system are clearly outlined: an 'impoverished' conception of skill, a rather underdeveloped notion of the educational components, an obvious heterogeneity of practice and duration, and the still relatively low demand from employers to train young people, not primarily

employees, as apprentices. It is also with reference to the historical heritage that these problems are articulated: one component of this heritage can certainly be seen in the fact that, in the UK, traditional apprenticeships have declined dramatically in the second half of the twentieth century. Problems which are not directly linked with quality issues also seem to be associated with this, since it becomes clear from the data that apprenticeships are still strong in the field of traditionally male occupations, while they differ in quality once one looks at the services sector. With respect to the latter aspect, apprenticeships appear highly dependent on national labour markets, the esteem of university qualifications, and with it the relationship between non-academic and academic routes within the education system. This includes the status of school or college-based further education which, traditionally, is strong in English-speaking countries. Here again, continental Europe has preserved a decidedly occupational approach towards VET, with quality control, social partnership and legal regulation as crucial components, but also with university-based teacher training as a corresponding system.

Despite these differences with the more established and well-working apprenticeship systems in Europe, the book is not purely pessimistic when it comes to offering solutions and perspectives following a 'rethinking of apprenticeships.' John Bynner, in his attempt to 'throw some historical light' on the relationship between youth transition and skill formation, looks at 'what is needed for its successful development in the UK' (17). Focussing on the pedagogical and social benefits deriving from apprenticeships as a 'key pathway' into employment, he ostensibly points to continental approaches from which the UK could learn in order to overcome the 'patchwork nature of English VET' (27). John Hayes, the current government minister responsible for apprenticeship, is hopeful in terms of raising the status of apprenticeships, but also the flexibility of vocational qualifications in general. However, one could question this 'double purpose' since successful apprenticeship systems in continental Europe have a rather low degree of flexibility and differentiation, although Switzerland here certainly appears more 'modern' than Germany or Austria (which also has a much stronger focus on full-time VET than the two neighbouring countries). Another critical issue discussed in this book is subsidies for employers without which the English apprenticeship system would probably have an even more marginal status than the one it has in the present educational architecture of the country.

This is a most interesting book, delivering substantial up-to-date insights into one of the most fascinating issues of VET research and politics alike. However, it would have been interesting and even desirable to include experiences of other English-speaking countries in this volume, e.g. Ireland, Scotland or the US – which have their specific problems although they resemble the English system in a number of institutional ways. Another issue that would certainly enrich any publication on apprenticeships is explicitly picking up on the role teachers and trainers play in the system and the way their qualifications are generated.

Nevertheless, I would strongly recommend readers to look at and consume the contributions of this edited book, especially from a pedagogical perspective since a number of educational issues are being discussed. It is this aspect which certainly may be regarded as one of the most relevant when it comes to 'rethinking' a 'future-proof' concept of skill formation beyond higher education.

References

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