

PREFACE

This book is based on the enthusiastic, competent, and intensive work of members of Working Group 4 of the COST Project A 11: Vocational Education in the years 1998-2002. Flexibility, Transferability, and Mobility were the key concepts, as well as the key targets to be covered by the whole COST Project. More than 200 researchers from 16 countries were involved in this unique project in the area of vocational education in Europe. While the other working groups were focused on policy-making processes, teaching and learning environments, transfer, evaluation and assessment, the focus of Working Group 4 was on the systems' level of Vocational Education and Training systems. The study of shaping conditions for a flexible VET was, from the start, the most hybrid, complex and rather broad topic to be covered. It was especially at the beginning of the work that this generated long discussions, not only on the concepts and definitions of flexibility, but even more on the context, history, culture, and traditions of VET systems and their consequences. Of course, combining researchers from different countries, with totally different VET systems, disciplines, and research traditions, yields contrasting and competing views on values, norms, politics, the labour market, and education. Working Group 4 opted to work, on a comprehensive and comparative basis, on flexibility, and divided this topic into three subthemes: institutional and organisational conditions; curriculum conditions, pathways, and assessment; conditions for and of VET professionals.

The outcomes of the work are presented in this volume. It was agreed that the cross-cultural nature of social-scientific research should be given attention, first and foremost to understand the culturally embedded and rooted meanings of the phenomena and categories that each of the researchers hold. This is a sociopsychological process, with its own logic. Secondly, we have progressed into debating and learning from each other by better understanding interpretations and visions, all of which come from different cultures and research traditions.

We learned during the project that VET systems and VET research are now high on the political agenda of the EU and of most countries in the world. We learned too that flexibility is a really controversial issue, which cannot be solved by single technological strategies, master plans, or curriculum designs. But we have seen a series of solutions, critical studies - quantitative as well as qualitative - and reviews, which better help us to understand the complexities of actor systems, institutions, organisations, and people who have to work in practice: professionals.

VET has regained prestige and status in the past decade; it shows not only the important economic function of skilling for the labour market, but also the pedagogical and social function of educating human beings with their responsibilities for a future that will never be known. Transferability, as a personal attribute, and flexibility, as an institutional condition, prove to be crucial concepts for designing lifelong learning systems - public as well as private - and for creating opportunities for employability.

Without the expertise and friendship of the members of the COST group, this volume would not have come into existence. We should like to thank all our colleagues for their support and the authors for their efforts and collaboration in the editorial work. Our thanks also go to the reviewers, Leif Hommen, Fernando Marhuenda, and Phil Hodgkinson, for their excellent work, especially where the cultural diversity and scientific controversy related to flexibility is so evident.

We have the best of reminiscences of the plenary discussions at Newcastle, Göttingen, and Gothenburg, as major events of the whole COST Project at which to present our work, and as wise lessons to review our conclusions. We also enjoyed the working group meetings in Twente, Genova, Jyväskylä, Vienna, and Wageningen, where hospitality and professional work were combined in a productive way. The formula of COST has proved to be successful in bringing together researchers from all over Europe.

We are very grateful indeed to the Dutch Science Foundation (NWO-COST) for its financial support in preparing this book. Many thanks to Gay Howells and Janice Collins, who used their language competence elegantly to allow people to say what they really think, and who helped us to produce a consistent book. Monique Kole did the layout and all the necessary correspondence, and supported the authors and editors.

We hope this book will be seen as a major contribution for promoting VET and VET research, and as a real help for policy-makers, practitioners, teachers, students, researchers, and governmental institutions for thinking ahead on the flexible future of VET within their cultures and traditions, to give meaning to the demands of the economy, society, and the individual. VET is education par excellence.

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