Skills for inclusive and sustainable development: Perspectives from the Asia Pacific region and beyond

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Published online: 25 June 2014
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The UNESCO Chair in Technical and Vocational Education and Training at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, Rupert Maclean, and Shanti Jagannathan, Senior Education Specialist in the Regional and Sustainable Development Department of the Asian Development Bank, Manila, are to be congratulated on their timely co-guest editing of this special issue of *Prospects* on Skills for Inclusive and Sustainable Development: Perspectives from the Asia Pacific Region and Beyond. This topic is profoundly important to countries in the Asia Pacific region and beyond, as they seek to achieve economic and social development that is fair, inclusive, and sustainable. It is also of great importance in exploring constructive ways that the economic tigers in Asia, which are experiencing unprecedented rates of economic growth, can achieve “green growth” rather than growth that further damages the environment through such trends as an ever-increasing carbon footprint.

Promoting skills development for employment, and for sustainable and inclusive development, is of great interest to UNESCO, which is the Focal Point and Lead Agency of the International Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, 2005–2014. The area of education for sustainable development (ESD) is also of continuing interest to the UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE), which devoted the September 2005 issue of *Prospects* to this topic (Maclean 2005).

Within UNESCO, the UNESCO International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, UNESCO UNEVOC in Bonn, Germany, takes the lead on this important aspect of ESD, in close collaboration with colleagues in UNESCO Paris. There can be no sustainable development without education and without appropriate green skills for employability. As UNESCO UNEVOC elaborates in its various publications (e.g., UNESCO UNEVOC 2012), sustainable development cannot be reached through technological solutions or financial instruments alone, since achieving sustainable development

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requires a change in the way people think and act. In this regard, skills development that increases employability, in the form of technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and that supports the greening of economies, has a key role to play since TVET prepares learners for fields of work and business such as construction, waste management, and agriculture, many of which consume enormous amounts of energy, raw materials, and water. Green TVET helps develop skilled workers who have knowledge of—and a commitment to—sustainable development, as well as the requisite technical knowledge. Greening TVET is crucial for making a transition from energy- and emissions-intensive economies to cleaner and greener production, and for the greening of societies (Corcoran 2005; UNESCO 2011).

As the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon put it in January of 2012,

Environmental, economic and social indicators tell us that our current model of progress is unsustainable. Climate change is destroying our path to sustainability. Ours is a world of looming challenges and increasingly limited resources. Sustainable development offers the best chance to adjust our course. (UNESCO UNEVOC 2012, p. 1)

Climate change is generating economic and environmental dislocations, and these pressures are set to increase in the coming years (IPCC 2007). These threats also provide opportunities to those cities and regions that seek to address climate change by pursuing technologies to reduce emissions. Such actions will see a reengineering of established production techniques and will increase demand for climate-compatible goods and services. Those places that best anticipate and respond to these needs will be positioned for significant growth in the years ahead. A number of industries, such as electricity generation, property development, construction, transport, and hospitality, have been identified as “carbon vulnerable”, but equally opportunities will be generated in green and energy-efficient technologies and applications which will bring a new economic growth area. Where environmental concerns were once associated with problems of high cost and inefficiency, responding to the climate crisis is now rapidly becoming a high-growth industry that offers increasingly attractive profits and returns. TVET needs to respond to this opportunity through the influence of policy makers, managers, and staff in technical and vocational education. Effective curriculum planning and teaching challenges being brought about by climate change require a response in an emerging carbon-constrained future.

How might TVET contribute effectively to a carbon constrained future, and what future employment opportunities will be generated and what will be lost? Which workplace skills will require new knowledge and teaching, and will states invest more in institutions and programmes that can provide new skills development?

Countries’ government officials believe that TVET has a major contribution to make to their economic and social development. It is also important to reduce the skills gaps that exist in many countries, both developed and less developed, between a given country’s labour market needs, and the number and type of work-related skills its citizens possess. Here TVET is also crucial, because it is estimated that 80% of the jobs undertaken worldwide require technical and vocational skills (UNESCO 2005).

As the various articles in this special issue clearly demonstrate, ESD and TVET are powerful forces that can help people to become active and ecologically responsible citizens, workers and consumers, able to address local and global challenges. However, to be effective, such efforts also require the support and involvement of business firms, non-government organisations, international development organisations, governments, and civil

society as a whole. Certainly the matters to be addressed are far too important to be left to governments, since the necessary changes go well beyond the powers of individual governments. And international collaboration is essential, since the problems being addressed do not recognise national borders.

Green TVET encompasses pre-employment education and training, learning in the workplace, and further training that addresses environmental, economic, and social sustainability, while meeting the needs of industries and individual learners. Green TVET prepares people for green jobs and skills development that contribute to preserving or restoring the quality of the environment, while improving human well-being and social equity (Fien, Maclean, and Park 2009).

It is therefore important to invest in Green TVET because Green TVET helps production move to more environmentally conscious practices. Investment is required because national governments need to seize the potential for job creation by providing skills needed in new green sectors, and because disadvantaged groups in the labour market, including youth, women, persons with disabilities, and rural communities, require targeted support to develop knowledge and skills for green jobs.

ESD and Green TVET complement each other, with TVET going beyond promoting skills development for employability. It empowers young people and adults to develop skills for work and life. Green TVET therefore means more than just developing technical skills for green employment in such areas as eco-tourism, renewable energy, and recycling. It also means developing 'soft' green skills. Therefore ESD and Green TVET overlap in important ways. Like ESD, Green TVET can include education for enhancing problem-solving skills in everyday situations (life skills education), education for sustainable consumption and lifestyles, and entrepreneurial learning. Green TVET ensures that all workers are able to play appropriate roles, both in the workplace and the broader community, by contributing to environmental, economic, and social sustainability. ESD is at the core of green skills and provides a framework to reorient education and training at all levels towards sustainability.

I have no doubt that this special issue of *Prospects* will contribute much to the ongoing international debate on this matter, and will be of great value as a background document for those participating in the UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development, to be held in Japan in November 2014, on the occasion of the end of the UN Decade of ESD.

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