

More and more separate national and local activities are brought together and are being compared as a consequence of the processes labelled globalization. Differences as well as similarities are brought out when disparate practices are connected. Systems of education and work are strongly subjected to these comparisons as transnational corporations pursue their Human Resource management across borders, and as transnational labour markets bring together employees from separate cultures. In addition politicians increasingly make use of international comparisons and ratings to measure the performance and efficiency of educational systems and their contribution to economic growth and the modernization of work practices.

A basic question that comes out of these comparisons and ratings is whether education and work in different localities and contexts are becoming more similar or more different. Are they diverging or converging? This is the general theme of this book. Divergence and convergence is examined in relation to three dimensions: 1. *National models* of vocational education, 2. *Learning environments* in education and work and 3. *Identities* of work and occupation. In this way the book covers central issues on the agenda in relation to the future of vocational education: The institutional framework as well as the social agents and the contexts of learning. The first two themes are related, since the key difference between different national models of vocational education is the way they connect school-based and work-based learning. The third theme on identities and biographies is included in order to examine divergence and convergence from the

perspective of the learner, not just from the perspective of structures, contexts and policies. In this way the publication attempts to give a more coherent assessment of the general theme.

The publication is an outcome of intensive work and discussions in the international research network VET & Culture in connection with the 13. network conference held in Denmark in august 2006. Out of the 45 papers presented at the conference 18 have been reviewed and revised twice and have been accepted for publication here.

The contributions contribute with new knowledge or new research perspectives in the field and represent a variety of cross-disciplinary and critical approaches. In contrast to the dominant one-dimensional economic standard for assessing divergence and convergence, the purpose of this book is to explore the issue from social, political and cultural perspectives.

Diverging and converging forces

Generally the key question behind international comparisons is which of the models compared contributes best to the value-adding of companies and the growth of national economies. This kind of international ordering and rating of systems of education and work implies a strong tendency towards convergence. Characteristics of what is currently considered 'best practice' are detached from the social and cultural context and elevated into general standards of a universal role model. This exerts a strong force on all others to adapt to this standard by copying elements from the model to stay competitive: the highest level of skills, the most excellent educations or the most advanced knowledge. This market driven convergence is supplemented by political initiatives across countries to create transparency, permeability and transferability of skills and educations and

common quality standards of training practices (e.g. the Copenhagen Declaration in the EU-area).

Similarly there are converging forces in relation to work: general attempts to deregulate working conditions and wage systems and increase flexibility, etc. This is often driven by efforts to emulate the shifting 'best practices' in work organisation, HRD and the organisation of production. A growing professionalization of management through the use of formal education (MBA programmes etc.) and the use of universal management concepts tend to create more uniform approaches in management. The increased mobility of capital across borders and the threat of outsourcing production are used by employers to erode local and traditional standards of work and to implement the same forms of flexible employment and work organization around the world. At the same time unions are struggling to implement common minimum standards for working conditions and pay in order to defend the benefits of collective bargaining that are under pressure – and thus induce convergence in standards of work.