



# What Problem Should Skills Solve?

Stephanie Allais and Carmel Marock

## Abstract

Theories of change underpinning skills interventions of donors and development agencies contain tangled webs of assumptions: interventions in relation to youth unemployment often focus on vocational education and training, which is seen as undervalued relative to university education and yet closer to labor markets. However, it is *also* seen as the problem child of education and training systems. The solution is the problem—and a plethora of interventions are designed in this muddle.

Rising youth unemployment and underemployment concurrent with the massification of higher education has intensified century-old debates about the relationship between education programs, curriculum, and the everyday world, including the world of work. Symptoms of this are the rise of debates about “employability” in relation to university curricula, attempts to vocationalize school curricula, and policy focus on vocational education and training, often with the aim to deflect potential university enrollments. The expansion of university qualifications is frequently seen as leading to wasteful expenditure for states and individuals, and sometimes as counterproductive in terms of the skills and expertise needed by employers and societies. There is also a strong concern internationally that university-educated youth remain unemployed—and are increasingly some of the largest proportions of unemployed people in poor countries.

In many instances these debates exemplify a common paradox in educational reform: education is seen as the solution to a variety of societal problems, while at the same time positioned as the problem. The line of thought is: if education can just be changed in any number of ways, it will stop causing, or start solving, any number of problems. Nowhere is this magical thinking more common than in vocational education and training (VET), as revealed by [our research into theories of change that underpin skills interventions by donors and development agencies](#).

## Youth Unemployment as the Key Problem, Vocational Education as the Solution

Interventions to address youth unemployment and underemployment are often based on the assumption that skills deficits prevent young people from accessing labor markets or income generation possibilities. The inverse assumption is that a lack of relevant skills is a major barrier to inclusive economic growth. An analysis of documents from a wide range of donors, development agencies, and development banks illustrates that the assumption of “skills mismatches” is shared by many (if not most) development partners. Interventions then focus on VET, which is described as the component of the education and training system that is seen as “closest to the labor market.” A commonly articulated idea from agencies that we interviewed is that VET *could* provide a way to get individuals into work faster than higher education. However, it is also clear to all respondents that VET systems are not actually working and are not actually getting people into work in the desired ways. The idea of VET leading to employment is frequently stated, even when the same document or the same respondent is quick to point out that VET does not currently do so.

## But Vocational Education Is Also Seen as a Problem...

In short, while VET is seen as an immediate solution, it is also VET that is regarded as the “weak link” or problem in the education and training system. This leads to an endless set of attempts to “fix” a range of different aspects of VET systems that are assumed to be problematic, in the hope that fixing these will then ensure that youth have skills, and then get jobs or better income generation capacity.

What was clear across the analysis of documents and discussion with key informants is that there is very limited insight into relationships between the myriad of interventions and the extent to which they were solving or ameliorating the assumed underpinning problems, never mind whether they were contributing to solving the core problem. There is often little engagement with the complex ways in which changing one component of a skill formation system will have an impact on other components of it.

### Many Interventions, Little Clear Evidence of Success

Unsurprisingly, there is little clear evidence of success, given that these interventions often aim to fix isolated perceived problems, despite talk of the need for integrating education and training into economic development strategies. Where interventions are described as looking at education in relation to the economy, such as skills anticipation, they are mainly focused on bringing change within the education and training system, as opposed to changing the economy with implied needs for different types of expertise and skills.

Lack of integration with economic development strategies appears to be aggravated by the ways in which governments and organizations are structured. Institutions in the development space, as well as the governments being assisted, have separate divisions, units, and ministries dealing with economic development interventions as well as vocational education and skills interventions. Further, organizations' work is at least partly informed by institution-building strategies and approaches.

Another factor that complicates the work of governments and development agencies in the VET space is measurement. Measurability shapes interventions by providing visible "wins," both to national governments and to the taxpayers funding development aid or the governance structures looking to make decisions about investments. Three issues emerged in our research related to this.

First, measurement itself is sometimes seen as an intervention that should lead to change. Providing comparative data such as the World Bank's Human Capital Index is presented as an intrinsic good in building education systems.

Second, short-term evaluations are used when longer term labor market impact is the issue of interest. Experimental designs test whether interventions have enabled target groups to transition into the labor market; they focus on the impact on individuals in the short term, but not on whether the environment is changing to support a more sustained and widespread impact.

Third, there is a tendency to focus on evaluation of the implementation of interventions. This means that there is a circular "theory of change": success is seen as successful implementation of policy interventions or creation of institutional change without consideration of whether the intervention has resulted in any resolution of the initial identified problem.

### Conceptual Disjunctures

Underpinning much of this is a deep conceptual disjuncture. On one side is the idea of social relations, whereby skill formation is seen as relational. In this approach education and skills are part of broader economic and social relationships, institutions, and development trajectories. Taking this seriously is difficult for development work, because economic development strategies need to be foregrounded, as well as issues such as working conditions, work organization, and occupations. On the other side is the idea of the individual, or the idea of development of individuals' "skills" as an answer to accessing labor markets through improving productivity, thereby contributing to inclusive growth and thus increasing opportunities for new entrants. This kind of reasoning, and the interventions that are underpinned by it, is magical thinking. ▲

*Measurement itself is sometimes seen as an intervention that should lead to change.*

*Stephanie Allais is research chair of skills development and professor of education at the Center for Researching Education and Labor, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. E-mail: [Matseleng.Allais@wits.ac.za](mailto:Matseleng.Allais@wits.ac.za). X: [@AllaisStephanie](https://twitter.com/AllaisStephanie)*

*Carmel Marock is research associate at the Center for Researching Education and Labor, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.*