

## Expert Interview with Professor Lorna Unwin, Editor of [Journal of Vocational Education & Training](#)

### 1. Please introduce yourself and your current institutional affiliation.

I'm Lorna Unwin and I'm Professor of Vocational Education at the Institute of Education, which is part of the University of London, and I'm also Deputy Director of the LLAKES research centre. LLAKES is funded by the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) and was launched in 2008 to explore the role that lifelong learning plays in mediating between two agendas that are very important to most governments, and certainly to the UK government, and that's trying to get economic growth and competitiveness whilst trying to ensure that society is cohesive and inclusive and those two agendas are often in tension. So the research centre is examining questions around, for example, inequality in society and its impact on people's life chances and their opportunities to access the kinds of learning that they need. It's also looking at to what extent conditions at the local and regional level within society can actually help to foster both strong economic conditions and also a cohesive society.

### 2. As the incoming Editor, how did you first get involved in the journal? How has your career lead you to this point?

In thinking about my involvement in the journal, I guess I have to go back what might seem quite a long way, back to 1976. At that time I was studying at the University of Manchester, doing the full time one year course to train to be a teacher – this was the post graduate certificate in education. I was doing the certificate that trains you to teach in further education colleges and as part of the course we were introduced to the journal which at that point was still under its original name which was the *Vocational Aspect of Education*. The journal changed its name to the *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* in 1996. But back in the mid-seventies when I was training to be a teacher, *The Vocational Aspect of Education* was the journal for those of us who were training to teach in further education and who were particularly interested in vocational education. It was an important part of the reading that you did to learn about the history, the philosophy, developments, innovations etcetera in vocational education. I'd become very interested in vocational education in what might seem quite a curious way, in that my undergraduate degree was in American Studies and as part of that we studied American Literature, and there is a wonderful poem by the great 19<sup>th</sup> century American poet, Walt Whitman, called 'A Song of Occupations' and in it he celebrates working people and actually includes lists of jobs, many of which of course wouldn't exist now, but were jobs that were vitally important to people's lives at the time and also were important to the way in which the United States was developing as a prosperous economy. That poem actually made me think about the way in which, particularly in Britain, we somewhat undervalue what you might refer to as ordinary jobs, the sorts of jobs that keep the world turning and help us all to live happy and decent lives. So I began to become interested in how people learn to do those sorts of jobs and

therefore became interested in for example apprenticeship in the way in which people learn to do their jobs both at work, and outside work.

I then became a lecturer in a Further Education college, and I found myself teaching apprentices, full time students on vocational courses, professionals who were updating their skills, adults who were re-training and so on. So when I began to teach in further education the *Vocational Aspect of Education* remained part of the reading I did to help me develop as a teacher and also sparked an interest in research.

I then secured a post at the Open University as a lecturer in Post Compulsory Education & Training and began to develop my career as a researcher. [I completed a PhD on the topic of employer involvement in vocational education and training in the UK]. Eventually I managed to get an article published in what by then had become the *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*. I was asked to join the editorial board and then a bit later on I became a member of the Editorial Management Committee of the journal and subsequently was delighted to be invited by my colleagues on the Management Committee to become Editor.

**3. For researchers or students who have never encountered the *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, what is the journal about in a nutshell?**

- **What are the journal's aims?**
- **Which areas does it primarily focus upon?**
- **What is the range of issues and concerns does the journal aim to explore?**

The journal presents research-based commentaries and critiques on all aspects of vocational and professional education and training. I've deliberately included the word professional here because over the years the terms vocational and professional have become more and more interchangeable, and there are very interesting debates about what's the difference between the vocational and the professional? We're interested in studies of vocational and professional pedagogy, so for example, work-based learning, the workplace as a site for learning, the latest developments in coaching or collaborative learning in the workplace, and the development of vocational expertise, so that would involve discussions about what constitutes vocational knowledge, the relationship between the vocational and what in many countries is referred to as general education. We are also interested in policy analysis and the way in which vocational education and training systems in different countries are evolving.

The journal will also include articles on the changing nature of work. The world of work is a very dynamic field; it's changing all the time and therefore vocational education and training changes itself in order to reflect the changes in the world of work. So we are interested in the way in which VET systems, approaches to VET, reflect those changes in the world of work. At the same time though we're interested in work itself, in the sense of, what do we mean by work? So we don't just mean the world of paid work and employment, we are also interested in work as a phenomenon that is part of people's lives [and society in general]. There's lots of work that is unpaid, there's lots of work related activity for which people need vocational expertise, and for which they may need training. So we have a very broad

understanding of what we mean by work and we're always interested in problematizing that and exploring it.

We're also interested in the notion of identity. So to what extent does the involvement of people in work and therefore in vocational education and training programmes, help to shape their identity. It also links to the notion of learning cultures and the different ways in which work places, vocational education and training schools, colleges, also vocational education in higher education develop their own cultures of learning.

Something that's also of strong and continuing interest is the way in which vocational education and training and indeed professional education and training also itself reflects what you might refer to as segregations in the labour market, so that would be classically along gender lines, ethnicity, social class.

In terms of the breadth of research that we cover, we're keen to reflect the diversity of the world of work and that means we are interested in everything from what you might see as the public service arena of work [including professions such as nursing and the law], through to services such as hairdressing, catering, hospitality which some years ago would have been seen as the more traditional occupations for vocational education. The journal is broad because the field of inquiry that we are concerned with is so broad itself and is so dynamic.

And very importantly, the journal is international in scope. It covers vocational education and training on all continents and in the last 12 months we've had articles submitted from 28 different countries.

#### **4. What do you see as the strength of the *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* as an academic journal compared to other titles in the field?**

I would like to argue that a key strength of the *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, which we on the board tend to refer to as JVET, is that it takes vocational education and training seriously. Its breadth of coverage means that it is a forum for debate about vocational education and training in its broadest sense.

I'd also want to argue that the word training is part of the title because we take training seriously. In the field of educational studies there's long been debates about should we refer to for example teacher education rather than teacher training. Is training something that is a narrow type of activity that is only suited for certain purposes, education is a richer process? In JVET we take training seriously because we believe as a practice and a process it is very important to the development of occupational expertise and indeed in most walks of life, good high quality training is very important to our development as human beings.

I would argue that a further strength of the journal is that it's multi-disciplinary in scope. This is very important because you need several disciplinary lenses through which you can actually study the field. So hence we have articles which will present the research from the perspective of sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, education, political science,

economics, anthropology, economic and social geography. There are other disciplines which I probably haven't included and should have in that list.

The journal also wants to see itself to be highly accessible. We want this journal to be read by professionals in the field as well as mainstream academic researchers. We want it to be read by policymakers because we want them to engage with current debates around the world. We want people who have vocational education and training or the development of vocational expertise as a part of their own professional lives to be interested in the journal, for them to see it as something that they would enjoy reading and would find informative.

We also do like to encourage co-authorship, where you might have an academic research co-authoring with a professional in the field. That's something that I think enriches the journal and enriches the field of enquiry.

For the past fifteen years the journal's been hosting a very successful international conference which we hold every two years (so the next one will be in 2013). This provides a very important forum for the editors, for the Editorial Board, for our colleagues who help us review articles. It provides a very important forum for them to hear about the latest research and for the participants who contribute to the conference to help to contribute to the shaping of the journal.

The conference is successful I think partly because people find it to be a very constructive environment in which to present their research. The feedback we get from the conference is very encouraging in that you get both young researchers but also experienced researchers too, saying how constructive they've found the environment. It's a true learning environment in the sense of people feeling that they're not going to be attacked, they're going to be supported. We'd want to encourage both new and existing researchers and professionals in the field to submit their articles because they will get constructive feedback.

For people who are interested in finding out about the conference that we'll hold in 2013 there will be a website address that you can go to which will be linked to this interview.

**5. What do you think are the most contentious issues in contemporary debate and research in education which your journal seeks to address?**

An example of a contemporary and highly contentious issue would be the introduction, over the last 20 or so years, of competence-based approaches to designing vocational programmes and qualifications. This is linked to what I think will continue to be a contentious debate, not just in Europe but in some other countries too, around the development of National Qualification Frameworks. We now have for example the European Qualifications Framework being developed and there are great concerns about the extent to which those sorts of policy developments will lead to a narrowing of content in vocational programmes and certainly relation to the competence approach to a tick-box approach to assessments. These debates have been raging in Britain, in Australia, in New

Zealand, and they're becoming more prominent in some European countries too, so that will be an interesting area to watch I think over the next few years.

There is also a continuing debate about the purpose of vocational education and training in national education systems, and I think this has come more to the fore in recent years as we have seen the expansion of higher education in many countries, and that is also leading to interesting debates about the role of what you might call vocational higher education. Fascinating debates too about what we mean about vocational learning and we have seen, again in recent years, the influence of social theories of learning, particularly social theories of learning relating to concepts such as situated learning, communities of practice, concepts such as learning as construction and transformation. Very interesting developments in terms of, to use the jargon term, co-configuration of learning, where you get the development of products in, for example in software engineering where the designers in software companies will co-configure the design of products with their customers, their clients.

Another area of great interest now is what is referred to as inter-professional learning where you get professionals across different sectors or in different teams learning to work together. For example there was a very interesting article in [Volume 63, Number 2, by Paul Warmington](#), looking at multi-professional working, and using concepts from cultural activity theory to investigate those phenomena.

Other areas of interest for the journal in terms of contemporary debates, which you would find in other sectors and certainly of growing interest to educationalists, is the issue of globalisation. Particularly for our journal we're very interested in issues of migration, so labour mobility, people moving in and between countries in terms of work, and for example, the influence in terms of globalisation of multi-national companies on vocational education and training systems. To what extent do the concerns, demands, requirements of multi-national companies have an impact on national systems of education and training?

And then finally the whole area of inequality in relation to access to learning, issues to do with progression, how people can progress through participating in vocational education and training and particularly perhaps today, the issue of young people which is of great concern in many countries in terms of their life chances.

## **6. Who do you feel are your readership, your core audience?**

We would certainly see the journal as having three types of audience. Clearly researchers and academics, that's obviously a very core audience for the journal. In saying that, we'd want to feel that academics and researchers from across the field of education would be interested in the journal and we feel that because vocational education and training is central to all countries' systems of education, that people who are interested in education broadly would find something in the journal that would be of interest. We are very keen to encourage new researchers, from whatever background, to see the journal as somewhere they can showcase their ideas, their research.

And then two further key audiences would be professionals involved in vocational education and training whether that's people who are designing programmes, designing qualifications; people who work in industry for example, and are thinking about how to develop skills in the workplace; people who work in areas to do with designing assessment programmes; people who work in the area of careers education, careers advice and guidance. And then there are the policy makers. Again in terms of their role in developing vocational education and training systems but also thinking about the role of vocational education and training as part of a much broader field of education.

## **7. How important is the international element of the journal?**

JVET has always had international coverage and this continues to be of central importance. Every country in the world is grappling with the issues that are debated in the journal and so the journal I think plays a very important role in shining a light both on the similarities between countries but also on the differences. I think we need to understand how we're different and also what we share in order to develop a better understanding about the way in which vocational education and training reflects the cultures of the countries in which it takes place, and also the cultures of where it takes place. Also, because of the impact of globalisation, we are very keen to see at the heart of the journal, a comparative and an international perspective.

## **8. In what ways does the *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* assist in the development of practice that perhaps competitor journals do not?**

JVET is and always has been, very keen to reach out to professionals in the field of vocational education and training to show that the research that's being carried out can have a practical relevance. So it's always showcased new and innovative forms of practice and therefore you'll see within the journal articles, for example, that are evaluating new forms of pedagogies, the use of communication technologies for example. In Volume 63 Number 1, there was a very interesting article by [Victor Gekara, Michael Bloor and Helen Sampson](#) from Australia and Cardiff University in the UK, where they were looking at the introduction of computer-based assessment in what are referred to as safety-critical industry, in this particular article they looked at maritime education and training, so safety on-board ships. Now that's an example of a robust research based paper that will also have very practical relevance for the industry that it was focusing on, as well as being of interest to other sectors and other professionals, and researchers who are interested in the process and practice of computer based assessment. So it's got both the generic application as well as a sector specific application.

The journal is also in terms of practice, still very committed to the consideration of the professional development of professional teachers and trainers. When the journal began as

*The Vocational Aspect of Education*, it developed out of the intellectual concerns and the research that was being carried out in the UK at that time by people who were directly involved in the training and education of vocational teachers and trainers. So that is still very much a key area of interest for the journal.

**9. What 'hot topics' do you hope/expect to see coming through in the journal in the next two to three years?**

I think in the coming years, very much a hot topic will be how vocational education and training systems in different countries respond to a world in which, what you might call the old certainties of what counts as skill, are replaced by much more fluid concepts. Because of the dynamic nature of the world of work, what we mean by skill, what we mean by vocational expertise, vocational knowledge, are always in flux, we're always needing to debate what we mean by those terms and we're also needing to make sure that the changes in the world of work are reflected in vocational education and training programmes, what you might call the architecture of vocational education and training in different countries. The role of technology will continue to be a hot topic. I think particularly in relation to vocational education and training because the sites for vocational learning are diverse and new technology has a very important role to play in that, and also because if we think about the importance of technology both in the workplace but also the way in which many people now work and learn on the move. Can people access learning through their computers, through their mobile phones, so that they're carrying on their learning, wherever they are, even when they're not in a traditional workplace?

**10. What do you look for when considering articles and submissions?**

- **How do you spot a good article?**
- **What are the most common mistakes?**
- **What advice would you give researchers who would like to be published in your journal?**

As a journal we pride ourselves in offering constructive advice and feedback to everyone who submits a paper to us. In terms of offering advice to people who are thinking about submitting a paper, I would want to stress that we want to ensure that the papers that we publish engage the reader in a debate. So if the paper is presenting research findings, we want a clear explanation as to why the study in question was undertaken, how the authors took account of existing research, how the data was gathered and analysed, and importantly, provide an answer to the so-what question.

We're also happy for authors to share their doubts and concerns. We want authors to engage the reader – not everything is certain. So if a research study hasn't reached a conclusion, or has found perhaps more questions than answers, we're interested in that, we

are interested in problematizing what are often age-old concerns, we are interested in the presentation of new ideas.

If the paper's more theoretical, we want the author not really to presume the reader's an expert in a set of theories. So we don't really want papers which are written as if they are for an insider community. We want papers which seek to engage with a broad readership.

I would want to say to new authors, be wary of submitting an article that is what you might call a purely descriptive account. For example, there may have been a change to the way in which vocational education and training is delivered in a particular country, so there may have been a policy change. What we don't want is just a descriptive account of that change, we want the paper to ask some fundamental questions about what that change might represent and to critique it.

Above all, we want our authors to remember that they are communicating with a diverse international audience. Having said all that, there's no hard and fast rules. Our reviewers are very experienced and they reflect the diversity we want to encourage, Our reviewers have an open mind; they want to see papers which reflect methodological diversity, so we are interested in the qualitative as much as the quantitative. So I would really encourage people to read the journal, think about how to construct a paper that presents ideas in an engaging way, and then submit. And you'll be provided with constructive feedback.

### **11. What are your aspirations for the future of the journal – short and long term?**

As a new Editor, I'm obviously very aware that I'm following in a tradition of very committed Editors who've made the journal the success that it is. So I am very keen that I continue to ensure that the journal maintains its high quality, that it continues its appeal internationally, and to ensure that we continue to provide the constructive community if I can put it like that, to encourage people to publish with us.

I'm keen to strengthen the Book Review section of the journal because I believe that is important in terms of a service to our readers and I'm also thinking about introducing an Editorial, and possibly, but I say this quite tentatively, thinking about introducing what I'll just refer to quite briefly here as a policy debate section. Because vocational education and training is a very hot topic in its own right in most countries, both in the developed and the developing world, I think we might think about having a section where we have some short pieces engaging with hot topics.

### **12. Sign off**

I hope some of what I've been saying will be of interest and thank you very much for listening to this podcast. I want to finish by encouraging you to read the journal, to consider submitting papers to the journal, and also just to contact me, particularly if you've got ideas for the journal, or indeed if you've got questions arising out of this podcast.

