



Thirty years of sharing and caring in Vocational Education and Culture Research Network

Anja Heikkinen¹ & Liv Mjelde²

¹Tampere University, Finland

²Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway

(anja.heikkinen@tuni.fi)

Abstract

There are as many stories about the Vocational Education and Culture Network as there are people who have involved themselves in the network activities during the past 30 years; they all are worth telling. The organisers of the 2023 Oslo workshop asked us two to present a kind of memoir of the network because we were both involved at the start of joint activities. We hope this dialogue on our experiences will show some of the shared and distinctive features of the network. It is not chronological but covers a few themes raised by our experiences, illustrated by photos from earlier presentations and documents available to us. They do not try to do justice to all the diverse activities and meanings networkers have experienced during the past 30 years. Since so many have participated and contributed, we focus on activities rather than individuals, but readers will identify some long-term members in the photos. We hope a more detailed discussion continues after our dialogue.

Keywords: vocational education, culture, memoir, dialogue



Introduction

With the rising economic and political importance of vocational education and training (VET) and adult education, they have become issues in the academic world. This chapter provides a personal and dialogical story of the Vocational Education and Culture Research Network (shorter VET and Culture), which emerged as a grass-root initiative in Europe over 30 years ago, expanded worldwide, and is still in action. To capture a few glimpses from network history, visit the website¹ of the network and have a look at the list of main annual events (Appendix 1) and a selection of some network-connected publications (Appendix 2).

There are as many stories about the network as there are people who have involved themselves in the activities during the past 30 years; they all are worth telling. The organisers of the 2023 Oslo workshop asked us two to present a memoir of the VET and Culture Network because we were both involved at the start of the joint activities. Like others in VET and Culture, we have gone our separate pathways in life, but everyone's crossings back and forth have made the network what it is. We hope our experiences will show some of the shared and distinctive features of the VET and Culture Network.

This dialogue covers a few themes raised by our experiences, illustrated by photos from earlier presentations and documents available to us. They do not try to do justice to all the diverse activities and meanings networkers have experienced during the past 30 years. Since so many have participated and contributed, we focus on activities rather than individuals, but readers will certainly identify some long-term members in the photos. We argue that compared to other networks, the strength and persistence of VET and Culture are based on its loose structure and a strong commitment to a wide interdisciplinary, gender-sensitive, and critical approach to vocational and adult education and culture. We hope our dialogue encourages a more detailed discussion in the future.

The emergence of the network: What happened, in what context, and what did it mean to us?

Concerning the topic of the current Oslo workshop, could we claim the emergence of the network reflected an academic drift occurring in vocational education?

Anja: I would disagree. At least for me, the workshop in Tampere was motivated by problematising the neglect and ignorance of work and vocational education in research and studies of education in academia. My research at the turn of the 1990s, including comparisons between Finland, Germany, and Britain,

had focused on the historical formation and interpretations of vocational education primarily in crafts and industry. I analysed them in the intersection of the three spheres: economy and industry, political and social relations, and education. I found them to express controversial, competing, and transforming 'cultural' agendas and interpretations of vocational education.

I feel some guilt about combining vocational education with culture in the network title, though I have never managed to impose my reasoning on networkers. I was deeply critical of the theoretical and empirical aversion to work and work-related education in educational sciences, universalist and nation-state-centred comparisons in social sciences, and managerial psychology in organisational and business studies. This is a mainstream prejudice that demands to be challenged. Boldly I dreamt of revising concepts and connections of culture and education based on materialist ontology and epistemology, which centre on work, and work-mediated interaction among humans and their non-human environment (obviously being quite Marx-inspired). It also seemed a critical alternative for the rise of studies about vocational education and human resource development as instruments for the globalisation of trade and governance, supported by EU and OECD policies.

Reading research literature and familiarising myself with colleagues having interests and ambitions resonating (enough) with mine, in Finland, Germany, Britain, Norway, and Switzerland in the first place, there seemed to be a potential for a 'cross-cultural' collaboration to analyse work and vocational education beyond national borders. Though not necessarily referring to culture, they emphasised historical contextualisation, power structures in industrial relations and formation of subjectivities, the intersectionality of life histories with wider historical transformations, and distinctive pedagogies in understanding vocational education. A group of us organised a workshop 'Vocational Education, Culture and History - European Perspectives' held in Tampere in 1993. Our ambition was to outline a critical, historicising research agenda on the following themes:

1. Relationship of 'models' of state and state formation processes to vocational education, including changes in national and local citizenship,
2. Educational paradigms and their proponents, i.e., organisation and pedagogical principles of vocational education,
3. Vocational education as a constituent of life-worldly existence in a cultural context, i.e., social and personal structuring of life-course and spheres of life through vocational education,
4. Traditions of learning, teaching, and knowledge, which differentiate academic and vocational education and various forms of vocational education from each other,
5. All of these themes were seen to include a gender dimension.

Not taking certain definitions of vocational education as given, it was self-evident that the analysis of its formation must relate to other forms of education, such as adult and academic education. In practice, we could not continue activities strictly on previous themes, because there has been a constant discussion and debate about what they should be. However, I assume the themes have been more or less visible in all network activities ever since.



Figure 1. Tampere and Hämeenlinna 1993: 'Vocational Education, Culture and History – European Perspectives'.

Liv: In late October 30 years ago, I received an invitation from Anja Heikkinen to a workshop in Tampere in November 1993. I had just defended my doctoral dissertation: *Apprenticeship: From practice to theory and back again* at the University of Joensuu. I had been in Joensuu before, invited by professor Ari Antikainen in 1979 to talk on the 'Work of Hand and Mind', based on the first research I initiated in VET in the 1970s, on the integration of dropouts from the newly developed 9 years of compulsory school into vocational schools. I worked as a social worker in the biggest vocational school in Scandinavia. I started to acquire practical experience with dropouts and saw how unfairly the state apparatus treated vocational students and apprentices. Part of the work involved starting an interest organisation for vocational students and apprentices in 1970. It was perhaps a time prior to academic drift in this field. I tried to raise awareness in the academic world about research and writing on working-class education, specifically vocational education for craft and industry. At the time there was little interest or research money in the field.

I said yes to the invitation to Tampere and on some dark November days from the group that gathered, seeds were planted for the VET and Culture Network. We were scholars from different academic disciplines interested in researching the history and culture of vocational education. This thinking didn't exist much

in Norway at that time. Educational activists were invited to Finland and Malta for other VET and Culture conferences in 1994, 1995, and 1996. Finland was in a deep economic crisis in this period. But some money was found, invitations were produced, and new scholars joined the network.

The VET and Culture Research Network has no formal rules, structures, or aims, but does it have a distinctive research ambition and profile?

The expansion of the network required communication in English and increasingly led to the adoption of Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, for example in the acronym VET and Culture. On the website¹ the network informs: 'We are a voluntary network of senior and junior researchers and students, practising cross-cultural, independent and critical research on transformations in vocational education, and in relations between work, education and politics. The aim of the network is to support members in their different academic and institutional environments through collaborative research, virtual communication, annual meetings, teaching, supervision and publishing.'



Figure 2. Malta 1996: 'Vocational Education and Apprenticeships'.

Anja: The beginning of the network was almost accidental but based on mutual interests and ambitions of initiators to develop a joint research agenda with a cross-cultural, historicising approach to vocational education. In the early 1990s, Finland was not part of the EU, and there were hardly any opportunities to get funding for international research, especially for a topic marginal and uninteresting to the academic world, in educational or social sciences. Also, before completing my doctoral thesis, I couldn't act officially as a Principal

Investigator – contracted senior researcher – for initiating and coordinating funded projects. Therefore, we continued as a network, supporting research discussions through annual meetings, joint research and teaching, and publications. Thus, there was no institutional or financial support, and the participants had to organise activities as part of their regular work – but often not recognised or appreciated by their affiliations and colleagues – and by searching for individual funding for single activities. This promoted informal, personal, and non-bureaucratic practices among networkers.

At least my naivete drained when since the mid-1990s, vocational education and training became a priority in making EU-Europe the most competitive economy in the world. At the same time, marketisation ideology expanded globally, promoting research and development through management by projects-policy. New markets were opening for policy-led studies and careers in research on vocational education, but unfortunately, cross-cultural and historicising approaches were not given relevance.



Figure 3. *Sørmarka and Oslo 1997: 'Work of Hands and Work of Minds in Times of Change'.*

With the transforming of mainstream research networks and associations into project-generating and disseminating institutions, it was challenging to continue voluntary and informal conceptual and empirical analyses and reflections about the meanings of culture and vocational education. On the other hand, though the lack of time, funding, and recognition has accompanied the network down through the years, most participants have found the freedom from structures, project funding, and institutional restrictions an important quality of the network. There are few opportunities to meet, debate, and share ideas and experiences of intellectual and research interests and ambitions voluntarily and free from the regular pressure of academic work. However, the other side of the

coin is that no one can be forced to support a certain agenda, and even joint initiatives and ambitions are hard to implement without institutional support and resources. Yet, the continuity of the core group of the network has maintained the theoretical and methodological focus and the atmosphere and shown an alternative to newcomers or more random participants.



Figure 4. Joensuu 2005: *'Transforming Politics of Education and Work'*.

Due to my shifting academic position, I was primarily engaged with adult education for many years. Although I found it just widening and strengthening the historical and cultural perspective, the tensions and contradictions between adult and vocational education became visible in research, practice, and politics. Yet, instead of ignoring them, they should remain central topics of research and study. Sometimes I started to feel that networkers were searching for recognition by following renowned figures in social scientific discourse, instead of providing alternative and original analyses and interpretations about vocational education and culture. My few conceptual and methodological initiatives seemed not attractive enough for designing a joint research profile. Therefore, my function has rather been an enabler and coordinator for networkers to gather, develop, and discuss their own ideas and agendas.

However, despite the lack of a sharp agenda, there have been attempts to document the network profile in research and as an academic collective. For example, we had a project during 2005–2008 on developing books on three themes: reconceptualising education and industry; reconfiguring occupations – especially educators; and social relations of working and knowing. This was followed by discussing a joint 'intellectual agenda', for example in the 2010 annual event.



Figure 5. Hattingen 2010: 'Futures of VET and Culture'.

Liv: As Anja said, the beginning of the network happened almost by accident. For example, as my thesis was too controversial in Oslo, I defended my thesis in Finland in 1993. In 1990 I started working as a professor of Vocational Pedagogy at the old vocational teacher training institute in Oslo, hired to strengthen research and to work on the MA programme for vocational teachers. In 1993, there was not much belief in empirical research on vocational education, nor scientific understanding of the complexities and contradictions within the expansive educational system, which aimed to integrate vocational and academic education under the slogan 'Equality through Education'. Through my practical work in vocational schools, I, like many colleagues in the network, realised that the goals were far from fulfilled. Lately 'Social Justice' has been used in this context.

I am a sociologist by training, with minors in political science and history. I have much practical experience outside the academic world and teaching experience at all levels, 18 years as a teacher and social worker in the vocational schools in Oslo. Visiting vocational workshops widely in the world, I found a similar social division of learning; workshops and academic classrooms in vocational and adult education wherever I went. One problem in many academic institutions in Norway is a lack of historical knowledge about vocational education and its roots in crafts and industrial trades, and the gender divisions as they had developed under industrial capitalism.

While a visiting scholar at the Department of Sociology of Education in Toronto, I encountered strong women posing new questions about the social division of knowledge in science and women's place in family and working life. Feminist questions were at the forefront politically and in the streets in the 1970s and 1980s, although with marginal interest in 'the gendered history of vocational

education'. The VET and Culture Network took up related questions on the social division of labour. In May 1996, a group of female researchers gathered in Hämeenlinna to look into 'the gendered history of (vocational) education - European comparisons', raising new questions from a gendered and historical standpoint. The gender question within vocational education was also the topic in Aarau 1999.



Figure 6. Hämeenlinna 1996: 'Gendered History of VET - European Comparisons'; Aarau 1999: 'Gender Perspectives on VET'.

The Age of the Smart Machine as Information Technology and now Artificial Intelligence was called in the 1990s challenged both the labour processes on the manual labour market and led to an expansion of education and new research interests in the state apparatus in vocational education.

The Norwegian Research Council opened 1990s economic support for research on the educational reforms in upper secondary education, which had integrated vocational and general education under one common law. That gave new opportunities to the Institute of Vocational Pedagogy and other research milieus. We had the VET and Culture conference at Sørmarka in Oslo in 1997, where colleagues from the Institute of Sociology at the University of Bergen participated. They were doing comparative research on the European labour market, vocational education, and democracy. They followed up and organised a VET and Culture conference in Bergen. The Institute of Vocational Pedagogy in Oslo invited another Conference in 2004, where we had participants from South

Africa, the USA, Argentina, Cuba, and Australia, to mention some from beyond Europe.

My ambitions and activities in the VET and Culture Network have been to develop a cooperative and democratic way to develop interdisciplinary comparative research in vocational and adult education in the academic world on the one hand. On the other, to stress what I have called 'science and research from below', an educational science that takes people's everyday life as a point of departure. I wanted the working-class experiences with the new educational expansive reforms to be heard. We struggle in the academic world often from a mainstream point of view in our 'ways of seeing', and as we say in sociology, 'whose side are you on'. It is also important to make the contradictions between the work of hand and mind visible in both vocational and academic education. To make its ambitions and profile visible, the network has focused on joint publishing, such as the Peter Lang book series.

VET and Culture Network has no institutional home or affiliation, why and what are the implications?

The VET and Culture Network has commonly been identified as critical and alternative, even anarchic to hegemonies in academia. The continuity has relied on the voluntary sharing of informal mailing lists, letters, and websites. Might this be a methodological implication from 'culture' in the title, and from favouring a 'cross-cultural' and 'historicising' approach? Does this mean self-critical positioning and encounters in the intersection of diverse and contradictory fields of research, practice – work life, VET – and policymaking?



Figure 7. Mustiala 2003: 'Occupation and Education in Transition'.

Anja: I assume that besides the pragmatic, there are also personal and political reasons among networkers for avoiding institutional commitment. I had never learned or even wanted to confirm with academic rules and games. This may originate from my life before starting the so-called academic career in educational science. I came from a non-academic and not-too-easy social and family background and was engaged in the leftist student movement. Besides education, I have a degree in philosophy, sociology, mathematics, and natural sciences, and experience as a teacher in various educational institutions and as an administrator. Such background might have contributed to feelings of alienation from academia. Yet, in the 1990s, I had naively thought it possible to go your way and follow your ambition in research. Also, being not so young and having a temporary contract and a daughter to raise, I simply did not have time to satisfy hegemonic academic rites and rules. Most of all, there was no community or support for my research at my home university or even in Finland, while vocational education raised marginal interest in academia. Furthermore, critical, cultural, and historicising approaches were not welcome or were considered even dangerous, among leading practitioners, scholars, and policymakers of vocational education.

Some of the original principles in network activities were integrating research, studies, and dialogues with practice and policymaking, concrete and physical encounters and locating activities in places and spaces, such as VET institutes and worksites. While some of us and our activities have faced marginalisation, opposition, and even resistance from the established VET pedagogical, policy, and research communities, it has not simply been a disadvantage. It may have sharpened argumentation and strengthened the agenda.



Figure 8. Gilleleje 2006: *'Convergences and Divergences of Vocational Education'*.

Liv: I have had many of the same experiences in the academic world as Anja describes. When people are trained in the pedagogical and academic world they

may think that they 'know it all' when it comes to the art of teaching and learning. I was told, 'You do not need research'. Vocational education per se did not exist in the academic world and research interest in the field was zero until the 1990s. Yet, vocational teacher training has existed since 1947. Vocational teachers demanded other ways of learning how to teach. They wanted their own practice in the workshop to be at the rotation point for learning; such experiences demanded a John Dewey Laboratory School approach to teaching/learning. Our Norwegian MA programme in vocational pedagogy is based on cooperation and group learning. I started to grasp this more and more when starting work on the programme. I learned from and together with my students and good colleagues. Another thing was that I started working outside Europe with our ideas. In Norway, we made a successful application for building up a master's degree in vocational pedagogy in Kampala, Uganda, with scholars from Kyambogo University. It was a cooperation project with South Sudan where other teachers from our institute were involved. What I want to pinpoint here is that there was a lot of support from VET and Culture colleagues for this project over the years. The Peter Lang book series gave the students some texts with more complex ways of thinking about VET. The network also invited scholars and students from Kampala to present keynotes and participate in the conferences. It gave new opportunities to many people and enriched our discussions. It was also a learning experience that the same contradictions and relations of ruling existed in the academic bureaucracy in Norway and Uganda. Heartless and mechanistic bureaucratisation was part of academic life. New public management demanded also more bureaucracy and control from above.



Figure 9. Mzumbo 2014: 'Vocational Education Beyond European Conceptions'.

Is VET and Culture Network most distinctive because of intertwining research, pedagogy, ethics and politics?

Some have characterised the VET and Culture Network as distinctive due to the sharing, caring and open atmosphere. Yet, some have criticised this as compromising the competitive foundation of academia, arguing that ‘high-quality research and teaching cannot build on friendships’. In network activities, friendships may mean ‘intellectual hugging’ that builds on sharing critical and – though problematic and complex – gender-sensitive perspectives on work, education, politics, and academia. However, it may be that the reflections of our Australian colleague Sue Shore have become increasingly controversial since the network has faced the competitive atmosphere of global academic capitalism during later years.

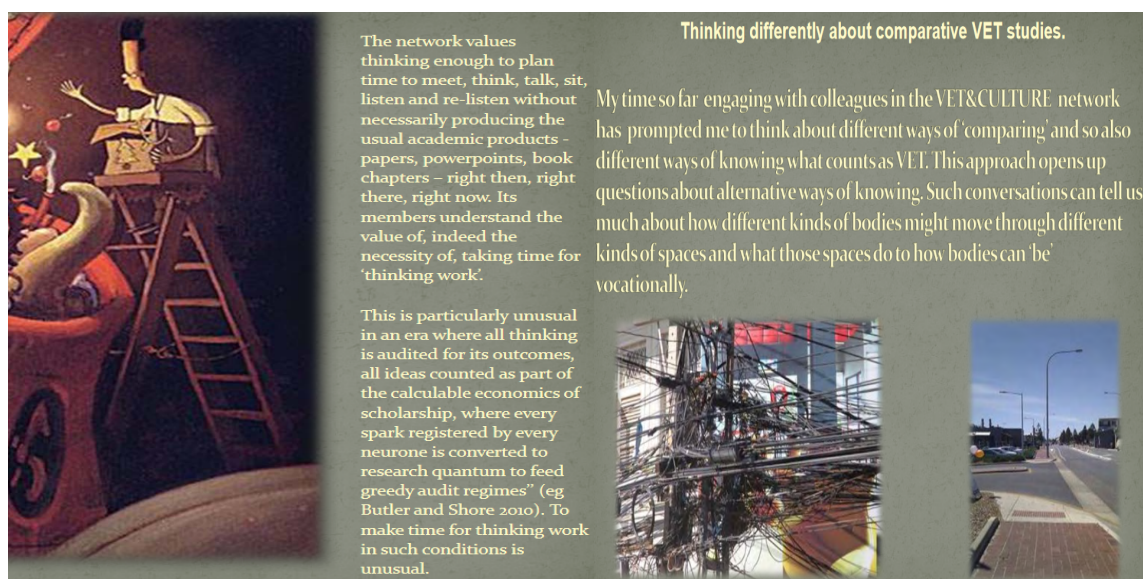


Figure 10. Sue Shore 2012: 'Reflections on VET and Culture'.

Anja: For me, such entwinement is fundamental for several reasons. First, I am committed to the idea that research, teaching, and studying should be intertwined in academia. Network activities should combine them, to relate and be meaningful to our everyday lives. Second, it is also an issue of resources and space. I would not have time and other resources in my environment if I did not integrate research, teaching and 'societal interaction' - the slogan of recent university policies, substituting our understanding of the linkage of theory and research with practice and politics. For me, collaboration in teaching and working with students is the most important among network activities. During 1998–2003 we experimented with collaborative research-based study modules applying

VET and Culture principles between Finnish, German, UK, and French universities. They continued in 2005–2008 as a pilot programme ‘Cross-cultural Collaboration in Lifelong Learning and Work’ in MA and Doctoral studies, jointly among Finnish, Swiss, UK, Maltese, Danish, and Australian universities. They provided an opportunity for long-term and intensive conceptual and methodological discussions and concrete – though small-scale – cross-cultural empirical research on vocational education.

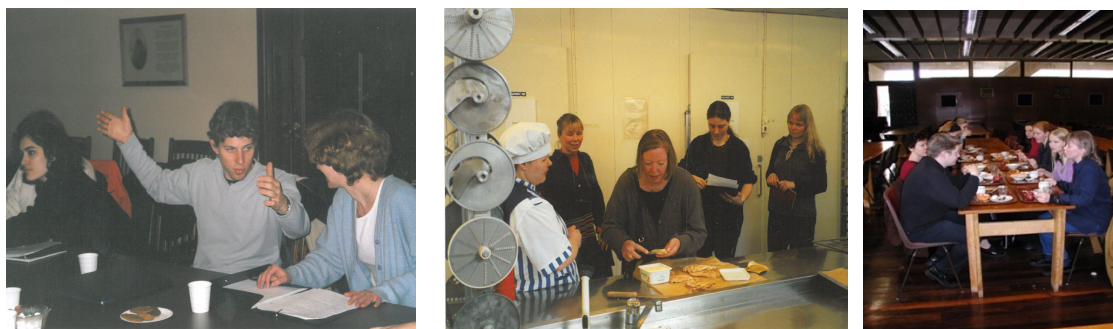


Figure 11. EMVET modules 1998–2003: Jyväskylä 2001, ‘Status and Prestige of VET’; Leicester 2002, ‘Methodological and Ethical Challenges of Cross-cultural/comparative Educational Research’.

Though the gender perspective is mentioned as the quality of the network, it may not quite be the proper expression of how I understand this intertwinement. It is rather thinking about theory and research as components of praxis in a wider sense, where intellectual – analytical, reflective, interpretative – activities intertwine with concrete activities shaping human and nonhuman environment, and where both activities are conditioned by and affecting material and historical realities. This implies conscious mutual exposure or encounter – and bodily, ethical, and emotional – between theory, research, practice, and politics. In sum, politics may be understood as a struggle on, and as an exercise of power to decide about the future and education as promoting an ethically sound future by intervening in individual and collective growth processes. Therefore, political, educational, and ethical action intertwine as praxis – also bodily and emotional, as do theorisation and research on politics, education, and ethics.

Yet, I believe that the global triumph of capitalism, the world-historical era of the Capitalocene, which has enabled the environmental crisis of the Anthropocene epoch, is politically, educationally, ethically, and theoretically permeated by hegemonic masculinity. This affects both males and females or any assumed ‘genders’. Since the issue is fundamental when analysing and theorising economy, work, occupations, and vocational education, I have hoped that a gender-informed approach, together with other Capitalocene-critical approaches

to colonialism, or nonhuman perspectives to politics, economy, and work, would characterise the network in all its activities.

Consequently, I have understood the network as a self-educative community – sometimes I suggested the concept of a cross-cultural study circle to characterise the ‘ideal’ of activities – where members regardless of their seniority or theoretical and methodological expertise and experience are open to learning from each other. This also means that those who take the responsibility to organise events or activities also consider how they are pedagogically organised, to allow participants to learn and educate each other. For example, it means thinking about the ‘choreography’ of events, how they are structured and how participants are taken care of and guided.

Liv: The advantage of the VET and Culture Network is that we have been interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary-oriented. We have not been concerned about academic and scientific backgrounds. We have been searching for ways of building inspiration and curiosity together in the research of vocational and adult education. We have tried to inspire ‘The Unfinished’, as researching and teaching in the field of vocational pedagogy demands. It may allow us to be close to what Jeanne Gamble has called ‘unthinkable’ in vocational pedagogy, and be clear that as teachers/researchers, we do not have all the answers. I have been concerned about how to build a good non-competitive foundation in our learning processes as teachers and researchers in general and in our VET and Culture conferences. But my main point of departure is, how to work towards an educational system where cooperation and curiosity for all is the main goal and where respect for the protection of nature and people’s cultures is the centre of the learning processes.

What are the impacts of the VET and Culture Network?

The networkers are widely engaged in research, practice, and politics. Since the network is voluntary and lacks institutional status and resources, its impact is mainly concretised and documented in their other affiliations and projects. It is hard to estimate its distinctive personal, collective, and institutional influences.



Figure 12. *Intensive workshops Tampere 2006, London 2007, Tampere 2008, Malta 2008: 'Crosslife – Cross-cultural Collaboration in Lifelong Learning and Work – Pilot Program 2005–2008'.*

Anja: Networkers like me are active also on hundreds of other platforms, in national and international research associations, projects, and publications. Since the network has no such official status or institutional reputation as established scientific associations, the impacts of participation in the network remain quite invisible and unofficial. People have used the network for a diversity of individual purposes, which is logical due to its open and inclusive profile. Yet, I am positive that it has catalysed theoretical, methodological, political, and practical ideas; giving peer support and empowerment to people to survive and succeed in their lives and careers. Still, those who have been there for a long time know that it has influenced members in many ways. It has encouraged or opened up opportunities for them to focus on certain research topics, develop agendas, and carry out projects. It has promoted alternative ways to research, teach, and interact with practice and politics. For me and many others, it has both been integrated into our regular academic work and existed as separate cross-cultural and historical study modules, programmes, and projects – such as 'Vocational Education and Culture'-modules and 'Cross-cultural Collaboration in Lifelong Learning and Work'-pilot – addressing changing relations between work, education, and politics. For many, the network means lifelong friendships.

However, despite the lack of formal status, the network has produced an astonishing number of publications, as a collective, in different combinations, and as individuals. Besides other publishing forums, the Peter Lang-series Studies in Vocational and Continuing Education has served as a literary home for the network since early 2000. There are countless other joint activities among networkers, linked to their everyday life, such as joint courses, seminars, and supervision of graduate and doctoral students, but also to their other networks or academic associations. Since tens of colleagues and hundreds of students have

been involved mentioning individual names and occasions would not do justice to their engagement.

Liv: Maybe it has been an advantage that the network does not have an official status. Conforming to ‘the rules of the academic game’ was unnecessary. I felt we did not need to compete; people were willing to help each other. For example, Justine Nabaggala from Kampala went on for a PhD in Canada, thanks to connections through our meetings. The atmosphere of support and willingness to cooperate have been significant. Our colleague Olav Eikeland had difficulty getting his work on Aristotle, actually on ‘academic apprenticeship’, published in English, but the book was published in the VET and Culture Network series.

What could and should be the future of the network?

Anja: Nobody ever planned that there would be this kind of network and even less that it would be still active after 30 years. It hasn’t been self-evident when there are no formal structures or resources to moderate changes in institutional positions and life situations or some inevitable personal tensions among networkers. One of the worrying periods was the global COVID-19 pandemic, which led all institutions and actors into uncertainty and chaos. Yet, a critical mass of networkers has been concerned about keeping the network alive, and we managed.

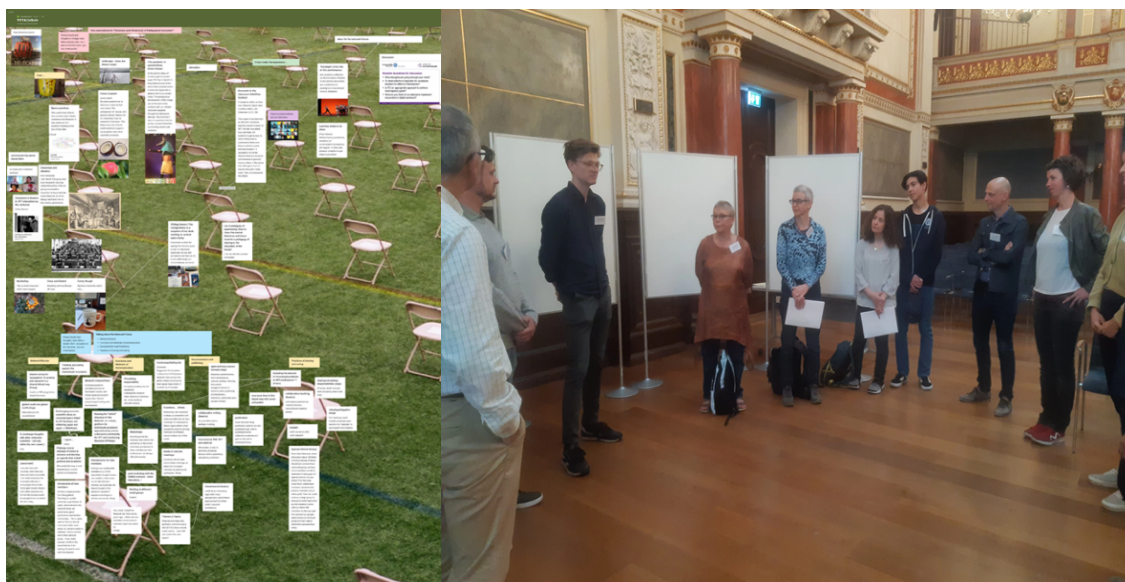


Figure 13. Three online workshops 2020–2021; in-person Rostock 2022: ‘Current Challenges and Hegemonic Discourses on Vocational and Adult Education’.

Looking back 30 years, many of the basic principles of the network seem more prevalent than ever. Despite the expanding VET research and study programmes, they are increasingly policy-led and conformist. It has been a struggle to maintain the critical and historicising focus on vocational education and culture, among established factions such as comparative, economist, policy analytical, learning psychological, and multiculturalist research. The competitiveness in academia has become ever more global and brutal. Therefore, the voluntary mobilisation of researchers is more important than ever in creating alternative spaces to do critical, historicising, cross-cultural, and gender-informed research on vocational education.

However, after 30 years, it is vital also to critically revisit the research topics and practices of the network: what may not have been addressed or have become marginalised and forgotten. Although forgivable due to the loose and voluntary nature of the network, it is a pity that it did not engage in a more systematic (self)critical conceptual and historical analysis of culture and vocational education, concerning work, occupations and economy, and education and politics. In the geological epoch of the Anthropocene and the world-historical era of the Capitalocene, it seems urgent to continue such analysis by taking their nonhuman, planetary, technologised and gendered qualities seriously. This does not mean abandoning previous theoretical and empirical research and conceptualisations but reconsidering them in a wider, deeper cross-disciplinary, and non-Eurocentric perspective.

I hope the ethical, political, and pedagogical identity and the caring and sharing atmosphere of the network will prevail. However, new research perspectives and the pressures of global academic capitalism also require critical reflection on the evolution of network practices. Open dialogue is needed about revitalising the integration of research, teaching and studies, and encounters with practice and politics in network activities.

Liv: None of us can tell in which direction research on vocational and adult education will proceed. Pedagogy is an old craft, often with a stuck record and not much critical thinking seems to happen at the time. Critical social sciences are new constructions and may face a lot of challenges in the coming years. The education system is in crisis. The world is unpredictable to say it mildly. Social science departments are often closed if they do not serve 'the ruling apparatus' and critical professors in our fields lose their jobs. This is happening in this time of crisis. The network has been kept alive for 30 years by enthusiasm and non-traditional ways of cooperating in the academic world. One important feature of the network has been that we have always included in our meetings to step outside the 'academic classroom'. We have visited factories, vocational schools, adult education centres, and craft and industrial workplaces as part of our agenda in different countries. That gives inspiration for keeping our research

focused on the complexities of vocational and adult education and culture from a comparative perspective. I hope the grounds can be prepared to keep these traditions alive also in the future. ‘Never despise humble beginnings’ as I wrote with Manfred Wahle, who was also one of the organisers of our first meeting 30 years ago, which was the beginning of a long journey towards rich inspiration for scholars around the world in an era where the only constant is change.

Anja and Liv: We appreciate the initiative for historical self-reflection in Oslo in 2023. Considering local and global inequalities in work and well-being, escalating environmental crisis and accelerating competition in academia, the topics, mission, and principles of a critical VET and Culture Network are more urgent than ever.



Figure 14. Oslo workshop 2023: ‘Academic drift in vocational education’.

The theme of the 31st annual network meeting in the University of Valencia 2.-4.10.2024, ‘Cultures of work and education: Understandings and values of work taught and learned in adult and vocational education’ attests to the vitality of the network. If the Vocational Education and Culture Network were not there, it would be high time to invent it again. We feel privileged to have been part of its evolution; and hope to continue the struggle for esteem of students, teachers and researchers of vocational and adult education in the future.

Endnote

¹ Website of the network: <https://vetandculturenetwork.wordpress.com>

Notes on contributors

Anja Heikkinen is an emeritus professor of Education at Tampere University (TAU). Her research, teaching and publications focus on relations between education, work and politics, from historical, cultural and gender perspectives. She has been active in national and international research networks, associations and projects in vocational and adult education, and history of education, as well as leading the research group Equality and Planetary Justice in Vocational, Adult and Higher Education in TAU.

Liv Mjelde, Dr. Philos., is professor emeritus in Vocational Pedagogy connected to the Senior Centre, Oslo Metropolitan University. She is a sociologist specialised in Sociology of Education. Her research interests focus on the social division of knowledge: the changing relations between vocational and general education from psychological, didactic and sociological perspectives. One of her main research fields is the gender divisions of labour. Her scientific work is published in several languages.

Appendix 1

Main annual meetings of VET and Culture-Research Network

- 'Vocational Education, Culture and History - European Perspectives', Tampere and Hämeenlinna, Finland, 1993
- 'Searching for Agenda of VET and Culture', Tampere, Finland, 1994
- 'Vocational Education and Culture, Prospects from Theory and Practice', Hämeenlinna, Finland, 1995
- 'Gendered History of VET - European Comparisons', Hämeenlinna, Finland, 1996
- 'Vocational Education and Apprenticeships in Europe', Valletta, Malta, 1996
- 'Work of Hands and Work of Minds in Times of Change', Sørmarka and Oslo, Norway, 1997
- 'Economic, Social and Political Embeddedness of Vocational Education - Historical and Cultural Perspectives', Bergen, Norway, 1998
- 'Gender Perspectives on VET', Aarau, Switzerland, 1999
- 'Lifelong Learning - One Focus, Different Systems', Bochum, Germany, 2000
- 'Social Competence and Learning: A Relation Causing Many Questions', Arvidsjaur, Sweden, 2001
- 'Governance and Marketisation in Vocational Education', Erfurt, Germany, 2002
- 'Occupation and Education in Transition', Mustiala, Finland, 2003
- 'Working knowledge in a Globalizing World; Learning at School - Learning at Work', Sørmarka and Oslo, Norway, 2004
- 'Transforming Politics of Education and Work', Joensuu, Finland, 2005
- 'Convergences and Divergences of Vocational Education', Gilleleje, Denmark, 2006
- 'European Challenges for VET - Cultural, Political and Didactic Issues', Konstanz, Germany, 2007
- 'Reflections on VET and Culture: Past, Present and Future', Arvidsjaur, Sweden, 2008
- 'Inclusion and Exclusion in a Globalised World', Baden, Switzerland, 2009
- 'Futures of VET and Culture (Themes and Topics, Methodological Approach, University Teaching and Studies)', Hattingen, Germany, 2010
- 'Research for VET Policy and Practice', Turin, Italy, 2011
- 'The Futures of Adult Educator(s): Agency, Identity and Ethos', Tallinn, Estonia, 2011
- 'The Personal and Political in Cross-Cultural Comparisons', Tampere, Finland, 2012
- 'Shaping the Futures of (Vocational) Education and Work - Commitment of VET and VET Research', Wuppertal, Germany, 2012
- 'Myths and Brands in Vocational Education', Tampere, Finland, 2013

- 'Vocational Education Beyond European Conceptions', Mzumbe, Tanzania, 2014
- 'Vocational education, citizenship and participation: Problematizing relations between education, work and politics from contemporary and historical perspectives ', Valencia, Spain, 2015
- 'Vocational and Academic Education – Clash of Cultures', Vienna, Austria, 2016
- 'Disciplinary Struggles in the History of Education', Tampere, Finland, 2017
- 'Opening and Extending Vocational Education', Zürich, Switzerland, 2018
- 'Vocational and Adult Education in Times of a Pandemic', virtual, 2020
- 'Impact of Digitization on (Vocational) Education', virtual, 2020
- 'Closenesses and Distances in Vocational Education', virtual, 2021
- 'Current Challenges and Hegemonic Discourses on Vocational and Adult Education', Rostock, Germany, 2022
- 'Academic Drift in Vocational Education', Oslo, Norway, 2023

Appendix 2

Selection of publications, connected to VET and Culture-Research Network (some available online, and in ResearchGate or Academia.edu), presented chronologically according to the conventions of the publication forum.

University of Tampere/Tampere University Press

Heikkinen, Anja, Pätäri, Jenni, & Molzberger, Gabriele (Eds.). (2019). *Disciplinary struggles in education*.

Heikkinen, Anja, & Sultana, Ronald (Eds.) (1997). *Vocational education and apprenticeships in Europe: Challenges for practice and research*.

Heikkinen, Anja (Ed.). (1996). *Gendered history of (vocational) education: European comparisons*.

Heikkinen, Anja (Ed.). (1995). *Vocational education and culture: Prospects from research and practice*.

Heikkinen, Anja (Ed.). (1994). *Vocational education and culture: Prospects from history and life-history*.

University of Jyväskylä Press

Heikkinen, Anja, Mjelde, Liv, & Lien, Tove (Eds.). (1999). *Work of hands and work of minds in times of change*.

Cambridge Scholars

Heikkinen, Anja, & Lassnigg, Lorenz (Eds.). (2015). *Myths and brands in vocational education*.

Peter Lang series Studien zur Erwachsenenbildung; Editors: Klaus Harney Dieter H. Jütting

Governance and Marketisation in Vocational and Continuing Education, by Rudolf Husemann, Anja Heikkinen (Volume editors), 2004.

Lifelong Learning: One Focus, Different Systems, by Klaus Harney, Anja Heikkinen, Sylvia Rahn, Michael Schemmann (Volume editors), 2002.

Peter Lang (Education)

Gender Perspectives on Vocational Education – Historical, Cultural and Policy Aspects, Editors: Philipp Gonon, Kurt Haefeli, Anja Heikkinen, Iris Ludwig, 2002.

Futures of education II: essays from an interdisciplinary symposium, Editor: Jürgen Oelkers, 2003.

**Peter Lang series Studies in Vocational and Continuing Education; Editors:
Philipp Gonon, Anja Heikkinen**

- Governance Revisited – Challenges and Opportunities for Vocational Education and Training, by Regula Bürgi, Philipp Gonon (Volume editors), 2021.
- Apprenticeship in dual and non-dual systems – Between tradition and innovation, by María José Chisvert-Tarazona, Mónica Moso Diez, Fernando Marhuenda-Fluixá (Volume editors), 2021.
- Opening and Extending Vocational Education, by Philipp Eigenman, Philipp Gonon, Markus Weil (Volume editors), 2021.
- Internationalisation and Transnationalisation in Higher Education, by Vesa Korhonen, Pauliina Alenius (Volume editors), 2018.
- Collective Skill Formation in Liberal Market Economies? The Politics of Training Reforms in Australia, Ireland and the United Kingdom, by Janis Vossiek (Author), 2018.
- Vocational Education beyond Skill Formation – VET between Civic, Industrial and Market Tensions, by Fernando Marhuenda-Fluixá (Volume editor), 2017.
- History of Vocational Education and Training in Europe – Cases, Concepts and Challenges, by Esther Berner, Philipp Gonon (Volume editors), 2017.
- Shaping the Futures of (Vocational) Education and Work – Commitment of VET and VET Research, by Gabriele Molzberger, Manfred Wahle (Volume editors), 2015.
- National Qualifications Frameworks and the Dual Model of Vocational Training in International Cooperation, by Markus Maurer, Philipp Gonon (Volume editors), 2014.
- Challenges and Reforms in Vocational Education – Aspects of Inclusion and Exclusion, by Stefanie Stolz, Philipp Gonon (Volume editors), 2012.
- Hybrid Qualifications: Structures and Problems in the Context of European VET Policy structures and problems in the context of European VET policy, by Thomas Deissinger, Josef Aff, Alison Fuller, Christian Helms Jørgensen (Volume editors), 2013.
- Divergence and Convergence in Education and Work, by Vibe Aarkrog, Christian Helms Jørgensen (Volume editors), 2012.
- The Ways of Aristotle – Aristotelian Phrónêsis, Aristotelian Philosophy of Dialogue, and Action Research, by Olav Eikeland (Author), 2009.
- The Quest for Modern Vocational Education – Georg Kerschensteiner between Dewey, Weber and Simmel, by Philipp Gonon (Author), 2009.
- Knowing work: the social relation of working and knowing. By Markus Weil, Leena Koski, Liv Mjelde (Volume editors) 2009.
- Reworking Vocational Education – Policies, Practices and Concepts, by Anja Heikkinen, Katrin Kraus (Volume editors), 2009.

Work, Education and Employability, by Philipp Gonon, Katrin Kraus, Jürgen Oelkers, Stefanie Stolz (Volume editors), 2008.

Working Knowledge in a Globalizing World - From Work to Learning, from Learning to Work, by Liv Mjelde, Richard Daly (Volume editors), 2006.

The Magical Properties of Workshop Learning (Translated by Richard Daly), by Liv Mjelde (Author), 2006.

Social Competences in Vocational and Continuing Education, by Antony Lindgren, Anja Heikkinen (Volume editors), 2004.

Examples of books, special issues in journals, proceedings etc. from network activities

Heikkinen, A., Jinia, N. (Eds.) 2023. *Environmental care and social progress – (im)possible connection*. Osder Publications.

Harju, A., Heikkinen, A. (Eds.) 2016. *Adult education and planetary condition*. Finnish Adult Education Association.

Heikkinen, A., Jögi, L., Jutte, W., Zarifis, G. (Eds.). 2012. *The Futures of Adult Educator(s): Agency, Identity and Ethos*. ESREA ReNAdET&VET and Culture.

Seddon, T., Henriksson, L., Niemeyer, B. (Eds.) 2009. *Learning and Work and the Politics of Working Life: Global Transformations and Collective Identities in Teaching, Nursing and Social Work*. Routledge.

Vocational Training 32/2004, special issue 'A history of vocational education and training in Europe - From divergence to convergence'.

E. Figueira (ed.) 2003. *Vocational Education and Training in Europe: Culture, Values & Meanings*. INOFOR.

Nijhof, W., Heikkinen, A., Nieuwenhuis, L. (Eds.). 2003. *Shaping Flexibility in Vocational Education and Training – Institutional, Curricular and Professional Conditions*. Springer.

Journal of Education and Work 2/2001, special issue 'Centres and Peripheries in Vocational Education'.

Sakslind, R. (red.) 1998. *Danning og yrkesutdanning – Utdanningssystem og nasjonale moderniseringsprosjekter*. Norges forskningsråd.