The Systemic Development of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Three Countries: Bosnia And Herzegovina (BiH), Syria, the United Kingdom (UK)

By David Parkes

1. Introduction

This article is concerned with systemic change at national level in the vocational education sector. A **systemic** change may be defined as one experienced by the whole of an organization or a country and not just particular parts of it. The article explores such change in three very different countries and circumstances and in different periods of time – the late 1980s, the late 1990s and early 2000s. The three countries indicated in the title are examples of applying major change in an education sub-sector with a key question: 'how to make systemic change work **in practice** within the complexity of politics, people, social policy, bureaucracy and the overall environment?' Here, we concentrate on approaches and mechanisms to bring people(s) together to reach consensus in political (small and big 'p' contexts). The mechanisms are intended to provide the means (and the money) for individual actors to reach consensus over ways forward. The three countries have been chosen because the attempts at change were not just notional but funded in many millions of euro or pounds and were subject to complex national, international policies and values.

For the purposes of the article, three countries have been chosen as different examples of attempted systemic development at national level. The fact that each country's development project presents a different period in time as well as different levels of complexity makes it possible to review both short and longer-term outcomes. In each, the author had responsibility (as head or part of a team) for both designing the project and for its implementation. **Section 2** deals with how to make sense of the complexities of vocational education and training (VET) as a sector given the different types of intervention;

section 3 presents the 3 countries' project objectives and financing; **section 4** the provision of working frameworks to take the projects forward; **section 5** looks at managing change in complex situations; **section 6** examines managing the interaction of the different actors as change occurs; **section 7** asks what contributed to outcomes and of what kind? **Section 8** reviews what went right and wrong and why? **Section 9** is a Post script.

2. How to make sense of the complexity

Firstly, what is vocational, education and training (VET)? Basically, it covers a broad set of formal and non-formal initial and continuing education and training. VET provision extends from very low basic skills up to higher education level access and qualifications, across the full spectrum of the economic sectors and their needs for skilled, competent and specialist staff.

VET is a very complex area, an inter mix of often changing labour market needs, complex qualification systems and frameworks and competence-based outcomes together with curricular and organizational demands (general education is only a little less complex).

One way of handling this complexity (for the projects) is to review the *architecture* common to all VET systems (however divergent) which make up a system (and within which sit government and management) and to review how each element may be developed in relation to the others. (Parkes, 1995)

The suggested architecture of a VET sub-system consists of:

1. Mission – the overall aims and objectives (including an understanding of constant change in the sector);
2. VETs relation to the labour market: its structures and actors;
3. Content: curriculum: certification; quality; evaluation (currently embraced by national qualification frameworks);
4. Capacity development (particularly teacher/trainer and management development);
5. Location of decision-making/decentralization;
6. Development of institutional homes to house key functions such as curriculum development;
7. Legislation;
8. Finance.

Items 4, 5 and 6 above are supportive to items 1, 2 and 3 with finance and legislation supporting them all.

This general architectural framework is important since finance (and the whole organizational and decision-making process) are there only to support student learning (mostly still in institutions – schools, training centres, enterprises etc.) Students undertake courses and/or acquire competences. All the rest is to support that.

Within this framework a VET system works, if it can:

1. define occupational sector priorities;
2. identify appropriate sector knowledge, skills and competences required;
3. turn these into standards and appropriate curricula;
4. transform and deliver these in institutions at national level;
5. assist in making the learning process attractive for students and teachers;
6. provide timely and effective feedback through reporting, monitoring and evaluation;
7. be governed in an acceptable way for all stakeholders;
8. establish quality control and tracing of student destinations;
9. be a balanced system;
10. have recognized and transparent qualifications;
11. be cost efficient.

Elizabeth McLeish (1998) in her Introduction to *Processes of Transition in Education Systems* starts with four post-communism stages of reform:

1. ***Corrective Reforms** that are initiated with immediate repairing objectives;*

2. ***Modernizing Reforms** that are interventions aimed at reducing gaps and catching up with advanced institutions and structures;*

3. ***Structural Reforms** that are targeted at the structures, legal framework and management of educational systems;*

4. ***Systemic Reforms** that are deeper and have a global character because they call for a genuine change of paradigm in terms of educational policy. (McLeish, 1998)*

For our three countries, then, the Responsive College Programme in the United Kingdom (UK) (Bilborough, Parkes and Thomson, 1988) come under stages 1 and 2; Syria under 3 but Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) under 4 since we are dealing with a post war, fragmented country mixing three different peoples and religions being subject to EU criteria as part of the path towards negotiating eventual EU membership.

With BiH and Syria we have funding and therefore structures and values coming from international donors, not only the EU but also the World Bank (in the case of BiH) and the UN, plus individual countries with their own agendas – donor cooperation is tricky (Parkes, 1997). International donors such as the European Union (EU), the World Bank, the United Nations (largely through UNESCO), the Asian Development Bank and many others, including individual countries, have substantial funds to aid development in countries undergoing change – though of course with their own agendas and values. For example, for education the EU tends to be supporting the public sector and for the World Bank it may be private initiatives. The US as an individual country may support the development of American-style community colleges and the UK that of business education. The beneficiary country and the individually funded project need to coordinate the different donor approaches – rather like a marriage ceremony where the groom and bride do not want to receive five washing machines.

3. The actual projects in the three countries

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)

Initially, for VET the European Union had a smallish (circa Eur 4 million) programme to assist with the post-war development of vocational education and training. The programme derived from a needs analysis undertaken in Summer 1996, jointly for the World Bank and the EU. The author was one of the coordinating consultants (Boglia, Lutz and Parkes, 1996) designing the programme and was then responsible for the 'policy and strategy' component of the resultant project (1998–2002). There were three elements to the programme:

1. Curriculum development for initial skill training in nominated occupational sectors;
2. Continuing education and training for special needs;
3. Both components related to pilot schools and training centres – that is people on the ground.

Subsequently, the author was asked to lead the policy and strategy component within the project to develop Green (2000) and White (2001) Papers and subsequently the White Paper for general education (2003).[1]

Syria

For Syria, in 2000, the author was a member of the EU team designing a EUR 21 million VET strategy to be addressed by two main sets of activities: support to the Syrian government in an overall approach to VET development culminating in the creation of a 'national institution' to house the outcomes. The proposed outcome for such an 'institution' was perceived by the Syrian government as likely to be one of three scenarios: Scenario 1 – an authority reporting to the prime minister or deputy prime minister that takes control of decision-making and operations in all areas of VET; Scenario 2 – an authority reporting to the prime minister or deputy prime minister that has a mix of decision-making and advisory roles leaving most existing activities involving the provision of VET with current ministries; Scenario 3 – an authority reporting to only one minister that takes control of decision-making and operations in all or most areas of VET, bearing in mind that the then situation had 17 separate ministries with responsibilities for VET.[2]

The overall project would build on the outcomes from the VET and labour market interventions under pilot activities to help to create the conditions for general VET provision and employment services to be more responsive to local labour market needs. Subsequently, over a longer period, the author had responsibility for developing the finance component through to 2008 (see section 4 below).

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[1] A 'green' paper is a set of policy recommendations presented for consultation to key constituencies at a stage when amendments (minor or major) can be made. A 'white' paper is government agreed policy and strategy. It is a stage prior to implementation but it represents a commitment on what is politically, technically and organizationally feasible.
[2] Modernization of VET Programme for Syria 2007; Europe AID 20173/C/SU/SY, a partnership between the government of Syria and the European Union, 2007.

The UK

From 1986 to 1989 the author was Director of the GBP 2 million Responsive College Programme (Bilborough, Parkes and Thomson, 1988) funded by the then Ministry of Labour, concentrating on VET colleges (supply side) responding to client needs, that is employers, students and parents (the demand side). The project required:

1. The creation of a systematic marketing management information system, quality control and market research;
2. The management of change and the management of short-term projects to facilitate change.

4. The provision of working frameworks

All three projects were subject to an overall development architecture – for example:

In Bosnia and Herzegovina

1. Content: curriculum development, certification and qualifications, standards and assessment;
2. Capacity: teacher and management development;
3. Institutional Development: the latter is seen both as State/Entity/Cantonal (an administrative region) and local development and the evolving profile of the school(s) in the face of reform initiatives;
4. Structure: harmonization of legislation and finance.

In Syria

For the development of the VET finance system in Syria (a component of the overall project) the starting point was that 'reform strategies do not exist without a budget line attached.' The four key questions for VET financing in Syria were:

1. What are the current and future sources of finance?
2. How will they be collected and by whom?
3. How will they be dispersed, by whom and by what criteria?
4. What measures are in hand to reform current finance mechanisms?

In the UK

Both of the objectives, set out in section 3, were subject to an outline model of:

1. Market research (what are employer and student needs for skills and training);
2. Product development, selling and promotion (basically curriculum and competence needs identified via extensive interactions between the demand and supply sides);
3. Quality control (basically extensive review of outcomes and costs);
4. After sales service (follow up of outcomes and consequent modification of inputs).

These were fashionable business marketing terms of the period and seen by the then Thatcher government as likely to be perceived particularly favourably by employers and employer associations. Attached to the project was the creation of performance indicators,

another tool becoming fashionable in the mid-1980s UK – as the beginning of the measurement of outcomes in the overall British education and training systems. Indicators included client satisfaction measures for students and for parents. After sales service included follow-up of student destinations.

5. Managing change

At this period organizational theory and change management were little understood by the actors in the field. A process of cultural transformation and the translation of policy into practice is almost always an extremely lengthy process.

McLeish (1998) argues in her introduction to *Process of Transition in Education Systems*[3] that

> the completion of the transition process at the structural/legislative level in no way implies that educational transition at the micro level has been achieved. To change a label is easy, to effect a comprehensive change in practice is very difficult (see section 8 below). System change has to build on the given historically grown institutional structures. It is likely to be achieved only through small, incremental change in narrow and targeted areas and only where there is equilibrium between radical change and traditional forces.
> Change requires a clear sense of public purpose, new partnerships and new skills, as well as careful policy coordination, compensatory mechanisms and collaboration in adequate forums for consultation and decision-making. These are the challenges.
> Reform and change has to be carried out largely by existing staff, and despite widespread agreement with global policy objectives and improved policies, there may still be great discomfort felt by the reform actors at the prospect of changing traditional ways. Accomplishing change is about reversing deeply embedded policies and strongly held beliefs.

At national level, governments need to facilitate change by:

1. Understanding fully social partners' goals, competencies and capacities in regard to VET as the first step towards building consensus.
2. Being fully aware of where developments should be heading, especially in regard to how much decision-making power can be transferred to a social partnership structure. The importance of this is further stressed if VET management and/or delivery is done by a number of ministries, committees etc. (remember Syria had 17 ministries dealing with VET).
3. Facilitating a process where the government itself is a major player.
4. Acknowledging that employers (and maybe even trade unions) are reluctant to push harder for influence simply because they are afraid that it might backfire. This is likely to be true in transition countries. Employers are exploring the emerging opportunities and their boundaries, often taking a cautious approach making sure not to step unnecessarily on the authorities' toes.

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[3] A 'transition country' refers, normally, to a country undergoing economic reform, usually from communism, but here refers more particularly to countries undergoing systemic reform in education, aided by donors with their own values.

The difficulty in all of this is the administrative and management capacity to implement policy and structures even when legislated for. For how it worked out in the real world of our examples BiH, Syria and the UK see sections 7 and 8.

6. Managing the process with people

If we take the case of the BiH initial project outlined in section 1, then the 'policy and strategy' component was intended to help establish common and cooperative policy strands for the two entities (the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Republika Srpska). The former consists of ten cantons of which three had a large Croat population and seven were predominantly Bosniac. The country's population is made up of three contributing peoples: Orthodox Bosnian Serbs, Bosniac Muslims and Croat Catholics, all recently at war. Why mention the three religions? – because the timing of meetings was complicated by widely different religious holidays quite apart from differences having helped create war in the first place. Given that the Republica Srpska was intended to move from a centralized structure and that the Federation had ten cantons with wholly independent education ministries and ministers there were likely to be a number of separate scenarios for strategic plans but (very hopefully) linked to common policy statements.

For professional development in the policy and strategy component, the actors consisted of ministers, vice ministers, civil servants in ministries of education, labour and finance; social partners; education officers and school directors. Working together, there were 25 actors from the Federation and 15 from the Srpska Republic – working on six key themes: legislation, education administration, the labour market, curriculum development and evaluation plus finance.

The principal outcomes were green/white papers (see above) providing common policy initiatives for VET. The fact that the three key groups worked together was a major outcome in itself. It is also noticeable with the titles of the White Papers that for VET in 2001 the ownership is given to the EU PHARE programme funded by the European Union[4] – but for primary and secondary education in 2003 it is given to the BiH Education Authorities assisted by the EC-TAER Programme – a quite proper switch of ownership. The author would argue that, among all considerations, it is the priority of the consultant to facilitate consensus rather than to impose agreement.

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[4] The Phare Programme was a pre-accession instrument financed by the EU for about a decade before 1989. The EC-TAER Programme was a specific programme established for BiH.

7. What contributed to outcomes and of what kind?

Firstly, money: post the Balkan war, despite continuing enmities money was needed for reconstruction and to overcome resistance – it came not only from the EU, as in our case, but from the World Bank, the UN and individual countries (all of course accompanied by donor cooperation, a feature of the project). (Parkes, 1997)

Continuity of project funding is a key issue for success. In a second phase one canton had a successful introduction of modularized curricula but EU funding is only for pilot projects – systemic introduction is to come later. Despite all parties finding the introduction of modularized curricula successful, it ceased with the end of the flow of money. When the money ran out there was no means even of repairing the photocopier – quite simply it was the end of modularization (no copier, no modules).

Second, political will both from inside BiH and from outside: It must be always borne in mind that, post the Dayton Agreement (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dayton_Agreement) for peace in BiH (brokered by the West and signed in December 1995) there was, for most of the project period, pressure from the international community. Much of the pressure passed through the Office of the High Representative (nominated by the Western Governments with overriding powers including the ability to remove presidents and ministers). Additionally, international bodies such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) were given a coordinating role for education between 2001 and 2005). UNESCO and the Council of Europe put considerable pressure on politicians for reform in all domains, education being only one. As above, major donors such as the EU and the World Bank, plus non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as SOROS (The SOROS Foundation's Open Society provided USD 50 million of support to Sarajevo during the Balkan war) and bilaterals have all had varying though not always compatible influences. The outbreak of the Iraq crisis transferred the political will and the money away from BiH. 'See you in Baghdad' was the departing cry of the UN representatives in Sarajevo.

Third, timeliness: The UK's Responsive College Programme (RCP) (Bilbrough, Parkes and Thomson, 1988) was helped by aims and objectives which were consistent with local, national and international pressures. At that period, VET colleges were mixed-economy institutions with traditional local authority-subsidized education and training for the public good, full-cost courses for the private sector and a third intermediate sector – a category of learning activities subsidized by government agencies

Fourth, incremental and attitude change: For RCP, credibility was earned and developed from specific and concrete achievements taken incrementally.

Change in attitudes was perhaps the greatest single achievement, a factor which uses vast energies and requires constant sustaining in systems. In some cases, the operational stage was only undertaken when the 'attitude changers' (usually with deputy director posts in individual colleges/schools and senior administrators at local/regional level) having used up their credibility moved on to other posts and left the mopping-up process to their untainted successors.

Fifth, Consolidation occurred during the embedding of systems: The development of procedures and the building of continuity via responsibility in senior management roles.

The Syrian system of VET financial management had been characterized by two features: an extremely high level of centralization and a low level of participation of actors other than public authorities, mainly representative of the education sector.

To ameliorate this lack of financial delegation the system for financing needed to be consolidated around the following 13 requirements (Managing VET: Towards a Modernization Strategy 2008):

1. Fit within the budgeting cycle of the government;
2. Correspond with the policy and management cycle of the proposed authority in its VET coordinating role for overall government and line ministry priorities (remember 17 of them);
3. Acknowledge the self-initiatives (relative autonomy) of a VET school;
4. Be sufficiently flexible to adapt to new developments and needs;
5. Incorporate multi-funding resources;
6. Stimulate VET schools to attract co-financing from the labour market;
7. Value labour market-oriented certificates;
8. Give sufficient steering capacity for the government;
9. Provide stability with adequate financial means for VET schools;
10. Stimulate the efficient use of financial means;
11. Be simple and transparent;
12. Avoid possibilities for deliberate misuse;
13. Have controllable development costs.

8. What went right and what went wrong?

Right: the **BiH project** was, for the EU, an outstanding success with a White Paper agreed between the Srpska Republic and the Federation entities – the success of the VET project led to a similar exercise for general education which also produced green and white Papers.

Wrong: but have they been implemented? Only partially – largely the Serbs and Croats have continued to run their own separate curricula but at least dialogue continued and coordinating bodies were established at national level.

Right: the outcomes of the Responsive College Programme were implemented nationally (and indeed the approach was subsequently replicated in three transition countries).

Wrong: however, the politics of the UK meant measurement and performance indicators were increasingly put in place to a point of exaggeration. Supply/demand problems (20 years later) largely continue – with ongoing crises of skill shortages.

Right: the Syrian project continued on track from 2000 to 2008.

Wrong: One should explain that the EU Office in Damascus was keen to see the EUR 21 million programme succeed in its own right, but also (among other projects) as a contribution to regional stability – then war came – then war came.

9. Post script (luck and judgement)

In the case of a different country project, project money ran out for phase 1 and phase 2 was delayed. During a project study visit to Paris, we visited the Commission in Brussels to discuss interim funding with a team of the country's three deputy ministers who were briefed to be unanimous in their submissions. Negotiations were on track when one deputy minister explained his minister could not agree to X; thus negating the prospective agreement. The brave interpreter translated into French 'my minister is in full agreement'; a million-euro package was then agreed (an interesting, if delicate, example of a personal judgement for the general good).

Author

David Parkes worked until recently as an independent international consultant under French legislation. His clients included the EU, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, UNESCO, The Council of Europe, national and regional governments and enterprises in the private sector (but he has taught in primary, secondary, vocational education and training and higher education in the UK and the USA).He was formerly a senior staff member of the National Education Staff College in the UK and Deputy Director of the European Institute of Education and Social Policy in Paris. He works across all education sectors and has combined the management of large-scale world-wide projects and consultancy with reflection and review, for example with regular editorship/contributions of and to the European Journal of Education.

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