Chapter 11
TVET and Ecologism: Charting New Terrain

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Introduction

This chapter builds upon the understandings of the discourses of ‘productivism’ and ‘ecologism’ in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) outlined in Chapter 3. The natural environment is a silent stakeholder in technical and vocational education and training (TVET). Yet as a major supplier of skilled labour to industry, TVET is directly implicated in the reproduction of ‘productivism’, the globally dominant ethos that presupposes economic growth is a permanent and necessary feature of human existence, regardless of its environmental impact and consequences. Productivism gives precedence to the needs of industry over all others and reifies work (as paid employment) as the principal source and measure of social worth, to the virtual exclusion of other human values and vocations (Giddens, 1994).

Although omnipresent since the birth of TVET as an institution, productivism has become more pervasive and deeply embedded in contemporary constructions of TVET as a result of the ascendancy of neoliberalism (sometimes referred to as economic rationalism) and human capital theory over the past two decades. As markets become increasingly global and competitive, governments and supranational organizations faced with the problems of structural unemployment and underemployment are intensifying pressure on TVET systems to produce more economically productive and employable workers (ILO, 2002; OECD, 1996; World Bank, 1991).

TVET has been systematically harnessed to the logic of economic growth and industrial production since the mid-1980s through processes of structural adjustment and training reform. These processes, which emphasize the economic importance of skills formation and involve the marketization of TVET and the introduction of competency-based training (CBT), have tightened the connections between TVET and economic production (Anderson et al., 2004; Bennell et al., 1999; Gill et al., 2000; Marginson, 1993). Discursive strategies have been mobilized to justify the

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subordination of individual learners’ needs to those of industry and to prioritize work and employability over the non-economic outcomes of TVET (Anderson, 1998).

In consequence, TVET policy and practice are now premised on two fundamental assumptions that have acquired the status of self-evident truths and are routinely reproduced in TVET institutions and programmes; namely that the principal, if not sole, purposes of TVET are to promote economic growth through the development of the human resources required by industry to increase productivity and profit (training for growth) and to produce graduates with skills and competencies for work in order to increase their economic output and employability (skills for work) (Anderson, 2002, 2003a). Implicit in the structure, content and delivery of TVET programmes, these two assumptions systematically shape and direct the formation of learner subjectivities. In effect, learners are reproduced as agents of productivism, lacking a reflexive understanding of their roles as ecological actors and the negative impact and consequences of their producing and consuming behaviour.

This chapter starts from the proposition, first articulated in Anderson (2002, 2003a) and elaborated in Chapter 3, that in an era of manufactured uncertainty and ecological risk (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1994), productivism and the training-for-growth and skills-for-work assumptions no longer constitute a rational or meaningful basis for TVET. Firstly, mounting scientific evidence of deep-seated and potentially irreversible environmental problems shows that permanent economic growth is untenable. Secondly, the erosion of full-time and secure and equitably distributed employment undermines both the ideology of work and the discourse of employability. In consequence, a new post-productivist vision of TVET is required, based on values and aspirations that aim to promote ‘a society which displays international and ecological responsibility: concern for persons throughout the planet; ecologically sustainable developments; protection of flora and fauna’ (Stevenson, 1994, p. 117, original emphasis). In effect, the myth of perpetual economic growth must be superseded by ecologically sustainable development as the bedrock of TVET.

Sustainable Development and TVET

Although an ambiguous and contested term, ‘sustainable development’ has been defined as noted in Chapter 3, as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs’ (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). Socially critical advocates of sustainable development refute the primacy of economic growth in favour of a more balanced and integrated approach to economic, social and ecological development (Fien, 1993; Fien and Wilson, 2005; Huckle, 1991). Social equity, economic justice, and a general improvement in human welfare, especially in the poor South, are seen to be essential preconditions for environmentally sustainable development. Along these lines, the UNESCO Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning (1997, Articles 1 and 17) declared: