The Cult of Resilience and Sustainability or The Crisis of Human Emancipation: Exploration and Analytical Inferences of nowadays VET through the lens of Marcuse's Critical Theory

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ABSTRACT: This article critically examines the prevailing utilitarian orientation of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in the discourse of resistance and sustainability that impose a cult of Vocationalism through the lens of Herbert Marcuse's critical theory. It explores how the systemic influence of technological rationality, reinforced by marketdriven imperatives, stabilize steadily a conformist, one-dimensional society that suppresses critical consciousness and human emancipation. Centralizing on key concepts such as false needs, reification, and repressive tolerance, the analysis reveals how current VET practices often serve to reproduce systemic domination under the well-intentioned guise of neutrality, resilience, sustainability and efficiency. The article appeals for a transformative reimagining of VET—one that moves beyond instrumental skills to profoundly cultivate critical reflection, democratic engagement, and human dignity. The integration philosophical and ethical inquiry into curricula, promoting learner agency, and encouraging normative questioning of technological and societal systems, a liberatory and purified of cliché model of VET can be realized—aimed not solely at labour market integration but at breeding autonomous individuals capable of remodelling the shape of a more just and realistically sustainable future.

KEYWORDS: Marcuse, VET, educational suppression, resilience & sustainability, Vocationalism.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid technological acceleration, digital automation, and global labour market volatility led to a vocational education and training (VET) that is increasingly framed as the educational solutions to economic uncertainty. Policymakers and international institutions emphasize VET as a key mechanism for preparing youth and adults to meet the changing demands of the workforce. Skill development, industry alignment, and employability dominate the discourse. However, beneath this strongly pragmatic orientation lie the profound ideological questions:

What kind of human being is VET producing, and for what purpose?

Is Vocational and Professional education only "an education for work"?

In this contextual framework the VET is seen through the lens of **Herbert Marcuse's critical theory**, particularly his analysis of **technological rationality**, **imposed false needs**, and the **one-dimensional society**. Marcuse, one of the founders of the Frankfurt School, warned of the insidious ways in which capitalist societies integrate individuals through *well-seemingly rational systems* that ultimately suppress critical consciousness and human emancipation. His critique, while formulated in the mid-20th century, has profound resonance today as education systems, especially vocational ones, urged to increasingly align themselves with market imperatives, often ordered by politically- driven policies camouflaged under resilient and sustainable policies.

Modern vocationalism promotes a **reductionist view of the human**, one tailored to the needs of production rather than liberation. Exploring VET through Marcuse's concepts, an aim is to uncover the ideological hidden underpinnings of skill-based education, challenge the cult of employability, and propose a more critical, emancipatory model of vocational learning. The concepts of resilience and sustainability deeply entered educational discourse with abundant pedagogical and ethical nuances and didactical connotations. Resilience is referred to the capacity of individuals and systems to recover from disruption and to maintain continuity in the environment of uncertainty. Sustainability as firstly "promoted" in ecological and social context, emphasized on, ecological responsibility, and the justified balance of social, economic, and environmental priorities. Initially these terms were multidimensional and strictly normative, directing toward human stable prosperity, justice, and ecological responsibility.

When these concepts migrated into VET policy frameworks, their meanings have been narrowed and instrumentalized often ambiguously by multiple European and national strategies. They were increasingly deployed as policy buzzwords: questionable unproven and equivocal enough to generate consensus, leading often to unjustified and unfounded reforms oriented toward economic competitiveness. For instance, "***resilient VET systems***" are often equated with flexible labour markets, and "***sustainable skills***" are connected to industrial growth sectors. The shift in meaning reduces complex pedagogical and ethical values to functional dubious imperatives aligned with labour market efficiency.

The menace of such semantic inflation is twofold. *First*, the analytical conceptual clarity of "resilience and sustainability" is eroded and totally lost when they are stretched to cover almost any policy objective broadly that they subsume disparate and sometimes conflicting policy objectives. *Second*, their rhetorical power as umbrella categories obscures contradictions. It weakens *operationalizability*, since indistinct and ambiguous concepts cannot be reliably measured or tested. In this sense, resilience and sustainability become "*floating signifiers*" (*Laclau, 1996*) that provide legitimacy to policy agendas, rhetorically persuasive but offering limited conceptual or instrumental utility for guiding educational practices.

Hidden Risks for VET and Contradictions

Although the concepts of resilience and sustainability are widely celebrated within VET policy and discourse, their uncritical adoption risks have significant structural incongruence and contradictions. What appear as universally desirable goals in practice may function as mechanisms of control, domination, and reproduction of existing social and economic unstructured hierarchies. While presented as ostensibly progressive, the current policy enactments often reproduce rigidity, economization, responsibilization, and vocational narrowing. Rather than serving as emancipatory concepts, they risk functioning as ideological mechanisms that stabilize existing inequalities and legitimize the vocationalization of education. Such risks are the following: ✓ *Risk of Stagnation and Rigidity*

Resilience is commonly associated with adaptability, flexibility, and the ability to respond to change. At the systemic level, the inappropriate pursuit of resilience often results as a defensive orientation toward stability and continuity rather than productive transformation. Institutions that emphasize their resilience may become overly preoccupied with preserving existing structures and practices, even when these are outdated or misaligned with broader societal needs. As *Crouch (2011)* states in the policies of neoliberal governance, the rhetoric of adaptability frequently masks insidiously institutional inertia: systems adapt just enough to survive, but rarely enough to innovate. In VET, this can result in content and curricula that respond narrowly to labour market fluctuations while resisting more fundamental reimagining of the purposes of education, such as pseudo cultivation of *democratic citizenship* or deep *ecological responsibility*. Resilience risks producing rigidity — a paradox in which adaptation becomes a form of steady entrenchment.

✓ *Risk of Instrumentalization*

Within VET policy, sustainability it is chiefly reduced to *economic* sustainability. The economization manifests in the prioritization of skills frameworks for sectors with vital for growth expectancy, competitiveness, and industrial survival. Education is valued primarily for its capacity to reproduce a sustainable labour supply, thereby sidelining drastically its intrinsic and civic purposes. *Biesta (2015)* suggests the dangers of the "*learnification*" of education, where processes of human formation are subordinated and reduced only to measurable outputs. A parallel dynamic is: sustainability becomes synonymous with efficiency and cost-effectiveness, while its social and ethical dimensions — equity, justice, intergenerational solidarity — are totally marginalized. Sustainability in old school paradigms also existed but nowadays it is appropriated and loaded with nuances, as its rhetorical power co-opted diffusively to legitimize an economistic vision of vocational education.

✓ *Risk of Individualization of Responsibility*

Resilience discourses frequently resend the task of adaptation from systems to individuals. Students, teachers, and workers are highly expected to engender resilience, demonstrating psychological toughness, flexibility, and lifelong adaptability in order to survive precarious labour markets. Such a policy- led orientation *Rose (1999)* features as the "*responsibilization*" of the subject under neoliberal realities: individuals are constructed as self-managing agents accountable for their own success or failure. Within VET, this vicious shift means that structural inequalities — such as underfunded institutions, unstable labour markets, or discriminatory practices — are reframed as personal challenges. Each learner that fails to secure *sustainable employment* is perceived as lacking

resilience, rather than as a victim of systemic dysfunction. This discursive tactics not only depoliticize inequality but also legitimizes it be manipulated reshaping and recasting vulnerability as personal deficiency.

✓ *Risk of Narrowing Horizons*

Resilience and sustainability discourses risk reinforcing the dominance of vocationalism by drastic narrowing the horizons of education to labour market responsiveness. This reduction is framed as adaptability to employer demands and sustainability as economic efficiency and VET becomes locked into a strong utilitarian paradigm. Learners are steered toward *predefined occupational pathways*, and their educational success is measured predominantly by employability metrics. This narrowing excludes alternative purposes of education: personal growth, critical capacity, civic engagement, and ecological imagination. From a Marcusean perspective, such reduction follows the logic of technological rationality, in which education is absorbed into the functional requirements only of the system, suppressing the potential for critical or emancipatory thought. What is presented as forward-looking — equipping learners for a sustainable and resilient future — may, in practice, curtail their capacity to envision futures beyond the dictates of the labour market.

Marcuse's Critical Framework: Key Concepts

Marcuse's concept of *technological rationality* refers to a mode of thinking in which efficiency, productivity, and control are elevated above all other values (*Marcuse, 1964*). It is not merely the use of technology that concerns Marcuse, but the rationality embedded within technological systems, which redefines human needs and social goals in terms of technical optimization. In his words, "technical progress, as such, does not suggest any particular way of using it; it can be used for liberation or domination" (*Marcuse, 1964*).

In vocational education, this rationality manifests through competency frameworks, outcome-based learning, and tightly coupled training-to-work pipelines. Learners are not encouraged to question the systems they serve but are trained to function within them with maximum efficiency. Such systems tend to condition learners to function within existing economic structures, often discouraging critical questioning of the societal roles and power relations embedded within technological and industrial processes. Consequently, the educational experience becomes a tool for **reproducing the status quo**, reinforcing systemic control under the guise of rational progress, thereby limiting the development of autonomous, critically conscious individuals. In this sense, technological rationality operates as a **soft form of domination**, one that replaces critical inquiry with operational thinking.

His conceptual doctrine concerning education could be summarized in the following *Four Core Themes*:

- *First Core Theme*: Marcuse frames Vocationalism as a form of technical or technological rationality, reducing human capacities to technical functions that serve the needs of advanced industrial or capitalist societies and suppresses emancipatory interests (*Alvesson, 1985; Fourie, 2024; Vieta, 2010; Oskay & Ballard, 2024*).
- *Second Core Theme:* Vocationalism and technological rationality function as tools of social control, neutralizing dissent and co-opting potential agents of change. Key arguments: Integration of the proletariat, quantification, one-dimensionality, manipulation of needs and reason, reproduction of whiteness (*Ocay, 2010; Walsh, 2013; Calderón, 2006; Carneiro, 2016*).
- *Third Core Theme*: Barriers to emancipation include the *dominance of technological rationality*, the performance principle, the ideology of whiteness, neoliberal governmentality, and the obsolescence of critical categories. Key arguments: Technological rationality, performance principle, whiteness, neoliberalism, paralysis of criticism, one-dimensionality (*Fourie, 2024; Carneiro, 2016; Oskay and Ballard, 2024; Stevenson, 2022*).
- *Fourth Core theme*: Marcuse's critique is extended to contemporary contexts, including neoliberalism, race, education, and technology (*Calderón, 2006; Pierce, 2006; Stevenson, 2022*).

A *liberatory model of vocational training* would fundamentally shift focus from mere skill acquisition aligned with market productivity to fostering critical consciousness, personal agency, and human development. This alternative approach would integrate philosophical and ethical dimensions into the curriculum, encouraging learners to question the societal and environmental implications of technological and industrial systems. It would emphasize dialogic and participatory pedagogies that promote democratic engagement and reflective thinking, empowering students to become active agents capable of shaping technology and society rather than passive operators. Such a model would prioritize human dignity, creativity, and subjectivity, fostering diverse pathways of success that transcend mere employability and delve into fostering autonomous and socially responsible individuals committed to societal transformation and ecological sustainability.

False Needs and the Manufactured Human. A cornerstone of Marcuse's theory is the distinction between **true needs** (those that support life, freedom, and the flourishing of the human being) and **false needs** (those imposed by social interests that perpetuate alienation and consumption). Under advanced industrial capitalism, education increasingly serves to satisfy false needs—such as the need to be employable, competitive, and technologically literate in predefined ways—rather than nurturing autonomous individuals capable of shaping their world (*Marcuse, 1964; Marcuse, 1969*).

VET systems often frame these needs as natural or inevitable, masking their ideological origin. For example, the constant push to align curricula with "market needs" may obscure deeper questions: *Whose market? For what ends? What kind of life is made possible—or impossible—by this training?* In accepting the definitions of value and success handed down by economic systems, VET risks becoming a **reproducer of alienation**, rather than a liberator from it. *The One-Dimensional Man and the Loss of Critique.* Marcuse's concept of the *one-dimensional man* captures the collapse of dialectical thinking in contemporary society (*Marcuse, 1964*). It refers to the absorption of opposition, ending-off of alternative modes of thought, and the tendency of individuals to internalize the *logic of domination* as natural. Education, when subsumed under instrumental rationality, contributes to this condition.

Vocational learners are typically not exposed to philosophical, civic, or ethical reflection through their studies. Instead, the curriculum centers on utility, measurable outputs, and job preparedness. Thus, it often **reproduces a onedimensional consciousness**, where the only legitimate goals are *employability* and *adaptability*. The possibility of imagining different forms of society, work, or life itself is foreclosed.

Marcuse's critical philosophy of technology is cleared illustratively in *Fig. 1*. emphasizing the pivotal importance of integrating the philosophy of technology into VET curricula. Marcuse stated firmly that *technology is not neutral but inherently embedded with social and ideological implications* that shape human consciousness and societal structures. The need of incorporation the **philosophy of technology** into VET programs, educators can cultivate in learners the critical awareness necessary to "unmask" the underlying force dynamics, repressive rationalities, and societal interests that influence technological development and deployment. This integration is crucial because, under *the prevailing regime of technological rationality*, technological systems are often presented as autonomous and neutral instruments of progress, obscuring noticeably their role in perpetuating domination and alienation. Marcuse's critique notes that uncritical engagement with technology leads to a form of *repressive desublimation*, where *technological advances serve to deepen conformity and suppress dissent*. Therefore, integrating philosophy of technology within VET can determinately act as a pedagogical countermeasure— encouraging students to critically evaluate **how** *technologies serve societal interests, whose needs they ultimately satisfy, and whether they facilitate emancipation or reinforce existing power structures*.

Marcuse emphasized that "true human liberation" requires a conscious and in-dept understanding of the social and political dimensions of technological systems. It aligns with his view that technology should serve human needs and freedom, rather than simply optimizing productivity within a system of control. Consequently, integrating the philosophy of technology equips learners not just with technical skills but with the capacity for critical engagement and ethical reflection—essential components for building autonomous, creative, and socially responsible citizens capable of challenging technological determinism and contributing to societal transformation.

The mentioned inclusion of the philosophy of technology in VET programs, grounded in Marcuse's critique, is essential for developing a critical consciousness that can resist *technological rationality's oppressive tendencies*. It prepares learners to become not only competent technicians but also reflective agents capable of envisioning and implementing technological practices that advance human emancipation, sustainability, and social justice.
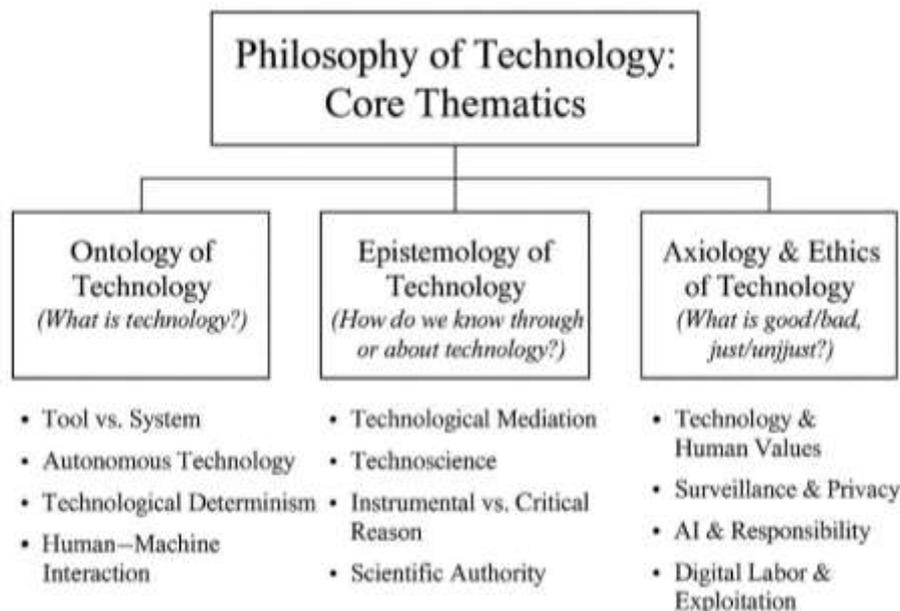
Figure 1. An Overview of Thematics for Philosophy of the Tech in Vocational education (based on Marcuse's critical theory)
Source: author's

New Dimensions of Marcusean's Negative Educational Phenomena in Vocational Education

- *Imposed Modernity and the Crisis of Emancipation.*

In the dominant narrative of progress (especially *neoliberal one*), modernity is presented as a linear and unquestionable ascent toward freedom, prosperity, and inclusion. VET is framed as a major instrument in this trajectory—mobilizing individuals to adapt to technological acceleration, achieving employability, and contribute to economic growth. Through the lens of Marcuse's critical theory, modernity reveals itself not as a *liberatory project*, but as *a system of technological rationality*—a regime that displaces autonomy with control, and critical reason with conformity.

- *Modernity as Ideological Regime.*

Marcuse's critique of advanced industrial society exposes *modernity as an ideological operation*, where the rhetoric of progress conceals the imperatives of domination. The ostensibly neutral logic of efficiency, productivity, and innovation is in fact saturated with **instrumental rationality**—serving not human emancipation, but the *reproduction of the existing order*. What is celebrated massively as "educational advancement" often reflects the *hegemonic categorical needs of capital*, not the flourishing of the subject. Vocational education, far from being a neutral gateway to inclusion, becomes one of the main *apparatuses of imposed modernity*— a field where *bodies and minds are shaped to fit market dynamics, not to challenge them*. Curricula saturated with metrics of **digital competency**, **modular learning outcomes**, and **outcome-based assessment** represent the absorption of education into a **functionalist paradigm**, where **learning is no longer about meaning, but about output.**

- *Pedagogical Agiotage and Chremastic Medicasters.*

The contemporary VET environment is increasingly governed by what can be called **pedagogical agiotage**—a frenzied circulation of educational capital, credentials, and pseudo-innovation, driven less by pedagogical depth and more by market volatility. Institutions compete for accreditation, funding, and "excellence" in a symbolic economy where *quality is simulated through evaluation instruments rather than enacted through emancipatory practice.* The **chremastic medicasters** (defined in other author's publications) presents briefly: education managers and technocrats with speculative authority who claim to offer "educational healing" (efficiency, quality, relevance, employability) while covertly advancing agendas aimed at consuming national resources. They prescribe **quick Edu- fixes** and often nowadays the variety of **educational digital placebos** (proliferating e-learning platforms,

microcredential courses, AI-readiness) to systemic problems rooted in the alienation of labour in the VET students. The result is not transformation, but technocratic overreach disguised as reform.

- *Competency Fetishism and Educational Camouflage.*

Central to this regime is **competency fetishism**—the reduction of knowledge, judgment, and praxis to measurable, transferable, and depoliticized numerous "competences" (*Illich, 1971; Feenberg, 1999; Marcuse, 1964*). This fetish obscures the historical and ethical dimensions of learning, reducing the learner to a "portfolio of skills" optimized for labor markets, rather than a subject capable of dissent, vision, or negation.

This is sustained by an *educational camouflage system*—a bureaucratic architecture of *organizational assessment*, *performance dashboards*, and *managerialist indicators* that simulate improvement while masking deeper structural regressions. Marcuse's notion of "*repressive desublimation*" is clear: educational critique is absorbed into managerial discourse and rendered harmless through proceduralism and jargon.

- *Digital Surrealism and the Crisis of Meaning.*

One other frontier of imposed modernity is described as **digital surrealism**: the surreal experience of technological oversaturation producing not clarity, but unmeasured confusion—more data, fewer questions; more access, less freedom. Learners navigate a digitally mediated education that *promises huge empowerment* but often delivers *disorientation, distraction, and depoliticization.*

In such an environment, *educationalism striving for captation* (*author's term*) supplants critical pedagogy. This pathological fixation on capturing attention in every aspect of education, securing "pseudo-active" engagement, and ensuring compliance eclipses any aspiration toward political awakening or existential inquiry. Learners are no longer encouraged to question power structures or envision alternative futures; instead, they are conditioned to adapt, pivot, and endure within the given order.

- *Education as Reproduction of the Administered World.*

The crisis of human emancipation is not merely social or economic in nature—it is, at its core, fundamentally educational in origin and expression. Education has become a medium of *affirmative adjustment*, rather than *negative critique.* Marcuse's notion of the *one-dimensional society* finds its most advanced and punctual articulation in contemporary education systems, which reproduce the deep illusion of autonomy and critical agency, while in practice embedding *normative compliance* and cultivating *adaptive obedience* often under the guise of pedagogical innovations and remedies.

Genuine Vocational Education must escape from its role as an *adaptive mechanism* within the neoliberal economy and must reclaimed as a site of critical reflexivity, where learners are not only trained for work but empowered to interrogate its forms, functions, and purposes. Only then can vocational education recover its potential as a vehicle for emancipation rather than conformity. *Table 1.* summarizes contemporary "*educational maladies*" through the lens of Marcuse's critical theory and illuminates how current systems serve functions of systemic control and reproduce dominant ideological structures.

Table 1. Summary of Educational Pathologies under Imposed Modernity in VET and Technological Rationality

Term (Pathology)	Definition / Symptom	Effect on VET / Emancipation	Theoretical Reference / Inspiration
Chremastic Medicasters	Managerial experts who treat education like a technical crisis to be "solved" with market-oriented remedies.	Suppress democratic pedagogy in favor of monetized consultancy logic.	Aristotle (Chrematistics), Marcuse
Captative Educationalism	Obsession with capturing attention, engagement, and "retention" at all costs.	Turns education into a gamified trap rather than critical liberation.	Guy Debord, Foucault
Pedagogical Agiotage	Volatile circulation of reforms, rankings, and certifications to boost institutional "value."	Inflates superficial innovation, erodes depth and coherence.	(*Bourdieu, as cited in Baudrillard, 1994; Bauman, 2000*)

Competency Fetishism	Idolization of discrete skills and outcomes while ignoring critical thinking, context, and ethics.	Reduces learners to labor inputs; reinforces alienation.	Illich, Marcuse
Educational Camouflage Systems	Bureaucratic façades using metrics to simulate progress or quality.	Blocks critique, conceals stagnation.	*(Lyotard, 1984; Marcuse, 1964)*
Assessment Fetishization	Belief that constant measuring ensures quality, regardless of substance.	Reduces pedagogy to audit rituals and performativity	*(Power, 1997; Ball, 2003)*
Digital Sussrealism	Disorienting pseudo-real digital learning environments lacking meaning.	Simulates freedom; produces confusion and detachment.	*(Zuboff, 2019; Virilio, 1994)*
Monitoring Paralysis	Excessive tracking and datafication of learning, which overwhelms decision-making.	Suppresses spontaneity; privileges compliance over creativity.	Foucault (Panopticon), Deleuze
Thematic Cyclonism	Erratic shifts in educational focus dictated by trends or funding agendas.	Prevents continuity, reflection, and deep learning.	Bauman (Liquid Modernity)
Platform Fetishization	Belief that ed-tech platforms inherently improve learning.	Elevates tools over teaching; de-skills educators.	*(Winner, 1986; Illich, 1971)*
Digital Mimicry Syndrome	Institutional replication of digital trends without critical adaptation.	Creates digital theatre without pedagogical substance.	Debord, Marcuse
Soteriological Model Manias	Cyclical launching of "save-us" reforms and paradigms claiming redemption.	Exhausts teachers; produces cynicism; discourages critique.	Marcuse, Illich, educational reform critiques
Auditocratic Learning	Learning ruled by audit, verification, and optimization logics.	Destroys trust, creativity, and relational pedagogy.	Power, Foucault, Ball
Gamified Conformism	Use of gamification to subtly enforce behavioral norms and competition.	Trivializes learning; undermines autonomy.	Debord, Zuboff, Marcuse
Curricular Hyper-Modularism	Fragmentation of knowledge into decontextualized micro-units.	Prevents synthesis, depth, and holistic understanding.	Illich, Postman
Automated Didacticism	Reliance on AI and algorithms to "deliver" learning.	Undermines dialogue, care, and teacher judgment.	Freire, Dreyfus, Heidegger
Metrics-Driven Mystification	Use of seductive numbers to obscure power, inequality, or decay.	Hides ideological control behind neutral-looking dashboards.	Marcuse, Lyotard

A comprehensive application of Marcuse's critical theory to contemporary education is essential to address ongoing systemic issues that tend to perpetuate *alienation, conformity*, and *ideological(political) control*. The generalization of his ideas provides a critical framework to interrogate how current educational practices serve the interests of systemic domination rather than fostering genuine human development some inferences systemized in **Table 2.** In the context of modern pedagogical challenges, issues such as the overemphasis on standardized competencies, the commodification of education, digital alienation, and the neglect of critical and ethical reflection highlight the limitations of prevailing models. Applying Marcuse's conceptual tools facilitates the identification and critique of educational pathologies—including competence fetishism, superficial engagement, and the suppression of dissent—that impede the realization of a truly emancipatory pedagogy. Such a framework encourages the development of educational models

that prioritize human dignity, creativity, and reflective capacity, promoting individuals capable of resisting systemic control. Generalizing Marcuse's ideas supports the formulation of pedagogies aimed at critical emancipation rather than mere adaptation It underscores the necessity to transform education into a space for questioning dominant ideologies, cultivating autonomous judgment, and envisioning alternative social unconventional arrangements. This theoretical extension is indispensable for reorienting educational practices toward human prosperity within and beyond systemic constraints.

Table 2. Summary of Loci Meta-Clusters of "Deleterious Trends" in VET

Meta-Cluster	Subordinate Terms (Pathologies)	Data Focus
Instrumentalization of Knowledge	Competency Fetishism, Educational Camouflage Systems, Curricular Hyper-Modularism, Automated Didacticism, Epistemicide by Efficiency	Focus on measurable skills, outcomes, metrics, and streamlined efficiency that reduce critical context and diverse knowledge.
Digital Alienation	Digital Surrealism, Platform Fetishization, Digital Mimicry Syndrome, Gamified Conformism	Focus on digital environments, platforms, gamification, and technology adoption that disconnect learners from meaningful engagement.
Audit and Governance Pathologies	Assessment Fetishization, Monitoring Paralysis, Soteriological Model Manias, Auditocratic Learning, Metrics-Driven Mystification, Bureaucratic Neopedagogy	Focus on constant measurement, data tracking, audits, and bureaucratic controls that overwhelm creativity and genuine learning.
Ideological Control Mechanisms	Chremastic Medicasters, Captative Educationalism, Pedagogical Agiotage, Thematic Cyclonism, Performative Reflexivity	Focus on managerialism, market logic, superficial reforms, attention capture, and ideological rituals that enforce conformity and suppress critical pedagogy.

Reimagining VET: Toward Critical and Emancipatory Education

Marcuse firmly states that contemporary education reproduces domination under the illusion of freedom. the task of educators, theorists, and policymakers is not merely to improve or modernize VET, but to transform its purpose and direction. Vocational education must be reimagined not as a tool for labour market integration alone, but as a site of critical consciousness, resistance, and humanization.

Reimagining VET necessitates a profound move from its prevailing instrumental and industrial paradigms towards a model rooted in critical and emancipatory principles. Contemporary VET functions primarily as a mechanism of reproduction within neoliberal market economies, keeping conformity and compliance rather than establishing genuine human emancipation and critical consciousness. Its focus on measurable skills, outcomes, and efficiency often results in the reduction of education to a set of standardized competencies aimed solely at aligning learners with the needs of the labour market, thereby neglecting the broader dimensions of human development, such as subjectivity, creativity, and ethical reflection. Such paradigms are sustained by tendencies like *competency fetishism*, which reduces knowledge and praxis to *quantifiable skills* that can be transferred and measured, leading to severe obscuring their ethical and contextual dimensions. The curricular emphasis on *hyper-modularism* and didacticism, coupled with an over-reliance on automated assessment and *metrics-driven accountability*. The proliferation of digital environments creates *digital surrealism*—a state in which learners experience an overload of information that leads to disorientation, distraction, and depoliticization, replacing critical engagement with passive consumption and superficial interaction. The *platform fetishization* and *gamified conformism* serve to further disconnect learners from meaningful engagement with societal issues, fostering passivity rather than active resistance.

Educational governance driven by *assessment fetishization* and *bureaucratic monitoring* contributes to a climate of auditocracy, where systemic focus shifts from authentic learning to compliance with managerial indicators, often reinforcing existing power structures and suppressing dissent. Ideological control mechanisms, including *pedagogical agiotage*, commodify education through the circulation of credentials and *pseudo-innovations* that prioritize symbolic capital over pedagogical depth. These dynamics

function as forms of repressive desublimation, where critique and genuine transformation are masked under proceduralism and superficial reforms, thus maintaining the status quo under the guise of progress and sustainability.

These pathologies require reconfiguring VET as a space for critical reflection, where learners are encouraged to interrogate not only how to perform tasks but why particular socioeconomic arrangements exist and who they serve. The core aim should be the humanization of the learner, asserting their dignity beyond their instrumental role as workers or consumers. This entails cultivation subjectivity, creativity, and agency, allowing individuals to develop a sense of authentic selfhood that resists reductionist logics.

Such a transformation invites the development of a critical curriculum that integrates philosophy of technology and ethics of labour, connecting technical skills with broader questions of justice, power, and societal well-being. Only through this reorientation can VET evolve into a humanizing and emancipatory form of education—one that challenges the dominant narratives of control, conformity, and instrumental rationality, and instead promotes critical consciousness, resistance to systemic domination, and the pursuit of human flourishing in all its dimensions. **[1] From Instrumental to Critical VET**

The dominant form of VET is **instrumental**: it prepares learners to do, not to question. Marcuse calls for education that does not just transmit knowledge or skills but cultivates the capacity to think *against* the given—to develop what Paulo Freire later called **conscientização** (critical awareness). In this light, VET must shift:

- **From technical training → to ethical and reflective learning**
- **From job readiness → to life readiness**
- **From adaptation to industry → to imagination of alternatives Humanizing the Learner**

At the core of Marcuse's critique is the notion that the human being has been **reduced**—to worker, consumer, functionary. A new vision of VET must reassert the human not as a means, but as an **end in themselves**. This involves:

- Affirming **dignity** over performance.
- Encouraging **subjectivity**, creativity, and expression.
- Supporting **agency**, not just employability.

Such a shift would challenge the "one-size-fits-all" logic of industrial training models and foster **pluralism** in definitions of success, knowledge, and the good life.

[2] Towards a Critical Curriculum A Marcusean curriculum in VET would:

- Introduce **philosophy of technology** and **ethics of labor** alongside technical modules.
- Include **critical pedagogy**, drawing from thinkers like Freire, Illich, and Giroux.
- Encourage **interdisciplinary learning**, where students can explore the social, ecological, and psychological implications of their future professions.
- Create spaces for **democratic dialogue** within classrooms—where learners question not only how to operate machines or systems, but **why those systems exist** and **who they serve** *(Freire, 2000; Giroux, 1983; Illich, 1971*).

Some emerging models echo this vision—such as **Scandinavian vocational schools** that integrate civic education, or **alternative dual systems** that balance industry training with democratic engagement. Yet, these remain the exception.

[3] Liberation through Non-Repressive Technologies

Marcuse also imagined the possibility of **non-repressive technologies**—tools that could serve freedom rather than control. In VET, this opens space for exploring how digital tools might enable collaborative, decentralized, and creative forms of work (*Marcuse, 1969; Feenberg, 1999).* But only if learners are empowered to shape technology, rather than be shaped by it.

Critical VET would thus aim not only to **train** but to **transform**—to equip learners not just for the job market, but for **emancipated life** within and beyond labour.

CONCLUSION

The article underscores the imperative to critically reconceptualize VE) as a more transformative and emancipatory pedagogical enterprise, rather than a mere instrument of market efficiency and capitalist reproduction. Drawing extensively on Herbert Marcuse's critical theory, particularly his critiques of technological rationality, onedimensional society, and repressive needs, it becomes evident that contemporary VET practices tend to perpetuate systems of domination masked as progress. The prevailing focus on skill acquisition, standardized metrics, and outcome-based training often results in the mechanization of human subjects, reducing

learners to mere functionaries within a broader techno-economic apparatus. Such an approach risks undermining the development of critical consciousness, subjectivity, and genuine human agency—elements essential for fostering autonomous individuals capable of both personal and social transformation. To challenge this prevailing paradigm, it is crucial for educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers to adopt a more holistic and philosophically informed perspective that prioritizes human dignity and ethics over purely instrumental objectives. This entails integrating critical pedagogy, civic dialogue, and aesthetic dimensions into vocational curricula, thereby fostering reflective inquiry alongside technical competence. Such a reorientation would encourage learners to question not only how to operate systems but also why they exist, who benefits from them, and whether their current forms serve justice and human flourishing. It involves creating pedagogical spaces that promote democratic dialogue, fostering subjectivity, creativity, and political agency, especially in contexts dominated by digital and technological mediations. Another issue is that a liberatory VET would demand a shift from a transactional, market-driven model towards one that emphasizes educational ecosystems rooted in social justice, inclusivity, and sustainability. This entails resisting the push towards hyperfragmentation of knowledge and automated didacticism that decontextualize learning and stifle critical engagement. Instead, curricula should be designed to foster synthesis, depth, and holistic understanding—integrating philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic inquiry alongside technical skills. In this way VET can serve as a space for critical interruption— where learners are equipped not solely for immediate labor market needs but also for active participation in democratic society and for envisioning alternatives to the status quo. Embracing Marcuse's vision requires a fundamental reimagining of education's purpose: shifting from a system that reproduces social conformity and alienation towards one that nurtures human emancipation, creative autonomy, and the capacity for critical self-reflection. This transformation is essential not only for fostering resilient and autonomous individuals but also for addressing broader societal issues related to inequality, environmental crisis, and social justice. Moving forward, a critical, emancipatory model of VET has the potential to serve as a transformative force capable of fostering societal conditions where human beings are recognized and valued as ends in themselves, rather than as means to economic productivity. Such an approach would herald a substantive shift towards a more equitable, democratic, and human-centered educational future.

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