CEDEFOP
European Centre
for the Development
of Vocational Training

BRIEFING NOTE

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK AHEAD

Preparing the future of vocational education and training in Europe 2020-30

Public debate on the future of work and of education and training has been raging across Europe. Globalisation, digitisation, migration, demographics and the greening economy are the challenges fuelling discussions. Unemployment, underemployment, mismatches between people's skills and available jobs, and flat or falling incomes have been undermining the cohesion and the social model of European societies.

It is against this backdrop that EU Member States have been working ever more closely together in vocational education and training (VET). In June 2016, the European Commission published a *New skills agenda for Europe*, which spelled out a list of immediate actions, with a view to enabling Europe to improve the quality and relevance of skills formation, to make skills and qualifications more visible and comparable, and to advance skills intelligence, documentation and informed career choices.

As the current framework for cooperation in VET approaches its 2020 horizon, Cedefop is now looking further ahead to stimulate the debate on European VET cooperation until 2030. The first step has been to take stock of the current features of European VET systems, to identify similarities and differences.

VET in Europe: one term, many interpretations

National VET systems vary considerably across Europe. Although each country has its own approach to VET provision, content and governance, there is common ground among them. VET is perceived as occupation-specific education and training. It is geared towards securing supply of skilled labour, and is usually considered inferior to general or academic education. In most countries, it predominantly addresses young people, providing them with qualifications at the middle level (EQF levels 3 and 4). Reflecting this combination of diversity and convergence, four main patterns can be distinguished in European VET systems today.

VET as work-based/dual initial training

This approach, typically illustrated by the German dual system, is based on practical knowledge and 'learning by doing', for young people (recognised as apprentices) to become members of an occupation/ profession with a distinct professional ethos and occupational rights. Substantial contribution by companies (financial and as a place of learning) and strong coordination between employers (and trade unions) are an intrinsic part of this approach. VET is clearly associated with the middle level of education (ISCED-11 levels 3-4), with access to higher education being restricted or not. The employers' perspective is dominant, as VET's main purpose is to secure the supply of skilled labour and to foster business innovation and growth.

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BOX 1. CEDEFOP'S *CHANGING NATURE AND ROLE OF VET* PROJECT

Cedefop's research project *The changing nature and role of VET in Europe* (2015 to 2018) aims at capturing the dynamic character of VET by analysing past changes and deriving ideas on future challenges and opportunities it faces in Europe. More specifically, the project looks at:

- the changing definition and conceptualisation of VET;
- external drivers influencing VET developments;
- the role of traditional VET at upper secondary level;
- VET from a lifelong learning perspective;
- the role of VET at higher education levels;
- scenarios outlining alternative development paths for European VET in the 21st century.

To initiate the project, Cedefop asked VET experts in the 30 countries covered ([a]) to share their perceptions of how national VET systems are being perceived and are changing ([b]). The results of this survey offer an insight into the diversity of national VET solutions, while also pointing to common trends and shared challenges. This briefing note is based on two working papers by Markowitch et al. (forthcoming, September 2017), which look at VET from a multifaceted viewpoint, combining a system/institution perspective with both a pedagogical/epistemological and a socioeconomic/labour market perspective. This allows us to observe how vocationally oriented learning forms and formats are spreading and how a closer link to the labour market is developing, including in institutions not traditionally defined as 'vocational'. More publications will follow as project outcomes become available.

([a]) The 28 EU Member States, Iceland and Norway.
([b]) Survey carried out between September and November 2016. Results will be published in: Cedefop (2017). *Changing conceptions of VET: results of a survey among European VET experts* [forthcoming].

VET as initial vocational education

VET is understood as an integrated part of initial education, where schools financed and governed by the State are the main place of learning, and learners are regarded as pupils/students. Sweden exemplifies this approach in which VET mainly takes place in classrooms (although there are work-based elements as well) centred around a teacher-student relationship. It is not necessarily occupation-specific, but can cover broader vocational fields. It is provided at middle and higher levels (ISCED-11 levels 3-5), and provides access to higher education. Individual progression and personal growth are rated higher than securing supply of skilled labour. Some countries offer a variation of this approach, giving more emphasis to occupation-specific education. In these cases, school-based and work-based options form part of one system.

VET as further training

In some countries VET is understood as mainly on-the-job training for all age groups at various levels (including lower levels), offered by a wide range of further and higher education providers. Ireland is a good example. The idea is to train semi-skilled and skilled workers or professionals. Programmes for the unemployed or second-chance programmes form part of this type of VET. Getting people into work prevails over their occupational identity. Employers' views dominate and VET is considered a means to secure supply of skilled labour and promote innovation and economic growth.

VET as (part of) lifelong learning

VET is understood as coexistence of different learning approaches, learning sites, types of provider (school, companies, higher education) and types of instructor (teachers, trainers, masters). Finland exemplifies the approach, which addresses a wide range of education and skill levels (semi-skilled, skilled and professional), learning outcomes (both occupation-specific and broader vocational-field-oriented, as well as pre-vocational) and types of qualification (occupational, educational). It reaches out to different age groups and learners, whose status can range from apprentice to student. As a result, VET is associated with a great variety of purposes, including equity and social inclusion. IVET and CVET form part of a unified VET concept within a lifelong learning perspective.

Changing concepts, changing realities?

Beyond these patterns, some broad trends have been emerging across Europe, potentially changing the way VET is understood and developed in the future.

- **Focus on practical knowledge**: many countries, particularly those with largely school-based VET, have been placing increased emphasis on

practical knowledge in curricula and learning approaches, strengthening work-based VET provision. This includes introducing apprenticeship schemes (in many countries) and/or the expansion of such schemes to higher levels of education (as in Germany, France and Italy). At governance level, this translates into a more prominent role given to employers and industry (as in Hungary and UK-England), often in the framework of social partnership (Croatia, Lithuania and Malta), and an effort to encourage stronger participation of enterprises in VET financing.

- **Diversification of VET provision**: many countries have expanded their VET provision to address more age groups, skill levels and special needs groups. For example, Portugal has introduced VET pathways for young people under 16.
- **Easier access to higher education**: vertical permeability from secondary to tertiary level has increased. Access to higher education through vocational qualification has been opened up by countries with long-standing traditions in VET: Denmark, Germany, France, Austria and UK-England. Germany now grants higher education access to vocationally qualified applicants ([1]) if they have proof of relevant occupational experience, pass an aptitude test or successfully complete a probationary year of studies. Over recent years, higher education institutions have become major VET providers in many countries, triggering an academic drift in VET.
- **New VET pathways for adults**: many countries have created new VET pathways for adults, including Croatia (post-academic employment preparation at universities) and Malta (at post-compulsory secondary level), or simply increased the share of adult learners in existing VET programmes (Estonia, Ireland, Finland). This often goes hand-in-hand with stronger emphasis on accreditation of prior learning (as in France, Finland, Norway) and is frequently related to the introduction of European lifelong learning policies. Some countries expect growing demand for labour market retraining, including Lithuania, where new programmes for unemployed adults have been established. Overall, there is a trend towards using VET as a means to combat unemployment, including new options for disadvantaged and disabled persons (for instance the 'integrative apprenticeships' in Austria).

([1]) Such as 'Meister', 'Techniker' or 'Fachwirt'.

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- **Slightly improved parity of esteem**: despite extensive effort, VET's image of remains poor. Countries with a traditionally dominant position of general education have tried to raise VET's comparably low esteem, while countries with well-established dual VET provision have made efforts to stop the decline of esteem (Denmark, Austria). Spain, where VET's image has improved, is one of a few exceptions. The most striking example is Finland, where VET enrolment has steadily increased over the past 10 years.
- **Growing importance of learning outcomes**: while almost all countries now define and describe their VET qualifications using learning outcomes, they still diverge as regards qualifications content and profile ([2]). There are countries where the number of qualifications is being reduced, a trend which potentially decreases the specificity of learning outcomes (Norway, UK-England). In other countries, in contrast, an increase in the degree of detail and specificity can be observed. While this could lead to a convergence across countries (generic programmes become more specific while occupation-specific ones broaden), it could just be interpreted as growing pluralism in VET (coexistence and increasing variety of specific and generic programmes).

([2]) Between 2015 and 2017, Cedefop carried out a comparative study of 10 VET qualifications in 10 European countries (Cedefop, *Comparing VET qualifications* [forthcoming]) which confirms this diversity. For four of the qualifications, a comparison with countries outside Europe was carried out, bringing the total number of countries to 26. A summary of this research can be found in: Bjornavold, J.; Chakroune, B. (2017). Using learning outcomes to compare the profile of VET qualifications: a global approach. In: Cedefop, ETF and UNESCO (eds). *Global inventory of regional and national qualifications frameworks*, Volume I: thematic chapters.

These trends, which have been emerging over the past two decades, can be summarised as an expansion and diversification of VET on the one hand, and a strengthening or intensification of VET on the other. The strengthening of VET points to an increase in work-based training as illustrated by Denmark, Germany or Austria, often expanding to 'new' parts of the education and training system, in particular higher education. The diversification of VET points to it being (part of) lifelong learning as illustrated by France or Finland.

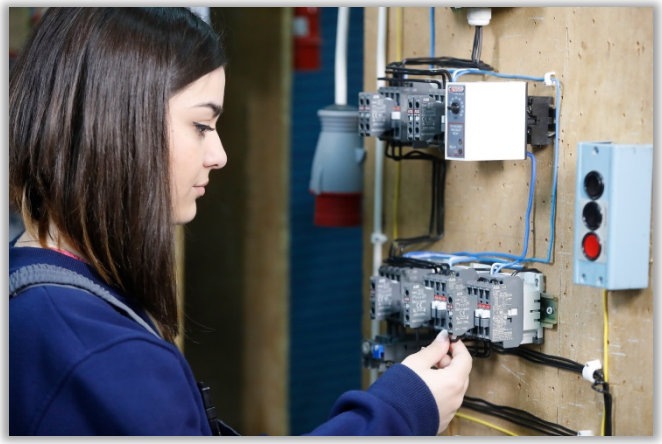
Challenges ahead

Considering the expansion and diversification of VET, involving new providers and delivery at new levels and in new contexts, there is reason to believe that European VET will become even more diverse and pluralistic. This may be positive, in the sense that VET will become more targeted and relevant, or negative, in the sense that fragmentation and polarisation ([3]) could increase.

The Cedefop survey reveals several challenges which need to be addressed in future European cooperation on VET:

- the traditional distinction between education and training subsectors (general, vocational and higher education, as well as initial and continuing VET) is not always practical when it comes to identifying and responding to new challenges;
- operating on the basis of too narrow a definition of VET, policy-makers risk overlooking the need for vocationally oriented education outside the traditional VET sector, for example in higher education. Future policy cooperation should focus on how education and training systems as a whole can promote and support the practice-oriented and work-related learning formats typical of VET. To achieve this, education and training providers at all levels need to strengthen dialogue and cooperation with labour market actors and society as a whole;
- future VET development may require solutions spanning several subsectors and involving institutions and providers currently operating individually. While the expansion of vocationally oriented education and training seems unstoppable, fragmentation and loss of transparency may also be experienced, making it more difficult for groups at risk to benefit from VET. Increasing the transparency and permeability of education and training systems, as supported for example by the EQF, is therefore crucial.

These – sometimes contradictory – trends are expected to play out differently in different European countries, hence the importance of monitoring whether they will reduce or accentuate existing differences across Europe. All policy-makers and practitioners with a stake in VET need to engage in a broad discussion on the best cooperation and learning approaches to secure its future, looking at VET's education, employment and societal dimensions. More than ever, the future of VET is inseparable from the future of work.



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([3]) Changing concepts may not always translate into changes of systems and practices. It is important to monitor how far changes in rhetoric are conducive to actual system change.

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