

Rethinking Vocational Education and Training Across Europe

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Abstract

For too long vocational education and training has been perceived as either an alternative access route to higher education or a provider “of last resort.” As a result, EU countries are experiencing an increasingly polarized labor market, with visible consequences for equity, social cohesion and political participation. These developments are forcing us to address long-standing weaknesses in our postsecondary education and training system, and the way it is perceived, structured, delivered and funded.

In February 2021, the [European Union](#) set a target that at least 45 percent of 25–34-year-olds should hold a tertiary educational attainment by 2030. [By 2022](#), almost half of EU member states had already reached this target; Ireland and Luxembourg are already over 60 percent.

Massification—in addition to Industry 4.0 and 5.0, the green and digital transformation including AI, demographic changes, reglobalization forces and geopolitical tensions—are changing the way we think about our education systems. What might have worked for systems catering for less than 20 percent of the population is no longer appropriate for upwards of 60 percent.

As participation has risen, the bachelor/master/doctorate ladder has become the universal qualification framework. [Almost 60 percent of total learners study for a bachelor qualification](#) but only 7.7 percent follow a short-cycle course. Pursuit of status and social advantage has driven demand at the expense of postsecondary vocational education and training (VET), which is often perceived as either an alternative access route to higher education or a provider “of last resort.” Even in Germany, which has a historically strong vocational sector, societal preference for higher levels of education, including higher technical education, is surging; indeed, many of those who choose vocational education eventually go on to higher education.

As a result, European Union countries are experiencing an increasingly polarized labor market. A growing gap between the highest- and lowest-skilled occupations is resulting in a hollowing out of middle-skilled jobs. Most new jobs will be in high-skilled global-facing sectors, but we ignore the fact that [almost 45 percent will require medium-level skills](#). As part of [Year of Skills 2023](#), the European Union reported many countries are experiencing serious and structural labor shortages in many critical sectors and occupations and across all skill levels, which is set to increase. This is having [visible consequences for equity, social cohesion, and political participation](#).

These [developments are forcing us to address long-standing weaknesses](#) in our education and training systems and the way postsecondary education is perceived, structured, delivered and funded.

VET Varies Across Europe

The system of and attitude to VET [varies considerably across the European Union](#) because of the distinctiveness of national systems. It is usually associated with occupation-related education and training, but this diverges considerably. France, Italy, Croatia, Cyprus, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, for example, include broad occupational fields while others refer to occupation- and job-specific training. Apprenticeship is often seen as the “pure” form because it directly combines learning with particular types of work. Ireland uses the term “further education and training,” which also includes adult literacy and community education.

Some countries, such as Germany, have strong track differentiation and linkages between education and the labor market. It provides initial VET (I-VET) at the secondary/upper secondary level with students making a decision during their midteens. The binary approach is replicated at postsecondary level, with a dedicated set of institutions often referred to as universities of applied science (UaS), e.g., *Fachhochschulen* in Germany, university colleges in Scandinavia, *hogescholen* in the Netherlands or polytechnics in Finland.

In contrast, Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States have much weaker track differentiation and school-to-work linkages. VET is usually a postsecondary nontertiary

pathway to employment or to higher education for students who have completed a common general secondary education. While Germany has historically managed to promote parity of esteem between vocational and academic education, sociocultural and policy factors have meant VET has a low underresourced status in many countries.

Focus on employability and productivity, along with concerns about widening participation and regional vitality, has had a transformative effect on policy and public thinking in many countries. Propositions include creating a more horizontally diverse and unified tertiary education system which, inter alia, integrates VET within the wider education system; greater collaboration and learning pathways between vocational, professional and academic; a broader curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices, combining skills with transversal competences; parity-of-esteem with respect to the learner experience; and recognition of VET as a key player in the regional research and innovation ecosystem.

The latter is evidenced in the European Union program for [smart specialization](#). The innovation literature and policy have overemphasized university-based knowledge creation and technological inventions ignoring the import of knowledge diffusion/exploitation and social innovation. In doing so, it has ignored the more direct and dynamic role that VET can play in generating absorptive capacity and sharing knowledge, especially related to process and service innovation.

Examples of What Is Happening

Some governments are rethinking governance arrangements. New Zealand was one, if not the first country to establish a [Tertiary Education Commission](#) in 2003. The [Scottish Funding Council](#) was established in 2005, and [Wales](#) has created the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research—an [exemplar for England](#), which is looking at options following a possible Labor Party win after the next election. Both [Ireland](#) and [Australia](#) are currently reviewing their systems, proposing an integrated “tertiary education system...where skills training and higher education sectors operate as one but retain their separate strengths and identities.” The Netherlands and Portugal are also rethinking their systems.

The European Union underscores the necessity of raising VET to a higher level including updating curriculum, teaching and learning, etc. OECD is talking of a PISA-like test for VET. Erasmus+ 2021–2027 provides 400 million euros to fund 100 [Centers of Vocational Excellence](#). The aim is to create transnational collaborative platforms or skills ecosystems bringing VET providers and local partners together to build capacity and contribute to regional economic and social development and innovation.

In Spain’s Basque country, establishing and maintaining the VET ecosystem is a top political priority. It brings together the Basque government education and economic development and industry directorate, economic and social partners, VET centers, as well as teachers and students. Aligned with the Basque Smart Specialization Strategy, the emphasis is on VET excellence, with an integrated approach to training, applied innovation and active entrepreneurship. The objective is to help guide Basque applied innovation, bringing together 19 centers in four hubs organized around the following priorities: advanced manufacturing, digital and connected factory; energies, and biosciences and biotechnologies.

In 2014, Ireland established a [National Apprenticeship Office](#) to oversee the expansion of apprenticeships into, inter alia, green technologies, biopharma, hospitality, international financial services, insurance, advanced manufacturing, and engineering in addition to traditional areas of construction, electronics, and automotive industry. They lead to awards up to doctoral level. The [National Tertiary Office](#) supports collaborative tertiary programs which facilitate learners beginning their studies in the local VET college and progressing to university. While such opportunities exist in the United States, formal arrangements are new in Ireland and Europe in general.

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Challenges Ahead

Massification has been a huge success. However, “going to uni” and the social status attached to it have reproduced elite advantages in which “academic” higher education is often seen as the only path to success. While collaborative learning pathways are a welcome means to expand participation and progress to university, there is a risk they simply underwrite this narrative. Finally, there is the tricky issue of finance. Spending per learner is highest for institutions which undertake research and development. In contrast, the quality of facilities and funding for VET and mature learners and lifelong learning opportunities tend to be limited—a regressive approach. A new funding and governance model is required if we are truly serious about building a parallel vocation-oriented system with optimized learning and development pathways equivalent to but different from higher education. ▲

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