

# Editorial

Vocational education and training (VET) is vital. It offers an alternative to academic education, equips learners with practice-oriented and employability skills, eases the school-to-work transition, and meets economies' demand for skilled workers.

Across the OECD, 44% of all upper secondary students are enrolled in vocational education and training; in some countries, such as the Czech Republic and the Netherlands, this rises to over two-thirds. Despite this high share, vocational programmes in many countries are still seen as a last resort. Too often, VET is seen as a fallback option for students who struggle with school or lack motivation, rather than as a first choice that leads to attractive career paths.

To meet labour-market challenges and to guide all learners into the right programmes for their talents and aspirations, we need to make VET more attractive and accessible. Our latest edition of *Education at a Glance* provides a range of new cross-national data on vocational programmes that will help policy makers understand the effectiveness of their VET systems to foster opportunity, inclusion and sustainable growth.

## Facilitating the school-to-work transition

Profound and ongoing transformations are reshaping how we live, learn, and work. It reinforces the importance of skills such as problem solving, teamwork and communication, which are key to employability and complement both academic and practical skills. Vocational education and training will become increasingly important to equip learners with a mix of such skills, facilitating the school-to-work transition.

VET is also key to addressing the accelerating pace of change in demand for skills. Throughout their careers, workers will need to upskill and reskill more frequently, and VET programmes can help bridge this gap. They will need however to remain flexible to meet the needs and preferences of adult learners that often face time constraints due to work and family responsibilities. Online learning and part-time provision can help make VET more accessible.

Ensuring that vocational programmes are steppingstones to further learning also requires stronger pathways between VET and other levels of education. On average across OECD countries, a quarter of VET students are enrolled in upper secondary programmes that do not provide direct access to tertiary education. Even where there is good access, often, we only see a small proportion of graduates of these programmes taking advantage of it during their careers, while students who do continue find they do not always have the tools they need to succeed.

## Making VET a first choice

To make it an equally valuable alternative to academic education, we need to continue enhancing the quality and perception of VET, and students need to be guided into programmes that match their talents and aspirations.

Close partnerships with employers will be key. These partnerships can ensure VET remains relevant to labour-market needs through industry-validated curricula, enable the integration of valuable work-based learning components into VET programmes and facilitate the school-to-work transition. Presently, there are still too many VET programmes that operate without the close involvement of employers. For example, less than half of all upper secondary VET students are enrolled in programmes that include elements of work-based learning, and there are several countries where such programmes are almost non-existent.

Strengthening the involvement of industry in VET should therefore be a priority. In recent years, many countries have taken steps to work more closely with employers. These reforms include helping employers – especially small and medium-sized enterprises – to provide work-based learning, creating platforms to enable VET providers and industry to exchange knowledge, and involving industry professionals in VET teaching and career guidance.


## Providing policy makers with the evidence they need

We can also do more to measure the full range of skills that VET students acquire, to capture the areas where VET students can excel beyond just academic skills. Better data on students' practice-oriented, technical, and employability skills could help make VET programmes more attractive. Towards this, the OECD launched the International VET Assessment initiative, which will provide internationally comparable data on the skills of VET students. In the medium-term, we are also examining ways to measure the quality of vocational outcomes directly, as learners complete their programmes.

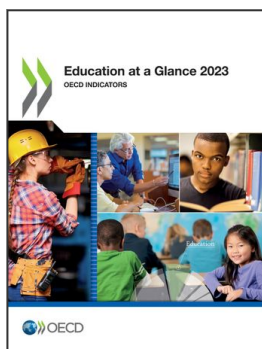
For young people to make positive choices about whether to pursue a VET programme, they need access to effective careers guidance to encourage them to explore the full breadth of employment opportunities from an early age. Students should also have opportunities to visit workplaces and interact with a range of workers well before they have to make any final decisions. Such first-hand experiences are powerful learning opportunities and associated with better employment outcomes in adult life.

These efforts will be most effective when supported by good data and evidence. In contrast to general schooling though, which has benefited in recent decades from considerable coverage in international large-scale assessments, there is comparatively little data available for VET. At tertiary level, the data is almost entirely absent, with no established definitions of academically and professionally oriented programmes. Data that does exist is hard to interpret due to differences in countries' VET and training arrangements.

At the OECD, we continue working to fill data gaps to provide the evidence policy makers need to build better VET systems, balance skills demand and supply, foster greater participation in lifelong learning, and ultimately provide the enabling conditions for strong economic performance and improvements in well-being.



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