Chapter 6

Key characteristics of effective vocational systems

Many of the findings of this report resonate with those from the earlier OECD study of vocational education and training at upper secondary level, Learning for Jobs (OECD, 2010). With that in mind, this chapter aims to integrate the findings of both studies and propose a set of key desirable characteristics of effective vocational systems.
Set out below are a set of key characteristics of strong vocational systems. These characteristics are based on the policy recommendations for vocational education and training advanced in the OECD reports on *Learning for Jobs* and this report on *Skills beyond School*.

### Deciding on provision and meeting needs: How the mix and content of vocational programmes are determined

**Mechanisms to ensure that the mix of vocational provision corresponds to the needs of the labour market**

Sometimes the availability of vocational programmes is driven by student demand and the capacity of training institutions, rather than by industry needs. This can be balanced by constraints on training provision where there is little demand for the skills, by an emphasis on work-based learning as a means of signalling industry needs, and by well-grounded career guidance to inform student demand.

**Adequate core academic skills, particularly literacy and numeracy built into vocational programmes**

Basic skills are needed both for jobs and to support further learning. Vocational programmes therefore need to assess basic skills on entry, address weaknesses, and explore ways to integrate basic skills into vocational courses.

**A range of programmes that offer opportunities for all, and minimise dropout**

Some types of practical and work-based vocational programmes are very effective at engaging young people who have previously become disenchanted by academic education.

**Flexible modes of study suitable to adults with working and home commitments**

Adults, often with home and work responsibilities, tend to prefer flexible and part-time study options and often wish to take advantage of distance learning. Programmes and policies should therefore adapt to their needs.
**Higher-level vocational qualifications, and avenues of progression from initial vocational programmes to both higher-level vocational and academic programmes**

Higher-level vocational qualifications for graduates of upper secondary vocational programmes, offering management and entrepreneurial skills, and skills in managing trainees, alongside a deepening of technical competences, play a key role in enhancing the attractiveness of the upper secondary vocational track. Pathways to more academic qualifications are also important.

**Delivering quality: How vocational skills are imparted to learners**

**High-quality apprenticeship systems, covering a wide range of professional domains and including higher-level apprenticeships**

Apprenticeship is an outstandingly successful model of work-based learning, and a way to develop skills and transition young people into work. It needs to be actively supported in partnership with industry, backed by quality assurance, and developed in novel territory such as in public administration.

**Work-based learning systematically integrated into all vocational programmes**

In apprenticeships, but also more generally, work-based learning has such profound benefits, both as a learning environment and as a means of fostering partnership with employers, that it should be integrated into all vocational programmes and form a condition of public funding. It should be systematic, quality-assured, assessed and credit-bearing.

**A vocational teaching workforce that offers a balance of teaching skills and up-to-date industry knowledge and experience**

This implies measures to encourage industry practitioners to teach part-time or to enter vocational teaching in mid-career.

**Using learning outcomes: How skills are assessed, certified and exploited**

**Qualifications developed with labour market actors**

This means that curricula, programmes and assessments are organised so as to meet the needs of industry, both in content and in modes of study.

**Qualifications reflecting labour market needs that are nationally consistent but flexible enough to allow for locally negotiated element**

Nationally consistent qualifications support labour market mobility, but a locally negotiated proportion of the curriculum allows provision to respond to local employer needs.
Qualifications systems and frameworks that keep qualification numbers manageable

The tendency of qualifications to proliferate, allowing confusion to dilute their signalling value, needs to be combatted by active management of the qualifications system, involving employers and trade unions.

High-quality assessments of vocational skills built into qualifications

Good assessment of complex occupational skillsets is hard, but it is an essential element of strong qualifications generally, and vital for qualifications that are competence-based.

Effective competence-based approaches, including both professional examinations and recognition of prior learning

Professional examinations are a little-recognised part of countries’ skill systems and often play an important role outside the formal education system. Recognition of prior learning requires strong incentives for the different actors to make it work.

Supporting conditions: The policies, practices and institutions that underpin vocational education and training

Vocational programmes developed in partnership and involving government, employers and trade unions

Typically, this will require a steering body involving the different stakeholders to co-ordinate provision, engage and involve all the stakeholders, including social partners, and address issues of coherence and co-ordination.

Effective, accessible, independent, proactive career guidance, backed by solid career information

Career guidance is still too often a weak by-product of school general counselling. The guidance profession needs to be upgraded and supported with good labour market information.

Strong data on vocational programmes, including information on vocational programmes in international categorisations and labour market outcomes

ISCED 2011 should improve the identification of vocational programmes, especially at the post-secondary level, but it needs to be well-implemented. Many countries need better information on labour market outcomes.
**Consistent funding arrangements so that choices are not distorted by the availability of funds**

While upper secondary vocational education and training rarely involves fees in OECD countries, post-secondary provision is subject to a range of fee regimes, not always consistent with those for other forms of tertiary education.

**Reference**
