Executive summary

Over recent years, Sweden has made great strides in the development of its vocational education and training (VET) system. Work-based learning is better integrated, social partners are more engaged and the VET offer for adults has been developed. Opportunity exists however, for better co-ordination among stakeholders and changes in delivery to ensure the attractiveness of VET to an increasingly diverse range of learners and their prospective employers.

Key findings

Sweden has a strong VET system. Upper-secondary VET prepares for higher levels of education and for employment by providing students with sound basic and occupational skills. But challenges remain: enrolment in upper-secondary VET has been falling; collaboration between schools is limited; social partner engagement, while strong nationally, is highly variable at a local level. Despite the tightening labour market and emerging skills shortages, unemployment has been rising in vulnerable social groups such as non-European born migrants and those with low educational attainment.

Key messages

Improving co-operation and consolidation of VET provision

In international comparison, Swedish VET schools are small. This increases costs and risks of mismatch between provision, career aspiration and employer demand. When VET schools are small, the need for collaboration over equipment, facilities and specialist expertise increases. The current Swedish system, in which unconstrained student choice and competition between schools drives the mix of provision and public funding, tends to discourage collaboration between schools. Co-operation should be encouraged more vigorously through school evaluation and funding criteria. Involvement of social partners in regional planning should be mandatory and their perspective should be taken into account in determining provision.

In programmes where economies of scale are obtainable, VET schools should be merged to create larger institutions. In practice, this would mean that VET programmes would be offered in fewer schools. This policy option, as those discussed in other chapters of this report, should apply to all VET schools – both private and public – and to provision aimed at both youth and adults.

Strengthening work-based learning

Work-based learning (WBL) is now nearly universal in Swedish upper-secondary VET and is valued by both students and employers. These are real strengths, but there is evidence that WBL quality is variable. The provision and organisation of WBL is highly dependent on individual schools and individual VET teachers. While many VET teachers

do a remarkable job, they are often time-constrained and may lack the specialist skills to organise WBL. WBL tasks currently assumed by individual VET teachers could be usefully shared with other organisations, such as reinforced local bodies where social partners are represented.

A theoretical strength of VET provision in Sweden is that students should only be enrolled onto programmes with WBL. This is a means of testing actual employer demand for the skills being developed. However, around half of Swedish school principals report that the number and mix of VET places offered does not depend on the availability of relevant WBL. Employer willingness to offer WBL could be used more fully to steer students towards occupations in demand in the labour market.

Over recent years, the involvement of social partners in Swedish VET has gradually increased. This involvement could be further reinforced in apprenticeship programmes. Social partners in Sweden are less involved in the design and delivery of apprenticeships than in many apprenticeship countries. Swedish employers offering apprenticeships have fewer responsibilities, but also less influence over apprenticeship. Drawing on international experience, employers in Sweden should have an opportunity to select their apprentices, have a stronger influence over the content and modes of delivery of WBL and be encouraged to pay apprentices a wage.

Empowering social partners

Sweden has successfully built a national framework for social partner involvement. At local level, schools are expected to create collaborative arrangements with Local Programme Councils (*lokala programråd*) linked to school provision. The influence and involvement of local councils varies greatly across schools and programmes. Building on existing local consultation arrangements, and the successful experiences with Colleges, Sweden could establish a more systematic institutional framework for social partner engagement at local level. This would promote collaboration between different stakeholders and reinforce links between national and local bodies in which social partners are represented.

Increasing the attractiveness of VET and strengthening pathways to post-secondary education

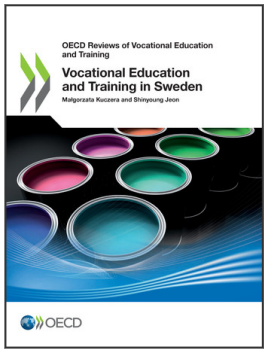
Sweden recorded the highest drop in VET enrolment among the OECD countries between 2009 and 2015. The declining popularity of VET may be related to the weak pathways from VET to higher education. To address this challenge, Sweden may reinstall academic content in the routine coursework in VET programmes, removed by 2011 reforms, but allow students who are less interested in academic subjects to opt out from more demanding academic courses.

Cross-country experience shows that initial VET programmes that offer weak routes for progression become unattractive to students and employers. Sweden could therefore strengthen links between upper-secondary and post-secondary VET. VET graduates will often be interested in gaining post-secondary qualifications for their career development. Flexible arrangements permit students to continue working while studying and therefore to maintain income from employment. Post-secondary VET provision should be more available to adults who wish to upgrade their competences. To attract working adults, programmes should be provided in a flexible way allowing for a combination of work and study.

Unlocking the potential of migrants through VET

Sweden faces skills shortages and an ageing population. The recent increase in humanitarian migrants represents opportunities, but these can only be fully realised if Sweden can address associated challenges. Compared to other countries, migrant progression rates onto the upper-secondary VET are low. The recent innovation of partial qualifications (Vocational Packages) offers an attractive alternative for such disadvantaged learners, but also present risks.

The policy priority should continue to be that young people, including humanitarian migrants, attain full upper-secondary qualifications. Vocational Packages should act as stepping-stones alongside close co-operation between upper secondary schools and municipal adult education, strengthened individual assessment, personalised approaches and stronger career guidance. Relatively modest changes to VET delivery, notably adjusting programme duration or entry requirements, can be expected to significantly improve migrant progression onto VET.



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