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**ISSUES PAPER: INFORMAL MEETING OF OECD EDUCATION MINISTERS ON VOCATIONAL
EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

Monday 22 January to Tuesday 23 January 2007, Denmark

This document sets out the issues for discussion at the informal meeting of OECD Education Ministers hosted by the Danish authorities.

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ISSUES PAPER: INFORMAL MEETING OF OECD EDUCATION MINISTERS ON VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

COPENHAGEN 22 – 23 JANUARY 2007

1 Providing skills for tomorrow: labour market and education contexts

Session 1.1 Taking account of the changing labour market

Issue

1. Vocational educational and training (VET) systems need to respond to fast changing labour markets and anticipate future needs. Economic developments, reflecting global pressures, technological innovation and new modes of work organisation are changing both workplaces and their skills requirements. Some countries, while broadly content with work-based VET systems, face a lack of apprenticeship places. Some others, who have adopted schools-based VET, have invested heavily in the trainers and equipment necessary to provide skills for which demand may be falling – while there is a growing demand for newer technical skills. Others still are drawing the conclusion that, given flexible labour markets, many skills could more effectively be provided through broad initial education combined with (lifelong) short courses and in-service and informal training. At the same time, increasing migration is filling some skills gaps in receiving countries, creating some new training requirements (such as second-language learning for adults) and creating some skills gaps in sending countries. Some countries face continuing challenges in integrating second-generation migrants into education and employment.

Questions

- Strong initial VET systems are often associated with very clearly defined trades in the workplace; weaker systems (for example in some Anglo-Saxon countries) are often associated with more fluid job definitions and more emphasis on informal learning. While the dual system has many attractions, attempts to export the approach to other countries where it has not been traditional have met with mixed success. How can developments in VET be better linked to complementary developments in work organisation and labour market reforms?
- How can an effective balance be maintained between initial VET – for long-lasting working skills – and continuing education and training to respond to specific, local or fast-changing job requirements.
- Under what circumstances do qualifications arrangements help link VET to labour market requirements? When do they entrench outdated trades and skills? Can more systematic recognition of informal learning enhance the efficiency of VET?
- How far can we expect migration to solve future skills shortages without recourse to domestic VET systems?

Session 1.2 The tertiary and wider education context

Issue

2. OECD countries have taken different routes in expanding post compulsory education. While all have expanded the high-level qualifications obtained in universities, some have maintained a strong formal VET sector, while others have sought to fill a perceived skills gap through diversification in tertiary and post-secondary education, sometimes involving the creation of a new tier of institutions, like the polytechnics in Finland. Some countries have tried to free up the pathway from initial VET into tertiary education, but few countries can claim great coherence in post-compulsory education, and pathways between sectors are nearly always complex, and sometimes blocked. At schools level, early division between academic and vocational tracks remains challenged by worrying evidence that it is damaging to equity.

Questions

- Both the existence, and frequent use, of access routes from VET into tertiary education would underpin VET of good status without a dead end. How can this route be developed and strengthened? How can VET systems accommodate young learners wishing to keep their career options open?
- Under what labour market conditions should countries seek to fill skills gaps through a) the expansion of tertiary education, or b) expanding VET schemes outside tertiary education (including secondary level and work-based VET)?
- Given the emphasis placed by employers both on basic skills (such as literacy and numeracy) and general competencies (such as social and communication skills), do VET systems give them adequate attention? Many countries have attempted to ‘integrate’ the general and vocational components of VET (partly in order to remove the stigma attached to VET). How successful have these initiatives been?

2 Quality and equity: parity of esteem and social cohesion

Session 2.1 Parity of esteem and quality

Issue

3. ‘Parity of esteem’ – meaning an equivalent status for VET and more general or academic tracks of education – is frequently sought. Employers are often the best judge of quality and relevance in VET, but feedback from them to VET providers is often weak. One key measure of quality is the extent to which those with VET qualifications go on to obtain good jobs using the skills acquired in VET, but the data on this are sometimes limited. In only a minority of countries has much attention being given to the pedagogical questions – how to teach vocational skills.

Questions

- Can we find ways of attracting more young people into VET courses – often highly valued by employers – rather than general upper secondary programmes?
- Could ‘parity of esteem’ be more readily attained if high-status training like medicine and law were clearly recognised as VET?

- How can employers and trade unions be more fully involved in the development of VET systems, to ensure that VET qualifications are seen as relevant and desirable?
- Are there adequate incentives for VET systems to innovate, and to learn from what works? How can data and research on VET be improved and used more effectively to support the development of policy and practice?
- Are VET teachers adequately trained in the practical and theoretical aspects of pedagogy? Are quality assurance mechanisms in VET adequately developed?

Session 2.2 Social cohesion and equity

Issue

4. Potentially, VET plays a key role in social cohesion: providing a wide range of people with the skills necessary to enter valued occupations. It is sometimes seen as a way of engaging young people in practical activities when they are bored with academic schooling – helping to increase participation in post-compulsory education. Alongside the skills which are best learnt through practical experience, some learners are also more suited to experiential learning, and, arguably, *all* students would benefit from some VET. But these arguments sit uneasily with the common practice of directing low academic attainers into VET tracks simply because they are low attainers. Fresh challenges are emerging in some countries with a growing demand to train new migrants and their children for work.

Questions

- Should it be the task of VET systems to engage disengaged young people – or does that task not belong more squarely to basic education? Can VET be ‘for all’, involving young people across the board?
- Is it realistic to expect that VET systems can be ‘high status’ while also playing a lead role in engaging and including those who are at risk of dropout? Can differentiation in VET systems into more and less demanding variants help to resolve this dilemma?
- How should VET systems adapt to increasing numbers of migrant children and adults, including second generation migrants.