

WORKING GROUP II

COMBINING LEARNING AT SCHOOL AND AT WORK

Issues paper



MAKING TRANSITIONS WORK

Final Conference on the Transition from Initial Education to Working Life

21-23 May in Budapest, Hungary

Introduction

Combinations of education at school and of workplace experience can be an important factor in successful transition systems for several reasons:

- They can make learning more applied and interesting for young people and contribute to improved educational attainment.
- They can help to develop the specific occupational skills that employers actually want.
- They can develop important general work habits and attitudes such as punctuality and team skills.
- They can signal these skills to employers when young people are seeking work.
- They can help employers and young people to get to know one another, thus facilitating the recruitment process.

But these outcomes will only be achieved if the objectives of learning at school and at work respectively are clearly defined; if the complementarity of these objectives can be recognised by young people, teachers, trainers and employers; and if teaching, training and learning processes are organised accordingly. **How do education and training systems which offer formalised combinations of learning at school and at work ensure the complementarity of learning goals, content, pedagogy and organisation?**

In order to attract successful students, combinations of learning at school and at work need to provide access to higher levels of education. It is no longer enough to provide young people with a solid occupational qualification in one or the other trade. Those who want to prepare for entry into tertiary education must be able to do so. On the other hand, some young people will not want to or not be able to acquire both vocational and full academic qualifications. **How should combinations of learning at school and at work be conceived in order to respond to the diversity of young people's interests and abilities?**

Much has been learned in recent years about the secrets of success of apprenticeship systems in a number of European countries. The involvement of the social partners and the role played by occupational qualifications and by occupation based labour markets are among the factors identified. On the other hand, such systems have been criticised for rigidities in adjusting to changing skill content and qualification structures and to differences across local or regional labour markets. It has been suggested that many apprentices are being trained for the wrong jobs. **How can the responsiveness to local needs and opportunities and to longer term trends in the labour market be increased, while preserving the advantages of apprenticeship systems?**

More detailed issues relating to these questions are outlined below under "Key issues for discussion". They provide the background for discussion in Working Group II. Interventions by participants should be informal and brief (no more than 3 minutes), in order to allow for an exchange of ideas.

Background

The combinations of work and learning can take several forms: apprenticeship, workplace experience organised by schools, and students taking part-time and holiday jobs.

Apprenticeship, in which paid employment and on-the-job training are combined with classroom instruction under a contract of employment and training, is the best known of these. Although nearly all OECD countries have apprenticeship systems, in only two -- Germany and Switzerland -- do the majority of young people enter work through apprenticeship in the form defined here. In Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway between a quarter and a half of all young people enter work through apprenticeship. For its success apprenticeship requires active and well organised employer associations, both nationally and regionally, and in most cases also well organised and active trade unions. It requires labour markets to be occupationally organised: in other words for entry to particular occupations to require the occupational qualifications that apprenticeship confers. It requires appropriate wage arrangements, appropriate arrangements to train and supervise young people within the enterprise, and co-ordinated relationships between education institutions and enterprises. Many of these conditions are not easy for countries to adopt, and attempts to introduce youth apprenticeships in countries such as Canada and the United States during the 1990s do not seem to have taken sufficient account of these important institutional factors. Apprenticeship is associated with good transition outcomes, particularly when compared to labour market programmes but its advantages are less when compared to full-time vocational education. Where young people are required to choose between a large number of relatively narrow apprenticeship categories at a fairly early age, as has been the case in Austria, Denmark and Switzerland, there is evidence of a growing tendency by young people to delay starting vocational training. Apprenticeship appears to be associated with a relatively high degree of gender inequity in transition outcomes, to the disadvantage of young women. Common criticisms of apprenticeship are that its content is often too slow to change, needing lengthy national consultations between the social partners; that its content is too difficult to adapt to differing local circumstances; that its content is too narrow; and that it provides too few bridges to further education.

School-organised workplace experience programmes have been adopted or expanded by many countries during the 1990s. Sweden, Finland, Australia, the United States and Canada are all countries in which these programmes have grown during the 1990s. They differ widely between, and sometimes within, countries in their length, intensity and degree of organisation. In Australia, Canada and the United States many are supported by local partnerships between schools and firms. Evidence on their effectiveness could be more extensive, but studies that are available do not suggest that they are having the same impact upon young people's transition outcomes as well organised apprenticeship programmes. Nevertheless it is clear that young people enjoy them and that they can help to make their school programmes more interesting and enjoyable. Some countries, have recently decided that a proportion of the study time of all vocational upper secondary students - e.g. at least 15 per cent in Finland and Sweden - must be spent in a work environment. Vocational schools have to find appropriate training places and to agree with employers on the sort of training to be provided. Contrary to the examples mentioned before, these forms of work experience are agreed and regulated at national level, with clearly defined responsibilities for schools, teachers and employers. It remains yet to be seen whether enough high quality places can be found. The Thematic Review has highlighted a number of quality control problems which arise: limited real involvement by employers and their representatives in programme design and management; inadequate support and resourcing for those in charge of organising the work placements by schools and school systems; and a lack of appropriate curriculum and assessment frameworks are among these.

Part-time and holiday jobs are another way that students can combine workplace experience with their education. For such employment to be possible employers and trade unions must negotiate appropriate part-time or temporary employment contracts and wage rates, and school time tables need to be flexible

enough to accommodate students' working hours. The proportion of students who have such jobs varies widely. It is high in Denmark, Australia, Canada, the United States and Sweden, but low in France, Greece, Belgium, Austria and Italy. In some of these countries other forms of workplace experience such as apprenticeship are also relatively limited. Evidence from Australia, Sweden and the United States indicates that those young people who have such jobs improve their employment prospects and reduce their chances of becoming unemployed when they leave school. Ironically Swedish evidence suggests that they are more effective than the work placement periods that are organised as part of school's programmes and that are intended to be integrated with classroom instruction. Such jobs only appear to interfere with students' educational performance when the hours are too long: over ten hours. In some countries rising tuition costs in tertiary education are leading to a rise in the number of students who work and in the average number of hours that they work. Some of the reasons that these jobs lead to successful transition outcomes are similar to those that are associated with apprenticeship. They develop both general and specific employment skills, they signal work readiness to employers, and they help young people and employers to get to know one another.

Further reading: Final report sections 2.3, 3.1, 4.1, and 4.2.

Key issues for discussion

Making it possible

For some countries the important issue to focus upon is how to increase the availability of education and workplace experience combinations and how to widen the forms that these take. This involves a careful consideration of the opportunities and limitations imposed by national institutional arrangements, in both education and the labour market, and of the steps that are most likely to be successful in attempting to introduce change.

Countries in which rates of participation in apprenticeship, school-organised workplace experience or student part-time jobs are low are invited to systematically consider which forms of these combinations should most appropriately be given priority, and to systematically consider steps which they might take in order to increase the availability of education and workplace experience combinations. For example by:

- Creating better dialogue, nationally, regionally and locally, between employers and education.
- Giving employers and trade unions a greater say in the management of programmes that combine education and workplace experience.
- Creating effective institutions at regional and local level in charge of organising such programmes.
- Providing funds to stimulate local partnerships between education and enterprises.
- Modifying school timetables and school assessment requirements to make access to work-based learning more attractive to students.
- Reducing gender differences in access to different types of programmes.
- Increasing the availability of part-time and temporary employment contracts for youth and reforming youth and training wages.

Countries in which rates of participation in apprenticeships, school-organised workplace experience or student part-time jobs are high are invited to explain how such high participation rates have been achieved.

Improving quality

In other cases the key challenge that countries face is improving the quality of programmes that combine workplace experience and education. Participants should focus upon sharing their experiences in improving the quality of programmes that combine workplace experience and education, for example by:

- Broadening the training programmes and qualifications, especially at the entry points.
- Relating more systematically what students learn in their work experiences to school learning.
- Introducing faster and more flexible ways to update the content of programmes and to adapt them to differing local circumstances.
- Building bridges between combined training programmes and tertiary study.
- Training those who manage programmes and those who train students in the workplace.
- Creating coherent curriculum frameworks and assessment requirements for school-organised programmes.
- Modifying school time tables in order to allow for work place training during normal school hours.
- Strengthening local agreements between schools and firms to improve the quality of programmes.
- Providing resources to schools to allow quality to be monitored and improved.
- More systematically relating what students learn from their part-time jobs to post-school employment.
- Strengthening recruitment links between educational institutions and employers.