



Vocational Education and Training in Costa Rica Strengths and Challenges

STRENGTHS

VET is prominent in the policy agenda

- In Costa Rica, technical education is recognised as a key contributor to both economic development and social cohesion. There is a consensus among stakeholders that more skilled technicians are required by industry while these jobs are attractive and may enhance social mobility and cohesion. Also, an adequately skilled labour force supports the attraction of foreign direct investment (FDI), while it improves the level of productivity and competitiveness of the country.

Some programmes have a work-based learning component

- In Costa Rica, students in technical and vocational schools can opt to spend 320 hours in the workplace at the end of their studies as a graduation requirement. A very large majority of students select this option while the remainder opt for a graduation project, mainly a desk research exercise. This is very positive given that work-based learning offers multiple benefits to students. In addition both MEP and INA offer internship programmes for their students.

Recognition of prior learning is present and reinforced by INA

- In Costa Rica, any person can apply for certification of their skills through INA and thousands are certified at INA centres or in the workplace. This represents an enormous benefit for people giving their skills visibility and improving recognition in the labour market.

Funding is currently adequate

- At the moment, funding is not the main challenge for the Costa Rican VET system as the levy scheme seems to provide secure funding every year. However the question remains whether this will be enough to face challenges related to the expansion and upgrading of the system.

Equity issues are addressed

- As in many public institutions in Costa Rica, equity is a key requirement for VET. For example, INA offers courses to the entire population aged 15 years and over; there are a number of programmes to tackle the specific needs of disadvantaged groups; and there is a strong commitment to promote gender equality within schools and at the workplace.

VET seems to have good status

- Upper-secondary VET seems to have a relatively good reputation among the population, especially as an option for students from vulnerable groups to find work in combination with pursuing higher education after completing their technical degrees. It is estimated that 20% of the cohort in upper-secondary education attend VET schools in Costa Rica and they tend to perform slightly better than students in the academic track.

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ENSURING THAT THE MIX OF PROVISION REFLECTS LABOUR MARKET NEEDS

Both employers and government sources in Costa Rica argue that there are insufficient graduates in technical specialties of increasing labour market demand. Employers in Costa Rica say that medium level technicians are the most difficult jobs to fill. MEP and INA pursue consultation with stakeholders but these seem to be insufficient to make the mix of provision more responsive to labour market needs. Also, many MEP and INA programmes and courses are not sufficiently flexible for individual technical and vocational schools and training units to adapt them to the needs of particular regions and employers. Moreover, workplace learning is not mandatory for all MEP and INA technical students. Finally, there is no adequate guarantee that employers offering a placement for VET students are genuinely interested in using and developing students' skills.

Recommendation: Improve the labour market responsiveness of the system

- Make workplace learning mandatory and quality assured for both MEP and INA provision.
- Allow MEP technical and vocational schools and INA training units more flexibility to adapt programmes to local needs.
- Ensure a mix of provision that reflects the needs of the labour market and is also balanced with student preferences.

DEVELOPING AN APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM

A proposal for the implementation of a dual system in VET is currently before the Costa Rican parliament but such an initiative is not clear about the exact proportion of workplace learning to be implemented in dual programmes and responsibilities assigned to employers remain insufficient. A "dual" education system typically combines apprenticeships in a company (where students should spend most of the programme time) with vocational education at a vocational school in one programme. The initiative is promising in terms of enhancing workplace learning in VET. However, it might also be used to develop an apprenticeship system.

Recommendation: Develop an apprenticeship system

- Costa Rica should use new legislation to pilot and develop an apprenticeship system, developing it carefully to take account of international experience and the need to fully involve and engage the social partners.

STRENGTHENING THE QUALITY OF VOCATIONAL TEACHING

One of the main bottlenecks in the supply of skills is the size and qualifications of the teaching workforce. Not all MEP technical teaching staff have adequate pedagogical training and despite recruitment efforts and increasing demand the number of teaching positions at INA has experienced little growth. The preparation of teachers in Vocational Technical Schools of MEP is still too dominated by academic education. MEP and INA teaching qualification requirements are not equivalent making it difficult to share teaching resources to address supply constraints. Finally, teachers do not have enough access to workplace learning and it is not easy for industry practitioners to teach in VET.

Recommendation: Enhance the quality and effectiveness of VET teaching

- Improve the professional development of VET teachers, with attention to the updating of industry knowledge and experience as well as pedagogical training.
- Harmonise MEP and INA teacher qualification requirements to facilitate interchange and tackle supply constraints.
- Develop partnerships for teachers to spend time in industry and for industry practitioners to teach in VET.

BETTER CO-ORDINATION

The VET system in Costa Rica offers a number of student pathways and linked institutional options making co-ordination particularly important. While *ad-hoc* co-ordination between individual institutions (e.g. between MEP and INA) is common there are many areas where there is not enough co-ordination, resulting in the duplication of efforts and responsibility gaps. This lack of co-ordination creates substantial challenges, for example there is no harmonisation between MEP and INA technical degrees and there is weak articulation with higher education.

Recommendation: Improve co-ordination in the system

- Engage social partners more fully, and improve co-ordination through a national body with overall responsibility for the vocational system.
- Explore the creation of a National Qualifications Framework to clarify study paths and qualification levels.
- Through these two measures, and in other ways, substantially improve articulation between vocational programmes and tertiary education

FURTHER INFORMATION

Increasingly countries look beyond secondary school to more advanced qualifications to provide the skills needed in many of the fastest growing technical and professional jobs in OECD economies. The OECD study, *Skills beyond School*, is addressing the range of policy questions arising, including funding and governance, matching supply and demand, quality assurance and equity and access. The study builds on the success of the previous OECD study of vocational education and training *Learning for Jobs* which examined policy through 17 country reviews and a comparative report.

Full country policy reviews have been conducted in Austria, Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark, Egypt, Germany, Israel, Kazakhstan, Korea, the Netherlands, Slovak Republic, South Africa, Switzerland, the United Kingdom (England), and the United States (with case studies of Florida, Maryland and Washington State). Shorter exercises leading to an OECD country commentary have been undertaken in Belgium (Flanders), Canada, Iceland, Romania, Spain, Sweden and in Northern Ireland and Scotland in the United Kingdom. Background reports have been prepared in all these countries, and in France and Hungary. The comparative report [Skills beyond School. Synthesis Report](#) was published in November 2014.

A Skills beyond School Review of Costa Rica, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training (José-Luis Álvarez-Galván, 2015) was published on 29 June 2015.

Further information about the policy review and reports on VET systems in other countries is available on the OECD website: www.oecd.org/education/vet.