



**WEBINAR: OECD REVIEWS OF POSTSECONDARY VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING:  
KEY FINDINGS**

28 January 2014, 16h00 Paris (France) time

**HIGHLIGHTS**

**Vocational education and training**

Between school and university there exists a little understood world of colleges, diplomas, certificates and professional examinations – the world of postsecondary vocational education and training (VET). In fact, this world is exceptionally dynamic, often large and/or rapidly expanding and of great importance to countries' skills systems.

A webinar on “OECD reviews of postsecondary vocational education and training”, held on 28 January 2014, brought together practitioners from higher education institutions and associations, ministries of education and other stakeholders from 14 countries to explore some of the key issues in postsecondary VET and consider what steps can take be taken to enhance quality. The following pages present some of the key highlights and participants' responses to the instant polls<sup>1</sup>.

**Definitions**

“Postsecondary VET” in this context means the programmes beyond upper secondary school level that prepare students for particular occupations or careers. Qualifications may be earned via postsecondary programmes, typically requiring six months to two years of full-time or equivalent preparation or via professional Bachelor's degrees.

This webinar did not address specific professional study programmes and qualifications, such as Microsoft software, examinations for accountants, and examinations for master builders. Qualification for specific professions typically involves a test, or examination, often organised by the relevant profession or industry and normally closely linked to a particular occupation or competence within a profession.

**OECD reviews of VET**

At the OECD we have been conducting country studies on VET for quite a few years now. A first series of reviews looked at upper secondary VET. The reviews started in 2007 and, following 17 country reviews across the globe, concluded with the publication of a final comparative report in 2010.

A second series of country studies look at postsecondary VET. In this series, called Skills Beyond School, 22 country studies have been published or are in the process of publication. We have also been involved in work on VET with a number of non-OECD countries.

To draw together key messages from all these country studies, we are now preparing a synthesis report. We expect to publish the synthesis report by the end of 2014.

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1. For technical reasons, some participants were not able to participate in the polls.

### Key issues: quality and delivery of postsecondary VET

Strong postsecondary VET requires good quality training delivered effectively. The country reviews of postsecondary VET identify a number of strands involved. During the webinar, we addressed three of these strands:

- the training workforce
- work-based learning
- ensuring adequate basic skills.

### Keeping the training workforce abreast of industry needs

At every level, the quality of the teaching and training profession is as critical in vocational programmes as it is in general education. Often there are challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers who meet the demanding twin requirements of pedagogical skills and practical professional expertise. While most countries require teachers to have pedagogical preparation as well as experience in their area of specialisation, it is a major challenge to keep practical knowledge of the workplace up-to-date.

According to the OECD reviews, this challenge is typically addressed in two ways:

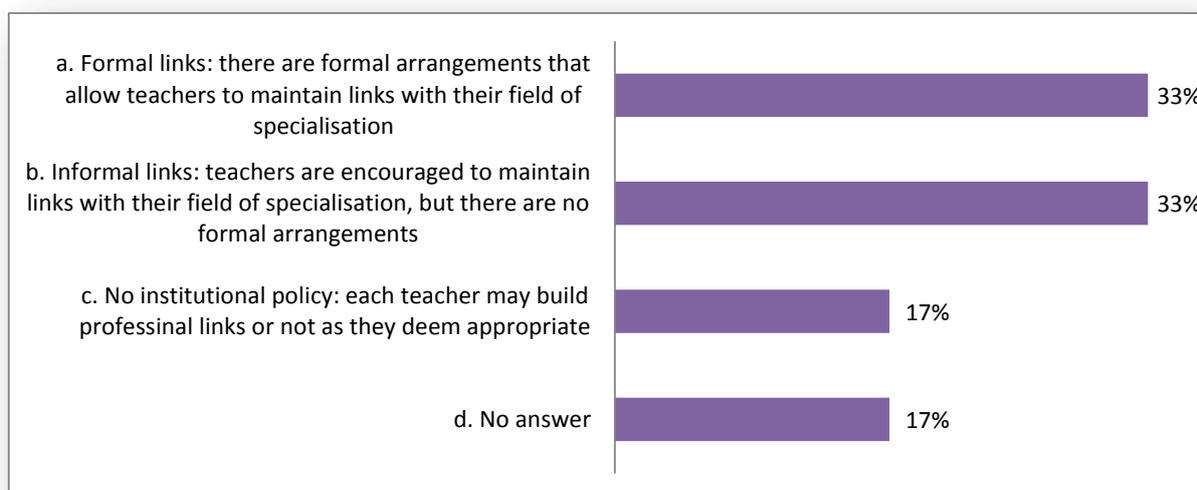
- Part-time working arrangements: practitioners continue to work in their field while also working as teachers.
- Mid-career practitioners are recruited directly from the industry.

Both strategies require a suitably flexible framework of pedagogical preparation suitable to people in these circumstances rather than training programmes merely adapted to older and more experienced entrants to the teaching profession.

More broadly, meeting the challenge requires thoughtful leadership in vocational institutions to make the most effective use of a team of teachers with a mix of different types of skills, namely pedagogical skills, more academic knowledge and industry experience.

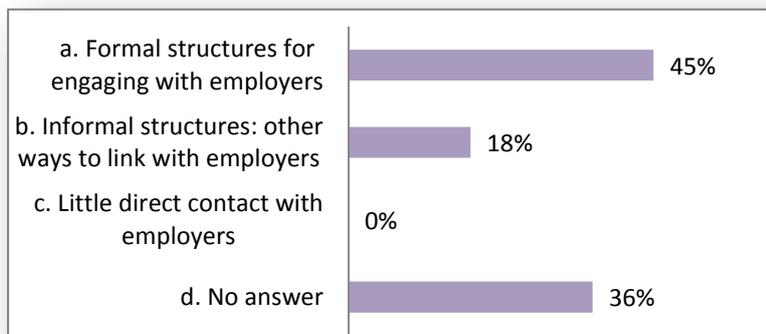
During the webinar, participants were asked how their institutions encourage teachers to maintain links with their field of speciality. In most cases, participants reported that there are either formal or informal arrangements in place to encourage teachers to maintain links with their fields of specialisation.

### How does your institution encourage teachers to maintain links with their field of speciality?



When asked about the types of links between the higher education institution and employers, nearly half of the webinar participants reported that there are formal structures in place to engage with employers. Only a few responded that there are only informal structures in place and no one responded that there is little direct contact between the institution and employers.

**What kinds of links does your institution have with employers?**



***Making work-based learning systematic***

Workplaces provide a strong learning environment in which to develop “hard” skills with modern equipment and “soft” skills through real world experiences with teamwork, communication and negotiation. Workplace training facilitates recruitment by allowing employers and potential employees to get to know each other, while trainees contribute to the output of the training firm. Workplace learning opportunities are also a direct expression of employer needs, since employers will be keenest to offer those opportunities in areas of skills shortage.

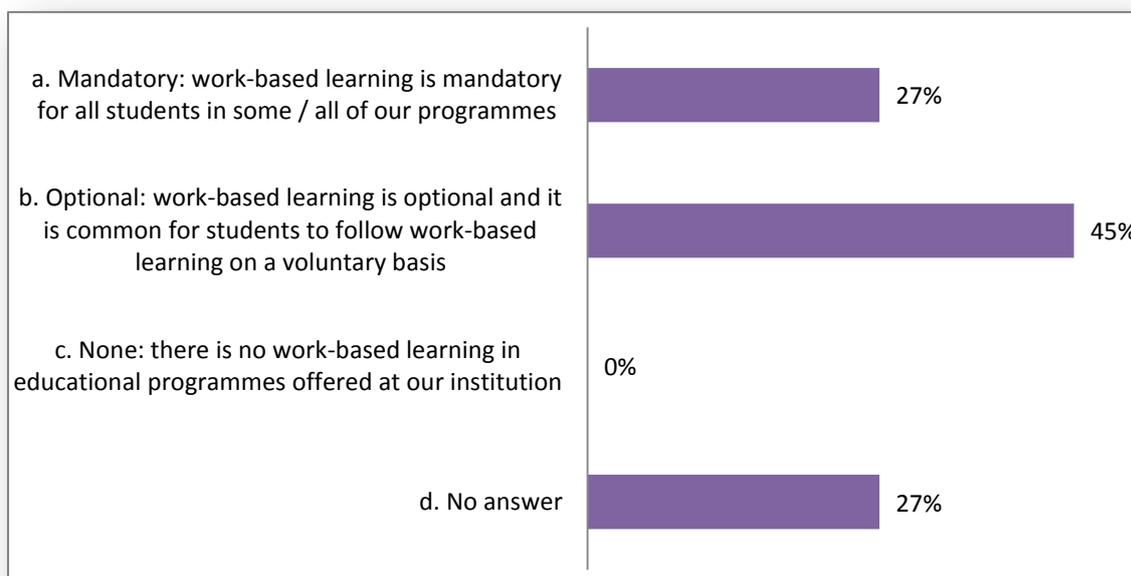
At the postsecondary level, there are many varying approaches to work-based learning as a component of programmes. While a number of countries systematically integrate work-based learning into their educational programmes as a quality-assured credit-bearing element, in many others it is often weak, *ad hoc*, and not subject to any quality control.

Integrated work-based learning programmes take a lot of effort and energy. There is often resistance on the part of traditionally-minded classroom teachers and of narrow-thinking employers. Educational institutions need strong incentives to establish the partnerships with employers that facilitate an effective workplace learning element in educational programmes. Employers also need incentives. Sometimes employers believe (often wrongly) that offering work placements to students is an unnecessary cost that they can avoid while still benefiting from a vocational programme by recruiting graduates.

Incentives for work-based learning programmes may be financial, for example: programmes may only receive funding when the educational institutions develop and maintain active partnerships that support work placements. This incentive makes partnerships with employers central to educators’ missions and employers are faced with the choice of offering work placements or seeing the vocational programme from which they hire graduates suffer from lack of funding. Vocational programmes of interest to employers may flourish with this type of financial incentive while peripheral programmes may be reduced or closed. By offering work placements, employers gain influence over the training programme, allied with the principle that the greatest influence goes to the employers who are prepared to contribute the most.

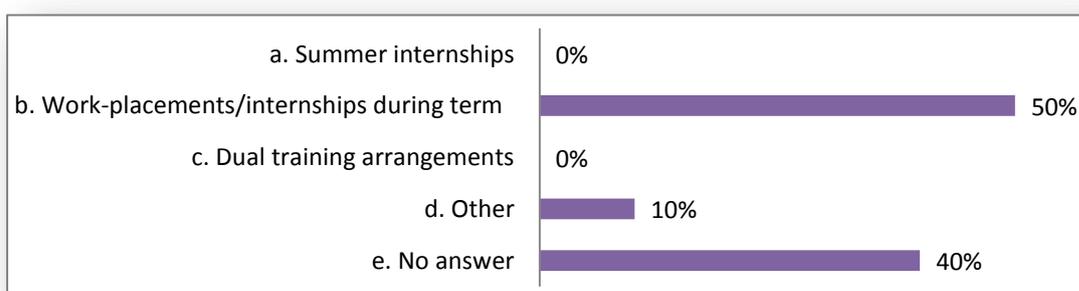
During the webinar, participants were asked how work-based learning is organised at their institutions. In about a third of the cases, work-based learning is organised as a mandatory part of the curriculum. More commonly, work-based learning is available and common among students. No institution responded that their educational programmes do not offer opportunities for work-based learning.

**Is work-based learning part of the educational programmes at your institution (e.g. work placements, internships, etc.)?**



Half of the webinar participants reported that work-based learning programmes are organised as work-placements or internships during term time. No one reported the existence of summer internships or dual training arrangements whereby school-based and work-based learning would alternate. In a comment to the group, one participant explained that she did not answer the question because there are a variety of options available at her institution and none of the poll choices adequately fit the situation.

**In what types of work-based learning do students at your institution typically participate?**



**Ensuring adequate basic skills**

In the labour market, the basic skills of literacy and numeracy are extremely important. These skills also provide a foundation for further qualifications that are, with increasing frequency, needed for people to get good jobs. Yet, the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (2013) shows that many adults have weak basic skills, despite universal basic education. In fact a varying, but sometimes surprising, proportion of those with higher (academic and vocational) qualifications also have weak basic skills.

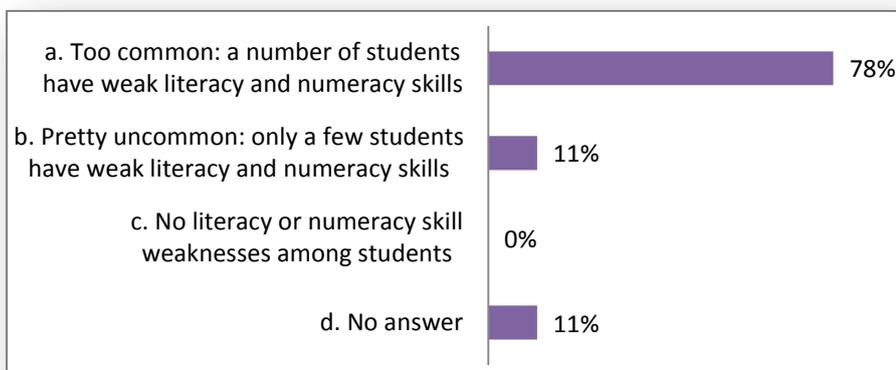
The implication is that vocational programmes at all levels need to give sufficient attention to basic skills and should not assume that students already possess these skills at an adequate level. Strong literacy and

numeracy skills are particularly important for vocational graduates who wish to pursue further academic qualifications, so sustaining and developing strong basic skills in postsecondary vocational programmes should help underpin transition to, and articulation with, academic education.

There are many challenges to teaching basic skills within vocational programmes, particularly when students have not pursued academic-style classroom learning for some years, or when they have negative past experiences with classroom learning. One promising means of tackling this challenge is to integrate basic skills with vocational training, so that literacy and maths skills are acquired in meaningful practical contexts.

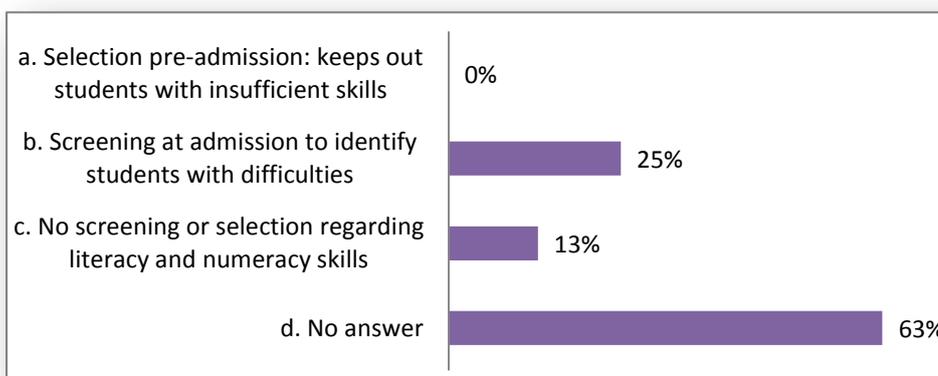
During the webinar, participants were asked how frequently they encounter students with weak literacy and numeracy skills. The majority of participants responded that this problem is too common; a number of students at their institutions have weak literacy and numeracy skills.

**How common are weaknesses in literacy or numeracy skills among students?**



Only a few webinar participants responded to the poll asking about institutional practice regarding literacy and numeracy skills. No one reported that the admission process prevents entry to applicants with weak skills. Some of the institutions have screening in place at admission to identify applicants with weak skills, for whom options to address and improve skills may be available. Several institutions have no screening process at admissions and teachers must address weak skills in the classroom as they encounter the issue.

**What is your institution's practice regarding weaknesses in literacy and numeracy skills?**



## References

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- OECD (2013), *Education at a Glance 2013*, OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing, doi: [10.1787/eag-2013-en](https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2013-en)

## Find out more:

OECD, Skills Beyond School	⇒	<a href="http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/skillsbeyondschool.htm">www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/skillsbeyondschool.htm</a>
OECD Skills Strategy	⇒	<a href="http://skills.oecd.org/">http://skills.oecd.org/</a>
OECD, Learning for Jobs	⇒	<a href="http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/learningforjobs.htm">www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/learningforjobs.htm</a>
OECD, Jobs for Youth	⇒	<a href="http://www.oecd.org/els/offtoagoodstartjobsforyouth.htm">www.oecd.org/els/offtoagoodstartjobsforyouth.htm</a>
OECD PowerPoint presentations on skills	⇒	<a href="http://www.slideshare.net/OECD/EDU/tag/skills">www.slideshare.net/OECD/EDU/tag/skills</a>

**Thank you for your interest. We hope to have the opportunity to meet you at a forthcoming IMHE event!**

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