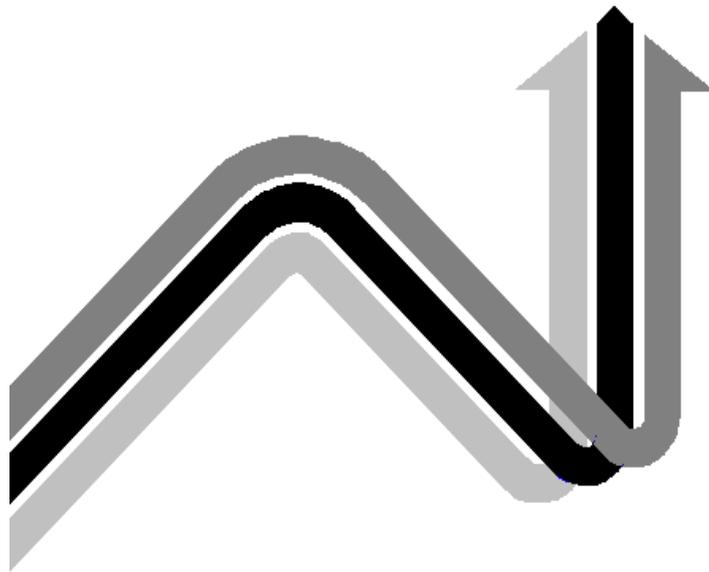


WORKING GROUP I

DEVELOPING WELL ORGANISED EDUCATION AND TRAINING PATHWAYS

Issues paper



MAKING TRANSITIONS WORK

Final Conference on the Transition from Initial Education to Working Life

21-23 May in Budapest, Hungary

Introduction

The development of open and coherent pathways of initial education and training as a basis for effective systems of lifelong learning has become one of the central policy concerns in OECD countries. This development responds to increasing educational participation, a growing diversity of student needs and interests, and the changing nature of work, requiring higher levels of general and vocational education and a more flexible workforce.

The following elements of well organised pathway systems can be identified:

- The availability of vocational as well as general education pathways at the post-compulsory stage;
- Work experience as part of post-compulsory education for as many young people as possible;
- Access to tertiary education from all general as well vocational secondary pathways;
- Modularised systems of qualifications that allow to combine courses and training units from different pathways and stages of education, including post-initial education;
- Equivalence arrangements between general and vocational education certificates, or the development of a unitary qualification system;
- Double qualifying pathways, providing a general education baccalaureat as well as a full vocational or technical qualification;
- Diversified and interconnected pathways of tertiary education, including applied and technical courses, open to young people as well as to adult learners.

No country has so far been able or inclined to develop all of these features within its education and training system. Countries with strong apprenticeship systems, for instance, have been reluctant to introduce modularised qualifications, but are gradually developing double qualifying pathways where apprenticeship can lead to tertiary education entry qualifications. Other countries, such as Australia and the United Kingdom, have emphasised the development of modularised qualification systems and course units. In North America, on the other hand, the emphasis has been on developing access to post-secondary education for young people and adults, in particular through improving the quality of secondary education and through the development of Community Colleges. **To which extent should and could these different approaches be combined? How can pathway policies contribute to the development of effective systems for lifelong learning?**

While considerable policy efforts have gone into broadening and upgrading vocational education and training, young people in most countries have over the past twenty years continuously “voted with their feet”, preferring to choose academic rather than vocational programmes. This trend has been reinforced in many countries by employer preferences for hiring young people with general and tertiary level education, either because they were looking for general and higher level skills, or because participation in vocational education was seen to signal a lack of educational success. **In view of such developments, would it be preferable to postpone the acquisition of specific qualifications for work to the post-secondary and tertiary level, as is largely the case in North America? Alternatively, how could vocational programmes and apprenticeship be upgraded so as to attract successful students and to satisfy employer needs? How could the needs of the least successful students be met in either case?**

The duration of initial education and training has been lengthening in most countries over the past decade, due to a number of reasons, including: extended study programmes and overcrowded universities; an increasing tendency for students to work during studies; growing numbers of dropouts returning to secondary or tertiary education; and waiting loops and detours in individual itineraries, often due to bottle necks at the entry to tertiary education. **What could be done, to reduce unproductive detours and unduly lengthy education and training pathways?**

Further reading: Final report sections 3.1, 3.2, 4.1 and 5.1.

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

Background

The main types of pathways at the post-compulsory stage are the following:

General education pathways have traditionally served to prepare young people for higher education. With growing participation in these pathways, increasing numbers of students are moving directly from general secondary education into the labour market, including those who leave school before high school completion. Further and adult education courses allow many of these students to return to formal education later on and to obtain secondary and post-secondary level certificates. Nevertheless, individual learning routes can become exceedingly ineffective in terms of the time spent in education, costs, educational attainment and labour market qualifications. Efforts to introduce vocational education and training into general education pathways have generally not been successful. It is rather through part-time and holiday jobs that general education students, especially in English speaking countries, are developing work skills and contacts with the labour market. This raises questions about the assessment and certification of labour market qualifications acquired through informal experience.

School-based vocational pathways have traditionally led to upper secondary level occupational qualifications and to immediate labour market entry. Countries vary strongly according to the time which is devoted to general education subjects and to work experience in school-based vocational education. Such programmes often include training in the enterprise as part of the curriculum. In Sweden and Finland, for example, national level regulations have been elaborated in co-operation with the social partners. All vocational education students must spend at least 15% of their study time in a work environment. In recent years, policies have aimed at increasing the share of general education within vocational education programmes. In most countries the majority of students’ time is reserved for vocational education subjects, but in Japan, Norway and Sweden, for instance, up to half of the study time is devoted to general education. The goal is increasingly to allow vocational students to acquire entry qualifications for tertiary education, as well as solid occupational qualifications. Austria has a longstanding tradition of attractive double qualifying programmes within technical-vocational schools. The quality and the value of school-based vocational education in the labour market varies according to types of schools and fields of study. More technically advanced and demanding programmes often provide excellent chances in the labour market, but they tend to be highly selective. In order to serve a broader range of students well, school-based vocational education requires particular didactic and pedagogical care and well integrated practical and theoretical learning in the classroom, in school internal work shops and in “real life” work environments.

Apprenticeship pathways within the enterprise have traditionally prepared young people for qualified work in large numbers of occupations. Apprenticeship countries have been most successful in ensuring

young people's transition from school to work. Youth unemployment in these countries has been kept comparatively low, both in absolute terms and relative to adult unemployment. At the end of apprenticeship young people are entering the labour market with widely recognised and valued qualifications. The most problematic feature of apprenticeship training so far has been its isolation from general education pathways and from tertiary education. This has in many countries discouraged young people from choosing the apprenticeship pathway, in spite of good employment perspectives. It may also have induced employers to turn to technical school and tertiary education graduates rather than former apprentices for highly qualified jobs in innovation intensive activities. Building bridges from apprenticeship to tertiary education is today a widespread preoccupation in countries with strong apprenticeship systems. With the introduction of the vocational baccalaureat, with the provision of significant support for interested apprentices through employers and other training providers, and with the explicit demand on the new Fachhochschulen to include former apprentices prominently among their students Switzerland is currently one of the most active countries in this respect.

The diversification of tertiary and adult education together with supple and unified qualification systems are further important elements in developing open and coherent pathway systems. The creation of non-university tertiary level institutions and the reorganisation of the initial years of higher education in many countries are intended to respond to several problems, including increasing the relevance of tertiary qualifications in the labour market and reducing the bottle necks which have occurred in many countries between the end of secondary education and the beginning of tertiary studies. Opening up tertiary education to adult learners is another important element of current pathway reforms. The establishment or innovation of national qualification frameworks can be a powerful strategy in support of institutional and organisational changes such as those mentioned before. Important elements of such innovation are the modularisation of qualifications, the introduction of personal qualification portfolios, and the development of equivalence systems or of unified qualification systems (as in Scotland). Under favourable conditions, these can become ingredients of genuine systems of lifelong learning.

Key issues for discussion

- How can a reasonable balance be struck between flexible, individualised and possibly fragmented pathways and non standardised qualification profiles on one side and, on the other, more holistic pathways of vocational education and apprenticeship, leaving less room for variety and choice but leading to clearly defined labour market qualifications?
- How can the quality of qualifications in open and flexible systems be ensured?
- What needs to be done to ensure that students who opt for unconventional course menus and qualification profiles are not disadvantaged in the labour market or in their educational careers?
- How can academic institutions be convinced to value non-academic qualifications?
- To which extent could broad vocational programmes constitute a risk for young people, by equipping them neither with relevant labour market qualifications nor preparing them well for further study?
- What needs to be done so that formally double qualifying programmes -- be they school-based or apprenticeship based -- can be mastered by students/ apprentices with average learning abilities, rather than only by the most successful students?
- How to prepare young people for labour markets which are not occupationally organised and which do not provide clear signals for desirable skill profiles?