

A *SKILLS BEYOND SCHOOL* BRIEF ON THE UNITED STATES



The Skills beyond School study

This brief was prepared for the publication of the *Skills beyond School Synthesis Report*, a review of post-secondary career, vocational and professional training covering 20 countries, including the United States (see box).

The OECD's *Skills beyond School* review

Across the world, countries are increasingly looking beyond secondary school to more advanced vocational qualifications to provide the skills needed in technical and professional jobs. This study addresses the policy challenges arising and builds on the OECD's previous study, *Learning for Jobs*, which examined vocational education and training policy at upper secondary level. For the purposes of *Skills beyond School*, 20 separate country studies, involving country visits, analyses and published reports, were pursued. Full country policy reviews were conducted in Austria, Denmark, Egypt, Germany, Israel, Kazakhstan, Korea, the Netherlands, South Africa, Switzerland and the United States (with case studies of Florida, Maryland and Washington State). Shorter exercises leading to a country "commentary" were undertaken in Belgium (Flanders), Canada, Iceland, Romania, Spain and Sweden.

The synthesis report was published in English on 13 November 2014. French, German and Spanish versions will follow.

See <http://www.oecd.org/education/VET>

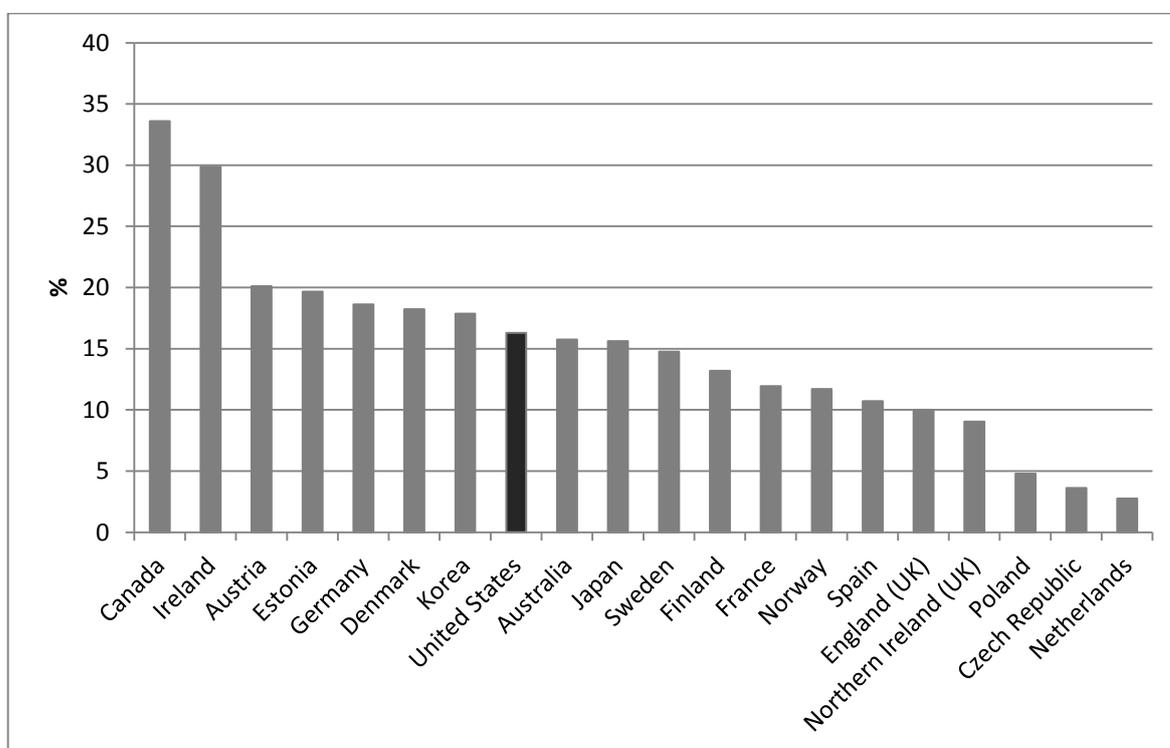
Skills beyond School in the United States

A review was carried out in the United States at the request of the U.S. Department of Education's OVAE (Office of Vocational and Adult Education) and NCES (National Center for Educational Statistics). The review reflects much of the diversity in post-secondary education system that is visible across the United States, supported by a wide range of Federal and state policies and programs. The review examines the unique features of Career and Technical Education (CTE) in the United States, alongside some challenges to America's global standing in post-secondary education outcomes and details recommendations for policy makers. The review was published in 2013.

International Comparisons

School and university, and the well-trod path between them, play a dominant role in thinking about education policy. But outside these two institutions there exists a less well understood world of colleges, diplomas, certificates and industry certifications – the world of post-secondary vocational education and training. Many professional and technical jobs require no more than one or two years of career preparation beyond high school level, and in some countries as much as one-quarter of the adult workforce have this type of qualification (see Figure below). Nearly two-thirds of overall employment growth in the European Union (EU25) is forecast to be in the “technicians and associate professionals” category – the category most closely linked to this sector. A recent US projection is that nearly one-third of job vacancies by 2018 will require some post-secondary qualification but less than a four-year degree.

Percentage of adults aged 20-45 who have short-cycle post-secondary vocational education and training as their highest qualification



Note: These data identify vocational post-secondary programmes by excluding clearly general academic qualifications (according to field of study) in ISCED 4 and 5B.

Source: Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) (2012) in OECD (2014), *Skills Beyond School: Synthesis Report*, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264214682-en>.

OECD recommendations

Funding for quality

In the United States, a variety of federal and state funding streams support post-secondary CTE, including Title IV Federal Student Aid under the Higher Education Act, the Carl D. Perkins Act, and the Workforce Investment Act. Of these, by far the largest and most influential is Title IV federal student aid. Title IV student aid channels many billions of federal dollars to post-secondary

institutions through the students that pay their fees, but the current arrangements linking title IV student aid to quality assurance have major weaknesses. The quality assurance system is insufficiently strong, is sometimes inadequately enforced, and is inconsistent in its application across the US. It also places too great reliance on institutional accreditation arrangements which, whatever their qualities in some respects, look mainly to peer-group assessments which may not reflect the interests and concerns of external stakeholders. Current arrangements also miss an opportunity to provide a clear quality standard for CTE programs, linked to their effective integration with labor market needs. The blend of this system with increasing tuition fees, constrained public budgets and broader economic distress creates a dangerous mix with financial risks both for individuals and lending bodies, including the federal government. Unless these challenges are addressed robustly they could undermine the broader goal of improving the skills of the US labor force.

Anchoring credentials in the needs of industry

Occupational credentials are subject to less central organization in the United States than in almost any other OECD country. This allows local college provision and industry certifications to be very flexible and highly responsive to changes in labor market demand. But it also means that some of the benefits of more structure and organization in credentials – greater clarity for both students and employers about the skills and credentials required for particular types of job - cannot readily be obtained. The OECD review proposes a national hallmark standard for certifications. This standard should be linked i) to evidence that the certification is supported by a sufficient number of employers in the relevant industry sector and would be used by them for recruitment purposes; and ii) that the examination is a robust test of the relevant professional competences. Seeking the hallmark would be voluntary. If adopted in certain sectors it would provide strong incentives for post-secondary CTE programs in the same sector to align themselves with those certifications, substantially increasing the clarity of entry routes to the associated careers. Two key elements in the US system – certificates delivered by post-secondary institutions, and the (often linked) certifications delivered by industry and professional associations – are inadequately monitored at present, with very few systematic sources of data. Better data sources are now being developed, and these efforts need to be sustained.

Building transitions that work

Transitions in and out of post-secondary programs are both very common and very important. Individuals need to be able to advance from high school into colleges and careers, and between these different domains. One key challenge is ensuring that learning acquired in one setting can be recognized and made portable, smoothing entry into different contexts of learning and careers. In these domains state governments very often play the leading role, by steering high school programs and managing state college systems. Stronger attainment in basic skills in early schooling would be extremely important in improving post-secondary success rates, but this raises many issues beyond the scope of this review. Research evidence suggests that strengthened CTE in high school, alongside substantive and good quality workplace training, would help the transition into post-secondary education (as well as into the labor market). Prior learning assessment – particularly when it involves the recognition of skills acquired through work and other experience - can help to encourage adults to return to post-secondary education. But to realize its full potential, more systematic action is necessary, recognising that there are many institutional barriers to its effective use.

Making it happen: Implementation

The federal government has a major role in implementing the proposed reforms, partly through structural legislation such as the Higher Education Act, and partly through small but strategically important programs such as the Carl D Perkins legislation. But action is also needed by the states, and by other organizations and stakeholder groups.

For Further information:

Simon Field, Senior Analyst, Directorate for Education, Simon.Field@oecd.org.

References and further reading:

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