



WHAT FUTURE FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN EUROPE?

Cedefop looks beyond today's planning horizon



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'Tomorrow belongs to those who can hear it coming', said David Bowie forty years ago. Jobs, labour markets and economies are rapidly changing: globalisation, technology and a growing services sector are both causes and symptoms. Ageing populations and dwindling youth cohorts, on the one hand, and labour migration, on the other, are affecting workforce composition. And that's not to mention the lingering impact of the financial crisis. All these are leaving their mark on European economies and societies. Against this backdrop, what is the role of vocational education and training (VET) in Europe in addressing the challenges ahead?

To help in shaping future policies, a Cedefop project considers different routes and multiple options for VET. An analysis of VET developments since 1995 has helped to outline a series of potential paths – scenarios – pointing towards plausible and consistent pictures of how VET can evolve by 2035, depending on today's decisions and policy choices. Using these scenarios, Cedefop intends to inform strategic discussions on future European cooperation on VET.

Future vision?

We can discern two competing European VET narratives:

- a pessimistic one, where VET is seen as a second choice, leaving less attractive, lower-qualified and

manual work for VET, while more advanced skills remain the domain of higher education. This narrative predicts that automation and digitalisation will lead to labour market polarisation, reducing the relative importance of medium-level skills traditionally provided by VET;

- an optimistic one, where VET is seen as expanding to higher levels and, increasingly, to adults, providing more diverse learning forms and locations and becoming more relevant to learners of all ages. In this narrative VET becomes increasingly important in responding to the needs of a service-oriented labour market, to some extent offsetting the effects of automation and polarisation.

Cedefop's analysis of trends in 1995-2015 shows how these competing narratives interact and counterbalance each other in different European countries ⁽¹⁾. A survey to enrich the research findings aimed to explore stakeholder views on past trends and VET in the future.

Trends anticipated by survey participants include increased work-based learning in all VET programmes, irrespective of level and national

⁽¹⁾ These trends are analysed in detail in the various publications of the project on the Changing nature and role of VET, see Box 1.

system. This includes further development of apprenticeships as well as a stronger focus on practice in school-based VET and higher education. Respondents also envisage VET provision increasing at tertiary level, within and outside the traditional higher education sector.

Believing that the fast pace of technological change will continue, respondents expect VET will (have to) become even more responsive to labour market needs. This entails (more) effective skills anticipation and stronger feedback mechanisms between industry and VET.

Increasingly flexible education and training pathways will reduce barriers to transitions, allowing learners to progress within education and training and to move more easily between learning and work. This links to a continued shift towards learning outcomes and more emphasis on transversal skills, broadening course content. Boundaries between initial and continuous VET will be progressively removed, aiding adult upskilling and retraining in a context where VET will be part of lifelong learning.

Survey respondents generally agree that VET's role in the future will be to prepare learners for specific occupations and working life. However, empowering learners to participate fully in society and become active citizens is even higher on the wish list than preparing for a specific occupation. Many also highlighted the need for VET to foster personal growth and fulfilment.

This emphasis on a need for a broader skills base may suggest a belief in personal development and active citizenship as an indispensable feature of any kind of future learning. This could mean that VET in Europe will be assuming increasing social value and becoming a more mainstream education pathway with broader purposes.

VET in 2035: three scenarios

The findings of the stakeholder survey helped fine-tune the research and shape the scenarios. These acknowledge that VET systems are 'path dependent': their future development will, to varying degrees, reflect the past. They are not meant to 'predict the future' but seek to illustrate how policy choices can influence VET structure, content and outcomes in different ways. A main role of the scenarios is to alert policy-makers to possible main trends and support reflection on the role they want VET to play.

While it is not likely that the scenarios will materialise in their 'pure' or 'ideal' form, aspects of one scenario

might dominate, influencing the way VET is provided and understood. They have been based on a model emphasising two important dimensions and tensions: pluralistic versus distinct development; and academic versus vocational drift.

In pluralistic development, VET systems are becoming more diversified with fuzzier lines between them and general education. Conversely, where VET is seen as a distinct education and training strand, a return to its 'traditional roots' is encouraged.

Academic drift means programmes and institutions are less work- and practice-oriented and general subjects are prioritised. Vocational drift, however, means stronger practice- and work-based orientation, occasionally leading to new vocational programmes and institutions.

These dimensions stand out as significant both in the mapping of the 1995-2015 developments and in the stakeholder survey responses. Combining them offers three main development scenarios that imply highly different policy choices in the years to come.

Scenario 1: Lifelong learning at the heart – Pluralist VET

This scenario broadens our understanding and conception of what is meant by VET. The emphasis is on vocationally and labour-market-oriented learning at all levels and in all institutional settings. Vocationally oriented learning will not be restricted to the institutions explicitly defined as VET providers today, but form part of an integrated lifelong learning approach.

- (a) Pluralist VET implies redefinition of its overall position in the education and training system. The focus on VET as a separate and distinct subsystem will become less relevant as there is a greater need for connecting and combining different forms of learning. The currently observed blurring boundaries between VET and general education at upper secondary level point in this direction, underlining the need to combine vocational skills and general subjects. The focus will be on overall skills and competence developments, not on VET as a separate sector.
- (b) This approach also requires a new orientation or focal point where VET is anchored in broader qualification profiles with a weaker link to specific occupations and jobs. It reflects the rapidly changing nature of occupation-specific skills and competences and the need for continuous updating and relearning. It also manifests the increasing importance of transversal skills and competence as a basis for coping with change.

- (c) The VET target group will be significantly broadened, notably by addressing the needs of learners of all ages systematically and through a strengthened relationship between initial and continuing VET.
- (d) Individually tailored learning solutions, project- and problem-focused learning will become indispensable. A key objective will be to explore and combine the widest possible range of relevant learning forms and pedagogies.
- (e) Progression and pathways of vocationally oriented learning throughout life and portability of vocational learning will be a key feature of pluralist VET. This requires transparent delivery at all levels and reducing barriers to transitions and progression.
- (f) The envisaged shift to more comprehensive skills and competence strategies and policies will influence the governance of vocationally oriented learning. Broader skills sets and a weaker link to specific occupation and job profiles may require involving a wider group of stakeholders, adding to and complementing the role traditionally played by social partners.
- (g) While EU-level policy will not interfere in the content and structure of VET, its role in relation to transparency, transferability and portability of skills and qualifications will increase.
- (h) Flexible pathways and the possibility to transfer broader skills sets across different types of education and training require even stronger coordination and governance mechanisms than today. If these mechanisms are a weak link, the pluralist scenario runs the risks of fragmentation and increasing inequalities.

Scenario 2: Occupational and professional competence at heart – Distinctive VET

The distinctive scenario seeks to strengthen the existing and dominant conception of VET as focused on entry into occupations and professions. It features the following characteristics:

- (a) VET's position as a separate education and training subsystem with clearly defined providers and institutions is reaffirmed and strengthened. The visibility of the VET sector is seen as critical to ensuring parity of esteem with general education. As opposed to other education and training subsystems, learning at workplaces is regarded as a key defining element of VET.
- (b) VET will be organised around the requirements and identities of clearly defined occupations and/or professions. This ensures a close link to

the labour market and emphasises a need for balanced commitment of education and training systems, as well as employers and trade unions.

- (c) Young people in initial education and training will be seen as the future core target group. Expansion of VET to higher levels is in line with this perspective. A key task of VET will be to help make young people mature professionally; enable specialisation but at the same time open up to renewal and innovation.
- (d) Work- and practice-based learning will be given priority. A key concern will be to modernise apprenticeships and practice-based learning to ensure their relevance to new occupational realities and education and training providers at higher levels. Promoting active learning through apprenticeships will gain increasing importance.
- (e) A main aim will be to establish work-based learning as a 'gold standard' across occupational areas and at all levels, including EQF 8. This is seen as ensuring a basis for future progression in people's learning and professional careers.
- (f) Social partners' role in governing VET will be reaffirmed, reflecting VET's link to occupations.
- (g) EU-level policy may support the distinct model by promoting cross-border cooperation and agreements on occupations and sectors, for example setting common standards.
- (h) The distinctive scenario runs the risk that rapidly changing technologies and labour markets raise questions on the role of medium-level skills and the long term-stability of occupations.

Scenario 3: Job-oriented training at the heart – Special purpose and/or marginalised VET

This scenario narrows down the understanding and conception of VET. Its focus is on training for jobs, reskilling and upskilling for short- and medium-term labour market needs.

- (a) VET's position in the overall education and training system will be increasingly linked to continuing and further training in the labour market. Employability in its narrow sense is of key concern, as is the ability to respond to groups at risk. Employability in the broader sense, empowering people to develop in a lifelong learning perspective, is taken over by general education at all levels. This reduced VET role reflects the effect of declining youth cohorts, limiting the ability of traditional VET to 'compete' with other education and training sectors.
- (b) This approach implies reorientation of VET to the skills needs of rapidly changing jobs and labour

market functions. VET focuses on short- and medium-term skills needs; less on basic and transversal skills and competences. These latter are the responsibility of general and academic education and training.

- (c) VET's target group is reduced, mainly to adults in need of immediate re- or upskilling or at risk of unemployment and social exclusion.
- (d) Shorter training courses, increasingly offered through open educational resources, are likely to become the predominant learning forms. While this is not exclusive to this scenario, the flexibility offered by these forms of learning, including at higher levels, is particularly relevant in this approach. Some individual tailoring is possible, as is limited on-the-job training. Attention to basic and transversal skills and competences is reduced, influenced by the focus on short- and medium-term skills needs.
- (e) In terms of pathways and progression opportunities, this scenario emphasises a need for more transparent training offers. These will make it easier for adult learners to access courses and programmes directly relevant to their needs.
- (f) This approach implies radically different VET governance, where individual companies and sectors play a key role. The role of the education and training system will be reduced.
- (g) EU-level policy will need to ensure transparency and portability. However, this will form part of labour market policies rather than broader lifelong learning policies.
- (h) This scenario runs the risk of underestimating the importance of basic and transversal skills and competence in meeting the needs of the labour market and society.

What lies ahead?

These three basic scenarios point to critical dimensions when discussing the future role of VET in Europe. However, the different scenarios are likely to coexist, influencing and perhaps dominating VET systems and institutions in different ways.

What they demonstrate is a need for strategic reflections and dialogue to decide on:

- VET's future purpose and role;
- the position VET is meant to have in relation to other policy areas and society at large.

Building on discussions of the scenarios and the overall findings of the project, Cedefop will continue its work to explore how VET may develop in the future. To take the work forward, Cedefop will also draw on

the research and analyses of its different strands of work, notably skills anticipation and mismatch, perception of VET, VET systems and developments in common priorities, qualifications, learning modes and support to different target groups. Research findings and outcomes of policy learning activities will support EU-level discussions on VET post-2020.

Box 1: LEARNING FROM THE PAST IN HEADING TO THE FUTURE

Learning from past changes to help shape future policy has been the philosophy of Cedefop's 2015-18 research into *The changing nature and role of VET in Europe* (*).

To shed more light on the characteristics, differences and developments in VET systems in the past two decades, the project has examined:

- changing definitions and concepts of VET;
- its external drivers;
- the role of traditional VET at upper secondary level;
- VET from a lifelong learning perspective;
- VET's role at higher education levels.

Consultation among VET experts at the outset of the project, workshops and a VET stakeholder survey in 2018 complemented the research. The views of around 1 500 survey respondents on past trends and VET in 2035 helped to fine-tune the research findings.

As a result, Cedefop designed a 'three perspectives' approach and a 'trajectories of change in VET' model leading to scenarios of alternative development paths for VET in the 21st century outlined in this briefing note.

The published thematic reports and an earlier briefing note can be found at:

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/changing-nature-and-role-vocational-education-and-training-vet-europe>

More reports and a synthesis will follow as they become available.

(*) The 28 EU Member States, Iceland and Norway.