

Executive summary

As tertiary education has expanded over the past decades, it has also diversified, including programmes with very different designs and functions, ranging from two-year programmes in tertiary institutions to free-standing professional examinations designed to upskill existing practitioners. Tertiary institutions have also diversified, for example in the very different missions of traditional universities and universities of applied science. In some European countries the scale of enrolment in the professional sector of tertiary education now rivals that in regular universities. But not all countries have established a separate professional tertiary sector, in some countries, including the United States, similar applied, practically-oriented programmes like business studies or culinary arts are taught within multi-purpose institutions alongside programmes focused on single academic disciplines, like physics or history.

Against this background, there is debate about the type of education and training that can help achieve the desired mix of skills in an economy and society. Learners not only need the skills and qualifications to find a first job, but also the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances for a lifelong career and participation in society. For tertiary programmes, the question arises about the proportion of programmes that should take their point of departure as a target occupation as opposed to an academic field. While there is no simple answer, the first step is to monitor what countries are doing in this area and improve the quality of comparative data to allow for benchmarking and research. This project was therefore launched to help improve comparative data on professional tertiary education and to inform policy making. This report compares professional tertiary education across OECD countries, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data, and sets out proposals for the development of internationally agreed definitions.

Professional programmes come in many shapes and forms

Professional programmes, also called “higher VET” in some countries, exist in diverse forms, such as short-cycle tertiary programmes (mostly two-year programmes), professional examinations designed to upskill experienced practitioners, and professional bachelor programmes. They often differ strongly in terms of their function, the learners they serve and design:

- Professional programmes play a key role in upskilling VET graduates. They are sometimes the only type of tertiary education directly accessible from upper secondary VET, and in some cases they provide a bridge into “academic” higher education, thus facilitating permeability.
- Past or current work experience is common among tertiary students, especially among those with a vocational upper secondary background, who are also more likely to have held high-skilled jobs than those with a general education background.
- Younger adults dominate in programmes providing initial preparation for labour market entry, both short-cycle tertiary programmes and professional bachelor’s programmes in various European countries. Other programmes, such as professional examinations, are especially designed for the upskilling of adults.

- Work-based learning is commonly an element in professional tertiary programmes especially at ISCED level 5, but is not always mandatory. Professional bachelor programmes often include mandatory internships and ‘dual’ tertiary programmes have also been growing. Relevant past or current work experience is often recognised as a form of work-based learning. Adults who benefited from work-based learning during their tertiary studies tend to have higher employment rates than those who did not, with longer (6 months and above) paid work placements leading to the best outcomes in terms of employment.

Internationally-agreed definitions will facilitate benchmarking and research

Huge gaps remain in comparative data because there are no internationally agreed definitions for programme orientation at tertiary level. For ISCED level 5, data are collected based on the agreed definition of “vocational”. But for ISCED level 6 and above, countries that provide data do so based on their own national definitions. Therefore, programmes preparing for the same professions (e.g. teachers, nurses) are classified differently by countries. Some countries choose not to provide data in the absence of agreed definitions.

Two major grey zones arise in the classification of programmes. Some programmes are both “academic” (in the sense of highly demanding intellectually) and “professional” (in that they prepare for a particular profession) – examples include teachers and medical doctors. In addition, programmes that prepare for a broader economic or occupational sector (e.g. business studies, food technology) are also classified differently by different countries.

To help improve data availability and quality, building on ISCED 2011 and previous international discussion, this report makes proposals for the development of internationally agreed definitions covering the orientation of tertiary programmes. These are based on consultation with countries to provide an understanding of how programmes with different orientations are provided across countries, and the practical constraints they face for data collections.

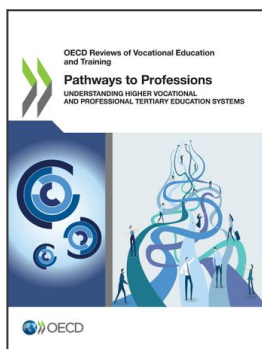
The proposal is to establish a three-way classification:

- Type 1: Programmes that provide applied education and training designed to equip students with knowledge and skills required to practice a particular profession.
- Type 2: Programmes that provide applied education and training designed to equip students with the knowledge and skills required to work within an occupational family or industrial sector.
- Type 3: Programmes that provide discipline-oriented education in the pure sciences, humanities and arts. While such programmes should also provide knowledge and skills of labour market relevance, these are applicable in very diverse contexts and are not intended to prepare students for a particular profession, occupational family or industrial sector.

The terminology used for each category is to be agreed in consultation with countries to take into account the different nuances and resonances of particular terms in different languages. One option might be to refer to the categories below as “profession-oriented”, “sector-oriented” and “general”.

Additional indicators could complete this classification, to capture variation in the delivery of programmes and their quality. Examples of such indicators are the share of practical training (in real or simulated work environments), the share of work-based learning (in real workplaces) or the engagement of employers.

In addition, agreeing on the classification of detailed fields of study set out in the ISCED-F framework could help to ensure clarity regarding some numerically large programmes (e.g. teaching, nursing) and facilitate reporting in countries that lack the institutional or programmatic distinctions that could underpin classification.



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