

5 Key findings and proposals for the classification of tertiary programmes by orientation

This chapter presents key findings from comparative data on professional tertiary education and advances proposals for the development of internationally agreed definitions for programme orientation at tertiary levels. Countries report a wide range of programmes as professional, including one- or two-year programmes, professional bachelor's degrees and professional examinations, which upskill existing professionals. Comparative data provide some insights into the functions of professional programmes, the profile of learners, pathways leading into programmes and associated outcomes. However, huge gaps remain in data because of the lack of internationally agreed definitions for programme orientation at tertiary levels. This report proposes a three-way classification of programmes, to distinguish between profession-oriented (e.g. training for nurses and interior designers), sector-oriented (e.g. food technology, business studies) and general (e.g. history, physics) programmes.

This report surveyed the field of professional tertiary education. This field emerged as the result of the diversification of tertiary education systems in particular throughout the 20th century. As tertiary programmes became increasingly connected to employment opportunities, many countries introduced shorter programmes, which in one or two years prepared individuals for working in particular occupations. Across countries these include associate degrees in Belgium and the Netherlands, higher vocational education and training (VET) programmes in Austria, Norway, Slovenia and Sweden.

At bachelor's level, the landscape includes professional bachelor's degrees, which are often taught in a separate tier of institutions, such as universities of applied sciences or university colleges. These institutions focus on applied, practically-oriented teaching and conducting less research than regular universities. But in countries with unified tertiary education systems, like the United States, the kinds of applied programmes taught at these institutions are more often delivered in regular universities, which provide a wide range of programmes, from occupationally-focused bachelor's programmes to PhD qualifications.

In addition, professional examinations represent a distinct family of qualifications. Unlike the programmes described above, they have few or no required coursework requirements, although participants usually pursue preparatory courses and several years of relevant work experience is an entry requirement. Such examinations (e.g. master craftsman qualifications in Germany, federal examinations in Switzerland) are a key path to advanced technical and managerial skills for graduates of upper secondary VET, not just in "traditional" vocational fields but also in emerging fields like finance.

This diverse landscape, the students it serves and the outcomes it leads to remains poorly measured by comparative data. The introduction of the ISCED 2011 framework created an opportunity to collect better data on professional tertiary education, by allowing for different programme orientations at all levels. This report has explored data provided by countries on professional programmes: it included all short-cycle tertiary programmes (as this level is predominantly professional) and ISCED level 6 programmes that countries have chosen to classify as professional.

Key conclusions from the data analysis include:

- Professional programmes play a key role in upskilling VET graduates. They are sometimes the only type of tertiary education directly accessible from VET, and in some cases they provide a bridge into the academic sector of higher education, thus facilitating permeability.
- Having 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. Older adults dominate in programmes offering other functions, including upskilling for existing professionals (e.g. professional examinations) and reskilling for adults.
- Work-based learning is commonly an element in professional tertiary programmes especially at ISCED level 5, but is not always mandatory. At ISCED level 6 professional bachelor's programmes often include mandatory internships and dual tertiary programmes have also been growing (though countries do not always classify these as "professional"). Relevant past or current work experience is often acknowledged as a form of work-based learning. In many countries, however, work-based learning is only used in some fields or is optional. 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.

However, huge gaps remain because there are no internationally agreed definitions for programme orientation at tertiary level. With currently available data, it is not even possible to establish in a reliable, comparative manner what share of students at bachelor's level pursue programmes with different types of orientation. Programmes preparing for the same professions like teachers, nurses or accountants are classified differently by countries. As a result, for ISCED level 5, data are collected based on the agreed definition of “vocational”. But for ISCED level 6 and above, the few countries that provide data do so based on their own national definitions of “professional” and “academic”, and some countries prefer not to provide data that could be ambiguous in the absence of agreed definitions.

To address this issue, this report has made proposals for the development of internationally agreed definitions. These proposals are based on consultation with countries¹ 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 advanced here is to establish a classification based on the professional dimension of programmes for two reasons. First, the academic-professional dichotomy is problematic, because some programmes are both academic (in the sense of highly demanding intellectually) and professional (in that they prepare for a particular profession). Second, operationalising the intellectual complexity of different programmes within each ISCED level would be extraordinarily hard and of questionable value.

The proposal here is to establish a three-way classification. 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”:

- 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 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.

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.

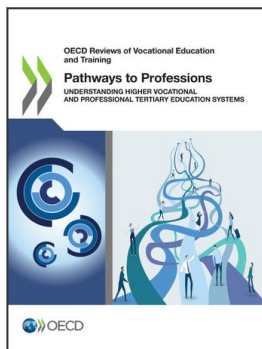
In practice, classification might be more or less straightforward depending on the design features of programmes and institutional context in different countries. The proposed approach is a pragmatic way to improve the quality and availability of data on professional tertiary education. Various data collections (e.g. UOE, LSO) are already in place and invite countries to provide a breakdown by programme orientation at different tertiary levels. The implementation of these proposals would yield large returns, unlocking the potential of ongoing data collections regarding professional tertiary education.

As tertiary education expands and diversifies, an important question for policy makers is what type of tertiary education can help deliver the desired mix of skills for our economies and societies, balancing the need to ensure smooth entry into employment and prepare for a career shaped by rapid changes in skills needs. While there is spectrum of programmes with different relative degrees of professional orientation,

and all programmes aim to lead into employment, there is a major difference between programmes that take their point of departure in an academic discipline (like physics) and those (like teacher education) that are designed around a target occupation (or a small set of target occupations). Better comparative data would help countries measure changes over time in the use of different types of tertiary education, benchmark themselves against other countries, and explore links between different types of tertiary education and various outcomes, such as access to tertiary education or labour market and social outcomes.

Note

¹ Relevant teams within the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills were also consulted, in addition to country consultation through the Ad-hoc Working Group on Professional Tertiary Education.



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