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## Transitions Beyond Initial Education



*The OECD has examined arrangements and policies surrounding the transitions beyond compulsory schooling. Extended education to at least completion of the upper secondary cycle is increasingly the norm right now across the OECD countries. Alongside shared patterns are marked differences on such matters as the relative proportions who engage in general or vocational study, as well as the possibilities to combine education with employment. Vocational education and training – which have tended to be neglected in countries compared with general school and university programmes, and which often do not well meet labour market needs – have been the focus of recent OECD review, with the publication Learning for Jobs. OECD policy orientations have stressed the need to improve the existence, diversity, relevance and transparency of different pathways, and the need to integrate them into a lifelong learning perspective, while protecting those left most vulnerable as others advance to further education and employment. The OECD recently released its Skills Strategy, an integrated, cross-government strategic framework that aims to help countries to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their existing national skills pool and skills systems, benchmark them internationally, and develop policies for improvement.*

The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.



## INTRODUCTION

OECD analyses have shed extensive light on the issues, arrangements and policies surrounding the transitions beyond compulsory schooling. Extended education with at least completion of the upper secondary cycle is increasingly the norm right across the OECD countries. Alongside shared patterns are marked differences on such matters as the relative proportions who engage in general or vocational study, as well as the possibilities to combine education with employment. OECD studies on guidance, information systems and qualifications have shown that there is much scope for improving transitions. Policy orientations have stressed the need to improve the existence, diversity, relevance and transparency of different pathways, while protecting those left most vulnerable as others advance to further education and employment; messages that have gained even more relevance since the onset of the economic crisis.

An earlier relative neglect of vocational education and training (VET) at the OECD has been addressed with reviews of VET policies and of systemic innovation in the VET field. Work at the secondary level and apprenticeships, encapsulated in the major report *Learning for Jobs*, has been extended towards the role of post-secondary and tertiary vocational education in paving pathways to jobs.

The OECD recently released its *Skills Strategy* – an integrated, cross-government strategic framework to help countries understand better how to invest in skills in ways to transform lives and drive economies. It aims to help countries to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their existing national skills pool and skills systems, benchmark them internationally, and develop policies for improvement. In the future, the OECD will support countries with the development and review of their skills strategies.

## KEY FINDINGS


**Secondary education has become the dominant experience for 17-year-olds in OECD countries:** At age 17, almost 9 out of 10 young people in OECD countries are in secondary education (87%). In some it is the quasi-totality of the age group at 95% or more (Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and Sweden). Seventeen-year-olds in secondary education are only the minority in Mexico (49%). Not all countries have figures for 17-year-olds already in post-secondary non-tertiary education, but among those that do, Austria stands out as having a sizeable minority of this teenage group (12%) transferred to such programmes. And in some countries, a small number have already launched into tertiary education even at this young age (e.g. in Australia [5%], Canada [3%], Germany [3%], Ireland [5%], Mexico [3%], the Netherlands [7%], New Zealand [3%]).

 [\*Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C1\*](#)

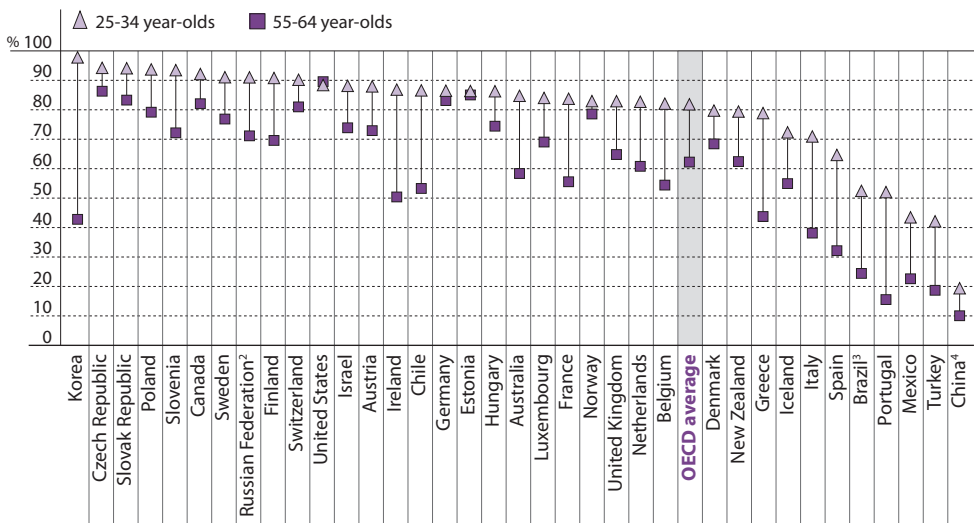
**Nearly three-quarters of 18-year-olds are still in education across OECD countries (73%), with already over a fifth in post-secondary education:** In certain countries, the large majority of the age group continues in secondary education at 18 years of age: 80-90% in



the Czech Republic, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia, and over 90% in Finland (93%), Poland (91%) and Sweden (94%). In others, significant numbers have already embarked on tertiary programmes – a third or more of 18-year-olds in Belgium (36%), Greece (43%), Ireland (36%), the United States (43%), rising to close to two-thirds in Korea (65%). Over one-in-five 18-year-olds in Austria (21%) and Ireland (23%) are in non-tertiary post-secondary programmes, compared with the OECD average of 3%.

 *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C1*

**Figure 3.1.**  
**Population that has attained upper secondary education<sup>1</sup> (2010)**  
Percentage, by age group



1. Excluding ISCED 3C short programmes.

2. Year of reference 2002.

3. Year of reference 2009.

4. Year of reference 2000.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the percentage of 25-34 year-olds who have attained at least an upper secondary education.

Source: OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing. Table A1.2a. See Annex 3 for notes ([www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012)).

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**Enrolment rates among 15-19 year-olds in OECD countries increased by more than 10 percentage points in the past 15 years:** In OECD countries, enrolment rates among 15-19 year-olds increased on average by 10.4 percentage points between 1995 and 2010. The increase was more than 20 percentage points during this period in the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary and Turkey (despite Turkey having the largest increase in cohort size among OECD countries), and by around 15 points or more in Ireland, Mexico, Poland and Portugal.



They remained virtually unchanged in Belgium, Canada (until 2009), Germany, Israel and the Netherlands, where (except Israel), more than 85% of 15-19 year-olds were already enrolled in education, while in France, the enrolment rate among this age group decreased from 89% to 84% during this period.

 [Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C1](#)

**Completion of upper secondary education has become the norm over the past 15 years:** In 1997, on average across OECD countries, the proportion of 25-64 year olds who had attained an upper secondary education amounted to only just about two-thirds (64%). By 2010, the proportion had increased by 10 percentage points (to 74%). Now only a handful of countries – Greece, Iceland, Italy, Mexico, Portugal, Spain and Turkey – have upper secondary attainment rates below 70% for 25-64 year-olds. Some of these countries have seen dramatic increases in upper secondary attainment rates from generation to generation. For example, Chile, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Portugal and Spain have all seen an increase of 30% or more from the older (55-64 year-old) to the younger (25-34 year-old) age cohorts on this measure. By contrast, it has increased only marginally, or even fallen, in countries with traditionally high levels of upper secondary attainment in previous generations. For instance, in Estonia, Germany and Norway the upper secondary attainment rate rose by less than 5 percentage points between the 55-64 year-old and 25-34 year-old age cohorts; in the United States it decreased slightly.

 [Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator A1](#)

**In a reversal of the long-term historical pattern, young women are now more likely than young men to graduate from upper secondary programmes in almost all OECD countries:** In all countries with available data, boys are less likely to finish upper secondary school with a diploma. On average, 74% of girls complete their upper secondary education within the stipulated time, compared with 66% of boys, a reversal from the historical trend. In Iceland and Norway, girls outnumber the boys who successfully complete upper secondary education by more than 15 percentage points. Only in Finland, Japan, Korea, the Slovak Republic and Sweden is the difference less than five percentage points, though with girls still ahead.

 [Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator A2](#)

**More than eight out of ten of today's young people will complete upper secondary education over their lifetimes:** Based on current patterns of graduation, 84% of today's young people will complete upper secondary education over their lifetimes; in G20 countries, some 78% of young people will. In some countries, it is not uncommon for students to graduate from upper secondary programmes after the age of 25: around 10% of upper secondary graduates in Denmark, Finland and Norway are 25 years or older, rising to 20% in Iceland, and to more than 40% in Portugal.

 [Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator A2](#)



**For young adults across OECD countries, 7 years can now be expected to be spent in education between the ages of 15 and 29:** Synthesising current enrolment patterns for young people in their latter teens and twenties, not far off half (7.0 years) of the 15 years between mid-teenage years and the end of their twenties will now be spent in education. Eight years or more of this age span is spent in education in Denmark, Finland, Iceland (women), Luxembourg (women), the Netherlands, Slovenia and Sweden (women). The “educational expectancy” of this transition age group tends to be longer among young women than young men though there are exceptions to this (Germany, Japan, Korea, Mexico, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Turkey). In Iceland, Italy, Norway, Slovenia and Sweden, a young woman can expect on average to spend a year longer or more in education than a young man.

 *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C5*

**Certain countries do not mix education with employment together for young adults:** How the average 7 years in education between the age of 15 and 29 will be experienced – in particular, whether it will include being in employment status while also in education – varies sharply from country to country. There are some cases where these years will be primarily devoted to education without mixing this with employment status. For instance, less than 12 months on average for men and women combined from age 15 to 29 are counted as being in both education and employment in the following countries: Belgium (0.6 in the total 7.0 years in education between these ages), France (0.9 in 6.6), Greece (0.4 in 6.6), Hungary (0.3 in 7.2), Italy (0.4 in 6.8), Japan (0.8 in 6.2, up to the age of 24 years), Korea (0.8 in 6.8), Luxembourg (0.7 in 8.2), Portugal (0.6 in 6.5), the Slovak Republic (0.9 in 6.9), Spain (0.7 in 6.0) and Turkey (0.8 in 4.7).

 *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C5*

**In other countries, being in “education” means being in employment as well for many young people:** There are other countries with a “mixed model” where an important part of the years in education are simultaneously in employment, including on work study programmes. In some countries indeed, more than half of this time in education will have the double status combining it with employment (Australia, Denmark, Iceland, the Netherlands and Switzerland).

 *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C5*

**A relatively even balance between students enrolled in upper secondary general and vocational programmes across OECD countries as a whole hides very large differences across countries:** Just over half of upper secondary level students (54%) are in “general” and the others are in pre-vocational and vocational tracks. Over 65% are in “general” tracks in Canada, Chile, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Japan, Korea, Mexico, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, and in the partner countries Argentina and Brazil. On the other hand, over 65% are in the vocational tracks in Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, the Netherlands, the Slovak Republic and Switzerland.

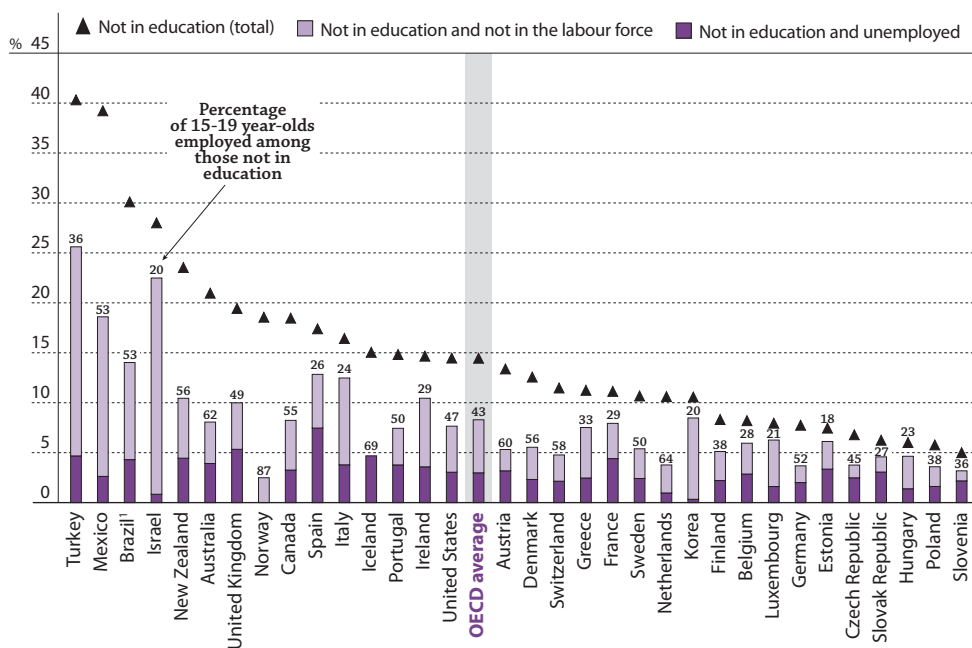
 *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C1*



In general, vocational education and training (VET) has been neglected: VET can play a central role in preparing young people for work, developing the skills of adults and responding to the labour-market needs of the economy. Despite this, VET has tended to be marginalised in policy discussions, often overshadowed by the increasing emphasis on general academic education and the role of schools in preparing students for university education. It is also often regarded as of low status by students and the general public. There are very limited data on VET available, especially data that can reliably be compared across countries.

Learning for Jobs, 2010, Summary and Policy Messages and Chapter 1

Figure 3.2.  
Percentage of 15-19 year-olds not in education and unemployed or not in the labour force (2010)



1. Year of reference 2009.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the percentage of 15-19 year-olds not in education.


Source: OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing. Table C5.2a. See Annex 3 for notes ([www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012)).

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**While strong vocational programmes increase competitiveness, many programmes fail to meet labour market needs:** Many of the unskilled jobs which existed in OECD countries a generation ago are fast disappearing and OECD countries need to compete on the quality of goods and services they provide. This calls for a labour force well-equipped with middle-level




trade, technical and professional skills usually delivered through vocational programmes alongside the high skills associated with university education. But VET systems face major challenges and vocational programmes for young people, often rooted in education institutions, tend to develop their own dynamic and can become too easily separated from the fast-changing world of modern economies.

 [Learning for Jobs, 2010, Summary and Policy Messages and Chapter 2](#)

**Across OECD countries about one in six young adults is neither employed, nor in education and training:** After several years of decline, the proportion of 15-29 year-olds that are neither employed, nor in education or training - the “NEET” population – has increased rapidly since the outset of the economic crisis, resulting in a proportion of 16% across OECD countries in 2010. This proportion varies widely across countries, however. At one side of the spectrum are Ireland, Israel, Italy, Mexico, Spain and Turkey where more than 20% of young adults are not in education or employed, while in Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia and Switzerland this is less than 10%. This increase reflects the hardship facing young people as a result of the global recession.

 [Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Editorial and Indicator C5](#)

**In rapidly-changing economies, career guidance has become more critical but it suffers serious weaknesses in many OECD countries:** Young people face a sequence of complex choices over a lifetime of learning and work; helping them to make these decisions is the task of career guidance. But in many countries, career guidance suffers from serious weaknesses. Too often those offering guidance are inadequately acquainted with labour market issues; guidance services can be fragmented, underresourced and reactive, so that those who most need guidance risk failing to obtain it; many guidance personnel are based in education institutions and may give partial, pro-academic advice; relevant labour market information is too often not available or not readily comprehensible; and the evidence base on “what works” in career guidance is generally weak.

 [Learning for Jobs, 2010, Summary and Policy Messages and Chapter 3](#)

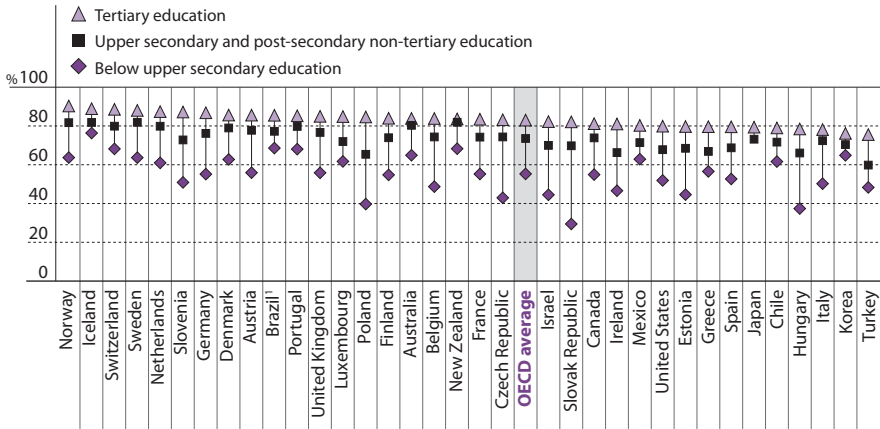
### Box 3.1. Education and economic crisis

The economic crisis has affected labour markets in a number of ways. Part-time work has increased, average actual hours worked by the full-time employed have decreased and the number of employees with temporary contracts has decreased in European countries. While the overall unemployment rate among the OECD countries increased by 2.4 percentage points between 2008 and 2010 (from 6.1% to 8.5%), the extent of the increase varies with age and level of education.

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### Percentage of 25-64 year-olds in employment, by educational attainment level (2010)



**How to read this chart:** The chart shows a positive relationship between education and employment. The likelihood of being in employment increases with higher levels of education. Individuals with tertiary education have the highest employment rate, compared to those with upper secondary education and below upper secondary education. However, the magnitude of this employment advantage varies across countries.

1. Year of reference 2009.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the employment rate of tertiary-educated individuals.

Source: OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Table A7.3a. See Annex 3 for notes ([www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012)).

StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932662029>


The youth population has been most affected. The unemployment rates for 15-24 year-olds increased by 4 percentage points, from 12.7% to 16.7% between 2008 and 2010. The labour market has become more selective and the lack of relevant skills and experience brings a higher risk of unemployment for recent entrants. The extent of the risk decreases as level of education increases.

Having more education has helped people avoid unemployment and stay employed during the economic crisis. Unemployment rates among 25-64 year-olds without an upper secondary education rose by 3.8 percentage points between 2008 and 2010, whereas for those with an upper secondary education, the unemployment rate increased by 2.7 percentage points and among tertiary-educated graduates, the rate rose by 1.4 percentage points over this time. The increase in the unemployment rate was particularly evident among men without an upper secondary education compared to women with the same level of education (4.3 percentage points increase compared with 2.3 percentage points).





**In most countries, there is a drop at upper secondary level in the students with special needs and receiving additional resources, compared with the primary and lower secondary levels:** For students with disabilities, a median of 1.6% receive additional funding at this level as against 3.3% for lower secondary. (The only exception to the drop between levels among the countries with data is England.) Similarly, the proportion getting additional financial resources specifically for learning difficulties is lower at the upper than the lower secondary level, again with the exception of England. For those recognised as having disadvantages and being thereby entitled to additional resources, there is again a drop between the two levels in most countries, with only the Slovak Republic showing a marginal increase from lower to upper secondary.

 *Students with Disabilities, Learning Difficulties and Disadvantages: Policies, Statistics and Indicators, 2008, Chapter 4*

**There is an important gap between the developed cognitive capacity in mid-teenagers (“high horsepower”) and their emotional maturity (“poor steering”):** The insights provided by neuroscience on adolescence are especially important as this is the period when so much takes place in an individual’s educational career. The secondary phase of education brings key decisions to be made with long-lasting consequences regarding personal, educational and career options. At this time, young people are already well-developed in terms of cognitive capacity (“high horsepower”) but they are immature (“poor steering”), not just because of inexperience, but because of under-developed neurological emotional development.

 *Understanding the Brain: The Birth of a Learning Science, 2007, Conclusions and Future Prospects*

## POLICY DIRECTIONS

The *OECD Skills Strategy* provides an integrated, cross-government strategic framework aimed to help countries understand more about how to invest in skills to help transform better skills into better jobs, economic growth and social inclusion. To this end, the first main policy lever to address is to **develop relevant skills:**

- **Gather and use information about changing skills demand to guide skills development.** More high-level skills are needed than ever before. Changes in skills demand have to be identified, articulated and translated into relevant curricula and programmes.
- **Engage social partners** in designing and delivering curricula and education and training programmes.
- **Ensure that education and training programmes are of high-quality.** Institutions need to be governed by a clear quality assurance framework that serves both accountability and improvement purposes, and that combines internal and external evaluation without imposing an excessive administrative burden.



- **Promote equity by ensuring access to, and success in, quality education for all.** Investing in high-quality, early childhood education and initial schooling, the provision of financial support targeted at disadvantaged students and schools later in life and second-chance options should all be considered.
- **Ensure that costs are shared and tax systems do not discourage investment in learning.** Employers can create a climate that supports learning, and governments can design financial incentives and favourable tax policies that encourage individuals and employers to invest in post-compulsory education and training.
- **Maintain a long-term perspective on skills development,** even during economic crises.
- **Facilitate entry for skilled migrants.** Formal recruitment channels, including for low-skilled migration, might be needed to close skills gaps.
- **Design policies that encourage international students to remain after their studies.** Several OECD countries have eased their immigration policies to allow international students to work during their studies and encourage them to remain after their studies to work. This practice allows these countries to make better use of this important source of skills.
- **Make it easier for skilled migrants to return to their country of origin.** Migration flows can have a positive impact on the stock of human capital in countries of origin: returning migrants bring back knowledge and experience as well as business links that are of use to their home country. To reap these advantages, countries can facilitate and encourage return migration.
- **Promote cross-border skills policies by investing in skills abroad and encourage cross-border higher education.** An increasing number of employers operate internationally and must therefore derive their skills from both local sources and the global talent pool.



*Better Skills, Better Jobs, Better Lives: A Strategic Approach to Skills Policies, 2012*

The second main lever is to **activate skills supply**, encouraging people to offer their skills and to retain skilled people on the labour market:

- **Identify inactive individuals and the reasons for their inactivity.** Integrating under-represented groups into the labour force has great potential to increase the skills base.
- **Create the financial incentives to make work pay.** Childcare services, tax and benefit systems should be designed so that working is more beneficial than not working.
- **Dismantle non-financial barriers to participation in the labour force,** with employers, trade unions and government working in concert.
- **Discourage early retirement.** To keep older workers in the labour market, many countries have eliminated early retirement schemes, increased the official pensionable age and corrected distorted financial incentives to retire early. Lifelong learning and targeted training, especially in mid-career, can improve employability in later life and discourage early withdrawal from the labour market.



- **Staunch the brain drain.** Experience has shown that the best way to prevent brain drain is to provide incentives to stay, including by improving labour-market conditions locally, rather than by imposing coercive measures to prevent emigration.

 *Better Skills, Better Jobs, Better Lives: A Strategic Approach to Skills Policies, 2012*

The third lever is to **put skills to effective use**, creating a better match between people's skills and job requirements:

- **Help employers to make better use of their employees' skills.** Government support schemes, especially for those with low skill levels, are often necessary to address under-skilling and to achieve an optimal match between workers' skills and job requirements.
- **Provide better information about the skills needed and available.** Quality career guidance is a critical part of any skills strategy. Coherent and easy-to-interpret qualifications help employers understand the skills held by potential employees, facilitating recruitment and matching.
- **Facilitate internal mobility among local labour markets.** Reducing costs and other barriers associated with internal mobility helps employees to find suitable jobs and helps employers to find suitable workers.
- **Help economies move up the value-added chain.** Government programmes can influence both employer competitiveness strategies and product-market strategies, which determine in what markets the company competes.
- **Stimulate the creation of more high-skilled and high value-added jobs.** By fostering competition for goods and services, policy can promote productive activities that contribute to stronger economic growth and the creation of more productive and rewarding jobs. Education institutions focusing on new technologies and innovation can also help develop the skills for future economies.
- **Foster entrepreneurship.** Entrepreneurs create new jobs and increase skill demand but they are made, not born. Education and training institutions have a role here in training students to identify opportunities, turn them into successful ventures, and recognise and respond to obstacles.
- **Tackle unemployment and help young people to gain a foothold in the labour market.** In many countries, young people struggle to enter the labour market and to find stable jobs that pay a living wage and offer good career prospects. Successful entry into the labour market at the beginning of a professional career has a profound influence on later working life.

 *Better Skills, Better Jobs, Better Lives: A Strategic Approach to Skills Policies, 2012*


The recent VET study has synthesised wide-ranging analysis and review into five key recommendations. These include:

- **Provide the right mix of skills for the labour market:** Provide a mix of VET training places that reflect both student preferences and employer needs, and share the costs of doing so between government, employers and individuals according to who will benefit.




Engage employers and unions in curriculum development to ensure that the skills taught correspond to those needed in the modern workplace while also ensuring that the VET fosters generic, transferable skills and that students in vocational programmes have adequate numeracy and literacy skills.

- **Reform career guidance to deliver well-informed career advice for all:** Develop a coherent career guidance profession, independent from psychological counselling and well-informed by labour market information. Recognise the importance of guidance by resourcing and evaluating it adequately, and ensure objective and abundant information about careers and courses, including through partnerships with employers.
- **Recruit sufficient numbers of teachers and trainers, and ensure they are well-acquainted with modern employment needs and are pedagogically prepared:** Promote flexible pathways of recruitment and facilitate the entry of those with industry skills into the VET teacher workforce. Provide appropriate pedagogical preparation for trainers, adapted to the learning being provided. Encourage part-time working and interchange between VET institutions and industry, so that vocational teachers can update their knowledge, and trainers in firms spend time in VET institutions to enhance their pedagogical skills.
- **Make full use of workplace learning:** Make substantial use of workplace training in initial VET, ensuring that the system encourages participation by both employers and students, and that the training is of good quality, (with effective quality assurance and a clear contractual framework for apprenticeships). Sustain workplace training and respond to increased demand for full-time VET during the difficult economic climate.
- **Support the VET system by engaging stakeholders and promoting transparency:** Systematically engage with employers, trade unions and other key stakeholders in VET policy and provision and qualification frameworks, strengthening quality assurance and adopting national assessment frameworks to underpin consistent quality. Strengthen data on the labour market outcomes of VET, and the institutional capacity to use that data.


 *Learning for Jobs*, 2010, Chapters 2-6 and Executive Summary

**A systematic approach to facilitating the school-to-work transition of young adults is urgent:** Effective preparation for work entails success in academic courses, the acquisition of strong generic work skills – from punctuality and effort to being an effective team member – and technical competence in the job-specific skills needed to do the entry-level work in careers that pay well. Therefore, beyond the development of young people's academic skills and knowledge, a strong school-to-work transition system needs to be in place. Workplace training makes up an essential part of such a system.

 *Lessons from PISA for the United States; Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education*, 2011, Chapter 11



**Recognise the gap between the cognitive capacity and emotional maturity in teenagers to avoid definitive choices:** The gap between intellectual and emotional capacity cannot imply that important choices should simply be delayed until adulthood when the gap closes. It does suggest, with the additional powerful weight of neurological evidence, that the options taken should not take the form of definitively closing doors.

 *Understanding the Brain: The Birth of a Learning Science, 2007, Chapter 2*



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