

# Learning for Jobs: Flexible Learning in Vocational Education and Training

JANA PETNUCHOVÁ  
*jana.petnuchova@stuba.sk*

ROMAN HRMO  
Institute of Engineering Pedagogy  
Faculty of Materials Science  
Trnava, Slovak Republic

**Abstract** - The article describes importance of vocational education and training (VET) which 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. The aim of this article is to highlight the definitions and understandings of vocational education and training (VET). Countries are now giving the long-neglected topic of vocational education and training dramatically increased profiles, reflecting recognition of its economic function. The aim of this article is to highlight the definitions and understandings of vocational education and training (VET). Personal philosophy of learning is based on a person's own fundamental values. It should provide answers to the following questions: Why should I study continuously? Where will success leads to and who will be beneficiaries? Will it be enough if I benefit from process myself or do I want to help other people to succeed?

**Keywords** - education, vocational education and training, vocational teacher and trainer, labour market, qualification

## INTRODUCTION

New information and communication technologies exceed the traditional framework of the learning process. Learning and education can no longer be viewed as a ritual that one performs only in the earlier part of life. ICT are being used to cross the barriers of age, time and space, bringing lifelong learning to all. People of all ages, in all places and in all different environmental contexts are learning all the time. Therefore, regardless of what activities are performing—they comprise the learning society (Queeney, 1995).

Knowledge is a valuable foundation of all social and cultural development. However, information society in itself is not sufficiently challenging to provide a goal for which we should strive. Only knowledge is not enough. Humanity is more important than mere knowledge.

The key issue in education is no longer the amount of knowledge learned, but the ability to use knowledge and know-how. In order to be able to find the essential knowledge among the information overload and to be able to apply it in other contexts, people have to learn the necessary skills. Knowledge and know/how alone, they are not enough. Information and knowledge can be taught, but skills need to be learned. The constantly changing environment makes the task even more challenging. Instead of one uninterrupted educational chain before entering the labour market, education in the learning society is a continuous process (Korhonen 1997).

Many countries are recognizing that good initial vocational education and training has a major contribution to make to economic competitiveness. Many of unskilled jobs which existed in OECD (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development) countries a generation ago are fast disappearing, either because they have been replaced by technology or because these countries cannot compete with less developed countries on labor costs. Instead, OECD countries need to compete on the quality of goods and service they provide. That requires a well-skilled labor force, with a range of mid-level trade, technical and professional skills alongside those high-level skills associated with university education. More often than not, those skills are delivered through vocational programmes (Field et al., 2010).

Vocational education and training (VET) can play a central role in preparing young people for work, developing skills of adults and responding to the labor-market needs of the economy. It means building a foundation of basic and transferable skills into vocational qualifications, to reflect a world career flux and development rather than one job for life. It means renewal of the career guidance profession to deliver active guidance for all young leaders, well-informed by knowledge of the labour market and vocational as well as academic pathways. It means ensuring that teachers and trainers in VET programmes have up-to-date industry experience (OECD, 2009).

Initial VET is designed to fill the gap providing the needed skills, and research has shown that it can yield good economic returns from the public investment involved. Countries with strong initial VET programmes, like Germany, have been relatively successful in tackling youth employment.

Historically, many vocational programmes were conceived as a stepping stone to a single target occupation. But increasing educational opportunities have challenged this. More and more young people, including students in vocational programmes, now expect to enter tertiary and other postsecondary education. For example; one quarter of Dutch upper secondary vocational students continue into tertiary VET, and around three-quarters of Korean upper secondary vocational students do so (OECD, 2010).

Among general academic skills, numeracy and literacy are of increasing importance in the labour market, and weaknesses in these fields are very common those in vocational programmes. VET programmes need to give sufficient weight to these skills, and students should be systematically assessed at the point of entry to vocational programmes as to ensure a basic minimum of skills and identify those in need targeted support (Eurostat, 2002).

In a review of adult education and vocational training in Europe, Tuijnman draws on a range of studies carried out throughout Europe to identify general trends in European training, and while he states that countries are moving in different directions, the one common trend he identifies is the marked quantitative growth in vocational education and training (VET).

Thus, the concerns of governments and employers alike about

vocational training have been reflected by an increased investment into this area, a number of European studies have argued that economic success depends on having a competitive high-tech industry, and that previous underinvestment into VET have undermined European efforts to respond to changing economic conditions, thus most European countries are now placing a heavy emphasis on policies to improve job training“(Tuijman, 1992).

## LEARNING FOR FUTURE

Faced with challenges such as intensified global competition, high numbers of low-skilled workers and an ageing population, vocational education and training (VET) is vital to prepare individuals for today's society and ensure Europe's future competitiveness and innovation.

The necessity of lifelong learning is not merely a matter of political will. It involves more aspects than the will to enhance the civilization of all the citizens. It is also question of changes in the working life and the challenges business enterprises. The entire industrialized world continues to live in an extremely rapid pace of change. Parallel to the persistently high unemployment rate, many areas of European industry are suffering from a tremendous shortage of skilled employees. The skills and knowledge of those employees who have been engaged in working life for a long time are not sufficient for more demanding tasks. On the other hand, the basic education of children and young people does not sufficiently encourage them to find out how they should learn to learn (Markkula, Suurla, 2000).

Personal philosophy of learning is based on a person's own fundamental values. It should provide answers to the following questions: Why should I study continuously? Where will success lead to and who will be beneficiaries? Will it be enough if I benefit from process myself or do I want to help other people to succeed? (Markkula, Suurla, 2000).

This kind of learning, which could be called maintenance learning, is discussed by *the Club of Rome* in their book “No limits to Learning” which was published in 1979 and is considered the basic volume on the principle of lifelong learning. Traditionally, societies and individuals have adopted this idea of maintenance of learning, which is only

interrupted by short period of reform (Botkin, 1979).

The philosophy of lifelong learning is not only about learning itself but also about development in learning. Preparation for the unexpected makes learning more effective both for individuals and society. Although it has often been said that learning should be enjoyable, the learners' duties and responsibilities for the development of their own skills and the expansion of their scope of thinking are equal importance.

Learning is more effective if it is a goal-oriented. The goal and career choices, even the meaning of life can change- and perhaps they should change – during the course of a person' life. Therefore the policies lifelong learning should be re-assessed at regular intervals (Schneeberger, 2007).

If a person learns to learn in early childhood the capacity of learning will be tremendous enhanced. Learning begins at birth, and the first four years of life are said to be the most essential for the development of learning capacity,

The idea of lifelong learning challenges us to put our learning potential to better use. People aged 65 or more could still learn effectively and pass on their experiences by advising others and doing creative work (Hagström, 1997).

As a consequence of educational reforms and developing knowledge society, there are more initiatives and opportunities to learn in various contexts, participating in processes of change. The importance of assessing and recognizing the achievements of non-formal and informal learning has, therefore, increased in this context. Education policy makers emphasize the necessity of raising the quality and prestige o vocational education and training (VET), which is highly dependent on the qualification and competence of vocational teachers. The course of development processes in VET has caused changes in the roles of vocational teachers, making their pedagogical activity more complex and requiring them to make self-supporting decisions. Teachers are therefore, being encouraged to continuously develop their competences. It is important stress, that knowledge, skills and abilities are not gained for life, and they need to be permanently renewed throughout the care of a teacher (Field et al., 2010).

## VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

On 22 September 2005 in Copenhagen (OECD 2005), the chief civil servants of education ministries from across the OECD opened a two-day discussion. Their agenda was wide-ranging. They have been asked to identify their most important policy priority in education in the coming years. The answer they gave surprised many, for it was neither schools nor universities, but in fact, vocational training and education (VET).

Three factors stand out as reasons for growing interest of policy makers in VET: economics, strains in the system and previous neglect.

- *Economics*—since OECD countries cannot compete with less developed countries on labour costs, they need to compete in terms of the quality of goods and services they provide. That means highly skilled labour force, technical and professional skills alongside those high-level skills associated with university education (Field et al., 2010).
- *Strains* – there are strains in VET system. One of them is the lack of workplace training places, and another is the lack of trainers. In some countries the rapid expansion of tertiary education has undermined school-based VET. For example in the United States a new terminology of career and technical education has replaced vocational education and training “to reflect an orientation towards a career rather than a single occupation (CEDEFOP, 2008).
- VET has been *neglected*. Challenging issues like how to go about teaching practical skills, or the rapid expansion of tertiary programmes, have received limited attention. The perceived low status of VET has therefore also been a barrier to engagement in the sector and how it has been viewed analytically. One object of this review is to remedy this past neglect (Ludvig, Pfeiffer, 2005).

Vocational education and training (VET) includes education and

training programmes designed for, and typically to a particular job or type of job. It normally involves practical training as well as the learning or relevant theory. It is distinct from (academic) education- for example in mathematics, which is relevant to a very wide range of jobs. Education and training for some high level professions such as medicine and law meets the definition even though they are not normally described as VET.

Initial VET includes programmes mainly designed for and used by young people (under 30) at the beginning of their career and commonly before entering the labour market. It includes many upper secondary and tertiary programmes.

Continuing VET is all other sorts of VET, including enterprise training of employees and training provided specially for those who have lost their job (OECD, 2010).

## PHILOSOPHY OF VET

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Learning is the systematic acquisition of new skills in a structured environment, resulting in a positive transformation of a person's behavior. Working is the utilization of skills. Learning therefore leads to working, and working leads to learning when workers realize that they lack particular skills necessary for their job. So this is a nutshell lifelong learning. An interest element in this definition is that learning is linked with context. Recent studies show that only context-based learning is effective (Botkin, 1979).

Cross P. and the Dutch Professor M. Boekaerts emphasizes that learning is far more than teaching. Learning is about making connections". Especially cognitive learning strategies, rehearsal, elaboration and organization (the what of learning) and met cognitive learning strategies, planning, monitoring, and selfregulation (The how of learning) are important connections. Experimental connections are necessary to assure that students conduct an active lifelong conversation between experience and learning (Queeney, 1995).

### **DO WE NEED GENERAL SKILLS?**

Various studies highlight the importance of general content in the curriculum. In modern economies an increasing number of jobs, including blue-collar jobs, require sound generic skills. A study from

the United States (Levy, 2003) suggests that technological change has made problem solving and complex communication skills much more important in the labour market. The development of these skills is underpinned by good literacy and numeracy skills (Levy, Murnane, 2004).

Labor markets change rapidly and often unpredictably. As virtually all workers will need to acquire new skills during their career, literacy and numeracy are particularly valuable in the long run (Kezdi, 2006). Strong literacy and numeracy skills are associated with better performance on the labour market.

For some students in VET programmes, very weak basic skills are a serious difficulty. Basic skills problems are widespread, damaging, often unrecognized, but remediable. It follows that there is a very strong argument for systematically assessing the literacy and numeracy skills of students at the point of entry to vocational programmes so as to identify people in need of support. In Belgium, for example, jobseekers complete a quick-scan test and, if it necessary, are directed to adult basic education centers (Basic Skills Agency, 1997).

In many countries, surveys show that employers strongly value soft skills, such as the ability to work team, communication skills and work discipline. In Austria for example a survey found that the lack of soft skills, such as reliability and adequate manners, was a common reason for rejecting apprenticeship applicants (Schneeberger, 2007).

Other skills, such entrepreneurship, are highly relevant to many occupations to which VET leads, but have been often neglected in traditional vocational programmes. Some countries have recognized the importance of entrepreneurial skills and have created programmes in this area. In Belgium the Flemish agency for Entrepreneurial Training (Syntra Vlaanderen) aims to stimulate entrepreneurship. It offers a range of training programmes, including courses in business management, entrepreneurial training as part of apprenticeships, and specific entrepreneurial training at ISCED 4 (The International Standard Classification of Education) level (Field et al., 2010).

Yet the importance of traditional skills has not declined. Moreover, people do not master them as well as one might think. As the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) showed, more than a quarter of all adults in OECD countries do not have adequate skills

to function in today's complex society. While the survey focused on people's ability to understand and use texts and illustrated documents, it revealed that far more was at stake. The massive influx of electronic tools onto the market has made writing and reading the most important skills anyone should possess. Paradoxically, the Internet revolution, electronic mail and global information flows are turning reading and writing into skills that no-one can do without, be it to search an Internet site or to apply for a job by e-mail. The range of absolutely essential core skills has broadened from cognitive skills, whether developed in initial education or elsewhere, the ability to handle information and to use a computer, and knowledge of one or more foreign languages.

In addition to these basic skills, there are others that are sometimes described as new and that give people control over their future in society and in the work-place. But these new competencies do not replace traditional skills; they complement and extend them, well beyond the world of work. Team-working, problem-solving and ICT (information and communication technology) skills are helping people to play a full role in society and exercise their rights and duties as citizens. The IALS (Institute of Advanced Legal Studies) showed a worrying correlation between economic inequality and different levels of literacy. Promoting basic skills has always been key to individual and collective success, and the odds are that this applies to the new competencies too (Pont, Werquin, 2000).

EU (European Union) level activities are being developed to address priority areas in each of the different levels of education and training – early childhood, school, higher, vocational and adult education – based on these overall aims.

These include, for example, expanding opportunities for learning mobility or enhancing partnerships between education and training institutions and the broader society.

Other actions are relevant to all levels of education, such as promoting multilingualism, innovation, creativity and adoption of ICT (Information and Communication Technology).

*The benchmarks for 2020 are:*

- at least 95% of children between the age of four and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in

- early childhood education;
- the share of 15-years old with insufficient abilities in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15%;
- the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10%;
- the share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40%;
- An average of at least 15 % of adults (age group 25-64) should participate in lifelong Learning (EC, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

To move closer to a knowledge-based society, Europe needs an innovation strategy to foster investment in, and the quality of human capital. More effective use of resources, a future oriented style of VET and new approaches to learning in schools and at work are essential ingredients of such a strategy. Special attention needs to be given to key competences, including ICT literacy, learning partnerships and the creation of learning-conducive environments in all settings. To move forward, governments should identify the key issues such an innovation strategy, supported by public-private partnerships and agreements on innovation pacts with social partners and stakeholders.

On 9 of June 2010, the European Commission presented a 10 year vision for the future of vocational education and training in the Communication. A New Impetus for European cooperation in Vocational Education and Training to support the Europe 2020 strategy. It includes:

- Ensuring access to training and qualifications is flexible and open at all stages of life
- Promoting mobility to make it easier to gain experience abroad, or in a different sector of the economy
- Ensuring the highest possible quality of education and training
- Providing more opportunities for disadvantaged groups such as school drop-outs, the low-skilled and unemployed, people with migrant backgrounds and the disabled
- Nurturing creative, innovative and entrepreneurial thinking in

students

The economies of OECD countries need specific occupational skills - in professional, managerial and technical jobs, in expanding fields such as health care, as well as in traditional trades like electricians. Vocational education and training (VET) systems, which supply these skills, are now under intensive scrutiny to determine if they can deliver the skills required, and ensure that they adapt to fast-changing needs (OECD,2011).

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