



Council of Ministers of Education, Canada
Conseil des ministres de l'Éducation (Canada)

Canadian Delegation Report

Informal Meeting of OECD Education Ministers on Vocational Education and Training

January 22-23, 2007

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Overview

The meeting confirmed that Canadian and European experiences and challenges relating to VET are different in many respects (e.g., migration and integration, Bologna process and European qualification framework, early VET/academic streaming in Europe). Such differences will need to be taken into account in developing further OECD-wide work/analysis on the issue. Note that Canada was the only non-European OECD member represented at the ministerial table in Copenhagen.

While a few ministers expressed the desire of having an OECD "PISA for VET," the OECD Secretariat resisted by indicating that there is much demand for extending the PISA program to new areas, but that it is an enormous undertaking, which requires extensive funding. In the case of VET, the OECD Secretariat pointed to data availability and comparability as very serious additional challenges. The OECD Secretariat noted that the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) may provide an opportunity to look at some specific elements relating to VET. OECD will examine means to increase VET profile in its publication *Education at a Glance*. Finally, the OECD Secretariat indicated that future OECD work on VET could examine specific systemic innovations in VET-related areas such as employer participation, teacher training, mentoring, cost/benefit analysis, and technology as tool for VET.

1. OPENING SESSION

Draft Agenda EDU/A(2007)1/REV1

Issues Paper EDU (2007)3

Mr. Bertel Haarder, Minister for Education and for Ecclesiastical Affairs, Denmark, gave opening remarks. He described the Danish VET system, which is focused on multiple entrance points for different needs, and spoke about the importance of exchanging best practices.

Mr. Angel Gurría, Secretary General of OECD, gave opening remarks. He listed the key issues in VET — the need to meet the real needs of the changing labour market in the global environment, migration, and the status problem — and remarked that PISA results show that streaming in early adolescence is undesirable. Mr. Gurría listed some of the solutions to these issues as follows: better data on VET in different countries; strong models of well functioning VET systems; better understanding of skills in labour market and how these skills are learned, enhanced, and lost; and an emphasis on continuous learning and skills upgrading, rather than labour market projections.

Mr. Marc Tucker from the National Center on Education and the Economy, US, gave the keynote address. Mr. Tucker gave the results of a study that had just been completed for the centre. The theme of the report was that the threat from India and China is not the loss of low-skilled jobs as once thought, but the loss of medium- and high-skilled jobs and the ability of these countries to compete by paying lower wages. The key is to train people who are more creative, innovative, and able to learn quickly.

Mr. Jan Figel, European Commission, gave remarks on the Helsinki ministerial meeting. The meeting, in December 2006, outlined a renewed mandate for VET. Mr. Figel spoke about the Copenhagen process, which is similar to the Bologna process but begun more recently, in 2002, and focused on VET. The process emphasizes transparency, information flow, quality assurance, and strengthened competencies. Mr. Figel hoped that the two processes could be aligned and would inform each other.

2. **SESSION 1: PROVIDING SKILLS FOR TOMORROW: LABOUR MARKET AND EDUCATION CONTEXTS**

Theme 1: Part 1: Taking account of the changing labour market

Ms. Barbara Ischinger, Director of Education, OECD, introduced this topic. She emphasized the importance of determining what skills will be needed in the future and spoke about the trends that influence this: migration, global labour market, and employer needs. She cautioned against relying heavily on employer-provided labour market projections as employers tend to want to over-saturate the market with skilled workers to reduce wages and mobility. She also talked about the need to let go of certain industries if they can be better delivered somewhere else. She also stressed the need for quality at all levels of program delivery. She suggested that it was time for OECD to revisit this issue in a focused way, as had been done in the early 1990s.

3. **SESSION 1: PROVIDING SKILLS FOR TOMORROW: LABOUR MARKET AND EDUCATION CONTEXTS**

Theme 1: Part 2: The tertiary and wider education context

Mr. Jan Björklund, Minister for Schools, Sweden, introduced this topic. He spoke about the changes to the VET system currently being undertaken in Sweden. He took issue with the idea that the key is more education; Sweden is moving to a streaming system with three tracks: apprenticeship, VET, and higher education. The focus will be on quality of programs, not on an expansion of the higher education system. The new system will be closely linked to workplace requirements.

Both topics were discussed during this session. There was a general agreement that VET systems differ substantially between countries and that their success and effect also differ. For example, Estonia has very little VET and is trying to create a better environment and acceptance of it, while Switzerland has a majority of its students in VET programs.

Canada noted that while university graduates still have better employment rates than VET graduates, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that an increasing number of university graduates are returning to college to take VET programs.

It was generally noted that, in many countries, the stigma of VET programs prevents students from wanting to enter them. However, in some countries, as in Canada, as it becomes apparent that employment levels for VET students are rising, more students are choosing this stream. In Switzerland in particular, students understand that the benefits of going into VET outweigh the costs.

There was a discussion of the need to create more entry points from VET to higher education and eliminate dead ends. This might also address the status problem to a certain degree. One way of creating pathways between VET and higher education is an emphasis on prior learning assessment. There was also some discussion of the importance of national qualifications frameworks to the effective use of PLA.

It should be noted that most of the discussion about pathways focused on the practice of streaming students in secondary school into either VET or higher education streams, which is less of a practice in Canada.

It was suggested that OECD countries should move to a system of measuring competencies rather than institutional credentials. Ms. Ischinger noted that this would be partially taken care of with PIAAC.

At the session on apprenticeship, a number of questions were raised for possible consideration by the OECD secretariat:

- What skills will be needed in the future?
- How can countries implement quality assurance processes?
- How can governments persuade employers to take on apprentices?
- Do we need a VET PISA?
- What is the role of employers in determining labour market needs and appropriate qualifications?
- How can we determine and compare levels of attainment and learning outcomes?
- What are the best practices in VET for Aboriginal students?
- What is expected of VET? Is there a tension between what employers want (skilled labour) and what governments want (to include in the workforce students who traditionally might be at risk)?

4. **SESSION 2: QUALITY AND EQUITY: PARITY OF ESTEEM AND SOCIAL COHESION**

Theme 2: Part 1: Parity of esteem and quality

Ms. Ute Erdsiek-Rave, Minister of Education, Germany, introduced this topic. She emphasized the importance of lifelong learning; of connecting VET systems to other educational opportunities including meaningful upward mobility opportunities; of international recognition of qualifications; of flexibility of VET systems to adapt to technological changes; and of the acceptance by employers of VET qualifications.

5. **SESSION 2: QUALITY AND EQUITY: PARITY OF ESTEEM AND SOCIAL COHESION**

Theme 2: Part 2: Social cohesion and equity

Dr. Diane McGifford, Minister of Advanced Education and Literacy, Manitoba, introduced this topic. She linked the discussion at the table on VET programs for migrants to parallels in Canada regarding VET programs for Aboriginal students. She spoke about involving the community in the programs given at the University College of the North in Manitoba.

There was discussion about both topics. There was general agreement that an inherent tension exists between VET as a social equity tool that helps those who would otherwise be marginalized and the idea that VET should be highly esteemed and accepted as such by employers.

There was a discussion regarding how to bring higher esteem and quality to VET systems, including a discussion on quality in teaching and measurement outcomes. Canada spoke about the Red Seal program and the sector councils in informing how VET is taught and constantly upgraded through cooperation between industry and institutions.

Other ideas included

- Fostering fluidity between VET and academic education
- Eliminating VET as a dead-end by developing crosswalks and reducing barriers between academic and occupational training: "open-entry/open-exit" model in lifelong learning
- Avoiding characterizing/marketing VET as tool for marginalized and disadvantaged groups (e.g., immigrants, uneducated, Aboriginals) while recognizing the role of VET as policy tool for social cohesion
- Developing a culture of apprenticeship, and encouraging employers — including the public sector, which is often the largest employer — to offer apprenticeships

- Marketing economic opportunities resulting from VET (employer demand, salary, level of employment of graduates) and highlighting success stories of VET students and teachers
- Developing a national qualifications framework to assist in marketing benefits and prospects of VET
- Acknowledging that literacy and numeracy are prerequisites to quality VET (Canada) — VET is not the panacea to these problems, which should be addressed by the entire education system
- Avoiding setting postsecondary academic enrolment targets in the abstract, without taking into account VET and labour market needs/possibilities
- Ensuring coordination between education and labour authorities who each have VET responsibilities
- Demonstrating commitment to VET by linking its funding to academic funding
- Working with parents who have a strong traditional bias to favour academic education
- Ensuring quality VET through appropriate teacher qualifications (VET for teachers, too)
- Developing sector councils (Canada) with involvement from industry, labour, and institutions to inform curriculum and to develop standards for a culture of apprenticeships (noting that industry interests in VET do not always coincide with public policy interests, e.g., employers may seek to avoid developing transferable skills to retain its workforce or may seek to ensure excess supply to reduce wages)

6. CONCLUSION AND CHAIR'S SUMMARY

The Chair's summary and the Secretary General's opening remarks are attached as Appendix I and Appendix II.

The OECD Secretariat indicated that future OECD work on VET (note February 5, 2007, expert meeting and related material) could examine specific systemic innovations in VET-related areas such as employer participation, teacher training, mentoring, cost/benefit analysis, and technology as tool for VET.

INFORMAL OECD MINISTERIAL MEETING ON VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING, COPENHAGEN 22 – 23 JANUARY 2007.

**CHAired BY BERTEL HAARDER,
MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND ECCLESIASTICAL AFFAIRS, DENMARK**

CHAIR'S SUMMARY

Fifteen Ministers from OECD countries met for an informal discussion on vocational education and training (VET). In opening presentations, Marc Tucker, of the United States, underlined the necessity for OECD countries to make a step improvement in labour force skills to meet global competition – particularly by developing creative, team-working and design skills. OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría also argued for a blurring of boundaries between general and vocational education so that all could experience some vocational training. I argued that we now need to substantially improve OECD statistics on VET, to match the range of data available in other sectors of education.

In discussion we:

- identified the need to challenge the apparent priority given to high status tertiary education rather than vocational training, and agreed on the need for increased flexibility in VET systems, allowing people to change routes, and to especially to move upwards into tertiary education.
- recognized the challenge of persuading employers to provide a sufficient number of good quality apprenticeship places. Underlining the importance of the social partners in this and every other aspect of VET, we agreed on the need to look carefully at the costs and benefits to different parties of apprenticeship arrangements. More radically we considered the option of apprenticeships *for all*, including for example, those in tertiary education.
- identified good quality and up-to-date qualification frameworks, alongside arrangements for the recognition of prior learning as a very important policy tool, and noted the important work of the European Union in this area;
- noted the need to upgrade the skills of those providing VET training with better standards for trainers, recognizing the balance between national standards, and responsiveness to local and sectoral requirements;
- underlined the need for VET systems to provide stronger support to help disadvantaged groups, including some migrant groups, minorities and those with disabilities and learning difficulties in entering the labour market. Strong basic education and skills for all must underpin this role.
- identified the need to improve our information base to evaluate the performance of our VET systems and institutions. At international level we looked forward to the launch of the new OECD survey of adult skills (PIAAC), better OECD data comparing countries, and strong examples of effective VET systems against which to benchmark performance.

The idea of 'PISA for VET' remains attractive to some of us, although clearly a very challenging option.

The OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría and European Commissioner Jan Figel underlined their mutual commitment to co-operate closely on all these issues in the future.

Opening remarks to the Informal Meeting of OECD Education Ministers on Vocational Education and Training, Copenhagen by Angel Gurría, OECD Secretary-General Copenhagen, Denmark 22 January 2007

Dear Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all to this Informal Ministerial Meeting on Vocational Education and Training. I would like to thank Minister Bertel Haarder and the Danish Government for organising and hosting it. What better place for this gathering than this country with the highest share of happy people in the world? While we are here to learn from each other about vocational education and training, I think we should use this opportunity to learn a thing or two from the Danes about how to be satisfied with our lives. In my remarks today, I will focus on the importance of vocational training and education and highlight the OECD's role in developing policies and identifying best practices in these areas. Vocational education and training (commonly known as VET) has always existed - children learned to farm and hunt from their parents long before schools, teachers and the labour market were invented. They learned these essential skills as apprentices - through watching and practising. Our job is to refashion this ancient role to fit the needs of the 21st century and this is precisely what we will focus on here today and tomorrow. Vocation education and training is not just the interest of Education Ministers - it also concerns your colleagues in labour, finance and economics ministries, because it is about providing the necessary skills for well-functioning, modern economies. In other words, VET is central to economic growth and development. We at the OECD put education and training into this broader economic context. The [OECD Jobs Strategy](#), for example, emphasises the need of education and training systems to respond to changing labour market requirements. Another issue we focus on at the OECD is international benchmarking and cross country comparisons. There is a huge variation in VET across countries - vocational training takes place mainly in schools and colleges in some countries, and in the workplace in others. Some countries - like the United States - rely heavily on training and retraining in colleges catering for adults, others - like Denmark- make more use of apprenticeships. But while there is no one-size-fits-all model for vocational education and training, globalisation is putting pressure on these nationally distinctive features of VET systems and labour markets. We can respond to these pressures most effectively if we have a good understanding of our commonalities and differences. We at the OECD stand ready to help improve this understanding - and this meeting is an important contribution to this process.

Key issues for vocational education and training

I would now like to briefly mention some of the key issues related to vocational education and training - namely the service economy; migration and inclusion; boundaries between VET, general education and work; and the status of VET. *VET in the service of the economy*. Getting the VET system right is critical - a labour force without the right skills will not succeed against tough global competition. And there can be weaknesses we should be careful to avoid - training can be offered in skills no longer needed in modern economies; or it can be delivered by trainers whose skills may be inappropriate; or in some cases relevant tests and objective standards for good VET may be missing. The big challenge is to make VET more responsive to changing

labour market requirements. Unfortunately, employers are not always interested in co-operating with VET institutions. *Blurring the boundaries between VET and general education.* Perhaps our terminology is part of the problem - instead of VET we might be better off talking about education and training for work and also about learning by doing. All schools, colleges and universities need to provide education and training for work - some of it very general and some more specific. They also need to offer more learning by doing - which should be particularly suited to acquiring the skills that employers expect and ask for - working in teams, creativity, communication and social skills. ... *and between learning and work.* There is also a need to soften the boundaries between learning and work itself. We need to determine how the two can be combined throughout life, both at the workplace, as well as outside, both during and after working hours, but always with the necessary support and participation of employers.

Migration. I have highlighted migration as one of my priorities as Secretary-General. More than 15 per cent of 15-year olds in OECD countries have at least one parent who is foreign-born, and VET systems should play the same role in smoothing the transition from school to the labour market for this population as they do for other children. Yet, our country reviews on labour market integration show that in a number of countries, VET systems are just not delivering for the children of immigrants. Thus, VET systems as a transition mechanism from school to work have to adapt to the growing share of young people with a migration background. *VET and inclusion.* Another disadvantaged group to which we are giving particular attention is those with learning difficulties and disabilities. There is a universe of difference between the quality of life of an unemployed person with special needs, often facing poverty and social isolation and that of the same person working, contributing and engaging. Targeted vocational training to prepare for work in the real world make all the difference. *Status.* VET has a status problem. It did not start that way -- the hunters who learned their skills from a parent had high status. The problem is that formal academic education has elbowed VET out of the way, and has cornered all prestige job-specific training. We do not hear Harvard Law School in the U.S., or the École National d'Administration in France describing what they do as vocational training -- although they are vocational training. And we do not hear elites in any country expressing a wish that their own children should undertake vocational training. So, by exclusion, VET gets defined as tracks for the also-rans. Moreover, our [Programme for International Student Assessment](#) (PISA) has generated clear evidence that very early separation into academic and vocational tracks - in early adolescence - is undesirable and sometimes leads to an irreversible tiering of opportunities later in life.

Conclusion

These are some of the challenges! So, where do we look for solutions? And how can the OECD help? *Better comparisons of VET systems.* We are already - through the OECD review of school-to-work transition - looking at how vocational education supports the integration of the young people into the labour market, but we need to go beyond this. We need better data on how VET is structured in different countries. We speak loosely about countries with a "dual system" or with "school-based VET", but we need to be much more precise. We also need some strong models of where VET systems and the labour market are working well to meet the needs of students and employers, the so-called "best practices". *Better comparative measures of workforce skills.* We also need a clear benchmark of the current skills of the labour force and a better understanding of how these skills are acquired, enhanced or lost. We in the OECD are working to launch a cross-country survey on adult skills, called the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). It will cover general competencies -

things like literacy and numeracy - and how these skills are used at the workplace. Looking forward, we need a vision of future skills needs. I say a vision not a forecast. One of the biggest challenges in designing education systems is that we cannot be that certain about the shape of national economies in 20 to 30 years. Straight-line extrapolation is notoriously fallible. Where skills requirements are volatile, unpredictable or firm-specific, continuous education and training are the obvious answer. Thank you for your attention. This is an issue of great interest to me and to the OECD and I look forward to learning about the outcome of the meeting and building on it together.