



# VET in a time of crisis: Building foundations for resilient vocational education and training systems

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This policy brief examines the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on vocational education and training (VET) systems and how VET systems are responding in OECD countries. The brief also presents steps that governments can take in the context of this crisis to build foundations for tomorrow's strong and resilient VET systems.

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**The global COVID-19 crisis** is imposing sudden and unprecedented pressures on governments and industries around the world, with virtually all sectors affected. However, **vocational education and training (VET) systems are being uniquely impacted**, not only in relation to how they provide VET in the context of current social distancing and travel restrictions, but also in terms of how they are being forced to anticipate and adapt to what could very well be a significantly changed labour market in the coming months and years.

The ongoing lockdown in many countries has **interrupted learning in both workplaces and the classroom**. It has been particularly **disruptive to work-based learning, including apprenticeships, and systems used to assess skills and ultimately award qualifications**. While in the short-term this



presents serious challenges for VET teachers, trainers and learners alike, the lockdown may ultimately result in stronger and more resilient VET systems if the right choices are made today. In particular, if the lockdown continues over a long period of time, wholesale closures of education and training institutions may force learning providers to adopt system and technology innovations that will expand the use of distance learning and distance or alternative assessments.

This brief explores these and other impacts in today's context, as well as what we can expect to emerge as challenges and responses in the coming months. It is based on information available as of 16 April 2020.

## The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on VET systems

With very few exceptions, schools all around the world are closed, affecting almost 1.6 billion learners (over 90% of total enrolled learners) from pre-primary to tertiary education, including VET.<sup>1</sup> If we take into account adult learners in training primarily or partially, the number is even higher.

Many countries have quickly created or adapted digital platforms to replace school-based learning, to varying degrees of success. However, work-based learning programmes (WBL), including apprenticeships, are often much more difficult to provide and assess at a distance. This is due to two key factors: first, the immediate disruption of provision caused by confinement and social distancing guidelines and regulations; and second, the fact that employers have historically tended to cut back on apprenticeship training during economic recessions.

- **Disruption in VET:** In the context of lockdowns, social distancing and travel restrictions, the main challenge for existing VET students, including apprentices, is not being able to learn in classrooms, school workshops or workplaces. In some occupational fields, theory can be taught and learned online, but practical aspects cannot be effectively delivered because of a lack of access to tools, materials, equipment and machinery. Other fields are facing specific challenges, such as health care, where some medical schools are being advised to diminish training intensity because of health risks<sup>2</sup> (though other medical schools are allowing current medical and nursing students to graduate early to fulfill immediate labour market demand).
- **Cuts in apprenticeship offers:** An economic recession is widely anticipated and has already begun in some countries, posing particular challenges in sectors such as hospitality, tourism, aviation and leisure services where demand is reaching historical lows. While this primarily means that some professions are unable to work, it also means that by extension they are unable to offer or maintain apprenticeships due to not only a lack of staff to provide training, but also a lack of financial resources. That said, it is also reasonable to expect a reduction in VET enrolments (and therefore fewer prospective apprenticeships) for the coming school year, partly due to uncertainty as to whether students can effectively access WBL, whether a VET programme can be effectively provided on line, and whether students can complete all the requirements necessary to be enrolled on time.

Both of these effects may be relatively invisible in terms of skills and labour market supply over the short-term, and indeed it may appear that supply is abundant in a time of layoffs and furloughs, but as the

<sup>1</sup> Number as of 23 April 2020 (UNESCO, 2020<sub>[16]</sub>). As of 6 May 2020, the number was 1.3 billion.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the AAMC has developed [guidelines around the role of medical students and COVID-19](#) in health care settings that include a recommendation that if the outbreak becomes widespread, schools should consider suspending introductory clinical rotations "until the epidemiology of COVID-19 is better known and the burden on front line care providers from COVID-19 patients has diminished" (Redford, 6 March 2020<sub>[18]</sub>).



economy starts to recover, shortages of skilled workers will likely become apparent, thereby hindering the recovery process.

## How VET systems are responding to the COVID-19 crisis

VET systems are in urgent need of a package of support measures to strengthen their capacity to respond to these current challenges as well as to adapt and respond effectively to both anticipated and unanticipated changes in labour market requirements. A range of country examples point to good practices that can be replicated across jurisdictions.

- **Increasing use of online and virtual platforms:** Many countries are encouraging and supporting VET providers in making use of distance-learning tools wherever possible to ensure the continuity of learning. Major private providers in many countries are also providing their online courses free of charge. While distance learning cannot completely replace in-person training, and its effectiveness depends on the occupation, it can nonetheless help learners to remain engaged and continue to make progress in their studies. These efforts at online delivery and communications can enhance one-to-one digital and real-world interactions between learners, learning providers and employers. Subsidising training, including the introduction of free online skill development courses at least during the pandemic, can help. For example:
  - France is providing online VET courses free of charge for a period of three months, including the core curriculum of vocational schools and main training courses for professional qualifications (French Ministry of Labour, 2020<sup>[1]</sup>).
  - South Korea has provided a virtual training platform – Smart Training Education Platform (STEP)<sup>3</sup> – that enables learning providers to upload their course content, in addition to 300 existing courses already available. This is being supported further by subsidies and quality assurance mechanisms.
  - In the Netherlands, in-person VET in small groups may be organised for students who do not have sufficient digital resources. Schools can also provide temporary access for these students to a workplace with internet access, and a computer or laptop (Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>).
  - In the United Kingdom, Skills for Health made Core Skills Training available on line to the healthcare sector including educational organisations, and is providing statutory/mandatory training and a dedicated COVID-19 online training resource freely accessible to all (Skills for Health, 9 April 2020<sup>[3]</sup>).
- **Training breaks or extensions:** Where online learning is not possible, breaks in learning may be required. Such breaks should not result in any fees, repayment or other penalty for both learners and providers. Financial and mentoring support may be required on both sides so that providers can maintain readiness and be quickly and fully operational post-crisis, and learners can resume learning as soon as possible.
  - In England (United Kingdom), apprentices who are forced to take breaks in training in the workplace or are unable to work due to COVID-19 related prevention measures or illness, can classify this period as a break in learning (UK Department for Education, 2020<sup>[4]</sup>). Meanwhile, apprentices in England who are deemed ready for assessment but are unable to be assessed due to assessor illness or COVID-19 related measures that make such assessment difficult, are allowed to take a pause in learning. Any time limit for assessment may also be extended (Institute for Apprentices & Technical Education, 2020<sup>[5]</sup>).

<sup>3</sup> STEP can also enable to use flipped learning and team project-based training.



- In the Netherlands, upper-secondary VET (MBO) students may still be admitted to higher VET (HBO) even if they were unable to complete one or two subjects or finish their work placement due to the crisis – they are given an extension in order to fulfil all MBO requirements and obtain their MBO qualification (Government of the Netherlands, 2020<sup>[6]</sup>). The country has also postponed the registration date for MBO programme admission (Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>).
- In South Korea, an extension of the training period or flexible training time has been allowed.
- Spain has agreed to flexibility in terms of the WBL component of VET programmes by extending the calendar for work placements, shortening the WBL component or integrating the component through other means (European Commission, 2020<sup>[7]</sup>).
- **Wage support for apprentice retention:** Even in cases where WBL is not feasible, it is important for apprentices to maintain contact with employers and if possible continue working through teleworking or virtual meetings.
  - Australia, as part of its economic response to COVID-19, is supporting small business to retain their apprentices and trainees through a new wage subsidy (50% of their wages for up to 9 months from January to September 2020).<sup>4</sup> This assistance will support up to 70 000 small businesses, employing around 117 000 apprentices and trainees (Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 13 March 2020<sup>[8]</sup>; Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020<sup>[9]</sup>).
  - Austria, Germany and Switzerland already have short-term work schemes (Kurzarbeit) to help companies with financial aid to compensate for the loss of employee earnings due to the reduction in working hours. This scheme does not normally cover apprentices, but due to the COVID-19 crisis, the measure has been extended to do so in Austria and Switzerland, and in a more limited form, Berlin. The industry and craft sector in Germany has asked the government to extend the measure to apprentices.
  - In Ireland, where apprentices are unable to work due to COVID-19 restrictions, it is expected that employers will generally seek a wage subsidy payment on their behalf. Alternatively, where a temporary layoff has been required, apprentices are generally eligible for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, or alternatively Jobseekers Benefit (Generation Apprenticeship, 2020<sup>[10]</sup>).
  - In England, the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme allows employers to claim 80% of usual monthly wage costs for furloughed employees, up to GBP 2 500 a month, plus social security contributions. A furloughed employee can take part in training, including apprenticeship off-the-job training (where the furlough payment does not meet the appropriate minimum wage for the time spent training, employers will need to pay the additional wages). Where their provider can continue to deliver training remotely, a furloughed apprentice can therefore continue their apprenticeship while furloughed (HM Revenue & Customs, 2020<sup>[11]</sup>).
  - Scotland already has financial incentives to employers taking on an apprentice who has been made redundant by another employer. This incentive provides GBP 5 000 to employers in the oil and gas industry and GBP 2 000 elsewhere.
- **Leveraging links between work-based and school-based VET:** Countries such as Denmark and Norway already provide alternative school-based VET in cases where upper-secondary VET students are unable to secure an apprenticeship (yet there is a recognition that school-based VET

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<sup>4</sup> Employers of any size who re-engage an apprentice or trainee that has been displaced from a small business are also eligible for a wage subsidy.



cannot fully replace work-based learning). In countries such as Estonia, Finland, the Netherlands<sup>5</sup> and Sweden, apprenticeships and school-based VET already lead to the same qualifications, alternating work-based and school-based learning. This model of delivery offers an option for accommodating apprentices whose WBL is disrupted. For example, in the United Kingdom, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) has indicated that current first-year undergraduate students will be able to take only theory courses in the short-term, and later make up the required 50-50 split of theoretical and clinical hours (Nursing & Midwifery Council, 2020<sub>[12]</sub>).

- **Flexible skills assessment and awarding of qualifications:** In many sectors, such as healthcare in particular, a direct route to qualification may need to be established quickly in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Some apprentices will not be able to complete their programme as expected, because they have been made redundant, or because of sustained disruption of their normal workplace or training location. These individuals will need effective support so that they can complete and gain their desired occupational qualification. To this end, it will be very important to revisit assessment arrangements.
  - **Recognising prior learning.** Recognising the prior learning of adults with substantial and relevant prior work experience can be achieved through a standalone final assessment. In Austria, Germany, Norway and Switzerland, a person can earn a full qualification upon demonstrating that they have already achieved the targeted learning outcomes by passing a final qualifying examination or proving those skills in other ways. It may be necessary to establish such a framework as an immediate measure to provide a means of qualifying individuals who have had their apprenticeship programmes disrupted by the COVID-19 crisis. For experienced adult workers, countries should establish direct access routes to the qualifications – either through direct access to examination or by topping up partially missing skills with modular training. For apprentices who have had their apprenticeship programmes interrupted, direct access to examinations and assessments can be offered.
  - **Fast-track licenses:** In the sectors with shortages or expected shortages such as medical and health care sectors, some countries are issuing short-term, fast-track licenses. For example, Canada is leveraging unlicensed internationally trained health professionals and recent medical school graduates to fight COVID-19. Ontario issued Supervised Short Duration Certificates for those who meet minimum qualifications and conditions. This measure can have a significant impact on the crisis response, as there are 19 000 foreign-educated doctors and nurses who are not working in their fields, according to numbers from HealthForceOntario. Similarly, British Columbia amended the province's Health Professions Act so that international medical graduates can apply for a supervised associate physician licence.<sup>6</sup> In the United States, several states and schools are allowing early graduation for current medical and nursing students and making it easier for migrants and foreign-trained medical professionals to provide patient care in hospitals (Mathema, 2 April 2020<sub>[13]</sub>). In the United Kingdom, the NMC launched the COVID-19 temporary register to recruit both health professionals who left the sector in recent years and qualified migrants – the eligibility of nursing students in the final six months of programme is under review (Nursing & Midwifery Council, 2020<sub>[12]</sub>) and a set of emergency standards will enable these students to finish their training on placement while ensuring that all of their learning outcomes are met.

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<sup>5</sup> Apprenticeships with on-the-job time representing at least 60% of the programme duration and school-based VET with mandatory work placements representing at least 20% of the programme duration. School-based VET is more popular in certain sectors or programmes leading to higher level qualifications.

<sup>6</sup> It has fast-tracked a new bylaw to amend the province's Health Professions Act so that international medical graduates can apply for a supervised associate physician licence to fight COVID-19.



- **Retraining of redeployed workers:** If the lockdown becomes lengthy and leads to the redeployment of workers, retraining of these workers may be necessary. Those workers that have to work in environments susceptible to infectious disease and cannot telework (e.g. construction or offshore oil and gas workers who have to live and work onsite for a certain period of time) or those working in sectors hit hard by COVID-19 because of supply chain disruptions or decreases in demand may need further training to reskill. For example, New Zealand will spend NZD 100 million redeploying forestry workers (Hendry-Tennent, 20 March 2020<sup>[14]</sup>). In several other countries, oil and gas companies have already been reskilling workers in emerging technologies as part of the broader energy transition – these efforts have been accelerated in light of the recent crisis.<sup>7</sup> VET systems should be prepared for such cases.
- **Informing, engaging and communicating with, learners, providers and social partners:** In all cases, measures need to be communicated. For example, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education in the United Kingdom has published new guidance on the delivery of assessment, and the English Department for Education has established a Coronavirus Helpline to ensure apprentices are informed of changes to regulations and practices. In addition, the country also provides motivational support for apprentices and employers.<sup>8</sup>
- **Investing in VET:** To mitigate future skills shortages and minimise the shock of the crisis, countries are investing in VET and building skills. Sweden, through its crisis package for jobs and transition, has put forward plans to increase funding and additional support to VET including distance learning providers in higher VET. In the United States, Youth Apprenticeship Readiness grants (USD 42.5 million), planned prior to the crisis but announced in April 2020, are supporting the enrolment of in-school or out-of-school youth (ages 16-24) into new or existing Registered Apprenticeship Programmes as well as pre-apprenticeship programmes (US Department of Education, 6 April 2020<sup>[15]</sup>).

## Actions today to build tomorrow's strong and resilient VET systems

The immediate concern of countries today is rightfully how to overcome the immediate crisis. But decisions taken today can have long-term implications, so policymakers also need to ask themselves how VET systems can be improved through these decisions and ultimately emerge from this crisis even stronger, more responsive, and more resilient than before. If they have the capacity to do so, countries should take the opportunity to review their VET systems and track how they are responding, or not, to the current situation.

In this context, countries and VET systems should:

- **Engage with employers and trade unions** at both local and national levels, taking into account that each sector is affected differently by the outbreak. Such engagement can open up lines of communication that may not currently be open, leading to greater engagement in the future. Such engagement may be considerably easier in the current context given increased acceptance of digital conferencing.
- **Start planning today for changes in the labour market** that might be accelerated due to the crisis, particularly if they have not been doing so already, including digitalisation. In particular, given that occupations involving routine tasks are being transformed, restructured or disappearing

<sup>7</sup> For example, Royal Dutch Shell in the United States and other countries is reskilling their workers in programming and machine learning, partnering with Udacity (Caminiti, 3 April 2020<sup>[17]</sup>).

<sup>8</sup> For example, [Amazing Apprenticeships](#) (communication channel commissioned by the UK National Apprenticeship Service) provides motivational webinars.



entirely due to increasing levels of automation, VET systems will need to focus more on those occupations demanding higher levels of autonomy, planning, team-work, communication and customer service skills that are more able to resist automation.

- **Provide financial assistance to VET systems and learners to undertake training in more future-proof sectors and occupations** that will be critical to economic recovery in the long-term. For example, with a dramatic decrease in transport demand and a major oil surplus, the oil and gas industry is facing an existential crisis and putting millions of jobs in jeopardy. In addition, the current crisis is expected to accelerate the automation and digitalisation of many occupations and tasks. In this context, stimulus packages can be better used to reskill, retrain and upskill workers in occupations at a high risk of automation or restructuring – as well as unemployed people – into more resilient, future-oriented and higher skilled ones such as renewable energy, IT or biotechnology.
- **Capitalise on the demand for digital, distance offerings** by exploring options for innovative, digital pedagogical approaches such as simulators, augmented/virtual reality, or artificial intelligence. VET systems should take advantage of any increases in funding that may be available in their respective countries to build infrastructure that can be used in the long term.
- **Examine policies and regulations with regard to the awarding of micro-credentials and digital badges** to ensure that progress made in the offering of VET at a distance can be appropriately rewarded with qualifications in a timely and effective manner.
- **Make sure that VET programmes are providing opportunities for learning foundational skills** such as digital, basic and socioemotional skills. Such transferable, foundational skills can help economies recover more quickly following a crisis, by helping workers more easily transition into other sectors or jobs. The confinement period represents a significant opportunity to expand offerings of these kinds of skills, which to a certain degree can be easily taught and learned at a distance.
- **Pay particular attention to vulnerable groups** including youth-at-risk, laid-off workers and migrants, in particular those who have no access to the Internet. These groups, who are often served by the VET system, are particularly vulnerable to crises including not only the ongoing pandemic, but also the expected recession. While many workers and groups are at risk of being left behind as the labour market evolves, close attention needs to be paid to inclusion and equity issues in every aspect of the VET system. Some specific equity initiatives may be needed depending on the context.
- Focus on efforts to maintain and build a **highly qualified workforce of vocational teachers and trainers**. In countries such as Australia and the United States, initial teacher education and training courses are taught online, and this is a model that could be quickly replicated elsewhere. VET teachers also need high quality digital delivery skills and confidence in using web conferencing solutions, and this crisis can provide an opportunity to build those skills across the VET teaching workforce.

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