

Editorial

The spread of COVID-19 has sent shockwaves across the globe. The public health crisis, unprecedented in our current lifetime, has caused severe human suffering and loss of life. The exponential rise in infected patients and the dramatic consequences of serious cases of the disease have overwhelmed hospitals and health professionals and put significant strain on the health sector. As governments grappled with the spread of the disease by closing down entire sectors of activity and imposing widespread restrictions on mobility, the sanitary crisis evolved into a major economic crisis expected to burden societies for years to come. According to the OECD's latest *Economic Outlook*, even the most optimistic scenarios predict a brutal recession. Even if a second wave of infections is avoided, global economic activity is expected to fall by 6% in 2020, with average unemployment in OECD countries climbing to 9.2%, from 5.4% in 2019. In the event of a second outbreak triggering a return to lockdown, the situation would be worse.

Education has not been spared. The lockdowns have interrupted conventional schooling with nationwide school closures in most OECD and partner countries, lasting at least 10 weeks in the majority of them. While the educational community has made important efforts to maintain learning continuity during this period, children and students have had to rely more on their own resources to continue learning remotely through the Internet, television or radio. Disadvantaged students have had the hardest time adjusting to distance learning. Spending on education may also be compromised in the coming years. As emergency public funds might be directed to health and social welfare, long-term public spending on education is at risk despite short-term stimulus packages in some countries. Private funding will also become scarce as the economy weakens. More damagingly, the lockdown has exacerbated inequality among workers. While teleworking is often an option for the most qualified, it is seldom possible for those with lower levels of education, many of whom have been on the front lines in the response to the pandemic, providing essential services to society.

Recognising the importance of vocational education

While remote learning has offered some educational continuity when it comes to academic learning, vocational education has been particularly hard hit by the crisis. Social distancing requirements and the closure of enterprises have made practical and work-based learning that are so crucial for the success of vocational education, difficult or impossible. And yet, this sector plays a central role in ensuring the alignment between education and work, the successful transition into the labour market, and for employment and the economic recovery more generally. Not least, many of the professions that formed the backbone of economic and social life during the lockdown hinge on vocational qualifications.

This year's *Education at a Glance* therefore places the spotlight on vocational education and training (VET). Most often provided at upper secondary level, but sometimes also at lower or post-secondary level, VET provides trade, technical and professional skills for the workforce. Often neglected in favour of more prestigious academic routes, VET has often been disregarded in educational policy debates. Indeed, on average across OECD countries, young adults today are less likely to pursue a vocational path and more likely to pursue an academic university degree than their parents were. This may partly reflect long-term labour-market prospects: although young adults with an upper secondary vocational education as their highest attainment are more likely to be employed than those with a general upper secondary one, their employment rate remains more or less stable with age while that of adults with a general upper secondary education increases. In contrast, the employment

advantage of a tertiary education continues to increase with age. Earnings are also lower: adults with an upper secondary vocational qualification have similar earnings to those with an upper secondary general qualification, but they earn 34% less than tertiary-educated adults on average across OECD countries. With rising concerns about the unpredictability of the job market and rapid technological advances making way for digitalisation and automation, it is important for VET programmes to adapt and provide students with the skills needed for tomorrow's society.

Yet the evidence from countries with high-performing vocational systems is that they provide a very effective means of integrating learners into the labour market and opening pathways for further learning and personal growth. During the lockdown that followed the spread of COVID-19, the reliance on vital services such as manufacturing and healthcare, many of which rely on vocational education, has brought to light, more than ever, the need to look at VET with a fresh eye and implement measures to increase its attractiveness to potential learners. One way to do that is to enhance work-based learning and strengthen ties with the private sector. In contrast to exclusively school-based learning, combined school- and work-based programmes provide students with a unique understanding of the workplace. By being placed in direct contact with employers, students assimilate the most relevant skills and gain direct exposure to the labour market. Despite their advantages, these types of VET programmes are still uncommon: they account for only one-third of upper secondary vocational enrolment on average across OECD countries.

Improving the progression from VET into higher levels of education is also important to support students in developing skills that provide value to the workplace. Enabling students to move between programme types, including into higher education, also signals that VET programmes are not an educational dead-end, but can open the door to further learning and self-development. Providing prospects for higher education also encourages vocational students to complete their education. Although the completion rate of students in a vocational upper secondary programme is lower than in general ones, vocational students are more likely to complete their qualification when the programme provides access to tertiary education than when it does not.

Most countries have opened pathways between upper secondary vocational programmes and higher education. On average across OECD countries, almost 7 out of 10 upper secondary vocational students are enrolled in programmes that, in theory, allow them to progress to a higher-level degree. However, while these pathways exist, few actually use them. A survey conducted across a few OECD countries for *Education at a Glance 2019* found that the share of vocational students is lower among entrants to bachelor's or equivalent programmes than at upper secondary level. Although short-cycle tertiary programmes are usually more attractive to vocational students than long-cycle degrees, these do not exist in all countries.

Education for resilience and recovery

As we enter the COVID-19 recovery phase, it will be critical to reflect on the role of educational systems – and particularly vocational education – in fostering resilient societies. VET can support the training of professionals such as healthcare or childcare workers, or those in manufacturing or agriculture, who have maintained essential services to the public during the pandemic. The global health crisis and the generalised lockdown that followed have brought to the fore professions that have often been taken for granted, renewing our awareness of their value to society. This has helped restore a sense of esteem for those workers who have worked relentlessly during this time to keep our world afloat.

The outlook is very uncertain. But, if anything, the pandemic has exposed our vulnerability to crises and revealed how precarious and interdependent the economies we have built can be. Disruptions on the scale we have just witnessed are not limited to pandemics, but may also result from natural, political, economic and environmental disorder. Our capacity to react effectively and efficiently in the future will hinge on governments' foresight, readiness, and preparedness. Through their role in developing the competencies and skills needed for tomorrow's society, education systems will need to be at the heart of this planning. This includes rethinking how the economy should evolve to guard against adversity, and defining the skills, education and training required to

support it. This also means working in close collaboration with other government sectors and the private sector to increase the attractiveness and labour-market prospects of certain professions, including those considered paramount for the common good.

More than ever, the pandemic is a call to renew our political commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals. Ensuring that all young people have the opportunity to succeed at school and develop the skills that will allow them to contribute to society is at the heart of the global agenda and education's promise to our future society. The current crisis has tested our ability to deal with large-scale disruptions. It is now up to us to build as its legacy a more resilient society.



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