



ELECTION BRIEF 19-04

WORKING GROUP ON YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

# HAVING THE CAKE AND EATING IT?

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## VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND INEQUALITIES

### KEY POINTS

- APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEMS EXACERBATE SOCIAL INEQUALITIES
- SOME EUROPEAN APPROACHES HELP, BUT MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE
- INEQUALITIES CAN BE TACKLED IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM MORE GENERALLY

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# European Student Think Tank

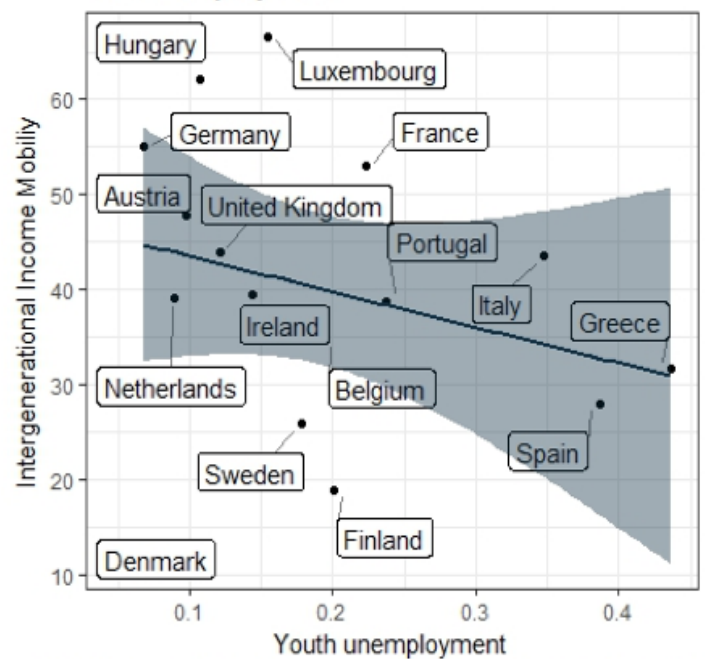
Vocational education and training (VET) has high priority on the national and European policy agenda. In contrast to general education equipping students with skills for higher education, VET prepares for employment in a specific occupation, trade or class of occupations or trades. According to the EU-agency Cedefop 'VET at all levels is at the heart of Europe's response to the economic crisis, but also addresses long-term trends such as ageing, changing skill needs across the jobs spectrum and the need for greener economies'<sup>1</sup>. Even though VET seems to hit a whole swarm of birds with one stone, it attracts attention as it makes transitions from school to work easier and thus lowers youth unemployment. One form of VET are apprenticeships, where students learn mainly at the workplace and hold a contract with an employer. Apprenticeships are the 'gold standard' in VET, since chances to become employed after completing the apprenticeship are high. However, this comes at a cost: Where VET works particularly well, it also fosters social inequality<sup>2</sup>. The Decent Jobs for Youth (DJfY) initiative acknowledges that apprenticeship schemes often entail inequalities and considers non-discrimination as important for quality apprenticeships<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, strategies to reduce social inequalities in VET need to be part of any effort to promote apprenticeships.

## SEGREGATION – TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

The main strength of VET is to bring students directly into employment, because teaching focuses on a specific set of skills. For employers, graduates from school with job-relevant skills are attractive as further training is unlikely to be necessary. The more specific the skills are, the better students are prepared for a particular job. The highly specific training in apprenticeship systems prepares students optimally for particular occupations. While this suggests good chances for employment for the apprentices, social mobility can suffer from such extensive VET schemes. Stronger specificity goes hand in hand with teaching different groups of students separately. So called 'tracking' leads to social inequality as students from less advantaged backgrounds tend to choose VET over academic streams<sup>4</sup>. Various theories explain why this is the case. Most importantly, VET often constitutes a cheaper alternative to academic and higher education for working class youths. Also, it can be less risky because it matches their parents' experiences better. In many cases, choices on educational tracks are made early in the educational career, based on parental influence, role models in the wider social environment or a teacher's judgment, all of which

are not necessarily a good indicator of academic ability<sup>5</sup>. Tracked education reinforces inequalities, since teaching in separated classes prevents students from learning from those with high abilities or ambitions<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, vocational tracks are usually an educational 'dead end' that prevents access to higher education.

## Intergenerational Mobility and Youth employment



Sources: Eurostat (Unemployment by sex and age - annual average [une\_rt\_a], OECD (Earnings elasticities for father to son, late 2000s)

In sum, the more VET is tailored to employers' needs and the more specific training is, the stronger segregation will be. Moreover, the more job-oriented education is, the more challenging the integration of general education and vocational education becomes. As a result, integrating vocational qualifications and higher education access becomes less feasible.

## THE EU: SOCIAL MOBILITY THROUGH THE BACK-DOOR

The role of the EU in education policy is constrained, since this area is part of the member states' competences. However, it supports policy-making by bringing different groups to one table, such as unions, employer organisations and governments. Facilitating international exchange is another key part of the EU's role. It sets targets and monitors progress. Through this range of tools, the EU puts forward its visions for VET. Overall, the EU conceives of well-functioning VET as an equalizer, providing the right skills for the labour market, helping young people into employment and promoting social inclusion.

Even though EU-policies tend to focus on the positive role of VET in giving not at least disadvantaged people access to labour market specific skills, some policies put forward by EU-bodies could also help mitigate the adverse implications of strong VET systems for social inequality. Firstly, creating more flexible pathways between educational tracks is encouraged (permeability). For instance, VET systems and apprenticeships could be designed in a way that graduates gain access to higher education, such as universities. In its New Skills Agenda, the European Commission stresses that progression to ‘higher vocational or academic learning’ needs to be enabled. Secondly, the EU’s declared goal is an improvement of the image of VET. A main policy in that field is the European Vocational Skills Week, a large-scale event aiming at raising awareness for the benefits of VET among students, businesses and the wider public. This can be a pathway towards improving social mobility, too, since it bears the potential to attract students from more diverse social backgrounds.

## NESTING APPRENTICESHIPS IN FAIRER EDUCATION SYSTEMS



While the clear emphasis of EU-policy is to increase VET participation, some of the EU’s efforts have the potential of mitigating social inequality, which emerges from segregated education. However, these measures are not sufficient. This is particularly true since it has been questioned to what extent enhanced permeability and higher education access for VET graduates can make a difference in reality<sup>7</sup> and the progress towards more permeability is slow<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, efforts to improve the esteem of VET programmes have not been successful in most cases<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, achieving more quality apprenticeships as set out by the DJfY-initiative would require more action to compensate for inequalities apprenticeships generally entail.

However, it goes without saying that efforts to improve permeability and reputation need to be intensified. An entry point for reform could be measures that aim to reduce parental and teacher influence on the choice between academic and vocational education. This can be achieved through positioning the decision between educational tracks to the latest point possible. Research shows that countries where this decision is made earlier tend to perform worse in social mobility<sup>10</sup>. Also, countries that prolonged their comprehensive, untracked schooling reduced educational inequality<sup>11</sup>. Countries at both ends of the spectrum in terms of tracking maintain highly developed apprenticeship systems that yield equally favourable school-to-work transitions. For instance, while the age of first tracking in Germany is around 10, the Danish education system builds on comprehensive schooling until students are approximately 16. Both countries, however, have a strong apprenticeship system. Yet another approach could be to reduce the costs of academic education relative to vocational education. This can be achieved through abolishing tuition fees in higher education, for example. Moreover, more generous financial support schemes for higher education students can be a promising way to reduce class-based segregation in VET.

Educational policies that compensate for the segregating effect of apprenticeships are key when launching VET-reform. Crucially, such policies need not necessarily come from within the apprenticeship system itself. Rather, the way in which apprenticeship systems are incorporated into the broader education system is important too. In addition, changes in other educational sectors can impact segregation in VET as well. An integral part of the DJfY initiative, quality apprenticeships that do not produce and amplify social inequalities require compensatory educational policies. Such policies should be taken into account and implemented together with apprenticeship systems and reforms. The opportunity of a new decade’s strategy in the EU should be used to employ new approaches.

## References

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