

Teachers and trainers for the future: Vocational training in a changing world

The ILO estimates that unemployment is up by more than 30 million worldwide since 2007. The number of unemployed youth increased by 8.5 million between 2008 and 2009, the largest year-on-year increase in at least ten years. Against this sombre economic background, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) systems worldwide are under pressure to deal with a host of employment and workplace challenges. ILO Online spoke with Bill Ratteree, senior education specialist in the ILO's Sectoral Activities Department, and Michael Axmann, senior specialist in skills development systems, in the ILO's Skills and Employability Department, about how TVET systems can respond to these challenges.

09/30/2010

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Why did the ILO convene this meeting on vocational training?

Bill Ratteree: As the ILO's Global Jobs Pact adopted in 2009 sets out, one of the key policy solutions to ending the worldwide jobs crisis will be equipping the workforce with the skills needed for employability. How TVET systems can contribute to improving this situation, particularly in reducing the number of inactive young people – those not in employment, education or training – and reducing social marginalization for all population groups has become a priority question for decision-makers.

The Global Dialogue Forum on Vocational Education and Training will examine how TVET systems can help countries deal with employment and workplace challenges. Adult and youth unemployment, new forms of work organization, sustainable development, among others, are driving a renewed search for balanced skills development that responds more closely to real workplace needs. This in turn creates a need for closer cooperation between enterprises, schools and other stakeholders to deliver and assess outcomes. Sectoral-based strategies and those developed by major groups of countries such as the G20 have emerged in response to the challenges.

The Forum will look at the contributions of public and private providers to dealing with these questions, and specifically the training, remuneration, working conditions of teachers. Strengthening social dialogue structures within TVET will be a major subject of the Forum.

According to the report to the meeting^{2/}, vocational training needs are greater than ever? What is the current situation?

Bill Ratteree: The economic and financial crisis has negatively impacted the employment situation since 2008. The ILO estimated the number of unemployed persons at 212 million in 2009 representing 6.4 per cent of a world labour force of some 3.3 billion people. The number of unemployed youth increased by 8.5 million between 2008 and 2009, the largest year-on-year increase in at least ten years.

How does this situation affect TVET systems?

Michael Axmann: Against this sombre economic backdrop, TVET systems worldwide are under pressure to deal with a host of other employment and workplace challenges in a creative and employment-driven way. These challenges include changing technologies, shorter product cycles, new forms of work organization, sustainable development and green jobs. In view of these far-reaching developments, using TVET policies in the most effective way in support of enhanced education and skills levels of workers has become of prime importance in economic, employment and social integration strategies worldwide.

Does the employment of TVET teachers and trainers meet these new demands?

Michael Axmann: Employment of TVET teachers and trainers to meet demand varies over time by country, but has shown strong growth in some. Saudi-Arabia foresees the engagement of 20,000 new TVET teachers and trainers by 2025, while the United States is expected to have 10,000 more teachers and trainers by 2018. More than half of the 23 European countries for which comparable data are available, have increased the numbers of secondary level teachers in recent years.

Much progress has been made around the world in redressing gender imbalances in TVET employment. The data shows strong growth in the recruitment of women teachers and trainers in a sector that historically has been male-dominated, but much still needs to be done.

It seems that high-income countries, especially preoccupied by actual or looming teacher shortages, have adopted a range of measures to address these new demands, including cross-national recruitment, “fast track” training and recruitment policies and greater recourse to part-time and flexible working arrangements that favour more employment mobility between TVET system and workplaces. Career structures are also evolving and becoming more diversified in response to overall reforms and needs.

Do we need more training for these trainers?

Michael Axmann: The increasingly multi-functional roles and responsibilities of teachers and trainers have led to new learning approaches with greater autonomy for programme decisions and outreach to the world of work. A wide range of countries now require significant non-academic work experience as part of training and certification in efforts to break down divides between TVET institutions and workplaces. Teacher assessment mechanisms are increasing as part of reforms to prepare teachers for TVET jobs.

What about the employment conditions of TVET personnel?

Bill Ratteree: Long-standing guarantees of job security in the public TVET systems are eroding, with more emphasis on merit than seniority considerations. Remuneration levels and structures are more susceptible to competition from private enterprise than other education sectors, and within TVET between public and private providers, requiring changes and improvements to ensure adequate recruitment, retention and professional commitment. Performance-related pay schemes are not yet widespread but are more likely to be a policy issue in the future.

Does the TVET sector also suffer from restricted public budgets in times of crisis?

Michael Axmann: Financing of this level of education, considered to be more costly than general education, remains low. In developing countries, it is increasingly compromised by lower levels of development assistance, and in the industrialized world, by the general impact of the current economic recession on government budgets. Long-established public–private partnerships provide a source of much needed financing and may be emulated more broadly in the future.

The report to the meeting insists on the role of social dialogue in adapting TVET systems?

Bill Ratteree: The increasing and constant changes affecting TVET and its relationship to the world of work have rendered social dialogue ever more relevant to the search for policy solutions. This includes all forms of information sharing, consultation or negotiation, including collective bargaining. Although social dialogue between governments, employers, trade unions and other stakeholders is growing, notably in the framework of public-private partnerships, it is often constrained by poor or non-existent institutions or mechanisms and lack of capacity by TVET actors to fully engage in dialogue on reforms, particularly to hear the voices of teachers and trainers. Good cases of countries with functioning social dialogue mechanisms in TVET can be found in some OECD countries, such as Denmark, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

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Report for discussion at the Global Dialogue Forum on Vocational Education and Training (29 – 30 September 2010), International Labour Office, Geneva, 2010.