

Abstract

Have we given as much attention to people who do not attend college and university as to those who do? Assumptions that massification would, on its own, provide opportunities for everyone are being heavily questioned. Technical and vocational education and training colleges and polytechnics are increasingly acknowledged as playing an indispensable role in post-18 years' education. Many countries are going further—reframing policy discussion around tertiary education, inclusive of formal, non-formal, “second-chance,” and life-long learning.

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Too Many People Left Behind: The Crucial Importance of TVET

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Recent decades have seen significant policy success increasing the numbers of young people attending and successfully completing higher education. According to *Education at a Glance* 2020, across OECD countries, 45 percent of 25–34-year-olds have participated in higher education, compared with only 28.4 percent of 55–64-year-olds—although this varies across countries. This is likely to increase to 49 percent over the next years. Despite costs associated with participation, people with a higher education qualification do better in the labor market and in life chances over the longer term. But what about the other 50 percent? Have we given as much attention to people who do not attend university?

Hyperglobalization, demographic change, the climate crisis, and the technological revolution—plus changes accruing from the COVID-19 pandemic—are all dramatically reshaping the world of work and how and where we live. In addition to the adage that people will work in jobs that we do not even know about now, the workforce itself will become more diverse, with a greater range of ages, more women, and more ethnic diversity. According to CEDEFOP, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, higher skills will constitute 41 percent of the skills mix required by 2030 and almost 45 percent of jobs will require medium-level skills. Yet, on average across OECD countries, almost 39 percent of 25–29-year-olds are classified as NEETs—neither employed nor in education or training.

These developments, and the resulting rise in populism and social unrest, are forcing policy makers to focus on long-standing weaknesses in their education and training systems. Assumptions that massification would *on its own* provide opportunities for everyone with mechanisms for social inclusion and mobility are being heavily questioned, and entry routes are now seen as just as likely to close off educational and career opportunities as to open them. In contrast to an overemphasis on high-status resource-intensive research universities, attention is turning those left behind. After all, the top 100 universities listed by the Academic Ranking of World Universities (2019) represent only 1.4 percent of total student numbers worldwide.

What is Nonuniversity/TVET?

Various terms are used to describe or define postsecondary education. Governments have often allowed their liberal market or coordinated binary systems to carve out distinctive educational pathways, with each preparing graduates for different occupational destinations. In the 1970s, UNESCO developed the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) as a framework to differentiate between shorter practical, technical, or occupational skill-focused and longer theoretical programs. ISCED was subsequently revised in 1997 and again in 2011.

Higher education (ISCED 6–8) is clearly delineated by internationally recognized qualifications (bachelor, master, doctorate) offered primarily by universities. In contrast, provision of, and attitudes to, the “nonuniversity” sector vary considerably. The nomenclature itself illustrates the extent to which public discourse and policy have often framed these institutions, and their students, as “the other.”

There are different types of credentials associated with ISCED levels 4 and 5, usually with little recognition outside their country. Provision ranges from countries with high standardization, strong track differentiation, and linkages between education and the labor market, to countries with much weaker track differentiation and school-to-work linkages.

Germany, for example, stresses parity of esteem between vocational and academic education. In Australia and Ireland, dual-sector institutions have been established

providing vocational/professional education from ISCED 5 to 8. Community colleges in the United States focus on workforce preparation, preparing students for their first job or retraining, upgrading, assisting owners of small businesses, or helping communities with economic development planning. In jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom, further education is seen primarily as a feeder into university, leading to predatory behavior between universities and colleges.

Nonuniversity/TVET (technical and vocational education and training) institutions provide pathways to well-paying careers as well as an entry into higher levels of education for those who wish to pursue further study. Yet, in many countries, sociocultural and policy factors have meant that these institutions have relatively low status and receive considerably less funding and resources than universities.

Reframing Postsecondary Education as Tertiary Education

Operating under different names, TVET colleges and polytechnics and similar institutions are increasingly acknowledged as playing an indispensable role in post-18-years' education. Many countries are going further—reframing policy discussion around tertiary education, inclusive of formal, nonformal, “second-chance,” and life-long learning. Objectives envisage a more integrated set of learning pathways and networks of colleges and universities providing both knowledge and skills with greater labor market relevance and emphasis on work-based and work-informed learning.

Changes are also affecting apprenticeship education, which has traditionally been provided in technical schools at secondary level. Redesigned for the twenty-first century, it retains the “earn-learn” model but now embraces computing, data analytics, advanced manufacturing, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and more, in addition to traditional fields such as construction, automotive, etc. Countries are taking different approaches, but what is clear is that postsecondary “nonuniversity” education is taking centre stage. An early innovator, New Zealand established the [Tertiary Education Advisory Commission](#) (TEAC) in 2000. It adopted a broad definition of tertiary education, bringing all private and government training establishments, business-based education, industry training, and all lifelong learning beyond the compulsory school system under the remit of the [Tertiary Education Commission](#) (TEC). Wales is moving in the same direction with legislation prepared to establish the [Commission for Tertiary Education and Research](#) (CTER). Ireland has brought further education and higher education together in one dedicated ministry.

Singapore's [Skills Future](#) provides a universal set of education and training programs for students, early and mid-career employees and “silver years,” and employers, developed as part of its [Singapore Skills Framework](#). It involves a wide range of postsecondary providers, including polytechnics. Brazil's federal network of vocational, scientific, and technological education institutions brings together more than 40 different institutions. [Ethiopia](#) has identified TVET as a national priority playing a key role in the transformation from an agricultural-based economy to a dynamic, industry-led internationalized economy. US President Obama, and now President Biden, propose making [two years of community college free](#).

The European Union launched the Centres of Vocational Excellence initiative, placing vocational education and training at the heart of a skills ecosystem contributing to regional, economic, and social development and innovation. In the United Kingdom, the [Commission on the College of the Future](#) published several reports setting out a similar agenda for postsecondary colleges. At the international level, there is the [UNESCO International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training](#) (UN-EVOC) and [CEDEFOP](#).

Changing Profile of Vocational Education and Training

Too often dismissed or ignored in the rush toward universal higher education, or seen as a cheap(er) option, postsecondary education/TVET is now recognized as an [essential component](#) of the (tertiary) education system and the broader ecosystem. This is because it encompasses skill development as well as innovation diffusion and applied research—which together can have a more direct impact on sustainable social, cultural, and economic growth, especially in less developed regions. It responds to needs for reskilling and upskilling and can contribute to addressing demographic challenges—in

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addition to its powerful role and social responsibility in working with disadvantaged and underserved communities. The objective of creating a coherent tertiary system, encompassing different types of educational providers working collaboratively, each aiming to be best in class, is an idea whose time has finally come. ▲