

Strategies for Reforming Workforce Preparation Programs in Europe

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The SPES-NET Project

The Post-16 Strategies project coordinated by Dr. Johanna Lasonen from 1996 to 1998 was chiefly concerned with four post-16 education strategies: vocational enhancement, mutual enrichment, linkages, and unification. These four strategies to promote parity of esteem between vocational and academic/general education were also seen as tools for analyzing the differences and similarities between the reform approaches adopted in the eight European countries (Austria, England, Finland, France, Germany, Norway, Scotland, and Sweden) associated with the first project (Lasonen, 1996, 1999).

The strategy of vocational enhancement entails reforming the content of vocational education and training separately from general/academic education. Esteem for vocational education is assumed to be linked with the standard of the content offered and the pedagogy applied in vocational education and training.

In the strategy of mutual enrichment, the aim is to cooperate across the divide between general and vocational education and to give students in each track a wider range of options by drawing on the best features of the other track. The two types of education are brought closer to each other but retain their distinctive character.

In the *linkages* strategy, vocational and general/academic education are given the same formal status and linked through a common certification framework. Both types of education guarantee qualification for further and higher education, and earlier studies are recognized irrespective of track.

In *unification*, the distinction between vocational and general education is abolished by combining them within a unified system and developing a curriculum that integrates the two types of education.

The first three strategies aim to maintain a separate identity for vocational and general education. By contrast, the fourth strategy seeks to combine them into a uniform upper secondary education system (Lasonen, 1999).

SPES-NET (Sharpening Post-16 Education Strategies by Horizontal and Vertical Networking) known as the Leonardo da Vinci project, continued the work of the Post-16 Strategies project. Lasonen also launched and Stenström coordinated the SPES-NET project that was funded by the European Commission, the Finnish Ministry of Education, and the proj-

ect partners, and that ran from 1997 to 2000.

It focused on reanalyzing and exploiting the four hypothetically identified reform strategies intended to promote parity of esteem between general and vocational education in upper secondary education.

Aims of the Project

The SPES-NET project focused on promoting vocational education and training in the partner countries, which increased from the original eight countries in the first project to 13 nations in this project. An initial objective of the Post-16 Strategies project was to find ways of improving the status and attractiveness of vocational education and training.

The aims of the succeeding project, SPES-NET, were to:

- Find ways to improve the status of vocational education and training.
- Find ways to forge links between educational establishments and enterprises.
- Disseminate the results of the Post-16 Strategies project.
- Define dissemination activities intended to create national and international networks.

Table 1. Partner Institutions: Type of Institution

Type of Institution	New Partners	Old Partners
Research institute		England France Austria
University department	Spain Greece Hungary	Germany
Further education college		Scotland
Teacher training establishment	Denmark	Norway
Administrative agency	Estonia	Finland
Consultancy and training establishment	Belgium	

Since the partnership had been extended to southern and eastern Europe, it became possible to evaluate the four previously identified post-16 education strategies in a new context. The project also tried to find ways to develop links between education and work as an important method for improving the status of vocational education.

The Partnership

The partnership brought together 14 institutions from 13 European countries including the new partners from eastern and southern Europe (see Table 1). Some partners represented researchers and others the context of practitioners. The SPES-NET project was carried out by a multicultural team representing researchers,

policymakers, administrators, and teacher educators. The methods used were calculated to promote mutual understanding and shared solutions while also producing cross-national knowledge of ways to improve the quality of initial vocational education. The workshops featured presentations of data and syntheses, roundtable discussions, and brainstorming sessions. Conclusions pertaining to separate nations were drawn as were comparisons. The results of the comparisons were disseminated in each partner country (Stenström & Lasonen, 2000).

The range of different backgrounds of the representatives made for a fruitful environment for a dissemination project. The interdisciplinary nature of the project was considered a

Table 2. Educational Reform Strategies

<i>Strategies by countries</i>	<i>1. Vocational enhancement</i> Germany Austria Denmark*	<i>2. Mutual enrichment</i> Finland Norway	<i>3. Linkages</i> England France Spain*	<i>4. Unification</i> Scotland Sweden
<i>Substrategies</i>				
<i>1. Improving links with higher education (HE)</i>	Reforming and expanding vocational HE	(i) Improving access to existing HE (ii) Creating a new vocational HE system		Creating a single system of post-compulsory education
<i>2. Improving links with employers</i>	Strengthening dual-system partnerships	Strengthening partnerships between providers of VET and employers		Strengthening links between employers and vocational and general education teachers
<i>3. Raising the status and qualifications of vocational teachers and trainers</i>	Equalizing the status of vocational and general education teachers	Providing some common courses for vocational and general education teachers		Common training and qualifications for general education and vocational teachers
<i>4. Improving the VET curriculum</i>	Improving the vocational education component	More general education on vocational programs		More integrated learning

*New partner

Sources: Lasonen, 1996; Young, 2000.

positive feature because it created bridges to shared understanding between different countries in Europe. This multidisciplinary, multicultural approach produced a range of different solutions to the problems of vocational education and training (Lasonen, 1998; Stenström, 2000).

The SPES-NET project undertook a reanalysis of the previously identified reform strategies, proceeding through the following stages:

1. Analyzing the four post-16 education strategies in a new context.
 - Preparing and analyzing case studies of the new partner countries.
2. Reflecting on the post-16 education strategies.
 - Fitting the new partner countries' reforms into the framework of the four post-16 education strategies.
3. Developing a framework paper on new substrategies for the previously defined four post-16 education strategies.
 - Preparing a final summary of the substrategies on the basis of the partners' responses to an earlier draft of the framework paper, which was prepared by the English partner (Young, 2000).
4. Surveying the progress of forming links between educational establishments and enterprises.
 - Preparing a framework paper on education-work relationships (Marhuenda, 2000).
 - Case studies of the partner countries.

Reflections on Post-16 Education Strategies

It was not easy to classify educational systems in terms of the four post-16 education strategies. The four hypothetical reform strategies of the Post-16 Strategies project revealed that contexts existing in northern, western, and central European countries made the comparisons complicated. Extending this analysis to other regions was particularly difficult in the case of countries undergoing structural and political changes, such as Estonia and Hungary, and in the case of countries such as Estonia and Greece, where vocational secondary education is not well developed (Stenström, 1999).

The question the SPES-NET project faced was whether the previously defined four post-16 education strategies were relevant to the new partners or whether a model that included a strategy for academic track separate from vocational and a strategy where they are unified should be adopted instead. However, it was decided to retain the original typology but shift the focus of the comparisons to improvements in the quality of vocational education. Out of the larger context provided by the 13 European partners a new conceptual framework of strategies and trends emerged. It was clear that reform strategies must be defined in a more precise manner, distinguishing between the different substrategies for improving vocational education and its status relative to general education as follows (Stenström & Lasonen, 2000; Young, 2000):

- Improving progression to higher education by students in vocational programs.
- Improving progression into employment by students in vocational programs.
- Improving the status and qualifications of vocational teachers.
- Improving the vocational and general components of the vocational education curriculum.

These substrategies were used for comparing reforms launched in different countries to improve vocational education.

In Table 2, the horizontal axis is represented by the four strategies that were identified in the original Post-16 Strategies project. The vertical axis is the four substrategies for improving vocational education that were identified in the SPES-NET project. The matrix shows the relation between strategy (as context) and substrategy (as content). The partly hypothetical options presented in the matrix indicate the existence of three types of reform strategy because the matrix combines two of the previously defined four strategies, mutual enrichment and linkages.

All partner countries had reported some developments definable in terms of the four substrategies. The substrategy of improving progression opportunities into higher education for vocational education students seems to be the easiest one to adopt. The substrategy of improving the status and qualifications of vocational

teachers is difficult, especially in those countries in which salary differentials between private and public sectors remain large. Finally, improving the vocational curriculum depends on administration, teaching, and teacher education and on cooperative links between employers and vocational education providers. The relationships between education and working life is one of the key questions involved in attempts to improve the quality of vocational education and training.

The SPES-NET project *focused* exclusively on *internal strategies* for improving vocational education and training, ignoring external strategies. Such external strategies as interventions in labor markets might affect the status of vocational education and training and the issue of parity of esteem.

The SPES-NET project also *concentrated* on differences between national systems and national strategies for improving the quality of vocational education and parity of esteem between vocational and general education as they are manifested *at the policy level*. It was not concerned with new curricula and pedagogies. However, moving from the level of strategy to the level of specific curriculum and pedagogic initiatives would be a valuable topic for further research (Young & Volanen, 2000).

The partner countries face a number of common problems despite having very different educational systems. These common issues relate to ways in which attempts to improve vocational education continue to be hampered

by the persistence of academic/vocational divisions in the curriculum. First, there is academic drift or the tendency to encourage students to opt for academic programs. Second, there is the concern expressed by both employers and vocational teachers about the poor quality and lack of motivation of students in vocational programs. Third, academic/vocational divisions are inhibiting the development of new types of vocational programs for the 21st century.

Despite the differences in how the sub-strategies are interpreted in different countries, some common trans-European trends did emerge. These are summarized as:

- More standardization of qualifications for students and teachers.
- Greater emphasis on work-based learning and the educational potential of workplaces.
- Efforts to increase employer involvement in all aspects of vocational education and training provision.
- More choices for students and more autonomy to localities and individual institutions.

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