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SHORT-CYCLE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION*: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

There is no broadly accepted definition of post-secondary education, as it operates at a crossroads of the main types of education and training within the formal education system and covers a wide variety of qualifications, for example:

- Advanced vocational training qualifications such as France's 'brevet de technicien supérieur' (BTS) or 'diplôme universitaire de technologie';
- Master of crafts qualifications;
- Partial academic courses used as building blocks for both first-cycle higher education degrees and short-cycle higher education qualifications.

Three education and higher education frameworks are often referred to in the context of post-secondary education. This varies from country to country. The three frameworks are presented below.

1. The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)

Within the ISCED typology, short-cycle post-secondary education options are level 5 programmes and are part of the tertiary education cycle. Traditionally levels 5A and 5B are viewed as part of the university sector and the professional/vocational education segment respectively. Figure 1 provides an overview of the ISCED typology showing the distinction between levels 5A and 5B in the tertiary education sector.

The clear-cut divide between these levels makes it very difficult for 5B level graduates to continue their studies at ISCED 6 level in terms of the recognition of the credits achieved.

2. The Qualification Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA)

This framework describes a three-stage cycle of studies – bachelor, master, doctorate – and places short-cycle higher education within the first cycle of higher education (Bologna Process, 2005). This has the effect of potentially levelling out the differences between the 5A and 5B ISCED levels, as both streams are considered part of the European *Higher*



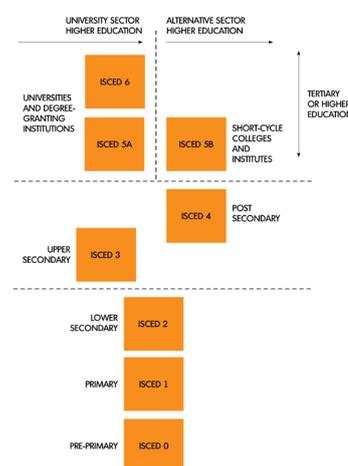
The ETF's Mutual Learning project on short-cycle post-secondary education in the Western Balkans and Turkey sought to share experience in this area of education among policy makers and practitioners. Here we present some current policies and practices and identify challenges to advance policy debate in this area.



CONTENT

- Three policy frameworks commonly used in formal post-secondary education at ISCED level 5 (level 4 will be tackled in a separate publication).
- Why such programmes are increasingly important.
- Challenges hampering the development of this area.
- An overview of recent reforms in the area with reference to EU developments.
- The policy debate that can feed into a broader discussion on the relation between level 5 programmes and the European Qualifications Framework.

FIGURE 1: THE ISCED CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM



Source: Mikhail, 2006



Education Area. Level 5 programmes normally have 120 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) points and are always less than 180 ECTS points, the minimum required for a bachelor's degree (Bologna Process). However, the recognition of short-cycle qualifications within the first cycle of higher education is at the discretion of different EU Member States, and this leads to different practices in different countries.

3. The European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) was adopted by the European Parliament in 2008 to compare national qualifications frameworks (NQF) in general and higher education as well as vocational education and training through a 'referencing' process. It is an overarching eight-level framework, which starts with primary school and ends with doctorate studies. Within this framework short-cycle post-secondary programmes are placed at level 5. In Albania, Turkey and Kosovo* the EQF levels are already used, whereas Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia have started working on eight-level systems. Unlike the QF-EHEA, where ECTS units provide the basis for distinguishing between the various levels of higher education, the EQF and NQFs emphasise different levels of competence.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence – hereinafter Kosovo.

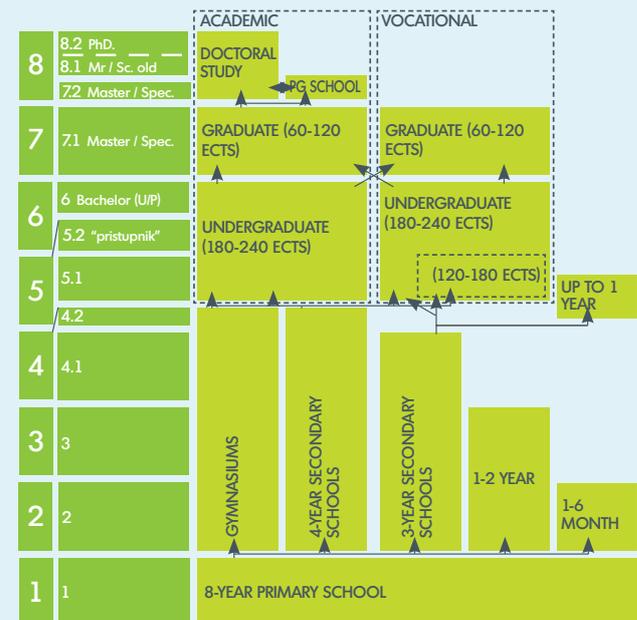
The EU 2020 strategy highlights the increasing need for higher-level skills to enhance economic growth in the EU. Labour markets in the Western Balkans and Turkey are also in need of young people with professional or vocational skills.

THE NQF IN CROATIA

The system adopted in Croatia is a prime example of the use of different standards within the EU and south eastern Europe. In Croatia an eight-level national qualifications framework largely reflects the European Qualifications Framework, in which short-cycle tertiary education is at level 5B (vocational) and 5A (academic).

In Croatia, level 5B is considered post-secondary non-higher education, as in Germany, Austria and Hungary. While in the Netherlands, France and Belgium (Flanders) level 5B is the first stage of higher education. On the other hand, the same education level in Cyprus, Malta, Norway, Sweden and the UK is known as a 'sub-degree' and is part of an integrated system that can eventually lead to a full degree.

FIGURE 2: THE CROATIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM



Source: Dželalija, 2009

THE IMPORTANCE OF SHORT-CYCLE POST-SECONDARY PROGRAMMES

The EU 2020 strategy highlights the increasing need for higher-level skills to enhance economic growth in the EU. To meet this objective at least 40% of 30-34 year olds should complete tertiary or advanced learning by 2020, which means that advanced learning must be provided outside higher education institutions. Labour markets in the Western Balkans and Turkey indicate similar needs which can be satisfied only by young people with intermediate professional or vocational skills. To increase the number of highly skilled people, tertiary education has been diversified by including post-secondary vocational education and training (VET)

programmes in reforms, and by devising short-cycle studies as an option to bachelor and master degrees. This has the advantage of supporting students to access university degrees and those for whom this cycle of studies represents the only opportunity to achieve a tertiary education qualification.

So far short-cycle post-secondary education has been provided by both public and private higher education institutions or the VET sector. A 2010 survey shows that the involvement of professional organisations and industry is marginal, as shown in figure 3.

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION AND THE EU 2020 STRATEGY

Despite the differences between education systems in terms of level 5B short-cycle programmes, the fact that some 1.5 million students are enrolled in such programmes across Europe shows the importance and potential of this type of education.

Post-secondary education is a way of increasing the number of students entering tertiary education. This in turn promotes equity and offers a successful strategy to reduce dropouts through the provision of an intermediary level qualification. To enhance European cooperation in VET for 2011-20, there are plans to develop or maintain post-secondary/higher VET at EQF level 5 or higher and achieve the 40% target of students with tertiary or equivalent education as set out in the EU 2020 strategy.

MAIN CHALLENGES IN SHORT-CYCLE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

In recent years, most Western Balkan countries and Turkey have changed the laws underpinning post-secondary education with a special focus on VET. As a result, issues related to the establishment of institutions to carry out the work for NQFs, the positioning of professional higher education in relation to academic higher education as a result of the Bologna Process, the pathways through tertiary education and the provision of the various tertiary education programmes have come to the fore.

As mentioned above, the provision of short-cycle post-secondary education at level 5 varies from country to country with no clearly distinct pattern. However, there is a tendency to deliver level 5 programmes through the public higher education system as these certificates are more widely recognised.

To meet the requirements set by the **Albanian** labour market for new skills and competences not yet provided by the education system, universities have recently launched a pilot initiative to expand level 5 short-cycle post-secondary education. Durres University has opened an applied sciences faculty with seven specialities (at 120 ECTS points) to bring 'matura' students to a qualified professional level.

In **Turkey**, level 5 short-cycle post-secondary education enjoys a long tradition and is under the patronage of the Higher Education Council. It is also organised by private (non-profit) education providers. Although funds are largely granted by public authorities, in some cases industry has given contributions. The government is reviewing institutional settings to improve access for all students.

Following the 2007 reform in **Serbia**, specialist post-secondary VET schools, 'vyse skola', which offered extremely limited access to higher education, became part of the higher education sector and were assigned the same duration as a bachelor's degree course. At the same time however, they became more academic and this increased the gap between VET and higher education.

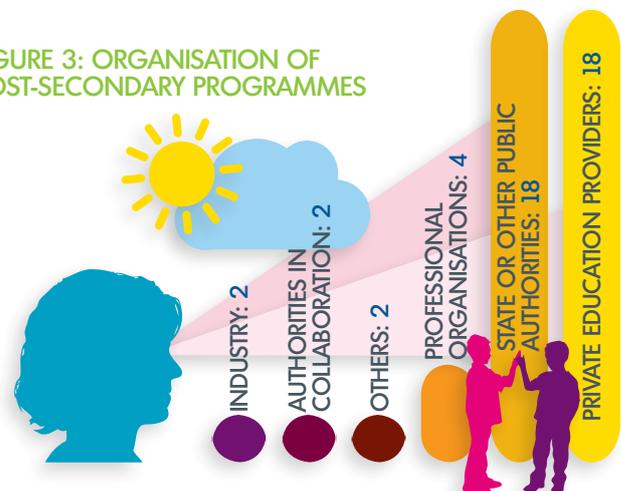
In view of establishing a national qualifications framework, **Kosovo** is considering level 5 short-cycle post-secondary education, although at present no public funding has been allocated for this. Nevertheless, some private American university diplomas may qualify as level 5.

Level 5 in **Montenegro** is also being discussed in the perspective of a national qualifications framework. The aim is to include level 5 education within higher vocational schools as part of the VET system. Employers in the tourism, electronics and security services sectors have signalled the need for labour market-oriented education. From the outset differences between level 5 and level 6 bachelor programmes need to be defined. A review of occupations delivered by higher vocational schools and links with bachelor programmes is under consideration. At present however, labour market evidence shows that graduates with bachelor or master's degrees have the highest employment prospects.

Croatian professional higher education is under the mandate of the Council for Higher Education. The 'vyse škole' have been accredited and transferred from VET into the higher education system. Within the Croatian national qualifications framework, its programmes are expected to be provided by VET (level 5.1) and higher education institutions (level 5.2). New initiatives to reform higher education are in the pipeline.

In the **former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia** and **Bosnia and Herzegovina** the institutional setting of post-secondary VET is being discussed in the framework of the European Higher Education Area. At the same time laws and strategies are being revised.

FIGURE 3: ORGANISATION OF POST-SECONDARY PROGRAMMES



Source: Kirsch and Beernaert, 2010



CONCLUSIONS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Intermediate short-cycle post-secondary qualifications at level 5 are important in supporting key policy objectives, including increasing access to tertiary education, promoting equity, delivering labour-market oriented skills and reducing the number of dropouts in tertiary education.

Yet these advantages cannot be achieved while level 5 short-cycle post-secondary education and training programmes hang in a grey zone between post-secondary VET and higher education, ultimately failing as an attractive qualification option for young people.

Permeability, or increasing vertical and horizontal access within different education pathways on the basis of acquired knowledge and skills can only improve modern education systems. In this perspective some EU Member States have already reformed their level 5 provision. Germany's *Berufsakademie*, the French *BTS*, the Swedish higher vocational education (*YH*), Italy's *Istruzione e Formazione Tecnica Superiore*, Slovenia's *Višje Strokovne Škole*, the UK's *Foundation Degrees*, and the Dutch *Associate Degrees* all offer different pathways both into the labour market and higher education with a strong component of workplace learning. These programmes are attractive for both employers and young

people and support initial VET graduates in their pursuit of tertiary education degrees and their employability.

Another way of making level 5 short-cycle post-secondary education more attractive is to further integrate these programmes in the European Higher Education Area qualifications framework. This would allow more effective national and international comparability using the Bologna Process as a reference.

Recent developments within the European and national qualifications frameworks in the EU integrate formal (and informal) components of education systems and focus on learning outcomes. These are expected to raise the profile of level 5 post-secondary programmes through their emphasis on labour market relevance and employability. Similar developments underway in the Western Balkans and Turkey are likely to generate similar results.

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