

The revised UNESCO Recommendation on Technical and Vocational Education and Training is of interest to all of us!

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In April 2016, UNESCO adopted a document which underlines the growing global significance of vocational education and training (VET) and represents an important milestone in terms of increasingly aligning the quality of VET to the requirements of the world of work. This article outlines the background and the process behind the development of the recommendation and defines its main contents with regard to practical relevance.

Starting position and objective

Fifteen years after the last version (2001), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) publicly presented its revised Recommendation Concerning Technical and Vocational Education and Training in April this year. The recommendation had already been unanimously adopted by the member states at the UNESCO General Conference in November 2015 together with the content-related Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education.¹ The mandate for the revision was enacted at the 37th UNESCO General Conference in 2013. Within two years, a new draft was successfully drawn up and agreed with the member states. The draft recommendation was initially developed by a group of international experts before being coordinated and finalised by the member states within the scope of a multi-stage consultation process.²

The updated document now globally strengthens the alignment of initial and continuing vocational education and training to practically related models with the involvement of the companies. At the same time, a further aim is to provide young people and young adults with attractive learning, development and employment opportunities.

The previous version from 2001 was strongly geared towards school-based learning processes and associated input factors. This meant that the focus was mainly directed on school teaching staff. However, reforms aimed at strengthening company-related and practically-oriented vocational education and training have been taking place in many emerging and developing countries since this time. Furthermore recent developments in the world of work and with regard to the importance of lifelong learning and emergence of qualifications frameworks had to be taken into account.

Main contents

The recommendation covers five main thematic areas in detail. These are policies and governance, quality and relevance, monitoring and evaluation, research and knowledge management and international cooperation. There is a clearly discernible understanding that VET encompasses initial and continuing training and extends into the tertiary educational sector. The importance of work-based learning is emphasised, and a holistic view of competencies incorporating professional, social and personal competence is adopted. The revised recommendation also presents an expanded definition of VET staff, a term which now extends beyond teachers at schools to include company-based trainers, tutors, mentors and other persons entrusted with providing company-based training, and upgrades the role of such persons.

The connection between VET and the labour market is underlined, and the private sector is integrated into the structuring and financing of VET via public-private partnership models. The intention is for both employer representative bodies and the trade unions to be involved in the development of vocational training via dialogue-based processes and instruments ("social dialogue"). The significance of research into VET-related topics has been explicitly incorporated into the recommendation in order to observe developments, identify changes and create as solid a database as possible for policy decisions. Research on VET shall be promoted and expanded worldwide. Member states are

¹ Cf. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002451/245118M.pdf> (retrieved: 07.09.2017)

² On behalf of BIBB, Head of the Research Prof. Dr. REINHOLD WEIß and the author were members of the group of experts.

Figure

Summary of UNESCO's normative instruments

Convention	Adopted by a two-thirds majority at the General Conference, accorded legally binding status for the member states which ratify it. These states report regularly on implementation.
Recommendation	Adopted by a simple majority at the General Conference, addresses all member states and has a recommendatory character. The member states report regularly on implementation (usually every four years).
Declaration	Adopted by a simple majority at the General Conference (a conference of all member states which takes place every two years). A declaration states general principles.

recommended to use or establish open-data information systems in order to align vocational education and training more closely to the needs of the world of work. They continue to be urged to improve quality assurance in VET.

In order to support international cooperation and networking, the UNEVOC Network at the UNESCO International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training based in Bonn is to be strengthened in its capacity to act as a multilateral platform for cooperation and peer learning. According to information supplied by UNESCO-UNEVOC, about 240 institutes currently belong to this worldwide network. In Germany, BIBB and the UNEVOC Centre “Vocational Education and Training for Sustainable Development” in Magdeburg are members.

Relevance and categorisation

The revised recommendation now provides a normative instrument which can serve as a reference framework and document within international cooperation and for the further development of vocational training in every member state and is also able to support relevant reform processes. Ongoing globalisation of markets, technological innovations and demographic developments in industrialised, emerging, and developing countries are all requiring adaptations to the vocational education and training of the member states.

Many of the contents of the recommendation are in line with the German notion of dual VET and the associated key principles. Other aspects make it clear that the characteristically German concept of social partnership cannot provide a global blueprint. Many states are struggling with such a design. For this reason, the term “social dialogue” has been adopted as a compromise formula which at least stipulates the participation of trade unions and employer organisations in the structuring of vocational education and training in some form or another.

What is the potential significance of the recommendation at the practical level? In formal terms, the document serves as a recommendation and, unlike a Convention when ratified by the member states, does not constitute a legally binding norm. It is, however, the second highest normative instrument which UNESCO has at its disposal (cf. Figure). A recommendation is aimed at all member states and therefore needs to strike a balance between the various starting positions in developing, emerging, and industrialised countries. Given this restriction, it is understandable that some formulations are vague in nature. This makes it even more important that the revised recommendation underlines the fundamental significance of work-based learning, even if such a concept is implemented in many different variations in practice.

The General Conference has called for the recommendation to be disseminated amongst the major stakeholders and within the respective (VET) education communities and for suitable support measures to be put in place. The plan is for an implementation report to be made no later than at the 2019 General Conference. From a German point of view, it is already clear that a considerable contribution can be made in this regard. A great deal of data and information on German vocational education and training are already available. If implementation is linked with the sustainability goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, further synergies can be exploited (in particular those relating to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (“ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”). In order to support the effectiveness of the UNESCO Recommendation, the focus is now on establishing (greater) awareness at national level and on its consideration within the scope of international cooperation. ◀

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