FUNDACIÓN
RAMÓN ARECES

Conferencia
"Learning for Jobs": un programa de la OCDE en clave de políticas educativas
Simon Field

Conference
"Learning for Jobs": An OECD programme on the question of education policies
Simon Field

Madrid, 6 de abril de 2011
Madrid, April 6 2011

Let me start by giving you three reasons why this topic of vocational education and training (VET) matters.

First the big picture, and say something about why this topic of VET matters. If you look at the earth from outer space you see the physical resources of this planet – the green continents and blue oceans. Our human resources are less obvious, but some things made by people are so big that they can be seen from outer space, and I am going to show you one of them now.

This is a copper mine, the biggest in the world, so enormous that it can indeed be seen from outer space. It is the Escondido copper mine in the Atacama desert in Chile. And a lot of the wealth that has been feeding economic development in Chile over recent decades comes out of this mine, and similar ones.

But the copper will run out. That’s the date that the mine will run out of copper at current rates of extraction.

So here is a visible reminder that in the future, physical resources are going to be less important and human resources more important. – and that includes those skills developed in vocational programmes. So those programmes matter to the wealth of nations. And they are wise in Chile - it’s no accident that Chile is using a special tax on their mining firms to pay for work on human resource development, because they know that that is what they are going to have to depend on in the future, rather than natural resources – in fact it is that fund that paid for our OECD work in Chile. So this book – on *Learning for Jobs* in part came out of that enormous hole in the ground.

Now one thing that has disguised the long run relative decline in the importance of natural resources – has been a short run boom in commodities. And behind that boom is something else making up the big global picture – and that is the emergence of modern China as an economic superpower – with a huge hunger for natural resources.

- And in China we see a growth in educational infrastructure and educational participation every bit as astonishing as the economic growth. Lower secondary education now effectively universal, and fully three quarters of the cohort enters upper secondary education – that’s **more** than in a number of OECD countries.

- So let’s look at China’s vocational education system - it now produces around 8 million vocationally trained graduates at upper secondary level each year, against my rough estimate of about 4 million in all the other OECD countries. Population sizes are comparable, but some big countries in the OECD – like the United States and Japan, have relatively little in the way of dedicated upper secondary vocational programmes – that's why China has more vocational graduates.

Of course the key point is quality, and that is certainly very variable in China. But that’s true in the OECD countries too. But just for example, around one third of upper secondary vocational programmes in China involve general academic skills – that’s quite a bit more than in many comparable programmes elsewhere. So a multinational company deciding where to locate its activities and looking to use mid-level vocational skills, may choose China over Spain, to take advantage of these Chinese graduates , and better numeracy and literacy than those of some of their counterparts in OECD countries, as well as lower wages and a huge fast-growing market on the doorstep – China is now the largest car market in the world. My conclusion is that many richer countries - and that includes Spain face a really big challenge to remain competitive, - and we will need to raise our game in the way we develop the skills of our young people. So that’s a second reason for taking this topic seriously.

Thirdly, there is the economic crisis [the effects of scarring]

That is the big picture. Now let me come a little closer in to the earth’s surface, to focus on some of the things we have found in our review. We have been to 16

countries all around the world. We have seen some very impressive programmes, but also many, many challenges. So let’s come right down to earth and look at one individual.

It is a fictional story, about a young woman – I will call her Maria - Maria lives in the land which is a kind of mix of all the 16 countries we have visited in the course of our work.

She is a young woman who has completed her compulsory schooling. She’s bright, practical, and she became a little impatient with her rather academic schooling. She has always had an interest in photography, and she chooses a vocational school programme, focused on the media, with a large emphasis on this subject. She starts the programme, but is a little worried to discover that her photography teacher, although a kind man, is very much steeped in the chemicals and the red light of the darkroom. He regards digital photography as an irritating and unnecessary innovation, and although the school has some digital materials, they are inadequate and outdated. Things reach a head when Maria is told by a family friend that her course is widely known as one where the graduates never seem able to get jobs in the same field, and always end up doing something totally different.

So Maria drops the course. Next time she is determined to do something with a clear job target in mind. So she seeks out and obtains an apprenticeship in a firm making metal stoves. One day a week, as part of her apprenticeship she attends a vocational school, where she learns about stove-making technology, plus some more general courses. She enjoys the work, and they like her in the stove factory, and although her supervisor is rather vague about what is expected of her, or explaining how to do things, she gradually picks up the relevant skills. But her mother, who is a primary school teacher, is worried that at the age of 17, Maria is not being taught sufficient mathematics, or being expected to read books and write things. So she goes to see the headmaster of the vocational school. He assures Maria’s mother that it is not a problem. “Trust me” he says. “Some young people are more academic, and some are more practical, hands-on sorts of people. Maria

is one of those. Maria is hardly asking for more mathematics, is she?” Marias mother acknowledges the point. “Besides” says the headmaster, “the stove company will be delighted to recruit Maria – they have told me so themselves. So Maria’s fine.”

Maria completes her apprenticeship, with a qualification in stove-building, just as the economic crisis strikes. The stove company closes down. Maria’s first step is to apply for a job in a steel mill, but they explain that stove-making skills are really not that relevant to them. After a few rather disheartening months looking for a job she decides to sit out the recession by re-entering full-time education – she applies for a two year course in management at a tertiary college. Unfortunately, she fails the entrance exam, which features mathematics and a written test.

Now this is just a story, but the problems which Maria faced are not uncommon in many countries. Now what has gone wrong?

this slide depicts two worlds. On the right the world of learning, and on the left the world of work. Of course they are stereotypes.

.

You can see that these look like quite different worlds. Learning is often seen as abstract, classroom-based, bound around by books, writing, formal curricula and academic exams. The world of work is seen as concrete, with fierce bosses and disgruntled customers, profits and lay-offs, noisy machines and filth. Those are stereotypes of course, but with a grain of truth.

What I want to say today is really very simple. Effective transition from school to work means that this gulf in cultures needs to be overcome. Although the point is quite general, I want to make it in the context of vocational education and training. It is based on the policy review we are carrying out of vocational education and training – entitled Learning for Jobs. We are working with about 20 different countries across the world, visiting them and undertaking individual reviews of country systems.

One other remarkable thing about this divide between learning and work is that it is found in most cultures – here in China and in many Western societies.

- So if we look at what happened to Maria our diagnosis, is a failure in making the connections between the two worlds which you see in this slide – the world of education and the world of work

- First of all, on the educational side, weaknesses in making the links to the world of work.

- Weak career guidance for those entering vocational education – so Maria was not in a position to consider the risks or opportunities in different pathways

- Nominally vocational courses which are unrelated to labour market needs and do not lead to jobs – Maria's media course

- Vocational teachers who have become out of touch with the needs of the modern workplace – her photography teacher

- Lack of the equipment in vocational schools relevant to the modern labour market – digital materials

- And on the labour market side failure to take account of broader educational requirements....

- Workplace training and apprenticeships providing too narrow a range of practical skills – and therefore not providing the broader vocational preparation that might underpin a career – the stove making qualification

- Supervisors of apprentices who are unprepared for the task – with weak teaching skills

- Inadequate attention to numeracy and literacy in some vocational programmmes – so fundamental in lifelong learning.

- Now these are points drawn from what we have seen in many different countries, but I think you will find that many of the challenges resonate with what you may see here in Spain. Of course, here in Madrid –in a European country. I have already been talking to you about China and Chile, with all the extraordinary differences of history and geography and culture and economy involved? And yet China, and Chile, and Spain, and indeed pretty well everywhere display in different shapes and forms the kinds of challenges that Maria faced, and underlying them this profound gap between the culture of education on the one side, and that of work on the other.

- Now in talking about the things that go wrong I have not come here to bash vocational education and training. VET is a hugely under-valued, component of a modern education system. But it does, often need reform – reform to help the Marias of this world.

So the message of our book is very very simple. Effective transition from school to work, real *learning for jobs,* means that this gulf in cultures needs to be overcome, and needs to be bridged. That’s a problem, for sure, which is easier to diagnose than to cure, but I want to give you the flavour of what that might mean in concrete terms, some flavour of the detailed recommendations set out in our book.

So how is this gulf between learning and work to be overcome. One answer is quite simple. We need vocational training systems that provide *the right skills, well taught, in the right place.*

[slide]

It sounds simple, but these words hide a lot of complexity. So let me explain what I mean by the right skills well taught in the right place.

First, the right skills.

By this I mean the right mix of provision in vocational training. The right number of places for cooks, computer technicians and electricians. Here we need mechanisms to bridge the gulf between learning and work, to make sure that the training mix matches the needs of the labour market.

[slide]

So how is this to be achieved? First, letting students choose their own courses of study is important, but there are limits, because the whole point of vocational training is that it is learning for jobs. Provision needs also to reflect the areas where there are going to be jobs. There are two ways of achieving this. One is to plan provision with some assessment of likely skills needs in the future. That’s hard. It is very difficult to get all those detailed forecasts right. The second way, which has many advantages, is to tie provision to workplace training. That automatically links provision to the areas where employers have sufficient interest to provide training opportunities.

So just for example in Sweden, where student preference has dominated VET provision at upper secondary level, the OECD review recommends making the 15 week period of work experience in this programme *mandatory.* The intended effect is for VET provision to be in fields where employers have sufficient interest to offer work experience.

Well taught

So we need *the right skills*, and we need those skills to be *well taught*. That is the second point. The quality of teaching and teachers.

[slide]

If we look at teachers and trainers in vocational training institutions we see again a gulf between these people, on the one hand, and the workplace on the other. The modern workplace is changing very fast. Look at vehicle repairs for example. Just ten years ago mechanics diagnosed a fault in a car by the sound of the engine, the

smell and the look. Now the task has changed fundamentally. On a modern car, faults are diagnosed by attaching a computer to the vehicle and running tests which are cross-checked through the internet with a website provided by the manufacturer.

Yet, too often, teachers and trainers in VET institutions left the workplace many years ago, and too often in those same institutions the machinery used for teaching purposes is out of date. That’s not surprising – it costs a lot of money for a VET institution to mimic the constant updating that takes place in industry. So to bridge the gulf the workforce in VET institutions needs familiarity with modern industry. That means, for example, opportunities for workers in industry to work part time as trainers in schools and colleges. It means encouraging teachers and trainers to spend regular periods in industry, to update their experience. From what we know of the VET teaching workforce in China, this could be an issue here too.

In industry we see a different problem, but a mirror image of the one I have just described. Too often supervisors of apprentices in industry don’t know enough about how to teach. So they need more training as teachers. So just for example in Norway, the OECD review recommended the introduction of mandatory training for the supervisors of apprentices in workplaces,

One way of helping both sides is to encourage partnerships between VET institutions and industry. For example in Finland, one scheme allows individual teachers in VET institutions to partner individual workers in industry.

So we need *the right skills well taught*.

In the right place

But we not only need the right skills, well taught. We also need them taught *in the right place*. And the most direct way of bridging the gulf between learning and work is to bring learning into the workplace, to make use of workplace training. The right place, is very often the workplace.

[slide]

Workplace training for young people has major advantages. It provides a strong learning environment with modern equipment and real world problems of awkward customers and difficult colleagues. It can improve transition from school to work by allowing employers and potential employees to get to know each other; it contributes to the output of the training firm, and it links training provision to a direct expression of employer needs. We understand that there are a number of initiatives in China to expand workplace training, and we applaud them.

Employer involvement

Of course all of this requires some underpinning by mechanisms to bring together the world of work and the world of learning, to promote employer involvement in the provision and planning of vocational training for young people. It is not something that can just be left to the government, or to the education system. In China we understand that government is seeking to establish consortia of employers to this end, and that sounds promising to us.

Above all it means an effective partnership between government, employers and unions to ensure that the world of learning is connected at all levels with the world of work.

Our message in summary

So in summary, our message is simple, and global

We need to overcome the gulf between learning and jobs.

We can do that by providing *the right skills, well taught in the right place*.

The right skills means skills informed by the requirements of the workplace.

Well taught means teachers and trainers informed by the requirements of the workplace.

And *the right place* means learning, where possible and practical, in the workplace.

These messages remain valid and relevant, in the context of the economic crisis.

Thank you.

And the broader messages here are not just about those in the vocational tracks – they are, more fundamentally, about the transition from school to work for the whole cohort, of how to avoid the abrupt transitions and discontinuities, linked to this gulf in cultures – abrupt transitions that can lead to dropout and youth unemployment.

And now a note of optimisim. In the United States a new report was published just last Wednesday in Washington DC by the Harvard school of Education at an event with US Secretary for Education Arne Duncan. Entitled Pathways to Prosperity it argues for radical reform of the US approach to the transition from school to work – it draws quite heavily on our own work in *Learning for Jobs.* It argues that “we Americans seem to think teenagers will learn best by sitting all day in classrooms.” Instead, it argues “most young people learn best in structured programs that combine work and learning. ….What is most striking about the best European vocational systems is the investment, social as well as financial, that society makes in supporting this transition [to working life] Employers and educators together see their role as not only developing the next generation of workers, but also as helping young people make the transition from adolescence to adulthood.”

I wanted to finish on this optimisitc note to remind you of the enormous strengths in the European tradition of VET at its best – strengths built on an effective partnership between the world of learning and the world of work. Strengths which account for the envious looks from the other side of the Atlantic. Reform therefore needs to build on these strengths.

Thank you.

Conferencia: **“Learning for Jobs”: un programa de la OCDE en clave de políticas educativas**

Conference: **“Learning for Jobs”: An OECD programme on the question of education policies**