

**OECD SEMINAR
On the Transition from Initial Education to Working Life
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BIAC Background Paper

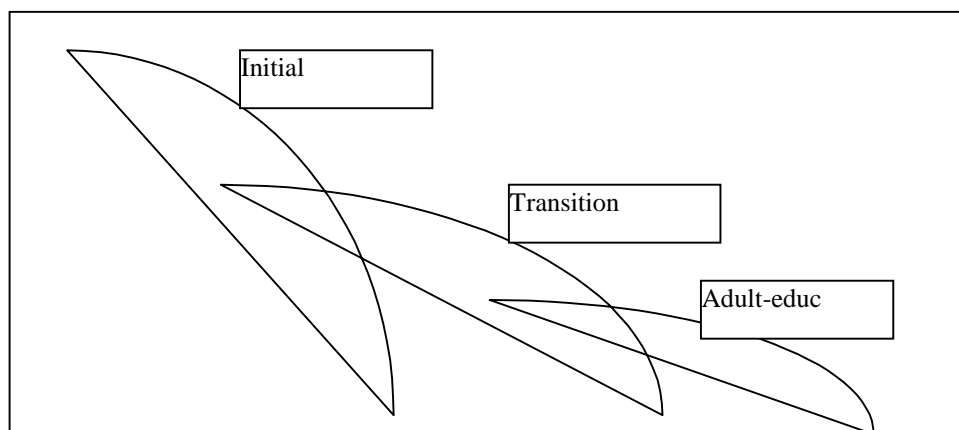
*Chiel Renique
Chairman of the BIAC Expert Group on Education Policy*

General remarks on the concept of transition from initial education to working life

Due to several factors, transition should no longer be considered as a sharp moment in life, but rather a process, a period of several years. The reasons for this are:

- Increased orientation to the world of work in general education.
- A greater percentage of a cohort enters upper secondary and higher education. In these sectors, increased combination of work and study occurs in most countries. (part-time work, co-operative learning, apprenticeships, etc.).
- At the beginning of the career, training courses, traineeships, etc. are frequently combined with the first work experience.
- Especially for higher educated individuals, there is a growing offer of either specialising or multi-disciplinary post-experience courses, for which work experience is one of the entry conditions.

We might be witnessing the emerging of a third curve:



Such a development would be interesting for several reasons:

- it can soften sharp movements on the labour market,
- it gives a more organic response of education, especially vocational education, to the qualification needs of the labour market,
- in low economic cycles, it can prevent youth unemployment.

Comments on the themes to be addressed at the seminar:

1. Effective pathways for transition and life long learning

No one type of pathway seems to hold the key to successful transition outcomes. There is a need for a mix and match approach among pathways based on the needs of the individual, the requirements of particular industries/job markets, as well as country and regional differences. General education is needed as a preparation for truly qualifying pathways.

Well structured and regulated pathways have the advantage that students who enter these pathways will most likely experience a smooth transition to the labour market. The other side of the coin, however, is that there may be serious capacity problems in one or several pathways, especially in those with strong links with employment possibilities. This is often the case in countries where the apprenticeship system is the only or the most important pathway. Another problem may be that not everyone succeeds in qualifying for entering one of the pathways. This leads to the conclusion that a variety of pathways is needed: variety with regard to the level, the length and the character of combination of learning and work (more school-based or more company-based, student status or under working contract, etc.).

In addition to the type of organisation of the pathways, the content is of course important for a truly effective transition. We should be aware of the fact that professions are developing fast and that job profiles are less stable than some decades ago. The velocity of developments in many sectors may now already exceed the time that is needed to change a curriculum in the traditional way and to wait for the first cohorts of students with the new qualifications.

On the other hand, it is worth keeping a framework of well defined vocational and academic qualifications in order to have maximum transparency on the labour market. There are two solutions to solve this problem. One is that curricula should have a substantial basic part, the core of the professional identity, but at the same time leave more freedom to the schools to adjust to the needs of their environment. The basic part can be rather stable and nationally regulated. The flexible part can differ according to regions, the profile of the school, the input of innovative firms, etc. The second solution is that in particular vocational pathways combine learning with work experience in some form. This may be an apprenticeship but also, for example, co-operative learning or internships in different firms.

Given a certain variety of pathways, students should be encouraged to assume more responsibility to find their way to the labour market and, for example, identify adequate training firms, project work for firms, junior-enterprises as part of the study, etc. Also in this case, a balance should be found between what is structured as a framework, what is compulsory, the options to choose and the room left for own initiatives. Besides "guidance" and "counselling", "initiative" and "career competence" should also be keywords of an increasingly pro-active approach.

Employability should be considered as the most desirable and feasible of all career goals taking into account that the required skill level in most jobs is rising, that self-reliance and flexibility imply a set of core transferable generic skills, that lifelong learning is now an ongoing requirement for all (not just the young) and that mobility will become increasingly important.

2. Well-functioning labour markets for young people

A well-functioning economy is the most important factor for an easy transition from initial education to work. Where jobs are plenty, there will also be jobs for young people and other groups at the margins of the labour market. This requires government policies that, for example, encourage job creation through entrepreneurial activity by reducing taxes and eliminating regulations that needlessly impede starting or expanding an enterprise. Job growth can only be achieved if countries implement the necessary structural reforms of their economies and facilitate policies which are conducive to greater flexibility, competitiveness and job creation.

Initial education should develop the talents of young people to the maximum of their capacity. It is obvious that the better the qualification at the start, the better the transition and the more durable employability will be.

Many young people prefer some job-hopping before they take a more stable career-path. This is not necessarily negative, because it contributes to a good set of skills and competencies of young people to possibilities in the labour market. In low cycles of the economy, people in transition may first take one or several jobs below their qualifications level. This will always be determined by the market. In particular in difficult times, it is certainly better to be part of the labour market, even if it is at a lower level, than to remain outside.

Integration into the labour market may also sometimes include a period of voluntary work in, for example, community or self-help organisations. This means in effect that a young person has contact with a variety of labour markets and customers/consumers and is thus well prepared to extend his/her networks and remain engaged with people and organisations.

Of special concern are those without completed vocational qualification. Government policies should support these groups, however, always in a manner that stimulates lower qualified individuals to integrate into the workforce. The department of education and/or social affairs can support these young people by offering training credits to be used by the employer (UK-example). It should be borne in mind that not only education policy is important but also wage-policy and the tax-level for low incomes can be instrumental for a better position of young people on the labour market.

3. Ensuring better policy coherence

The example of policy coherence was already mentioned above, underlining the concern for young people without any vocational education. We can add to this another example: in several countries there are youth-schemes, that support young people to find their first job if they stay unemployed for more than a certain period, for example 6 months, after leaving school. These types of programme are useful because a long break at the start means an even higher threshold for later entry and a serious risk for losing motivation.

We support a coherence in policy, targeting a smooth transition for every school-leaver. However, the objective should always be that finally everyone finds a regular job on the labour market.

Schemes that create jobs artificially are not sustainable. The fight against unemployment, including youth unemployment, cannot be won by simply creating "artificial jobs" in (partly) publicly funded activities, but by creating jobs in the private sector operating under competitive conditions.

Programmes for youth in transition should be run at local or regional level. Employment services, and certainly the private ones, can support these schemes very efficiently. Besides decentralised programmes, generic measures (such as tax-incentives, wage policy) at national level can also reinforce the work at regional level.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that there are also countries which do not have a shortage of jobs, but a shortage of new entrants. Some of the transition schemes and regional organisations should also be used to re-integrate people of older age in the workforce (woman re-integrating into the labour market, long term unemployed). Policy coherence to increase the percentage of the population that is participating in the workforce is necessary. The creation of jobs and transition pathways for young people is ultimately less dependent on governments and institutions than on a healthy economy.

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