Looking towards 2030: strengthening skills development for employment and a better future for all

UNESCO regional forum on technical and vocational education and training for Latin America
Montevideo, Uruguay, 23-25 November 2015

Concept note
UNESCO regional TVET forum for Latin America  
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I. The Forum

UNESCO, through its Regional Bureau for Education for Latin America and the Caribbean (Santiago, Chile), its Regional Bureau for Science for Latin America and the Caribbean (Montevideo, Uruguay), its Headquarters (Paris, France) and the UNESCO-UNEVOC International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (Bonn, Germany), is convening a regional forum for Latin America on “Looking towards 2030: strengthening skills development for employment and a better future for all”. Participants will include senior representatives of ministries and/or national authorities responsible for technical and vocational education and training (TVET), national training institutions, UNEVOC Centres, employers’ organizations, intergovernmental organizations, labour unions and the research community.

The Forum will be held on 23-25 November 2015 in Montevideo, Uruguay.

II. Background

A regional meeting bringing together the broader skills development community in Latin America is timely. Interest in TVET’s contribution to employment, sustainable and equitable development for all has sharply increased over the last decade (Marope, Chakroun and Holmes, 2015). The Third International Congress on TVET (Shanghai, May 2012), attended by over 700 participants from more than 100 UNESCO Member States, took stock of key challenges to TVET systems globally including socio-demographic evolutions, high levels of youth unemployment, socio-economic inequalities both between and within countries, growing economic interdependency between countries, pressures on natural resources and climate change, and increasingly rapid developments in technologies. The impact of natural and ‘man-made’ disasters and crises on conceptions of TVET and its role in sustainable development was also considered. The Shanghai Consensus highlighted the significant potential contribution of TVET to addressing global social, economic and environmental challenges, and recommended a series of actions to be implemented by governments and other TVET stakeholders.

In September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. The SDGs chart a new course for development for the next 15 years. Goal 8 commits countries to “Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”, while Goal 4 introduces a broad vision of education and lifelong learning for all, including affordable quality TVET. This followed on the heels of the adoption of the Education 2030 agenda at the World Education Forum 2015 (Incheon, May 2015), by which the international education community committed to promoting equitable and increased access to quality TVET. These global commitments are echoed by engagements taken in various fora in Latin America (e.g. Lima Statement, October 2014), where socio-economic inequalities, natural disasters and the effects of climate change, as well as high rates of informal employment, are particularly prevalent.

The TVET community is keen to identify ways of translating these commitments into effective policies and programmes. However, in many countries of the sub-region, lack of policy coordination and coherence, an overreliance on supply-driven models and low capacities for skills needs anticipation and assessment, insufficient and unequal opportunities for quality education and training resulting in structural inequalities along socio-economic, gender and rural/urban lines, lack of resources and involvement of the private sector, lack of recognition of skills acquired outside the formal education and training system, and low rates of female participation in key TVET areas are stifling TVET’s contribution to employment and decent work and, more broadly, to the sustainable and equitable development of economies and societies (OECD, 20152 and Jacinto, 20113).

In many countries in the region, employers are also expressing concerns regarding the relevance of education and training programmes and graduates’ abilities to adapt to the fast-changing demands of the world of work; indeed, more than a third of companies operating in the formal economy claim they have difficulties in finding properly-trained human resources (OECD, 2015). Companies call for more emphasis on developing employability skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, team work, communication skills and conflict resolution skills that can be used across a range of occupational fields and allow learners’ to update their skills continuously through lifelong learning. There is also increasing polarization of labour markets between low- and high-skilled workers (World Bank, 2015), suggesting that greater attention should be paid to improving foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy. At the same time, there is growing recognition of the need to strengthen links between TVET and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education.

A complicating factor for policy-making is the mounting pressure from labour markets, as unemployment is starting to rise and the hard-won gains in income distribution that were achieved during the last decade may become partially unravelling (World Bank, 2015). High labour informality affecting workers and enterprises is another feature of the labour markets in the region, deepening vulnerability and poverty. Another major challenge are the disparities in living conditions and employment situations in urban and rural areas (Severo, 2012). What is clear is that these large shifts in labour force participation, employment and types of employment may have important implications for TVET.

Governments and TVET stakeholders must therefore identify means of transforming and expanding TVET while ensuring its quality and relevance.

III. Objectives of the Forum

Participants at the Forum will take stock of achievements and challenges in skills development, assess and agree on areas requiring strengthened action, and chart directions for future joint activities in the region.

The Forum will focus on the following key objectives:

1. Identify and discuss progress and challenges facing skills development in the context of changing labour markets and explore appropriate collective responses (based on the Education 2030 agenda and Shanghai Consensus)
2. Develop inputs for a common skills development agenda to be introduced to the first regional ministerial gathering to be organized by UNESCO in 2016
3. Build better understandings of and share knowledge on the contributions of skills development to employment and sustainable development
4. Inform UNESCO’s work in skills development, and define initiatives for the sub-region in line with UNESCO’s draft TVET Strategy 2016-2021.

The Forum will also serve as a platform for sharing the draft UNESCO TVET Strategy 2016-2021.

IV. Organization of work

The Forum will begin with plenary sessions aimed at introducing participants to recent international and regional developments in TVET. These will be followed by working group sessions on key policy areas such as quality and relevance in TVET, skills for the informal economy, curricular and qualifications reforms, ‘green’ skills, teachers and trainers, and funding.

Prior to the Forum, participants are asked to fill in a survey on their perceptions of key issues in skills development and TVET in their country and/or the sub-region. The responses to this survey will be used to gain an updated overview of TVET and its links with labour markets in Latin America, and develop the final agenda for the Forum.

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