

National Strategy – **Political Recommendations for the Modernisation of Vocational Education and the WBL System in the Czech Republic**

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Region for effective modernisation of VET systems**

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1. Political recommendations

The proposal section of the Strategy is conceived and structured by content according to six priority areas. If any changes in vocational education are actually to be realised, it is clear that on one hand the largest number of the necessary steps lie with the Ministry of Education, while on the other it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve actual change without the co-operation of other parties and their contribution to the realisation of a number of the given measures. This is also clear from a more-or-less formal analysis of the proposed measures. There are a total of 43 of these measures, though the responsibility for the realisation of a considerable proportion of them lies with more than one party. The largest number of measures involves, to some extent or another, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports – 35 measures. Another 18 involve social partners, 9 the National Institute for Education, and 8 involve other ministries (not counting the Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs). A number of the measures involve the Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs directly, the regions and, of course, schools. This part of the Strategy (Political Recommendations) is structured according to the various parties concerned and the roles they have to play. We will not repeat the given proposals here, but refer to those that are of critical importance to the various parties concerned, and to contexts and connections.

It is, above all, necessary to emphasise the fact that the success of these changes does not depend merely on the work of any given party, but on a coordinated approach taken by them all. The most important thing is real political will at the level of both the Ministry of Education and the government as a whole. As is clear from just a mere enumeration of measures targeting various parties, one of the most important preconditions will be the thorough and effective coordination of all activities. One of the key measures should, for this reason, be the establishment of an appropriate coordination platform (measures D1.1 and D1.2) – a **National Council for Vocational Education**. This Council should certainly be no “mere” consultation body of the Ministry of Education, but should be established at the governmental level and furnished (preferably by law) with the pertinent powers and responsibilities. It goes without saying that it does not suffice merely to establish this Council – its systematic and long-term operation must also be assured. Its composition must be truly representative – the results of its work will go unheard and unused without the credibility conferred on it by respected figures. The minimum level of ministerial representation is clearly that of deputy ministers, accompanied by the corresponding representation of social partners. It also goes without saying that this Council may (should) establish an expert group or expert groups that will elaborate documentation for it on the basis of relevant data and documents. Only the interconnection of the political position (the Council itself) and expertise (an expert group) will assure decision-making in line with the principle of evidence-based policy.

The decisive role in the realisation of the entire strategy is, in any case, played, understandably, by the **Ministry of Education**, and measures in all priority areas are targeted at it. The **revision of framework curricula for school education** currently underway gives the Ministry of Education a unique opportunity to initiate real change.

Important aspects of the proposed change can (and must!) be codified in framework curricula for school education:

- A conception of framework curricula for school education reinforcing transferable competences and the general vocational foundation.
- Revision (and simplification) of the entire system of study fields.
- Consistent interconnection with the National System of Qualifications.
- Reinforcing and improving the standard of practical tuition.
- True co-operation with social partners, etc.

Should it not prove possible to initiate profound and, to a certain extent, radical change to framework curricula for school education, this does not, of course, mean that schools of a high standard will be unable to operate, though the necessary changes, particularly in relation to practical tuition and social partners, will be more difficult and will take longer. It is also necessary to bear in mind that changes to a system as extensive as education will not be easy to realise. It is essential to convince all parties involved that the proposed changes are necessary and useful. The key tool in this regard is open communication with all the important parties – with social partners, with the regions and, it goes without saying, with schools. This does not, of course, mean that it is necessary to accommodate every proposal put forward by everyone. In any case, the results of the field investigation (see Chapter 2) show that not all parties are convinced of the necessity of change. It is, however, necessary to explain openly, with relevant arguments and, most importantly, consistently and over the long term what the essence of the change is and what its effects will be.

It is quite indisputable that vocational education cannot meet its goals well without the adequate co-operation of **social partners**, their representatives at the central and regional level and companies themselves. It is essential that social partners (particularly employers) are prepared to take their share of the responsibility and not only to declare repeatedly their readiness to do so, but also to engage consistently in talks with state institutions at all levels. This responsibility lies, first and foremost, in a corresponding level of representation in both the proposed National Council for Vocational Education and regional platforms. If these entities are given the pertinent powers (and not merely a consultative role), then this also means the automatic sharing of responsibility.

It goes without saying that the willingness and ability of companies to contribute adequately is decisive to improving the quality of and expanding practical tuition in a real working environment. The pertinent incentives from the state (tax benefits, direct support for small and medium-sized businesses) are essential, but will not suffice on their own without the will of employers. Co-operation with schools, for example on the preparation and updating of the School Education Programme or the participation of company specialists during tuition and final examinations (school-leaving and apprentice exams), is also important. Care for the quality of vocational training at companies (standards for company workplaces and their observation, instructors of a high standard) is also important. Companies should also allow teaching staff to go on work placements to reinforce their connection with the real working environment and technological development.

The role played by employers in shaping and reinforcing a positive relationship to vocational education is extremely important and involves participating in various trade fairs and promotional events, as well as co-operating in the provision of careers advice. The introduction of a programme of vocational orientation may provide significant support in promoting an emerging relationship to vocational education. Not least, company prestige could also be increased by the introduction of an award of some kind to be conferred by employers themselves.

The regions are the founding bodies of secondary schools, for which reason they have considerable responsibility for their operation. This responsibility also takes in the form of the range of education on offer in the region. This range should be well balanced, i.e. it should respect both the needs of the regional labour market and long-term developmental needs and the needs of pupils. Regional platforms should become an important instrument for decision-making regarding the form of the range of education on offer as they make it possible to integrate various perspectives. Decision-making should be based on consistently analysed predictions of qualification needs. It should not, however, involve excessive regulation such as, for example, the populist proposal for the regulation of the admissions procedure of secondary schools. Excessively strict regulation that excludes a certain group from the range of education does not work in the long term and is ineffective. We know that the unmotivated choice of a study field may lead to it being studied, but in many cases the graduate will abandon the field in the end anyway and find work elsewhere. Positive motivation, using grants for pupils in preferred fields for example, is far more effective. Experience in regions that apply this approach has been positive. The selection of school principals also lies in the hands of the regions. Since the school principal has a considerable influence over how the school operates, the regions should devote greater attention to this aspect and base the selection of principals on transparent criteria aimed at reinforcing co-operation between schools and companies.

As has already been said, the proposals in this Strategy are not aimed directly at the establishment of a dual system. Nevertheless, a number of aspects of the changes we are proposing do bring the system of vocational education closer to the principles of a dual system. Strong political will (and not merely from the Ministry of Education), which leads to a willingness to implement measures that would transfer significant powers and responsibilities to employers, is necessary for the true introduction of a dual system. Since it is quite clear that there is a relatively low level of awareness of what a dual system actually means, a profound expert and political discussion that would clarify all associated aspects, while also preparing the ground (schools and companies) for such change, is required before specific steps leading to its introduction. It is also not necessary for the entire system of vocational education to operate (compulsorily) on a dual principle. The move towards a dual system should be a gradual process, though a corresponding environment should be enabled. If employers are willing to and capable of taking real responsibility for the operation of a dual system, even in just certain specific cases, then the legal environment should enable this.