

Vocational education after transition in Poland

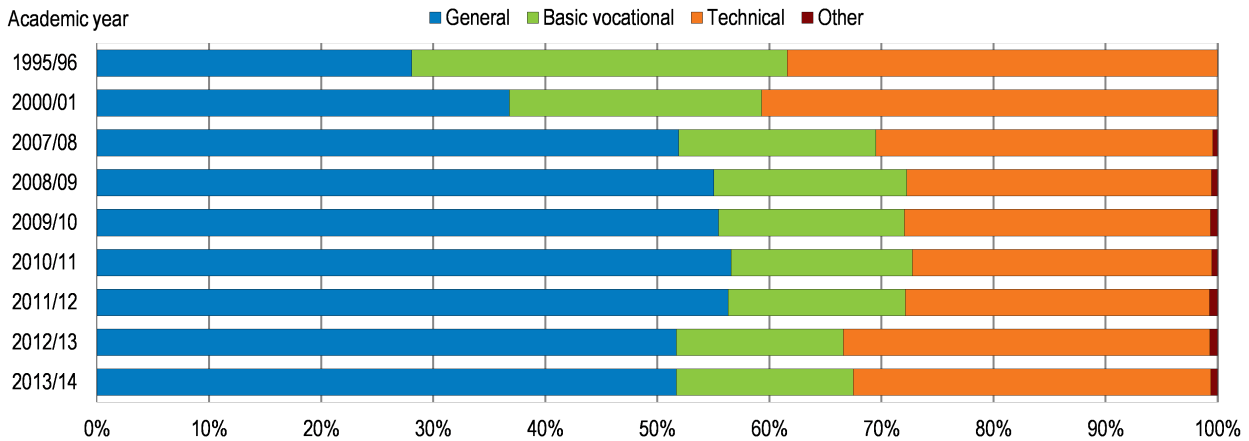
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Adapting vocational education to the needs of a market economy has been a challenge in Poland as in other transition countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Average educational attainment and literacy rates were relatively high and vocational education was strong in Poland, when the economic transformation set in. Yet, competencies taught in vocational schools were often specific to enterprises to which they were attached, many of which disappeared.

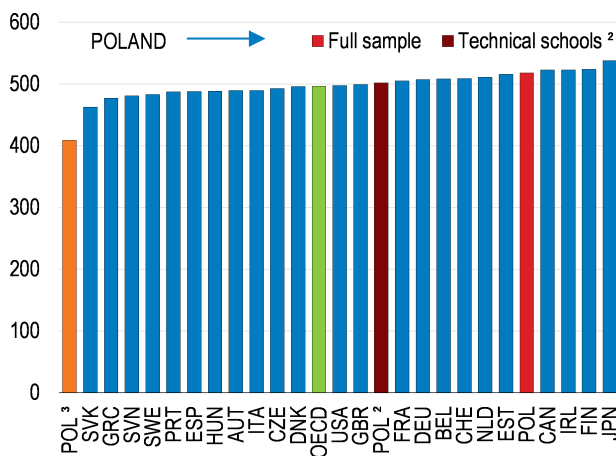
Meanwhile, it took vocational schools time to establish links to newly created firms, and the process of developing high-quality training in management, IT and other advanced technologies is still ongoing. Rote learning was widespread, and skills that help people adapt to new circumstances, such as critical thinking, creativity and leadership, were long neglected. Programmes on offer have not always been adapted to labour market needs, leading to shortages of workers in some areas and a surplus in others. As a result, the reputation of vocational education suffered. During the transition young people abandoned basic vocational education in large numbers (Panel A), while a tertiary education boom set in.

Vocational education lost ground during the transition

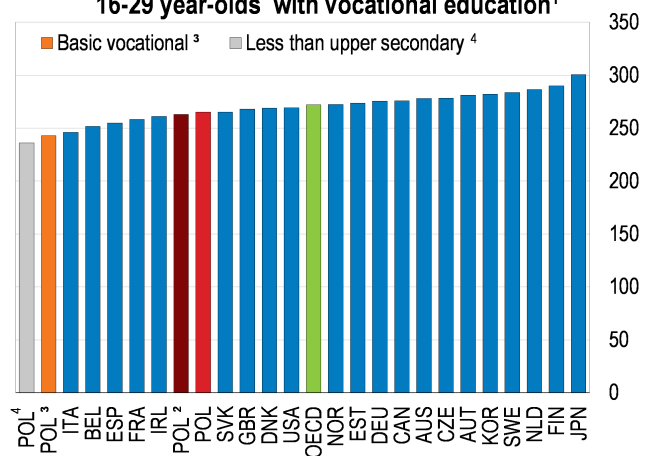
A. First-year students in upper secondary school by type of education



B. Mean PISA reading score



C. Mean PIAAC literacy proficiency scores for 16-29 year-olds with vocational education¹



1. The data are based solely on Flanders for Belgium and on England and Northern Ireland for the United Kingdom.
2. Mean reading score for 16 year-old students of Polish technical schools (Panel A) from an optional national study for the first grade of upper secondary school (16 year-olds) complementing PISA and mean PIAAC literacy proficiency score for Polish adults having attended technical schools (Panel B).
3. Mean reading score for 16 year-old students of Polish basic vocational education (Panel A) from an optional national study for the first grade of upper secondary school (16 year-olds) complementing PISA and mean PIAAC literacy proficiency score for Polish adults having attended basic vocational education (Panel B).
4. Mean PIAAC literacy proficiency score for adults with less than upper secondary education.

Source: GUS (2014), *Education in the 2013/2014 School Year*; OECD (2013), *OECD Skills Outlook 2013 Database and OECD calculations*.

The government has done much to adapt vocational schools to the needs of the market economy. Since 2012 curricula have been based on learning outcomes rather than on a narrow description of subject content. This has given schools more autonomy to adapt their programmes, including in collaboration with employers. There is now more emphasis on general competencies, such as basic skills, reasoning, problem-solving and teamwork, and the programmes also include training on setting up a business. The government launched an image campaign recently, and vocational education has started to regain some ground as shortages of workers with intermediate skills have become apparent.

But challenges remain. Many weak students are concentrated in basic vocational schools as evidenced by their low literacy scores in the OECD's PISA test (Panels B and C). Helping them level their skills requires particularly qualified teachers. Offering interesting pay and career opportunities at basic vocational schools would be one option to attract such teachers. While around 65% of students now combine study and work in firms – a considerable increase from earlier years – the rest still receive their practical training in workshops set up for training purposes. The challenge is to engage Poland's many small firms to offer work placements and contribute to the development of programmes to ensure that they are relevant for their needs.

Find out more:

OECD (2016), *OECD Economic Surveys: Poland 2016*", OECD Publishing.

Mertaugh, M. and E. Hanushek (2005), "Education and training", in Nicholas Barr (ed.), *Labor Markets and Social Policy in Central and Eastern Europe: The Accession and*

Beyond, The World Bank, Washington, DC, pp. 207-51.

Nešperová, A. (2000), *Employment and labour market policies in transition economies*, International Labour Organization, Geneva.