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# The concept of a minimum learning platform educational contents and methods for improving the low-skilled

**What can be done to ensure that as many young people as possible leave the educational system with the minimum of knowledge and competences for their further learning and employability?**

**Debate**

## Introduction

Highly industrialised countries show broad empirical evidence of a worsening position of low-skilled people in the labour market. In the framework of the Newskills<sup>1</sup> project, the main statistical indicators have been developed: rising wage differences between the low-skilled and the higher-skilled and increasing unemployment amongst individuals with low skills (Steedman, 1998). What can be done to stop this process of segregation and to improve the position of those falling out of the educational mainstream?

One of the basic strategies to address this situation is the reduction of the net supply of low-skilled workers. The more people with higher levels of initial training and education enter the labour market the higher the remaining share of jobs for the low-skilled. But since in most highly industrialised countries the demand for low-skilled workers has been decreasing faster than supply, the situation has worsened despite strong efforts by educational policy-makers to widen the participation rates in post-compulsory education and training.

As an approximate indicator, the 'low-skilled' can be defined as those who have not attained or completed any post-compulsory education and training (ISCED Levels 1 and 2). The primary route to reduce this share in the population is to 'persuade more young people to continue into upper-secondary education and/or vocational training'. According to the

Newskills project, 'The key variable of participation in post-compulsory education and training is the prior success in compulsory education; furthermore, for male workers, economic returns and real income available to spend on post-compulsory education and training. Those who do not participate and finally attain an initial level of training and education are handicapped in the long run. Motivational lacks for continuing and further training among the low-skilled is one of the consequences. Workers with lower levels in initial education 'receive less work-related training in part because they are less interested in taking it, and not because firms are less likely to offer it'. These empirically-based assumptions raise the question of:

What can be done to ensure that as many young persons as possible leave the educational system with the minimum of knowledge and competences for their further learning and employability?

Looking at the educational attainment of young persons in terms of ISCED in an international perspective, we can observe, on the one hand, the changes over the post-war period and, on the other, the still remarkable differences in national education systems (see table 1). The country studies of the Newskills project pointed out that 'education systems have been modified over the post-war period to make access to upper-secondary education a realistic option for progressively larger groups of young people' (Steedman, op.cit.). This is also true for north American, Asian and eastern European

1) Newskills project explanatory note, p. 2



countries. Growing enrolment in upper-secondary education and training pathways is the direction of societal change.

Countries still with a high proportion of their workforce in the primary sector are in a different situation. People who have attained less than upper-secondary education are still the vast majority and not a minority who could keep pace with mainstream students. Therefore the educational and labour-market situation of this share of the workforce cannot be really compared with persons without post-compulsory education and training in countries where continuation after compulsory school is an expectation of society, or can even be regarded as being nearly an obligatory standard. In 1995, nearly 90% of young adults in Nordic countries, Germany and the United States attained at least an upper-secondary education and training level (see table 1); additionally, some have begun but could not complete the whole training period.

Does this mean that in those countries the problems of low-skilled workers are going to disappear, or is it more likely an indication of a higher degree of educational integration and heterogeneity at the first post-compulsory level of education and training?

In the United States, which has more experience than European countries with a nearly comprehensive high-school (Trow, 1991), the problem of increasing wage gaps between high-school and college graduates is being discussed on a broad basis. In countries where nearly all of an age group are included, at least at the beginning, in upper-secondary education and training, a share of educational low-achievers might be subsumed within upper secondary students. If we imputed that low skills are only a problem where there is no enrolment in post-compulsory education and training, we would turn a blind eye to young persons with problems in countries where nearly all youngsters at least begin, or take part in, some kind of post-compulsory training.

The educational answer to the problems of low-skilled young persons cannot remain a formal one, we have to find substantial components of a minimum learning platform and learning and teaching

**Table 1**  
**Percentage of population who have completed at least upper secondary education, 1995**

	Age 25-34	Age 25-64	Increase (%)
<b>European countries</b>			
Austria	81	69	12
Belgium	70	53	17
Denmark	69	62	7
Finland	83	65	18
France	86	68	18
Germany	89	84	5
Greece	64	43	21
Ireland	64	47	17
Italy	49	35	14
Luxembourg	32	29	3
The Netherlands	70	61	9
Portugal	31	20	11
Spain	47	28	19
Sweden	88	75	13
United Kingdom	86	76	10
Switzerland	88	82	6
Norway	88	81	7
Czech Republic	91	83	8
Poland	88	74	14
Turkey	26	23	3
<b>Non-European countries</b>			
United States	87	86	1
Canada	84	75	9
Australia	57	53	4
Korea	86	60	26
New Zealand	64	59	5
<b>Country means</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>11</b>

Source: OECD, Education at a Glance 1997, Paris 1997, p. 39.

methods for how to reach it, at least gradually. It would be useful to look at countries with a highly developed service economy and a knowledge-based occupational structure, in Europe or elsewhere. The technological and organisational changes are changing occupational structures and the skills required.

The economy has always been interested in reliability, a positive attitude and the willingness to work hard. But today, employers emphasise additional hard and soft skills that job applicants would not have needed 20 years ago. In the service



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economy, it is not only a question of ‘hard’ or cognitive skills – although they are not to be neglected, - increasingly it is also a question of social and communicative skills. Technological and organisational changes are a main cause of changing requirements and of the worsening labour market position of the low-skilled. The experience of countries with the highest developed technology-based production and service industries is crucial for finding the minimum learning platform of future knowledge-based society. Changing employment shares for different categories of skill-levels are, to a very large extent, the result of ‘within-industry’ changes, rather than ‘between-industry’ changes: ‘This suggests that technical changes are an important driving force behind the fall in the demand for the low-skilled.’ (Steedman, op. cit.)

At the end of the 1980s, for example, many young Austrians who had not successfully completed lower-secondary education could be integrated without problems in the apprenticeship system and had opportunity to learn both vocational and personality-related skills in the dual system. Over the past few years, employers have begun to stress more and more the apprentices’ entrance qualifications regarding cognitive and social skills. Occupational requirements and educational streams have changed and have caused a new situation after compulsory schooling and in their transition from school to working life by means of different pathways of initial education and training. (Lassnigg and Schneeberger, 1997)

Murnane from Harvard and Levy from MIT have produced a very interesting contribution to the problem of low-achievers and changing skills requirements. Their starting point is data on skills needed today to get a job, for example, in a modern automobile plant. Test-scores show that nearly half of the 17-year-olds are not sufficiently trained for this kind of middle-class job.

The American educational researchers did not stop with an analysis of skills deficits, they also explored the basic skills needs of the future, they defined ‘new basic skills’ based on case studies in companies. Their findings about basic skills

needed today and in the future have important implications for the European discussion about a minimum learning platform, too (Murnane and Levy, 1996).

Basing on case studies Murnane and Levy suggest that people need the following abilities to get a middle-class job, terming them ‘the new basic skills’, namely the the ability to:

- read at the ninth-grade level or higher;
- do math at the ninth-grade level or higher;
- solve semistructured problems where hypotheses must be formed and tested;
- work in groups with persons of various backgrounds;
- communicate effectively, both orally and in writing;
- use personal computers to carry out simple tasks like word processing.’

The findings of Murnane and Levy based on experts in companies have considerable relevance for the problem of defining a minimum learning platform. Furthermore, under the aspects of the sociology of knowledge, it can be hinted that similar social structures and problems cause similar problems in the educational systems and, as a consequence, in the research area dealing with it.

For non-English speaking countries, a further minimum skill that young people need for being able to cope with occupational requirements in our technology-based service economy with its manifold needs should be added: the ability to understand and to read some basic English.

The need for some basic command of English can come up when reading technical manuals, while being in a foreign country on an installation or construction job, or in the tourism industry and retail trade. It is important to mention that these requirements occur in many occupational areas at the skilled workers’ level, not only above it. For these reasons classes of ‘subject-related English’ have been introduced in the syllabi of the Austrian part-time schools for apprentices in the 1990s.

Some would say that the points above are too low for a minimum learning platform,



some too high. But this underlines the need for both 'hard' skills (like maths and writing) and 'soft' skills like communication and social behaviour. Arguably, the minimum skills explored by Murnane and Levy are too high to reach within the framework of compulsory schooling, or at schools in general. This means that we need certain arrangements to ensure a high attainment rate of basic skills and a socially broad integration of youth into some kind of upper-secondary education and training.

Firstly, post-compulsory schooling should be structured and graded basing on defined cognitive and social skills, including the minimum learning platform. Disadvantaged young persons should be given more time and additional or special instruction to reach the minimum learning platform as a basic level for their further work and training. Secondly, it is necessary to use the learning possibilities of dual or alternating training models as a device of motivation and to learn from concrete experience. Some 'low-achieving' young persons can learn the same as the majority in vocational education and training pathways if they are given more time for the same curriculum.

An example from Austria is the special 'pre-apprenticeship' contracts<sup>2</sup> for low-achievers who cannot find a regular training place. They have the chance to learn the same as regular apprentices in their first year of the training period, but are granted two years to learn the content regular apprentices master in one year. The time factor should not be underestimated. Clearly defined learning levels are needed, but more flexibility for individual time periods to reach the various levels.

It is not enough to provide post-compulsory educational pathways with broad access and a high degree of formal (but not substantial!) permeability. Special provisions for those with problems and for those who need more time, more help and special learning arrangements to reach the minimum skills level described above are needed. It is important to provide education and training with a wide variety of learning opportunities which leave scope for different learning paces and places of instruction.

## Conclusions

Three crucial aspects need to be taken into account to be able to help the low-skilled, to give everybody the chance to attain the minimum learning platform and provide appropriate support in the framework of a socially broad integration in various and diverse pathways of upper secondary education and training:

□ a very modest and graded approach to the hard skills as components of the minimum learning platform we want to design. Otherwise we would turn education into a device of exclusion of those being at risk in the transition from compulsory school to working life not of social integration and personal improvement;

□ use the advantages of workplace experience, learning and learning motivation in all existing and innovative ways available to us, not only to train technical skills, albeit this is extremely important, but also improve the 'softer skills'. In our service society 'soft skills' have, in many parts of occupational and private life, turned into decisive and very hard skills. Soft skills can be improved under favourable conditions but they cannot be taught as maths or geography. They can only be promoted. That has to be considered when designing programmes for low-skilled young persons to obtain the minimum learning platform before, or during an initial vocational education and training programme;

□ consider, and take the appropriate pedagogical consequences of, different paces of learning. Some young persons need more time to reach a certain skill level than others.

Different learning paces do not involve lowering standards of the outcomes of vocational education and training in the end. It means, in many cases, that some young persons need more time, patience and understanding to learn the same skills standards. Therefore it is necessary to define clear levels of skills standards that can be attained step by step. The most basic level, including the transversal skills, should be taken as the minimum learning platform. Different learning paces and special support have nothing to do with 'watering down' educational and skills stand-

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2) The introduction of the *Vorlehre* is one of the results of the national employment action plan based on the employment guidelines of the European Commission. It was the aim of the concept to avoid any kind of 'stigmatisation' for the youngsters who go through the programme. Therefore it is directly linked with the standard apprenticeship programme: Those who are sufficiently qualified after the two years will have the opportunity to continue within the standard programme, the others will get a recognised certificate for the qualifications acquired by them; see: Georg Piskaty: *'Die Vorlehre - ein Bildungsangebot für "low-achievers"*, in: *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Bildungsforschung der Wirtschaft*, 10/1998, p. 9.



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ards. Clear standards are an essential prerequisite for efforts to integrate the low-skilled, of youth at risk, in the transition from compulsory school to working life.

Not everybody can learn everything if they get more and more time. There are al-

ways barriers and limits to learning, but for as many people as possible to reach a minimum learning platform there are ways to overcome various barriers (at social, emotional, cognitive levels) by providing youngsters with more time to learn and by giving them special support.

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