

BRINGING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION INTO THE MAINSTREAM

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Summary

Technical/vocational education ('voced') has considerable potential as an economic development strategy and as an instrument of social equity. The Lebanese voced system at pre-tertiary level runs parallel to the mainstream school system but does not interact at all with it. The voced subsector in Lebanon is stagnant and is plagued by internal inefficiencies pertaining to curricula and instructor quality; these need to be addressed. More importantly, however, the anachronistic nature of Lebanese voced needs to be recognized and addressed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ National decision-makers at the highest level need to recognize the importance of voced to Lebanon's economic and social development needs.
- ▶ Evaluate and address the inefficiencies within the voced sector such as outdated curricula, instructor qualifications, and the articulation between vocational majors and 'general education' subjects.
- ▶ The mainstream lower secondary curriculum needs to open up to commercial and technical subjects as part of a broad, general education.
- ▶ At upper secondary level, separate tracks need to be created for traditional-vocational and technical/technological pathways. The latter could involve dual enrolment of students at school and at a technical institute.

The 'brick wall' between mainstream schooling and voced needs to be torn down by incorporating commercial and technical subjects into the standard basic schooling curriculum, and the voced track at upper secondary level needs to be split into traditional-vocational and technical/technological tracks which would introduce the possibility of dual student enrolment at school and at a technical institute for the latter track.

Problem Statement

The importance of voced to Lebanon can be approached from several perspectives.

- ▶ There is a strong association between technical education and economic development. Economic success stories such as Germany and Japan (and in this region, Turkey) tend to include the blossoming of technical education.
- ▶ Vuced forges strong connections with the labor market and encourages self-employment, thereby reducing unemployment.
- ▶ Boys are more likely than girls to fail at school, and voced offers boys an attractive alternative to both conventional schooling and dropping out of education altogether.
- ▶ The economic benefits of voced are most pronounced for the poorest sections of society, thereby alleviating poverty and reducing socioeconomic inequality.

Lebanon has quite a well-developed voced sector below tertiary level. It operates under the auspices of its own administrative unit of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE). It has its own, recognized qualifications at Certificat, Brevet and Baccalauréat levels. It leads to tertiary qualification pathways either within the voced sector itself or within the university sector. It forges strong connections with the labor market. All these are strong 'plus' factors.

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However, Lebanese voced is a beleaguered system. It is an ostracized subsector which does not interact with the mainstream school system. It is widely seen as a refuge for academic failures from the lower social classes. Many vocational instructors are not formally qualified to teach. Many curricula and textbooks are outdated, and connections between the vocational and 'general education' components of programs are weak. The voced unit of MEHE has to set the cumulative pass mark well below 10/20 in order to boost pass rates.

The problem starts in Grade 7 where students in the mainstream school system undertake programs of study that are totally bereft of subjects such as Commerce, Agriculture and Workshop Technology. The Lebanese lower secondary ('middle school') curriculum is academically overspecialized – for instance presenting the subject Science as the three separate subjects of Biology, Chemistry and Physics. But students at the lower secondary level should be exposed to a broad, balanced curriculum including commercial and technical subjects so that they can make informed choices as they make the transition to post-basic schooling.

Ironically, a student who exits the 'academic' school system may end up pursuing 'vocational' pathways at university such as Accounting, Engineering or Nursing. The 'brick wall' that separates mainstream 'academic' education from voced in Lebanon remains intact until the end of Grade 12, but becomes remarkably porous at tertiary level. This porosity should come in earlier.

There is an obvious need to distinguish much more clearly than is currently the case between traditional vocational, technical/technological and commercial domains. By 'traditional vocational' is meant such occupational majors as plumbing, motor mechanics and pastry baking. These areas obviously do not articulate strongly with the 'academic' education domain. Fields such as avionics, business administration and electrical engineering just as obviously straddle the academic/vocational divide. The French voced system introduced this distinction 30 years ago by implementing different tracks at upper secondary level for the two ('professionnelle' and 'technologique'). It is high time for Lebanon to follow suit. This development would raise the possibility of dual student enrolment at a school and at a technical institute as an alternative to duplicating upper secondary courses in subjects such as Physics in technical institutes.

Once a student is on a career trajectory, s/he is generally interested only in topics that have a direct bearing on his/her chosen occupational major. One of the main reasons for the poor marks voced students tend to achieve is the 'general education' component of their programs. There is a great deal of debate in academic circles about the role of general education in voced. However, it seems a simple matter to make subjects such as Mathematics more relevant to voced students by offering them modules that match their major. This is currently not happening.

“There is a strong association between technical education and economic development.”

Key Messages

- ▶ Voked is important to Lebanon with respect to economic development, employment and social equity.
- ▶ The Lebanese pre-tertiary voced system is structurally quite well developed but has become somewhat stagnant and is riddled with debilitating inefficiencies in relation to curricula, instructor competencies and the relationship between vocational majors and general education subjects.
- ▶ The lower secondary school curriculum needs to incorporate commercial and technical subjects so that students can make informed choices when they exit basic education.
- ▶ At upper secondary level, voced needs to be split into traditional-vocational and technical/technological tracks. The latter track could involve dual student enrolment at school and at a technical institute.

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Conclusion

The Lebanese pre-tertiary voced sector has the potential to become a major force for economic and social development. It has administrative and qualifications structures in place but the system has stagnated and its performance is being impeded by internal issues relating to curricula and instructor quality that need rectification. Most importantly, the voced system needs to be ‘brought in from the cold’ by becoming more integrated with mainstream schooling. This will involve introducing what have long been regarded as ‘vocational’ subjects into mainstream school curricula, and creating a new technical/technological track which straddles the ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ educational domains and introduces the possibility of dual student enrolment at both kinds of educational institutions.



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