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"Dual Education: Europe's Secret Recipe?"

Europe has long embraced the use of vocational education to prepare youth for entry into the workforce. None has moved into this as strongly and consistently as Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. With their dual education systems and the intensive apprenticeship programs, these countries have forged very close links between the education system and industry. While many other European countries have developed extensive vocational programs, they have stopped short of the full commitment to apprenticeship programs. Would they be better off by moving further in the direction school-workplace linkage?

While the discussion of vocational education in general has been going on for some time, it has intensified with the recession of 2008 and the subsequent slow recovery of employment. Indeed the raw data suggest that people with vocational education at the upper secondary and tertiary level have higher employment rates than those with general education and this difference is especially pronounced for young people (age 25-34).

Vocational education, particularly with apprenticeships, is designed to ensure that workers have job-related skills that make them immediately useful to firms. Thus, when faced with employment problems, it may be good policy to ensure that

the education system is providing the skills most needed by the economy.

But the decisions are more complicated than just that, and policy deliberations must also consider a broader set of issues. First, there is now considerable evidence that general academic skills – mathematics, reading comprehension, and scientific understanding – have a strong influence on economic growth. Part of this comes from contributing to innovation in the economy, but part also comes from having a generally sophisticated workforce that can assimilate new production approaches. Thus, as a first caution, it is important that vocational programs not slight on the development of general cognitive skills.

Second, being prepared for immediate employment must be balanced by implications for employment as the job demands change. In a rapidly growing economy, the nature of most jobs throughout the economy is continuously evolving. This evolution means that the skills that a worker initially brings to the job may become obsolete as the job changes. These changes may be dealt with through “lifelong learning,” a currently popular theme of policy discussions. But, it is important that careful thought be given to both the character and the economics of such lifelong learning.

It appears today that there is a tendency for the gains in initial employment that come with apprenticeship programs to be offset to varying degrees by lessened employability later in life. Such tendencies are amplified by more rapid economic growth. As a result, it is important that policy take a broad perspective about the expansion of vocational education and not concentrate completely on initial employment.