

Year 12 students preparing for “shortage occupations” in vocational schools

As a unique feature of the Hungarian school system, “specifically promoted professions” (usually mentioned as shortage occupations) function as regulatory tools as well. Differently from other vocations, schools are allowed to enroll pupils in unlimited numbers for these vocational training programmes, the students can receive grants and enterprises have lower costs of practical training for these vocations. The purpose of this different regulation is to make these occupations more attractive for every participant, and, as a result, to reduce the alleged labour shortage, although there is no empirical evidence for it.

The purpose of our research project, which is part of the Social Renewal Operative Programme (Programme 3.1.1, Public Education in the 21st century – Development and Co-ordination) was to collect data on those senior (year 12) students of vocational schools who are trained for these shortage occupations. Data collection covered social background, educational career, practical training, job aspirations and future plans. The primary objective of the research was to give a prediction as to the possible consequences on the job market of this unique regulation which uses positive discrimination for shortage occupation training programmes. The five studies were written after a statistical analysis of the surveys carried out in May 2010. Over three thousand students who participate in training programmes for shortage occupations filled out questionnaires one month before the end of their last school year. Also, over eight hundred pupils of vocational schools for special needs students were interviewed as well, out of whom a significant proportion participates in vocational programmes for the same shortage occupations.

The survey allowed for a number of thematic analyses. Different student groups became comparable, such as students trained in shortage vocations and students trained in other vocations; students preparing for shortage vocations in ordinary vocational schools and those studying it in vocational schools for special needs pupils; students receiving practical training in the school and those receiving it at an enterprise; girls and boys in vocational schools; etc. A description could be made about the social background, the educational career, the characteristics of their choice of the given school and vocational programme, their further educational and work plans, their level of satisfaction with their present social situation and their expectations about the future. In many cases, the background of statistical differences could be identified and causal connections were demonstrated.

Several hypotheses – formulated previously during professional debates – were confirmed, but also, we received some surprising new results which are really to be considered by policy-makers. One of them is that, contrary to what we had thought, there is no clear hierarchy between students of ordinary vocational schools and vocational schools

for special needs pupils. Similarities between the social backgrounds of these two students are fairly significant, and despite the differences in their educational careers, they have similar future work plans. A similar proportion of the two groups plans to continue their studies, a similar proportion expects to get a job in their learned fields or to change field, and there is no significant difference between the two groups' wage expectations. The other surprising outcome we got out of the analyses is related to the critical levels of dropping out rates in vocational schools. On the one hand, the findings show that school failure, above all the repetition of a school-year in primary education sets back school career. More than 70% of those who were forced to repeat a school year in primary school will drop out before the end of the final vocational exam and will never get a skilled worker certificate in the school system. On the other hand, vocational schools, which cannot prevent the dropping out of 30% of pupils enrolled for vocational programmes and have a bad reputation for it, are nevertheless capable of helping through the same number of pupils – who are strongly at the risk of dropping out – to obtain their skilled worker certificate as the number who in the end never receive such a certificate.

The most important result of this research may be that the intention of policy-makers for a growing supply in shortage occupations fails to lead to positive results, and it is perhaps even counterproductive. Since choosing a shortage occupation programme is, in many cases, not a matter of voluntary choice but rather the only option open to the candidate, it results in reduced levels of learning motivation, lower achievements, higher drop-out rates, and also, school leavers of shortage occupation programmes plan to change occupation more often than those in other occupations. Higher drop-out rates can partially be explained by the fact that about a third of those wishing to find a job in this field do not succeed in doing so, or they can expect higher wages in other fields, which leads us to believe that there is not even a significant labour shortage in these vocations.