

Abstract of the SER-advisory report *Steering a course for innovation in vocational education*

In *Steering a course for innovation in vocational education* the Social and Economic Council advised the government on three subjects:

- the matching of supply and demand for secondary vocational education at national level (macro-effectiveness);
- practical occupational training in secondary vocational education; and
- innovation policy for vocational education as a whole.

The Council called for improvement of *the match between supply and demand* for secondary vocational education at national level. At present, supply and demand are not adequately matched. This is one reason why there are too many courses available in some disciplines and not enough in others. Without advocating the need for a perfect match, the Council feels that substantial discrepancies between supply and demand are unnecessary and can be avoided.

The Council feels the educational institutions should be responsible for improving the match between supply and demand at national level. Nevertheless, the minister of education is ultimately responsible for vocational education paid for with public funds. This implies that in special circumstances the government can intervene to help create a match between the supply and demand for secondary vocational education at national level.

The Council suggested two ways of creating a better match between supply and demand at national level:

- through legal incentives for educational institutions to achieve a better match. They would be obliged to consult each other and the business community on changes in capacity in vocational education. In addition, they would initially receive a provisional budget for new courses or expansion of existing courses, which would later – if the course meets a demand – be converted into regular financing.
- by having an independent committee assess the degree to which educational institutions are matching supply and demand at national level. The committee would respond to warnings from the field (an early-warning system). It would investigate these warnings and advise the minister of education on the policy that is needed. The minister would then take the necessary action.

The Council also called on the government, the educational institutions and the business community to speed up efforts to improve *practical professional training*. The evaluation of the Adult and Vocational Education Act has highlighted a number of current problems, including the counselling of participants. According to the Council, these problems must be addressed so that improvements can be made in the short term. However, merely solving the existing problems in practical professional training is not enough. The Council believes the parties must key in to developments in society, such as ‘life-long learning’. This implies that all parties should adopt a responsive and

innovative attitude. Social developments also demand that policy and the structure of vocational education should focus on the working career of the pupil. These developments will also compel the parties to consider the balance between tailored solutions and standardisation, between knowledge and skills, between professional training and general education and between working and learning.

Finally, the Council advised the government to seriously address the form and substance of *innovation* in institutions of vocational education and companies. The Council observed that there are several shortcomings in this area. For example, regulations are often restrictive rather than encouraging and the policy is fragmented. Educational institutions and companies also fail to collaborate adequately and innovations are not adopted sufficiently. Moreover, the Council feels that greater financial resources are needed for innovation in order to realise the long-term ambitions of a knowledge-based economy.

The Council suggests that the government should pursue an integrated innovation policy that is based on encouraging innovation from the bottom up and which provides scope for differentiation at regional and sectoral level. This policy would be built on three pillars. The first is a *basic strategy*, aimed at preserving and optimising the primary process of educational institutions through regular financing (lump sum). The second pillar is a *horizontal strategy*, aimed at ensuring that innovations are adopted and applied by providing incentives to strengthen vocational education as a whole at institutional level (incentive funds). Finally, the third pillar is a *vertical strategy*, aimed at developing innovations by means of experiments at regional or sectoral level (national innovation budget).