

Social status in Vocational Education and Training (VET) in the Czech Republic over the past 15 years, and an international comparison²

FEBRUARY 2021

VÁCLAV KORBEL A DANIEL MÜNICH

Summary

- The Czech Republic (CZ) has an historically strong system of vocational education and training (VET), which around 30% of first-year high school (HS) students enter each year. How many students should enter VET has often been debated. However, which students select into VET and how their composition has changed over time has been less examined.
- This study maps these phenomena by measuring the social status linked to VET programs in the Czech Republic since 2003. Based on previous literature, we define social status as the relative difference in PISA scores of first-year VET students compared to first year students at other types of high schools. The social status thus reflects which students chose VET, and is the sum of various factors that influenced their choice – the expected quality of education, employment prospects after graduation, and the perception and opinions of parents and primary school classmates. If the relative PISA scores of VET students decreased in comparison to those of students who entered other types of high schools from one PISA wave to another, we can interpret this as a decrease in the social status of VET students.
- We use PISA data from 2003 to 2018. The PISA survey tested fifteen-year-old students in their final months of primary school and early in their first year of HS. The data is representative for the different types of HS. For the international context, we subsequently expand the analysis to include 14 European countries that participated in the 2018 PISA

² This study represents the authors' view, and not the official position of the Czech Academy of Sciences' Economics institute nor of the Charles University Centre for Economic Research and Graduate Education (CERGE). We thank Josef Basl, Karel Gargulák, Štěpán Jurajd, Filip Pertold and Jiří Vojtěch for valuable comments and advice. All possible inaccuracies and errors are the responsibility of the authors. The study received support from PMI Czech Republic and the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic within the AV21 Strategy program.

survey and which include a VET program in their education system. In the international analysis, social status reflects not only the preferences of students but also the historical size of different types of HS, national educational policies, and state support of VET programs.

- The results show that the social status of VET programs in the CZ was significantly lower compared to that of other types of HS. The average difference in PISA scores was 113 points across 2003-2018. This represented the difference between the 50th (median) and the 15th percentile of students in the CZ. From an international perspective, this roughly corresponds to the difference between Singapore (1st place) and Serbia (43rd place) in the 2018 PISA survey.
- The social status did not increase over time, meaning that more students with relatively higher scores did not select into VET in more recent years of PISA testing. Outside of a temporary drop in 2006, social status was stable, and was similar for all groups of students, regardless of gender, size of the town where the school is located, or parents' education. This shows that VET was the least preferred option for all groups of students.
- Our international analysis documents that in 2018, Czech VET programs ranked among the lowest in social status of European VET programs, along with Slovakia and Belgium. The social status of VET programs was highest in countries with strong dual education - Austria and Switzerland. On average, social status was slightly lower (by 30 points) in countries which also have a technical education programs in addition to general and VET education.
- Our results confirm that the attractiveness of VET to Czech students is very low. The social status linked to it was stable over time and did not respond significantly to the economic cycles of the past 15 years. This suggests that soft interventions such as information campaigns, scholarships, and other support schemes implemented at national and regional levels have not been very effective in attracting better-performing students to VET education. This cannot be expected to change in the future. The goal of our study is not to argue for or against interventions aiming to increase the social status of VET, nor to consider what share of students should study in VET programs. However, if the Czech Republic decides to work towards higher social status for VET programs, international evidence suggests the following interventions would likely be effective:
 - Increasing the quality and effectiveness of teaching in VET programs, both by raising the competencies of existing pedagogical and non-pedagogical staff and by attracting new high-quality people.
 - Improving the long-term employability of graduates, for example, by teaching more general and soft competencies that enable students to adapt better in the labor market, and by improving the quality of vocational training so that the professional competencies of graduates correspond better to modern developments and are more applicable in the long run.
 - Increasing the permeability of the high school system, enabling students to change tracks during their studies if they find that a track does not suit them. Allowing specialization at a later stage of their studies more often is another option.