



LIFE SKILLS
AND WORK READINESS IN VET

Implementing Agency

giz Deutsche Gesellschaft
für Internationale
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

This document serves in support of an international facility, the VET Toolbox, funded by the European Commission and the German Government, which is aimed at strengthening the capacity of partner countries to implement vocational education and training (VET) and labour market reforms. The overarching objective of the VET Toolbox is to enhance the labour market relevance of VET and the employability of all.

The VET Toolbox partnership is composed by GIZ, British Council, Enabel, LuxDev and AFD.



The intended beneficiaries of the VET Toolbox are:

- National vocational authorities and regulatory bodies, including training funds;
- National and international enterprises involved in VET partnerships;
- Quality assurance organisations responsible for learner assessments and examinations;
- Public, private or mixed VET training institutes and VET pre-service and in-service instructor training institutes;
- National, regional and sectorial business and professional associations and civil society organisations.

Website: www.vettoolbox.eu

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E4D/SOGA



The VET Toolbox closely collaborates with, and has drawn experiences from GIZ's Employment for Sustainable Development in Africa (E4D) programme to promote employment, raise incomes and improve working conditions of, particularly, women and youth in Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda. E4D/SOGA – Employment and Skills for Eastern Africa - is a component of E4D aimed at promoting local employment and economic opportunities in and around natural resource-based industries and related sectors in Kenya, Mozambique, Uganda and Tanzania. E4D/SOGA is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) and Shell.

Publisher:

VET Toolbox Coordination Hub | c/o Belgian Development Agency Enabel

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INTRODUCTION

Companies that want to employ workers who have received VET often complain that new recruits are not ‘work ready’ and do not demonstrate the ‘life skills’ needed to ensure their employability. Companies feel they are left to invest considerable time and effort to get VET trained workers ready to resume the job roles for which they were hired. Often, their concern is not that newly recruited job seekers do not come with the necessary vocational-technical skills, but that they lack the basic life skills and self-confidence to learn on the job and through practical experience.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this tool is to provide guidance on supporting life skills and work readiness as part of VET or complementary to VET.

The target audience for this tool are:



- National vocational authorities and regulatory bodies, including training funds;
 - National and international enterprises involved in VET partnerships;
 - Public, private and mixed VET training institutes and VET pre-service and in-service instructor training institutes;
 - National, regional and sectoral business and professional associations and civil society organisation.
- Development projects/ programmes/ partnerships that support VET and life skills development for employment in and around large-scale investment projects.

DEFINITION



The competencies and skills captured under the headline ‘life skills and work readiness’ refer to a broad spectrum of behavioural and inter-personal ‘soft skills’, such as a person’s attitude and motivation to work and learn on-the-job (work ethics); working independently as well as collaborating in teams; solving problems and taking reasoned decisions; showing creativity and flexibility and demonstrate critical thinking; navigating through and constructively resolving conflicts; communicating effectively; presenting observations, ideas and findings; managing personal careers and financial affairs; understanding the importance of occupational health and safety, etc. There is an obvious overlap with the ‘core life skills’ as defined by the International Labour Organisation and covered in the **VET Toolbox Tool ‘Transferable skills’**.

RATIONALE

The rationale for life skills and work readiness training is to support young people in the transition from the world of school and VET to the world of work. It is expected to improve VET graduates' ability to secure a job, which in turn also gives them an opportunity to improve their vocational-technical skills and other competencies through further training-on-the-job.

DELIVERY MODES

The delivery modes for enhancing the employability of young vocational-technical graduates include:

- **Integrated in workplace-based learning approaches**

VET can teach these skills and prepare students for the world of work as an integrated part of workplace-based learning approaches. Multi-year apprenticeships are seen as the most systematic of these approaches, combining workplace-based training-on-the-job with periodic class-based learning. In Germany and Switzerland such programmes are referred to as the 'dual system'¹. In North America and Australia, and also in parts of East and West Africa, the equivalent would be 'cooperative training'. In Tanzania this approach is also known as the 'dual apprenticeship model'. Other forms of workplace-based learning include several months of work placements and/or industrial attachments, or periods of internships and practical experiences lasting at least several weeks.

- **Add-on provision**

VET and labour market delivery organisations can provide students with short-term 'life skills and work readiness' interventions as a separate add-on to other types of training. Such interventions can be part of a more comprehensive career guidance programme offered alongside technical training in VET organisations, or as a service offered through youth centres and/or job/career centres.

¹ In 'dual systems', class-based learning alongside systematic on-the-job training also doubles for the provision of applied secondary education which is especially important for those who have left formal education at the end of the mandatory school age.

ANALYSIS

When pupils leave primary or secondary school or even when they graduate from tertiary education, they cannot necessarily be assumed to master the core life skills that are needed to enter into, or advance in the labour market. The transition from the world of formal education to the world of work can pose a real personal challenge, which in turn discourages employers from taking on more early career graduates and invest in their on-the-job training until they become ‘fully functional’ employees for the jobs they are recruited to perform. While concepts such as ‘life long learning’ recognise that learning never actually stops and that every new job or work situation poses a learning opportunity/challenge, not every education system is built on equipping students with the social competencies and skills they need to advance themselves on-the-job.



Multiple institutional, social and individual factors may contribute to the absence of such skills. Typically, these have to do – amongst other factors - with:

(a) how young people were taught and rewarded in school (e.g. rote learning versus critical-reflective approaches that coach students how to acquire knowledge on their own; little exposure to working in teams building on each other’s strengths; little to no practical applications of the theoretical knowledge taught etc.);

(b) the role and position that they hold in society (e.g. hierarchical versus more egalitarian);
or

(c) socio-cultural factors affecting communication skills and behaviours (e.g. multilingualism, rigid social norms and expectations). Depending on cultural contexts, there may also be gender-specific challenges that would require gender-sensitive interventions.

POSSIBLE ENTRY POINTS

Short-term training courses can help to make up for some of the work readiness and life skills deficiencies. There are several ways to identify what the context-specific gaps undermining employability are and to conceptualise interventions to address these gaps.

- **Solicit and gather feedback from prospective employers, or recruitment agencies**

Prospective employers and recruitment agencies can be approached to find out about (i) common reasons for rejecting VET applicants and (ii) the in-house training investments employers would typically make themselves until they consider new recruits fully functional for the jobs they were hired to perform. A related question to ask would be whether employers were to hire more early career graduates, if they had to invest less in getting such recruits work-ready. This would reduce the risk of losing this investment when graduates they trained move on to other employers.

Prospective employers and recruitment agencies may also point to behavioural challenges, such as lack of awareness or understanding of business or sector-critical health, safety and accident prevention measures. Or, they may highlight mismatches between social norms and the team work and personal aptitudes required to deal with varying and evolving work situations (e.g. waiting to follow hierarchically communicated orders rather than taking initiative). Deficiencies may also have to do with lacking personal confidence, such as to speak up or to challenge superiors.

- **Draw on the experiences of education service providers**

Private and non-governmental providers of non-compulsory education and training may be willing to share their experiences respective observed gaps between sought after and available abilities and competencies. For example, organisations that conduct selection processes for scholarship opportunities or provide foreign language training may be willing to share their views on the causes of deficiencies in soft skills, as well as how these can be

overcome. For example, career guidance officers working with VET centre may be consulted with the local jobs centre and with local employers on their experiences and observations respectively designing a job preparation programme aimed at helping graduates to prepare for job applications, interviews and assessment processes.

- **Foundational gaps in basic numeracy and literacy**

Life skills and work readiness can pose a challenge at every skills level, but foundational gaps in basic numeracy and literacy are particularly serious constraints to self-guided learning on-the-job. This subject is covered in the below Text Box. One observation is that gaps in foundational skills are best addressed if these skills are placed in the vocational context in which respective learners can apply them. For example, mechanics should be taught mathematics for mechanics; nurses should be taught mathematics in the context of nursing; and language and literacy skills should be taught depending on whether these are used for interactions with customers or to read and understand instruction manuals.

CASE EXAMPLE

In Kenya, GIZ has collaborated with a local implementing partner, CAP YEI, to provide short-term work readiness and skills training to youth in three counties where large-scale infrastructure and industrial investments are being implemented. This training is provided for 3 months, with the initial 2-week training focusing on social soft-skills and reflective personal development to improve participants' ability and confidence to communicate in front and among groups, to organise and analyse information, for example in the form of mind maps, brainstorming sessions, worksheets and group discussions. The remaining time includes practical training through industry internships and trial periods, as well as further work readiness training that prepares participants for job applications and interviews. For example, this includes role plays, mock interviews, feedback forms and sessions, and CV writing.

i For more background and details on this case example, see [GIZ fact sheet](#).

LIMITATIONS

The limitations of imparting life skills and preparing graduates for the world of work are twofold: First, short-term courses offering training in life skills and work readiness might not be sufficient to bridge more fundamental gaps in core life skills, especially those imparted by general education (e.g. numeracy, literacy).

Second, the private sector and key industries may need a lot of convincing that it is in their interest to engage early on in the process of preparing students for the world of work and showing them why and how life skills and work readiness are important for their professional progress. They may not be able to organise themselves collectively to offer apprenticeships, work placements, internship or industrial attachment opportunities in provide life skills and work readiness training as part of such schemes. Smaller employers, in particular, may not see themselves in the role of career mentors and supervisors investing in the human capital that they require as a key production input. For example, where these employers are subject to an obligatory 'training levy', they may see paying this levy as a sufficient contribution. This is especially the case, if companies are not, or insufficiently involved in how such levies are put to use. On the other hand, there is a potential role for development partners to step into this void, working with public authorities and companies to offer opportunities for early career work experience or, even, setting up structured cooperative training or dual systems.

Foundational gaps in numeracy and literacy

A particular challenge is gaps in basic foundational skills. Enterprises with demand for low skilled workers have found that candidates without these skills can either not be employed at all, or, if they are employed as helpers at the lowest tier, they cannot progress beyond these roles.

Although many development countries have made good progress towards providing universal access to education, this progress has not guaranteed that those leaving school at the end of the primary or lower-secondary level are sufficiently equipped with basic literacy and numeracy, including communicating in the country's business language. Such gaps in foundational skills typically arise from poor quality formal education, or because (for many and possibly complex personal, socio-economic and/or geographic reasons) workers have not completed primary or lower secondary education.

Drawing on indicators allows one to gain a general picture of potential gaps in the foundational skills acquired through formal education. For example, the World Bank's Human Capital Index distinguishes between the average number of years that pupils are expected to spend in school and the learning adjusted average number of years that pupils come out of school with. The latter takes into account test scores achieved in math and science. Very few Sub-Saharan countries achieve test scores that lie above those expected of pupils in primary school, even though students expect to spend several years in secondary education.

In multi-lingual country settings, poor foundational skills in literacy and also oral communication can be due to the country's business language not being taught in primary school, or because it is taught poorly. If prospective employers use an international language (e.g. English, French, Portuguese), it may not be used for verbal communication among those social groups from which low-skilled workers are recruited. And, in countries where the business sector's working language is different from that spoken by low skilled workers and where, in addition, there is a general shortage of skilled vocational-technical workers, it can be particularly difficult to recruit and employ foremen/women who can lead and supervise a local low-skilled labour force. This then poses a serious structural constraint to hiring local labourers to filling low skilled job positions.



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Co-funded by the European Union

