

Executive Summary: Review of policies for lifelong learning in Armenia, TRP 2023

Outline of the main analytical points:

Approximately 3 million citizens live in Armenia, of which about 63,7% in urban areas. GDP reached 12.6% growth in 2022, with an unemployment rate of 11,6%. There are three top economic sectors, each with around 11-12% of total economy (industry, agriculture and wholesale and retail) and two economic sectors with smaller portion (around 6-8%) of the total economy (real estate activities and construction). An interesting feature of the Armenian private sector is the fact that more than 94% of the sector consists of micro-enterprises with less than ten employees. 38% of the employed workforce are women.

Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET) is mostly school-based, and all public VET institutions have a status of State non-commercial organisations (SNCO), acting in accordance with the corresponding law. Continuing Vocational Education and Training (CVET) is mostly organised in the framework of employment policies carried out by the Unified Social Services of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) which are responsible for labour market policies for target groups of population considered as vulnerable. Part of CVET programmes is delivered by VET institutions funded by participants on a commercial basis or donors' organizations. The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports (MoESCS) with the support of the National Centre for VET Development (NCVETD) manages and coordinates the public VET system. Currently, State institutional accreditation is mandatory for all VET institutions, while programme accreditation is a voluntary process.

Several issues exist in access to IVET, such as a growing share of paid education in recent years at preliminary and especially middle VET institutions, creating issues for accessibility to education particularly for economically disadvantaged groups. The number of available tuition free places, along with other supporting measures, is of primary importance for increasing the access to IVET programmes. Access to both VET and higher education for disadvantaged groups (including people with disabilities) remain a serious issue and several constraints related to increasing the access of students with special educational needs to the IVET system persist. Access to CVET for unemployed, disabled or other vulnerable groups is ensured only within the limits of available funding provided by State budget, as the volume of the related planned trainings is insignificant. The organization and delivery of CVET programmes at VET institutions, funded by participants on a commercial basis or donors' organizations, limit the access to CVET programmes. Moreover, there is a lack of comprehensive data on nature and volume of CVET programmes organized by VET institutions.

Policy responses to VET access issues are expressed in the Action plan for implementation of the "State Program for Development of Education of the Republic of Armenia until 2030" (Education 2030), which outlines targets to be reached by 2030, including increasing access to IVET and CVET. The creation of a universal inclusive learner-centred education environment is one of the strategic directions of the Education 2030. There is no specific policy or activity targeting the access of immigrants, refugees or people with special educational needs to IVET and CVET programmes. With regard to CVET the majority of issues defined in the Concept of Lifelong Learning (LLL) in 2012 still remain unsolved.

Attractiveness of IVET is hampered by several issues, such as a limited vertical and horizontal permeability. VET is not attractive for youth and especially graduates from secondary education schools, and a high share of basic school graduates admitted to VET institutions is linked to the introduction of the 12-year mandatory secondary general education in 2017, allowing them to receive also a certificate of secondary education. The shift between IVET and CVET is almost non-existing, since the vocational non-formal and informal learning validation (VNFIL) system is currently not operational. A career guidance system is being implemented, however, comprehensive and objective data on IVET/CVET graduates' job placement or other career pathways of VET graduates is not available. The important mismatch between skills and demand negatively affects the attractiveness of VET. Work-based learning (WBL) is considered one of the means to address this mismatch and the issues of relevance and quality of VET in general. However, in 2022 the share of specialties delivered

through pilot dual education programmes was only 8,4%. Poor knowledge of foreign languages and skills on internationalization by staff strongly limit the efforts of VET institutions for internationalization, which is considered a way for increasing the attractiveness of the Armenian VET.

Policy responses to attractiveness of VET aspire to address many of the issues identified. The draft Law on VET foresees the implementation of a credit transfer system thus creating a flexible pathway for students between general education and IVET. However, there is no specific regulation on transition from the VET-related levels 3 and 4 to level 5, and no provision for improvement of accessibility of tertiary education for graduates of IVET/CVET is foreseen within Education 2030. Currently, the VNFIL mechanism is not operational due to a limited capacity (mainly financial) of the National Training Fund (NTF) and the weak and obsolete procedures regulating VNFIL. VET institutions enjoying large autonomy have an opportunity to propose new IVET or CVET programmes to be funded by State budget. State standards and corresponding modular programmes for VET professions are developed in accordance with a set procedure involving sectorial committees, the NCVETD and the National VET Council (NVETC). There is no country wide, tracer study mechanism.

Resources, teaching/learning and management of IVET/CVET face a number of issues that limits the access and attractiveness of VET, such as (i) insufficient investments from the State budget for the improvement of building conditions of VET institutions and teaching/learning infrastructure, (ii) very low amount of State scholarships provided to preliminary and middle VET students (iii) VET institutions inherited old fashion and obsolete buildings which require costly investment for maintenance and heating in winter, (iv) for many specialties, obsolete literature is still in use, (v) due to students' and teaching staff's poor knowledge of foreign languages the use of textbook, teaching and learning materials in foreign languages is also limited, (vi) only entry requirements are used as a mechanism for evaluation of VET institution directors' qualification adequacy to the job position, and finally, (vii) although training for the secondary vocational education administrative, pedagogical staff and members of the management board of VET institutions have been carried out every year, their professional abilities still need to be improved.

Providing policy responses to the limitation of resources, teaching/learning and management of IVET/CVET is an ongoing process, which includes (i) optimization of the distribution of VET institutions and their professions to improve the conditions for an effective and quality VET provision (the Action plan for the implementation of Government program for 2021-2026 foresees the reorganization of 10 VET institutions by 2026); (ii) introduction and expansion of WBL foreseen by Programme of the Government of the Republic of Armenia for 2021-2026 and the Action plan of the Education 2030 and (iii) development by end of 2023 of the mechanisms for increased possibilities and forms of entrepreneurial activities by VET institutions.

Main recommendations:

The Torino Policy Level 2 Review team suggests specific steps, which can support the implementation of the approved policies for VET, including the Education 2030 Action Plan and the upcoming employment strategy. Conclusions and recommendations are presented in Chapter 3, with a more detailed overview in Appendix 4, including short-term, mid-term and long-term actions. A summary of six consolidated recommendations is provided below.

Recommendation 1: Setting-up a comprehensive national framework for LLL, that meets the demands of individuals and labour market in order to improve the effectiveness of the VET system

This recommendation involves a composite of different initiatives, which all together can contribute to setting up a consolidated national framework for lifelong learning. Some of these are already part of the national Education Strategy 2030. They have all been derived from the policy review in chapter two of this report and include the following result areas: (i) Agree and develop jointly with key stakeholders a coherent Strategy for LLL, based on relevant regulations, the mapping of LLL activities and the identified gaps. (ii) Develop a flexible learning system of short-cycle and long-cycle programmes and courses, including recognized micro-credentials (making affordable learning paths for disadvantaged groups) – mixing online learning, class tuition, WBL, self-learning etc. (iii) Develop and implement national anticipation skills mechanisms for mapping the future needs of the Armenian private sector and revision of level 4 and 5 qualifications IVET/CVET. (iv) Coordination of career guidance activities at secondary, VET and higher education institutions, as well as youth organizations for a cross-sectoral career

guidance strategy. This strategy should support the attractiveness of different educational pathways and build on solid evidence of the value of education programmes for future employability and career options, such as tracer study results and labour market information. (v) Reinforce the process for review of existing programmes for their vertical and horizontal labour market appropriateness, in close cooperation with social partners.

Recommendation 2: Adapting current governance settings to enhance the VET autonomy process in order to foster the relevance of VET system.

This recommendation covers a range of initiatives, which can all contribute to the establishment of a collaborative environment for enhancing the autonomy process in the VET sector, giving more responsibility and accountability to partnerships and good governance settings. This includes the following result areas: (i) Creation of a National training register. (ii) the integration of several national registers. (iii) Development of piloting of an independent and easy-manageable tracer study mechanism in few IVET and CVET institutions and evaluation of the pilot to develop a systemic and sustainable tracer study mechanism, (iv) Establishment of sectorial, regional or local educational councils (in cooperation with 49 centres of the MoLSA) to bridge between employment promotion, education and labour market, in order to share information and jointly plan regional or local capacity building initiatives, (v) Development of Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) with private sector for the funding and running of buildings, equipment, WBL development, involvement of companies' employees in the educational process etc. (vi) Implementation of targeted awareness raising campaigns on IVET and CVET in secondary education schools. (vii) Development of quality assurance and accountability procedures with yearly key performance indicators. (viii) Implementation of pilot projects within different categories of VET institutions with diversified funding policy including enterprises participation.

Recommendation 3: Initiate measures to increase the access to the IVET system.

This recommendation includes a number of measures, which can in turn contribute to increased access to IVET. These include the following result areas: (i) Development of mechanisms and tools, such as reinforcing the dialogue with the private sector in priority fields in order to link scholarships with the needed qualification profiles, to improve the image and awareness of priority fields among secondary education students for admission to tuition free places in IVET left unspent. (ii) Based on in depth analysis regarding special educational needs (SEN) access to IVET, preparation of an action plan for inclusion of SEN into IVET system and outlining a detailed roadmap with yearly performance indicators. (iii) Creation of a special admission "track" for immigrants/ refugees/displaced population, including the screening of qualification levels, offering additional training, and career guidance support, as well as the set-up of a database to record data on admission of immigrants and forced displaced persons from Nagorno Karabakh.

Recommendation 4: Initiate measures to increase the access to the CVET system.

This recommendation aims at increasing the volume of CVET students through targeted measures towards specific disadvantageous groups of the Armenian society. This includes the following result areas: (i) Monitoring the effect of the financial support and stipends to disadvantageous groups including through tracer studies after completion of their learning periods. (ii) By close cooperation between the MoESCS and the MoLSA introduction of practices from EU member states on "Job Guarantee", with a special focus on forced displaced persons from Nagorno Karabakh.

Recommendation 5: Initiate measures to increase the attractiveness of the IVET system

This recommendation is based on the results of the policy review in chapter two, and consists of a wide range of measures, that can make the IVET system more attractive to potential learners as well as to the employers. This consists of the following ten result areas: (i) Along with the optimization of the distribution of VET institutions and their professions, development of mechanisms and digital tools for effective delivery of IVET programmes allowing progressive decreasing of paid places share. (ii) Establishment of short higher education programmes for VET graduates and revision of level 4 and 5 qualifications. (iii) Development of guidelines for introducing WBL, based on the experience drawn from the implementation of international donors' supported programmes. (iv) Before system level introduction and following the adoption of new Law on VET, a thorough review of the different WBL pilot programmes could be undertaken, identifying lessons learned, coherence issues, gaps, risks etc. including recommendations to be discussed with the MoESCS, its agencies and partners. (v) Based on the

assessment of the potential, development of an action plan to support the internationalization of the VET system, including capacity building of staff, e.g. targeting the reinforcement of foreign languages (particularly English, French and German) of the staff VET institutions. (vi) Encouraging cooperation projects between Armenian and foreign VET institutions, particularly in the framework of the Erasmus+ programme, Armenia's membership in the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) and EPALE (Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe). (vii) Development of pilot projects for digitalization and innovation of specialties, offering different forms of learning that can take place outside school premises. (viii) Establishment of continuous development in digital teaching and learning methodology. (ix) Encouraging and setting up pilot twinning projects between Armenian and foreign VET institutions with the available international donor funding.

Recommendation 6: Initiate measures to improve the attractiveness of the CVET system.

This recommendation focuses on measures that can make the CVET system more attractive to potential learners as well as to employers. These consist of the following result areas: (i) Development of outcome-based qualifications, based on Occupational Standards (OSs), establishment of a credit system and alignment of the VNFIL system to the current qualification framework including implementation of a credit rating system for micro-credentials acquired from non-formal education. (ii) Setting up work-based learning opportunities in employment promotion programmes and bridging programmes to VET for inactive groups of the workforce population, based on a review of education programmes for inactive population. (iii) Development of a flexible learning system of short-cycle and long-cycle programmes and courses, including recognition of micro-credentials (making affordable learning paths for disadvantaged groups) mixing online learning, class tuition, WBL, self-studies.