



Virtual conference report on

Pathways between TVET and further Education

UNESCO-UNEVOC TVeT Forum, 23 to 27 October 2017

Moderated by Simon Field

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Author Simon Field, International expert

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Introduction and background

The topic of ‘pathways’ that make it easier for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) graduates to enter different forms of postsecondary and higher education, has recently been receiving much attention by policy makers in many countries across the world.

UNESCO is currently conducting a study on this issue with the view to produce a set of guidelines for policy makers to support reforms in the articulation of TVET and higher education. These guidelines, together with an analytical report, will be published in 2018. The purpose of this virtual conference was to share experiences and knowledge of this issue, both for the benefit of participants, and to provide input into the wider UNESCO exercise.

Opportunities for further education are vital for TVET graduates

In the past, few graduates of initial, school-level, vocational training aspired to further education. But higher-level qualifications are now a common expectation among young people, reflecting increased ambitions, labour market demand for higher level skills and a need to upskill and reskill throughout life. When academic school education is seen as the natural route to university, it is vital to show that TVET programmes can also open a pathway to lifelong learning, including higher education.

UNESCO is now putting a spotlight on this issue

In response, UNESCO and other international bodies, are now looking hard at opportunities for further education for TVET graduates. UNESCO has recommended that *“Member States should develop pathways and facilitate transitions between secondary, post-secondary and tertiary education including flexible admission procedures and guidance, credit accumulation and transfer, bridging programmes and equivalency schemes that are recognized and accredited by relevant authorities. TVET institutions, and other education institutions and authorities, should collaborate for the implementation of such measures.”*¹

Effective pathways serve multiple goals

‘Effective pathways’ means that those with TVET qualifications or practitioner backgrounds should have a full opportunity to benefit from further, postsecondary and higher education. This does not mean that those with TVET backgrounds ‘should’ pursue postsecondary or higher

“Member States should develop pathways and facilitate transitions between secondary, post-secondary and tertiary education including flexible admission procedures and guidance, credit accumulation and transfer, bridging programmes and equivalency schemes that are recognized and accredited by relevant authorities. TVET institutions, and other education institutions and authorities, should collaborate for the implementation of such measures.”

education, but rather that they should face no unreasonable hindrances if they wish to do so. Effective pathways serve several policy goals. They:

- increase the attractiveness of initial TVET by meeting student aspirations, and remove any perception of TVET tracks as dead-ends;
- help to meet growing economic demands for higher level skills and qualifications;
- support lifelong learning, so that individuals can continue to develop knowledge and skills throughout their adult lives, and economies can adapt the skills of the workforce in response to technical and economic change;
- remove artificial barriers, such as requirements to repeat course material, that increase the costs of learning and prevent some from realising their full potential;
- reduce inequality and promote social inclusion and mobility, by opening up access to further and higher education to a wider group of people, including the most disadvantaged.

¹ UNESCO. 2015. UNESCO recommendation concerning technical and vocational education and training. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002451/245118M.pdf>

Summary of the discussion

The background note shared with participants before the virtual conference, and through interventions during the event, questions were posed to participants about methods of improving pathways between TVET and higher education. In particular, participants were asked:

- about what could be done to **make learning more transparent**, so that students can understand the pathways available to them, and institutions can better understand what TVET graduates already know;
- about what could be done to **better prepare TVET students for lifelong learning**, through more focus on transversal skills, and other preparation to help TVET entrants to succeed in further and higher education;
- about what could be done to **make further learning accessible**, to overcome financial barriers, and have access to flexible modes of study suitable for adult learners.

Participant responses

National qualifications frameworks (NQFs)

NQFs have been widely seen as a way of improving pathways, as they allow stakeholders – for example in higher education – to observe the ‘level’ of attainment realised by a graduate of initial TVET, facilitating the entrance of that individual into higher education. Participants from Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Senegal among others endorsed this viewpoint.

Many participants welcomed the transparency which flows from NQFs. A participant from the Philippines emphasized the role of the NQF in making learning outcomes transparent to all the stakeholders, while from Sri Lanka it was suggested that the NQF allows students to see that entering TVET includes the option of subsequent higher education. In the United Arab Emirates, however, the structure of the NQF apparently leaves an unfortunately large gulf between academic and vocational pathways.

Credit recognition systems

A graduate of TVET seeking to enter another education and training programme will want her or his existing knowledge and skills to be recognized by the new programme or institution, so that the graduate does not have to go through the wasteful process of repeating material or learning what they already know. Participants described several practical ways in which credit recognition systems could support this process.

Participants from Canada and Nigeria explained that NQFs need to be underpinned by credit recognition systems that identify the knowledge and skills of TVET graduates, and skills learnt

“It is a quality assured national system for the development, recognition and award of qualifications which will benefit various sectors and stakeholders to include among others: lifelong learners needing to pursue higher education, employer needing specific training standards needed by the industries, trainers wished to move easily and readily between different education sectors and labour markets.”

Nehema K. Misola, Philippines

in the workplace can be identified precisely and in a standardized form, that can be recognized in further and higher education institutions through access and course exemptions. From Ontario in Canada, and Australia, we heard about ways of breaking down programmes into modular learning outcomes, that again can be compared with subsequent education and training programmes to support credit recognition. But credit recognition often runs into obstacles: from both Jamaica and Australia, it was argued that there is sometimes a disconnect between competence-based approaches in TVET and the knowledge-based viewpoint of higher education.

“This speaks to the need to better craft learning outcomes/statements of competence, to make it easier for higher education providers to understand and recognise the qualities and attributes of TVET learners. Arguably, qualifications frameworks help in this process as they can indicate the level of the competence and/or outcomes.”

André Diez de Aux, Australia

Participants from South Sudan and Madagascar emphasized the importance of TVET curricula in facilitating pathways into higher education. In South Sudan, the aim of the new curriculum is to remove any perception of TVET as dead-end, support lifelong learning, and thereby promote social inclusion, primarily through curricular developments that emphasize the continuity between TVET qualifications and further and higher education. Under an Australian arrangement, within the NQF, specific amounts of credit recognition are recommended for specific prior qualifications, including vocational qualifications, although there are wide variations between institutions in how this is implemented. A participant from Senegal pointed out that credit recognition should also include an effective framework for recognising prior learning, whether that prior learning takes place through a TVET programme, or in other less formal ways, including workplace experience.

Inclusion of general skills in initial TVET programmes

Many participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that initial TVET programmes support the development of general skills, including basic and soft skills, and the ‘learning how to learn’ skills that support subsequent lifelong learning. These skills not only support transitions in the short term, but, as a participant from Nigeria pointed out, they also help to future-proof TVET graduates in the face of changing skills demand in the labour market.

In a Japanese approach, problem-based learning is used in technical institutes (Kosen) to develop critical-thinking in the solution of technical problems, supporting the kind of high level problem-solving skills that will be welcomed in university settings. From Sri Lanka, it was argued that Open Educational Resources (OER) can be used creatively to support soft skills development for TVET students. A participant from Jamaica argued that TVET qualifications should be designed to include a wide range of transversal skills in the learning outcomes, allowing TVET graduates to handle further educational programmes successfully. A participant from Ghana argued that while TVET graduates need academic skills, so also do academically educated people need an understanding of practical, vocational challenges. From Australia, we heard about potential reforms to mandate stronger basic skills components in initial TVET.

Careers guidance

For students to navigate pathways, and find their way between TVET and other educational programmes, they need the right information and guidance – so a further key tool in supporting effective pathways is careers guidance and information.

From Canada, a participant described some of the challenges faced by careers guidance in supporting TVET students in their learning career – including tackling some common prejudices about TVET programmes and students. A participant from Kenya underlined the significance of career guidance in Kenyan secondary schools, ensuring that pupils understand TVET options, and how they relate to higher education. From Nigeria, there were proposals, as means of supporting further learning, for the use of a diverse range of media and information sources to support students seeking transition. Also from Nigeria, we heard about how summer work placements for school pupils are used to develop the practical skills of even those in academic tracks. From Senegal, it was argued that, with the aid of an NQF, bridges between vocational and academic tracks can be mapped out and supported by careers guidance. But a participant from Australia reported that a focus on university pathways in careers guidance in Australian schools means that the pathways from initial TVET to higher TVET receive inadequate attention.

Lifelong learning

Some participants felt that programmes for adults were inadequate. A participant from Trinidad and Tobago emphasized the importance of rethinking initial TVET so that it is seen as just the start of lifelong learning. From Romania, it was explained that sometimes once young people get a job, further education often depends on employer support, and that is often a barrier. This point is echoed by South Sudan, underlining the importance of actively ensuring lifelong opportunities for all.

Blocked pathways

Sometimes the route from initial TVET into further and higher education is blocked. This may be because a TVET qualification is, in principle, not regarded as a relevant



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entrance qualification, or because, in practice, the route from initial TVET is so awkward and cumbersome – for example because it requires a return to initial academic education without any significant credit recognition, that it is rarely travelled. One major challenge in the design of initial TVET is striking the right balance between programmes which leave out general education and are therefore dead-ends, and ones which make demanding academic requirements in the interest of subsequent transition to further education, but at the cost of high dropout rates. Sometimes initial TVET curricula are too narrow. One participant explained that the technical and vocational track in Ghana is much narrower than the academic track, limiting TVET graduates in their future careers, and giving graduates few opportunities to progress to university.

At the same time, participants pointed to positive developments. From South Sudan, there was a request for an internationally agreed framework that would help to support progression from TVET to further learning in individual countries. In Quebec in Canada, credit recognition and articulation between Diplomas in Technical Studies and college programmes allow three-year college programmes to be reduced to two years – this kind of articulation is often very hard to achieve without a strong push from government. From Burundi we learnt about new school reforms, where in the post-basic technical cycle in schools, pupils who do well may compete in the entrance examination for higher education – it raises the issue of how well students are prepared for such entrance examinations in TVET programme.

Other issues

Participants also raised several other more isolated, but very significant points:

- From Ecuador, Nigeria and South Sudan, participants underlined the importance of **political will and commitment to TVET**, to underpin effective pathways.
- **E-learning may change matters.** A participant from the United Kingdom underlined how distance and online learning, if developed imaginatively, could be used to teach practical and vocational skills. A participant from Nigeria emphasized that, as new skills requirements accelerate, flexible forms of e- and distance-learning will play a larger role – a point echoed by participants from Ghana and South Sudan.
- In Canada, there is apparently an emerging trend of **reversing the usual pathway**, with college graduates proceeding from general postsecondary education into TVET programmes – this is a pattern we are observing more frequently than before.
- A participant from Kenya pointed out that postsecondary programmes often are, and should be vocational, but there is a risk that **'academic drift' in postsecondary institutions** will convert good quality vocational programmes into weak academic programmes.
- From Jamaica, a participant described some governance problems, whereby many **tertiary institutions try to keep their distance from 'training'** because it is seen as being low status – a challenge which is widely shared internationally.
- From Kenya, we heard the proposal that postsecondary and higher education institutions should provide the kind of **continuous professional development to graduates** of TVET programmes that is found in some continental European countries.
- From Egypt, there was a proposal for a **tax (a training levy)** to support vertical and horizontal pathways of progression.
- From Nigeria, the challenge was described in terms of 'scaling up', recognizing that in most cases the required pathways exist, but they are insufficiently travelled. **Quantitative and qualitative targets for TVET agencies** might help.

Conclusions

The pathways between TVET and further and higher education are clearly a pressing concern to those who took part in this virtual conference. Several potential tools to improve these pathways were discussed, including qualifications frameworks, credit recognition systems, the inclusion of more general and academic skills within initial TVET, and more effective careers guidance. While these tools are helpful, none of them are effective in isolation, and concerted efforts will be needed to realise the shared objective of more open access, for all TVET graduates, to genuine lifelong learning. One key part of the jigsaw is the attitude of academic education, including higher education institutions, in the context of extensive institutional autonomy. Success will surely require many of those institutions to see it as in their interests to open their doors more fully to TVET graduates.

Looking forward, this virtual conference has contributed substantially to UNESCO's initiative on this topic, and UNESCO will publish a substantial report during 2018.

About the moderator

Simon Field is a leading expert on the international comparative analysis of country skills systems. As leader of the OECD's work on vocational education and training over many years he led reviews of vocational skills systems in more than 30 countries throughout the world. He is the lead author of two major comparative reports on country skills systems in Learning for Jobs and Skills beyond School as well as many reviews of individual countries. He is now the founder and Director of Skills Policy.



Participants

Number of participants: 182

Male: 101

Female: 81

Number of countries present: 63

UNEVOC Network members: 44

Name	Institution	Country
Abdirizaq Mohedin	Dambar training centre , Mogadishu	Somalia
Abiola Ibukunoluwa Adeyinka	PricewaterhouseCoopers, Abuja	Nigeria
Abulokwe Amaechi Clement	UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA, ENUGU	Nigeria
Achanson Christopher Romeo	University of Nigeria Nsukka , Nsukka	Nigeria
ADEROJU, JOHN ADEROGBA	UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA	Nigeria
Agbo Kelechi Okwuchukwu	University of Nigeria Nsukka, Nsukka	Nigeria
Aiman Badri	UNESCO, Khartoum	Sudan
Alejandro Yerovi	SETEC	Ecuador
Alfonso P. Francisco	TESDA, Marikina	Philippines
Alfredo Xavier Rello Rodarte		Mexico
Alison Mead Richardson	Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver	Canada
Amina Idris	NATIONAL BOARD FOR TECHNICAL EDUCATION, Kaduna	Nigeria
André Diez de Aux	TAFE Directors Australia, Canberra	Australia
Angeli Sofia Sergeevna	BIST, Ufa	Russian Federation
Anne Bowden	TAFE NSW, Tamworth	Australia
ANONG Léon	inspectorate of pedagogy for industrial technics, Yaoundé	Cameroon
Artur Gomes de Oliveira	Sergipe Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology, Aracaju	Brazil
AZEEZ TAIRU ADEBAYO	UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA	Nigeria
Bassey Njorkun Ndubuisi	University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nsukka	Nigeria
Biswajit Sen	ALL INDIA COUNCIL OF TECHNICAL EDUCATION & TECHNOLOGY, Shyamnagar	India
Bonnie Johnston	BC Institute of Technology, Vancouver	Canada
Borhene Chakroun	UNESCO	France
Carolyn O'Connor	Vocational Training Development Institute, Kingston	Jamaica
Cecilla Deloris Mitchell Davy	Heart Trust, Kingston 5	Jamaica
Chibuzo Nwachukwu Okongwu	University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), Nsukka	Nigeria
Chukwunonso Isidore Chikwendu	University of Nigeria, Nsukka , Nsukka	Nigeria
Daniel Uchenna Chukwu	University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nsukka	Nigeria
David Chang	UNESCO	Iraq
Deborah Mullan	Training That Works , Parkdale	Australia
Diane Booker	Comsultant, Adelaide	Australia
Domingo Moreno Oligier		Chile

Dominique Slade	Cambridge Assessment International Education, Cambridge	United Kingdom
Donnie clark		United States of America
Dr Karuiki	Kenyatta University, Nairobi	Kenya
DR. GAZALI SIKIRULAH I A	NATIONAL EXAMINATION COUNCIL, MINNA	Nigeria
Ebem Dozie Emmanuel	Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike. Abia State, Nigeria., Umudike	Nigeria
Eboagu Christiana Funmilayo	Yaba College Of Technology, Lagos	Nigeria
Eddie Dutton	UNESCO Office in Amman, Amman	Jordan
Elena Soroliou	Athens	Greece
elie shaaya	The International Society for Trainers and Developers ISTD, kuwait	Kuwait
El-Moatasim Bellah El-Alfy	Industrial training Council-Ministry of Trade & Industry, Cairo	Egypt
Emamorose Felix	UNOPS Multipurpose Youth Training Centre, Warri	Nigeria
Emilia Vorontsova		Ukraine
EMILY MAINA	Ministry of Education Directorate of TVET Kenya, Nairobi	Kenya
Emma Jane Fels	University of Melbourne, Parkville	Australia
ENEOVO JOHN IFEANYI	University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu	Nigeria
Eunice Ntobedzi	Francistown College of TVE, francistown	Botswana
Eze,Ogbonnaya O.	Unuversity of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nsukka	Nigeria
F Wanjiru Nyamu	Edukans, Nairobi	Kenya
Farid Safarmamad	Old Dominion University, Norfolk	United States of America
Farida Shohkosimova	UNESCO ALmaty , Dushanbe	Tajikistan
Fernando Ubal	UTU, Montevideo	Uruguay
Gabrielle Quinlan	Stuttgart	Germany
Gaby Douglas	Waikato Institute of Technology, Hamilton	New Zealand
Gashaw Menberu Chekole	federal republic of Ethiopia technical and vocational education and training age, Addis Ababa	Ethiopia
Gennesta Charles	Grenada National Training Agency, St. George's	Grenada
Gennette Clacken	HEART Trust NTA, Kingston	Jamaica
GianMarco Schiesaro	VIS - International Volunteers for Development, Rome	Italy
Gina Cheron	New York City Technical Education, New York City	United States of America
Gitta Siekmann	National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Adelaide	Australia
guillermo f. gramaglia ingaramo	Instituto Nacional de Tecnologia Agropecuaria, Buenos Aires	Argentina
Haltee Peters	Ministry of Education , Georgetwon	Guyana
Hanh Tran	The University of Melbourne, Melbourne	Australia
Hannatu Garba	University of Nigeria Nsukka, Nsukka	Nigeria
Hans Daale	CHAIN5, Leusden	Netherlands
Hazrat Hussain	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa TEVTA, Peshawar	Pakistan
helen mahony	Ballyfermot College of Further Education	Ireland
Hiromichi Katayama	UNESCO	France
Ian Philip Thomas Baird	ADVETI, Abu Dhabi	United Arab Emirates

Ibrahim Muhammad Bagudo	Umaru Musa Yar'adua University Katsina, Katsina	Nigeria
IGBERADJA SERUMU	INTERNATIONAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING ASSOCIATION (IVETA), ABRKA	Nigeria
Igberadja Serumu	Delta State University, Abraka	Nigeria
IhundeVeroOmonor	University of Nigeria Nsukka , Enugu	Nigeria
Ing Louis Aquilina	Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology, Paola	Malta
Isabel Patiño	VVOB, Quito	Ecuador
Janaina de Oliveira Ceia Dantas	Universidade Barão de Mauá, Rio de Janeiro	Brazil
Jason Hiscocks	UNIDO, Erbil	Iraq
Jennifer Walker	HEART Trust/NTA, Kingston	Jamaica
Jessie Coutinho de Souza Tavares	University of Fortaleza, Fortaleza	Brazil
Jo Hardie	Waikato Institute of Technology - WINTEC , Wellington	New Zealand
John Okewole	Yaba College of Technology, Yaba Lagos	Nigeria
John Taugau	Government , Port Moresby	Papua New Guinea
John W. Simiyu	University of Eldoret, Eldoret	Kenya
JOSEPH N NJAU	VETA, DAR-ES-SALAAM	Tanzania, United Republic of
Juanita Caddy	Canberra	Australia
Kamal Armanious	UNESCO-UNEVOC, Bonn	Germany
Katerina Ananiadou	UNESCO	France
Kayode Somorin	University of Benin, Edo State	Nigeria
Kedibone Boka	JET Education Services, Johannesburg	South Africa
Kelvin Gyekye	Linkmate Youth Network , Monrovia	Liberia
Kenneth Barrientos	UNESCO-UNEVOC, Bonn	Germany
Khedidja Mansouri	Education, Touggourt	Algeria
Kimar Mckay Brooks	UWI Mona Campus	Jamaica
Kira Clarke	University of Melbourne, Melbourne	Australia
Knowledge Chiwaro	Knowledge Chiwaro Ministries, Gweru	Zimbabwe
Lemecha Geleto Wariyo	Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa	Ethiopia
Lilian ogechi	University of Nigeria Nsukka, Enugu state	Nigeria
Lilit Beglaryan	Yerevan, 0001	Armenia
Lisa Bale	TAFE NSW, Kingscliff	Australia
Lova Zakariasy	Institut Supérieur de Technologie d'Antsiranana, Antsiranana	Madagascar
Loveness Msofi Mgalamadzi	Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources , Lilongwe	Malawi
Luis Cateura	Fundacion Paraguaya, Asuncion	Paraguay
LUIS GUILLERMO IBARRA FUENTES	MILPA ALTA	Mexico
Madgerie Jameson-Charles	The University of the West Indies, Port of Spain	Trinidad and Tobago
Madhusree Banerjee	ADB, Delhi	India
Madu chinenye marycynthia	Yaba college of technology, lagos	Nigeria
Marcia Rowe Amonde	VTDI, HEART Trust, Kingston	Jamaica

Maria Eugenia Jimenez Torres	Duoc UC Professional Institute, santiago	Chile
Maria-Carmen Pantea	BBU, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work , Cluj Napoca	Romania
Marjorie Barrett	HEART Trust NTA, Kingston	Jamaica
Mark Anthony Green	Vocational Training Development Institute, Kingston	Jamaica
Martin Ogbu Clement	College of Education, Oju, Oju, Benue State	Nigeria
Mary Leahy	University of Melbourne	Australia
Max Ehlers	UNESCO-UNEVOC International Centre, Bonn	Germany
May Ishaq	UNESCO	Jordan
MBEMBA LAURIANE PRINCILIA	ONG ASSOCIATION BRAZZAVILLOISEC, JEUNESSE ACTION EVOLUTIVE, Brazzaville	Congo
Megan Allardice	Wintec, Hamilton	New Zealand
Melton Yahaya Sundu	Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Gombe State., Gombe	Nigeria
Mohamad Hisyam Mohd. Hashim		Malaysia
Mônica Mota Tassigny	University of Fortaleza, Fortaleza	Brazil
Moustafa Mohamed Moustafa Wahba	Competency Assurance & TVET Consultant, Alexandria	Egypt
Mustafa Trond Smistad	Oslo and Akershus University College, Kjeller	Norway
NANCY ANN GEORGE	self employed, Kingston	Jamaica
Ndihokubwayo Athanase	Ecole Normale Supérieure, Bujumbura	Burundi
Neha Sharma	National Skill Development Agency, Delhi	India
Nehema K. Misola	UNEVOC Philippines - Visayas Center, Iloilo City	Philippines
Nkohla	Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth	South Africa
Nozawa, Miki	UNESCO , Bonn	Germany
Obiuwevbi Erieyovwe	UNOPS Multipurpose Youth Training Centre, Warri	Nigeria
Odéssia Fernanda Gomes de Assis	University of Fortaleza, Fortaleza	Brazil
Oliver Sæyffert	Wuppertal	Germany
OLUCHI JACINTA UMUNNAKWE	UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA	Nigeria
Oludare Akinlaja	Yada Yadaversity, Lagos	Nigeria
OLUYINKA TOKUNBO	International vocational Technical &Entrepreneurship Colleg	Nigeria
omeje theresa chinyere	University of Nigeria Nsukka, Nsukka	Nigeria
oniyide	TAI SOLARIN UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, LAGOS	Nigeria
Patience Awopegba	UNESCO, HARARE	Zimbabwe
Paz Portales	UNESCO, Paris	France
prudence marson	university of the west indies, MONA, kingston	Jamaica
Rafael Barrio	Public Administration, Barcelona	Spain
Rani Domah	Ministry of Tourism and Agence Française de Développement, Tsimbazaza	Madagascar
Rasika Ranasinghe	NCVER, Adelaide	Australia
Rehema Binamungu	VETA , DAR ES SALAAM	Tanzania, United Republic of
Robert Okinda	Kenya Technical Teachers College, Nairobi	Kenya
Roble Ayah	Institute of Applied Technology, Abu Dhabi	United Arab Emirates
roger bin john	university putra malaysia, puchong	Malaysia
Rónán Haughey	The Rónán Haughey Development Partnership, Sligo	Ireland

Roseann Gordon	Mandeville	Jamaica
Roslyn Benjamin	University of Trinidad and Tobago	Trinidad and Tobago
Ruiqi Li	UNEVOC-UNESCO, Bonn	Germany
Sabina Aliyeva	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH , Baku	Azerbaijan
Salvador GUERRERO	Cooperación Luxemburgues - Proy NIC 026, Managua	Nicaragua
Samantha Ahn	Sookmyung Women's University, Seoul	Republic of Korea
Sandra Sukhan	Red River College, Winnipeg	Canada
Sarah N Gilkes-Daniel	TVET Council , Hastings	Barbados
Shawnturner	import export, london	United Kingdom
Simon Broek		Netherlands
Simon Field	Skills Policy, Paris	France
Simon Madugu Yalams	Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University, Bauchi, Bauchi	Nigeria
Skeita Smith	University of the West Indies, Kingston	Jamaica
Sonia Ana Leszczynski	Universidade Tecnologica Federal do Paraná - UTFPR, Curitiba	Brazil
Sospeter Dickson Mkasanga	Vocational Education and Training Authority - VETA, Morogoro	Tanzania, United Republic of
Stefano Merante	VIS - Volontariato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo	Senegal
Sudath Ananda Liyanage	University of Vocational Technology, Ratmalana	Sri Lanka
Tameisha Sinclair	HEART Trust/NTA, St. Andrew	Jamaica
Tami Belhadj	Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board, Laval	Canada
Tim Loblaw	Bow Valley College, Calgary	Canada
TOBIAS CHIBUEZE ORJI	UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA, NSUKKA	Nigeria
tuhina	National Skill Development Agency, New Delhi	India
Ukomadu Juliet Chidimma	University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nsukka	Nigeria
v_djioze	unesco, Dakar	Senegal
vernice francis	HEART Trust NTA, KINGSTON	Jamaica
Vincent Mutunge	Hürth	Germany
William Osawa	Technical and Vocational Education and Training Authority, Nairobi	Kenya
Wouter de Regt	UNESCO-UNEVOC, Bonn	Germany
Yekinni Sunkanmi Afeez	university of nigeria, enugu	Nigeria
YOON SEOK SEO	National Polytechnic Institute of Cambodia, Phnom Penh	Cambodia
YP Chawla	Joint Electricity Regulatory Commission for Goa & UTs, Gurgaon	India
Yukiko Matsuyoshi	UNESCO Amman Office, Amman	Jordan
Zaheer Abbas Goraho	National Commission for Human Development NCHD, Karachi	Pakistan
Ziad Khan	Peace University, USA, Washington DC	United States of America
Zubair Shahid	UNESCO-UNEVOC International Centre	Germany

Contact us

UNESCO-UNEVOC International Centre for TVET
UN Campus
Platz der Vereinten Nationen 1
53113 Bonn
Germany



unevoc@unesco.org



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