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Education for the 21st Century: Connecting Schools with the Labour Market

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Summary

The aim is to create an education system that prepares young people for real life and for the economy of the future. This text proposes strengthening vocational and technical education, developing digital skills, and creating closer links between companies and schools. The ambition is for Czech education to better reflect the real needs of industry, IT, and services — while demonstrating that the new government understands the economy better than ideologically oriented theorists.

Key points

- The Czech education system needs deeper integration with the labour market, especially through dual education.
- Restoring the prestige of technical and vocational fields is essential for the competitiveness of the Czech Republic.
- Digital and AI skills must become a fundamental part of education across all levels and disciplines.

School for life, not for grades

The Czech Republic stands at the threshold of a fundamental transformation. Artificial intelligence, digitalization, the green transition, and demographic changes are fundamentally altering the structure of the labour market. Yet the education system remains, in many respects, anchored in the last century — oriented towards memorization, grades, and standardized tests rather than skills, creativity, and adaptability.

While the economy needs analytical and technically capable talent, the school system often produces graduates who lack practical competencies and the confidence to succeed in real-world settings. The problem is not teachers, but the system that requires them to complete administrative reporting instead of developing students' potential.

If the Czech Republic is to withstand competition from advanced economies, education must become a strategic priority — not merely a chapter of the state budget. It is not enough to add more IT lessons or rewrite curricula. We require a fundamental connection between schools and the real world of work, a restoration of prestige to vocational and technical fields, and a new type of partnership between the state, business, and schools.

As experience from Germany, Austria, and Finland shows, an education system can be not only a driver of innovation but also a pillar of social cohesion. Modern education does not mean "more content," but a better balance between knowledge and skills — the ability to think, create, and cooperate.

The aim of this study is to offer concrete proposals for transforming Czech education so that it prepares young people for real life and the economy of the future — while demonstrating that pragmatic and economically oriented policy can move education from ideological debate into practical implementation.

Why schools are failing to keep pace

The basic diagnosis of Czech education is clear: the system is stable, but it does not correspond to the times.

International comparisons (OECD, PISA) show that Czech students possess solid theoretical knowledge but lag significantly in practical application and teamwork. Schools educate students for "grades" and tests, not for innovation, creative thinking, and responsibility.

On the contrary, employers in industry, construction, IT, and energy have long reported a shortage of qualified workers. Paradoxically, in the era of digitalization, there is a lack not only of programmers, but also electricians and mechanics. This discrepancy has several structural causes:

1. **Outdated curricula and weak connection with practice.**
   Teaching often relies on theoretical subjects and frontal lectures. Students thus leave school with heads full of information but without the ability to solve real-world tasks. Practical projects, dual education, or company internships are more of an exception than the standard.
2. **Low prestige of vocational education.**
   While apprenticeships in Germany and Austria are considered a respected path to success, apprenticeships are still seen as a "Plan B" in the Czech Republic. Many parents and students

consider grammar schools the only “decent” option—regardless of the child’s actual abilities or the needs of the labour market.

3. **Insufficient digital preparedness.**
   The pandemic revealed dramatic inequities between schools’ access to technology, as well as the digital skills of teachers. Yet digitalization often ends with an interactive whiteboard rather than a transformative teaching strategy.
4. **Fragmentation and absence of strategic management.**
   Competencies are scattered among the ministry, regions, municipalities, and schools. There is no unified long-term vision that connects educational policy with the state’s economic strategy.
5. **Weak career counselling and transition to the labour market.**
   Most schools do not offer systematic support in career planning. Young people often have no idea which professions will have high demand and therefore make uninformed career decisions. The result is frustration, overcrowding at universities, and a shortage of labour in practical fields.

The consequence of this imbalance is a growing structural mismatch between education and the economy. According to the Chamber of Commerce of the Czech Republic, job vacancies in the country exceed the number of job seekers, and companies often lower qualification requirements due to labour shortages, which can complicate graduates’ employment in their field.

In the long term, this threatens the competitiveness of the entire country: without a technically and digitally literate workforce, it is impossible to build modern industry or an innovative economic environment.

The Czech Republic thus faces a paradox: we have quality teachers, capable students, and a strong tradition of technical fields—but we lack a system that connects them. Education must become a societal investment, not just an obligation.

Only then can schools once again become places where skills for the future are developed, not just knowledge of the past.

Restoring prestige to technical and vocational education

The foundation of the Czech economy is built on technical skills — from mechanical engineering, energy, and IT. Yet over the past two decades, the prestige of vocational education has gradually declined. The “vocational school” has become synonymous with failure rather than professionalism. Parents push their children toward grammar schools even when they lack academic ambitions, while businesses struggle in vain to find qualified workers.

If the Czech Republic is to remain the industrial heart of Europe, it must rehabilitate and revitalize the concept of expertise. Education levels must not be measured solely by the quantity of university graduates, but also by the quality of those graduates’ ability to create, repair, innovate, and undertake.

For decades, it was precisely the “golden Czech hands” that symbolized national skill, creativity, and technical cleverness. Czech industry, which once competed with the most advanced economies in the world, was built on people who had the technical skill to both design and produce goods.

From the shoemakers of Baťa, the designers in Plzeň, to today's engineering innovators—this tradition of skill and ingenuity was the backbone of Czech prosperity.

Today, however, there is a risk that the "golden hands" will be replaced by imported labour and a loss of continuity in crafts. If we do not want technical skill to disappear from Czech culture and the economy, it must be restored with dignity and respect. Being an electrician, locksmith, or mechanic must once again signify prestige, security, and opportunity—not the last resort.

Lost balance

Throughout the 1990s and after EU accession in 2004, emphasis has been placed on tertiary education. According to data from the Czech Statistical Office, the number of university students in the Czech Republic has increased significantly in recent years, while data on the share of students in vocational education show a long-term decline in their proportion within secondary education.

This trend has produced two negative effects:

- An excess of graduates in humanities and social sciences, who struggle to find employment,
- A shortage of technicians, craftsmen, and skilled workers, which slows industry and increases dependence on labour migration.

According to data from the Chamber of Commerce in 2024, Czech companies lack over 80,000 specialists in technical professions. According to a survey by the National Pedagogical Institute, a significant portion of secondary vocational schools struggle with insufficient collaboration with employers, leading to limited contact between students and real work environments during their studies.

What we can learn from Germany and Austria

We can draw inspiration from the dual system—a model that combines theoretical education with practical experience directly in companies.

In Germany and Austria, students in vocational schools spend up to half of their studies in real work environments. Companies share responsibility for training young specialists, invest in their development, and often employ them afterward.

This system rests on three pillars:

1) **Collaboration between the state, schools, and companies** – clearly defined roles, shared funding, and long-term agreements.
2) **Respect for expertise** – a craft or technical profession is not "second tier," but a path to prosperity.
3) **Attractive infrastructure** – modern workshops, technology centres, and company training facilities.

The Czech environment is culturally and economically close to this philosophy, but it lacks systemic anchoring. There are individual pilot projects, especially in the automotive and engineering sectors, but without a nationwide strategy, they remain isolated.

Proposed measures for the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, several programs already exist to support the modernization of schools—for example, the National Recovery Plan, the Integrated Regional Operational Programme (IROP), and initiatives such as "Vocational Classrooms II." These initiatives primarily fund digitalization, the equipment of vocational classrooms, and the improvement of schools' technical infrastructure.

The biggest gaps, however, lie in the absence of a long-term, unified fund that combines public, European, and corporate resources, the lack of systematic partnerships between schools and businesses, and the absence of motivational mechanisms for the private sector (e.g., tax incentives). Support focuses mainly on digital technology and less on the renewal of workshops, craft and technical disciplines, or the sustainability and maintenance of equipment.

The current system thus allows modernization, but it does so in a fragmented, short-term manner and without a strategic framework.

To make vocational education an attractive choice again, a combination of economic incentives, communication, and structural changes is needed:

Modernization of the content and infrastructure of vocational schools

Schools need technological facilities that correspond to the 21st century. In cooperation with businesses, the state should create a "Technology 2030" program—a fund for the renewal of equipment, laboratories, and workshops. Financing could combine public funds, European grants, and tax incentives for corporate partners.

National campaign "Smart Hands"

The goal is to break prejudices against crafts and technical professions. The campaign could combine media elements (stories of successful graduates, ambassadors from practice) with school visits and regional competitions. Inspiration comes from the successful campaign "Made in Germany – Beruf mit Zukunft."

Introduction of tax relief and grants for companies that involve students in practical training

Companies that maintain long-term cooperation with schools and create training positions should be able to deduct part of their costs from taxes or receive direct subsidies. Motivation must be long-term, not project-based.

Regional centres for dual education

Each region should have a network of "Talent Hubs"—facilities that connect secondary schools, universities, companies, and employment offices. The goal is to share equipment, coordinate internships, and provide career guidance.

Strengthening the role of regions and chambers of commerce

Region municipalities should be key coordinators in the development of vocational education. Chambers of commerce can function as quality guarantors and partners in the creation of educational standards.

Expertise as part of identity

Restoring the prestige of vocational education is not just an economic task—it is a cultural and social change.

Skill, technical thinking, and practical intelligence must be recognized as an equally important part of Czech identity. A country that once gave the world Baťa, Kolben, and Čapek must not be content with seeing craftsmanship disappear from public life.

Changing the perception of vocational education also means restoring national pride in craft, innovation, and work. Quality educational policy is not measured by the number of reforms, but by how many young people feel useful, competent, and confident.

Digital and AI skills as the foundation of new education

The professional environment is changing more quickly than education can respond. Artificial intelligence, automation, and digitalization are fundamentally reshaping not only industry but also services, commerce, and public administration. New professions are emerging that did not exist ten years ago, while entire fields that schools still prepare students for are disappearing.

If Czech education is to be truly "for the 21st century," digital literacy and working with artificial intelligence must cease to be optional extras and become basic skills for every student. Not because "everyone must be a programmer," but because understanding the digital world today is equally essential as literacy.

Digital skills are more than just computer science

The current approach to teaching computer science often focuses on using a computer or basic programming. However, this is not sufficient.

A modern education system must develop digital competence—the ability to understand technology, analyze data, evaluate information, and apply it creatively.

Digital literacy has three dimensions:

1) **Technological** – the ability to use tools, applications, and systems.
2) **Informational** – the skill of searching for, verifying, and critically evaluating information.
3) **Creative** – the ability to use technology for innovation, design, and entrepreneurship.

This subject matter should be omnipresent across all subjects—not only in computer science. Students can learn data analysis in geography, work with AI in language classes, or engage with digital simulations in biology. Technology should not be a "subject" but the foundational environment in which education takes place.

Artificial intelligence as a partner, not a threat

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become a symbol of both fear and hope. Many teachers worry that tools like ChatGPT or other generative AI threaten the authenticity of education. In actuality, however, they represent an opportunity to personalize learning, develop critical thinking, and motivate students.

AI can assist in several areas:

• **Individualized approach**: algorithms can adapt instruction to the pace and level of each student.

• **Progress analysis**: tools can identify a student's strengths and weaknesses, which enables more precise targeted support.

• **Creative use**: students learn to use AI for content creation, problem-solving, or experimentation—not to blindly copy it.

The key is the ethical and responsible use of AI. Schools must teach not only how to use AI, but also how to understand its limitations—how to recognize data biases, manipulation, or false information.

Investment in digital infrastructure and teachers

No digital education reform will succeed without modern infrastructure and prepared teachers.

Many schools still operate with minimal equipment, insufficient connectivity, and no professional IT support. This leads to regional inequalities and frustration among educators, who often innovate despite the system, rather than because of it.

Therefore, it is necessary to:

1) Establish a National Fund for Digital Transformation of Education, which would finance connectivity, hardware, software, and training.
2) Implement a system of continuous teacher education in technology and AI—not just through one-off courses, but as part of professional development.
3) Support the creation of regional "AI labs" and innovation centres, where schools can share equipment, best practices, and develop pilot projects with companies.

Finland can be viewed as an inspiration, which in 2019 introduced the Elements of AI program—an open online course for all citizens that linked the education system with the technological literacy of society as a whole.

Partnerships between schools and technology companies

The private sector plays a key role in digital transformation. Collaboration with companies such as Google, Microsoft, Cisco, Avast, or Škoda Digital can provide schools with access to cutting-edge technologies and know-how.

The state should actively support this collaboration through:

- Strategic partnerships, where companies adopt schools or regions and assist them in technological development;
- Grant programs for joint projects between schools and startups;
- Digital competency accelerators, where students can test their ideas in practice.

Such integration is not the privatization of education, but a fusion of learning and innovation. A school that collaborates with industry does not lose its independence—in fact, it gains relevance.

Digital literacy as a new form of citizenship

Digital skills are not only an economic necessity. In an era of disinformation, cyberattacks, and automation, they also represent a fundamental prerequisite of a democratic society.

A citizen of the 21st century must be able to verify information, understand algorithms, protect their data, and use technology responsibly. Digital literacy thus becomes a new form of civic literacy — a set of skills without which it is not possible to fully understand the world around us. A country that wants to be technologically sovereign must begin in schools. Investments in digital education are not a cost, but a guarantee of freedom, competitiveness, and the self-confidence of the entire society.

Dual education – connecting schools and companies

One of the most powerful tools for bridging the gap between school and work is dual education – a system that combines theoretical education with practical experience directly in companies.

This model is a common part of educational structures in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, and has long produced results: low youth unemployment, high labour productivity, and a strong connection between education and economic reality.

In the Czech context, dual education has been discussed for years. However, the problem remains that it is often reduced to a few pilot projects without systemic support, a legislative framework, and financial incentives for companies. If it is to function as intended, the state, regions, and businesses must assume joint responsibility to ensure that a young person after finishing school not only has sufficient knowledge, but is also able to implement that knowledge practically.

Principles of dual education

The dual system is based on simple but effective logic:

The student is educated at school while simultaneously gaining relevant work experience in a company as part of their educational experience.

As such, theory learned in classrooms is immediately connected with practice; the pupil understands why they are learning something by viewing how their skills create practical value.

The model has several key elements:

1) **Shared responsibility**: Schools and companies are partners, not supplier and customer.
2) **Long-term contractual relationships**: The pupil knows that their practical training has a specific goal — preparation for real employment.
3) **High-quality mentors**: Companies provide experts who guide and evaluate students, not merely “supervise” them.
4) **Motivational system**: Students receive scholarships or financial rewards, while companies receive tax incentives or access to talent.

Proposals for systemic measures

For dual education to function in the Czech Republic, it is not enough to "promote" it. Therefore, it is necessary to create an institutional, financial, and social framework that will give it stability and prestige.

Legislative anchoring of the dual system

- Anchor dual education in the Education Act as a standard form of study, not an experiment.
- Clearly define the responsibilities of schools, companies, and students.
- Introduce a legal framework for dual education contracts, including insurance and students' labour rights.

Financial incentives for companies

- Provide tax incentives to enterprises that train students over the long term or create apprenticeship positions.
- Introduce a state co-funding program for mentors' wages and the costs of educational infrastructure.
- Support shared educational facilities used by multiple companies within one region.

Regional centres of dual cooperation

- Establish "School–Company Connection Centres" in every region that would coordinate practical training, share equipment, and register demand for students.
- These centres may operate under the auspices of regional authorities or chambers of commerce.
- Their task will also be to collect data on graduate employment outcomes and evaluate the quality of partnerships.

Career guidance and student motivation

- From primary school onward, guide pupils toward understanding real professions, work habits, and opportunities in the region.
- Introduce motivational scholarships for students in dual education.
- Cooperate with parents—who often decide on school choice—through information campaigns.

Involvement of universities and research institutions

- Dual principles should also penetrate higher education, especially in technical and economic fields.
- Establishment of so-called "Living Labs" — laboratories where students, researchers, and companies jointly develop solutions for practice.

Dual education as a key to better linking education and the labour market

While dual education in the Czech Republic has so far encountered legislative and organizational limits, concrete models of cooperation between schools and employers are gradually developing. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, in its Strategy 2030+, emphasizes the need for a stronger connection between vocational education and practice, stating that examples of successful cooperation between schools and companies are gradually expanding. Additionally, some regions are piloting models in which students complete part of their instruction directly with employers, thereby gaining experience with a real working environment during their studies.

This approach is viewed in professional debates as one of the tools for strengthening graduates' job readiness, reducing the gap between theory and practice, and responding more effectively to the needs of regional labour markets. Although the system has not yet been introduced nationwide, existing initiatives show that, when rules are clearly set, dual education can be a functional element in the modernization of Czech vocational education.

For example, the Zlínský district is currently introducing a pilot model of dual education in which schools and companies jointly prepare students directly within firms.

The Zlín approach shows that regional coordination plays a key role—namely, the active involvement of the region as an intermediary between schools, companies, and other institutions. This role helps overcome one of the main weaknesses of the existing system, namely the fragmentation of initiatives and the absence of a unified framework. Although these are still pilot projects, they represent an important step toward the more systematic introduction of dual education in the Czech Republic.

Overall, the Zlín model can be seen as a practical example showing that, with clearly defined cooperation and an active regional role, dual education can become a functional tool for the modernization of vocational education—not a nationwide solution overnight, but a gradual change that better connects education with the real needs of the economy.

Benefits of dual education for the state, companies, and students

The introduction of a dual system brings multi-level effects:

- For the state: Reduction of youth unemployment, higher tax revenues, and a stable labour market.
- For companies: Access to motivated graduates, lower training costs, and greater employee loyalty.
- For students: Real work experience, greater certainty of employment, and a natural link between theory and practice.

For example, in Germany, within the dual education system, a student in a technical field spends approximately three days a week directly in a company and two days at school. Companies such as Siemens and Bosch have long cooperated with vocational secondary schools: students become involved in real projects during their studies, learn to work with specific technologies, and acquire work habits.

Results in practice:

- For the state: Young people move smoothly from school to employment, which reduces graduate unemployment and stabilizes the labour market. Graduates also begin earning and paying taxes earlier.
- For companies: The enterprise has workers it has trained itself according to its needs. The costs of subsequent training are minimal, and employees tend to be more loyal because they have already spent part of their studies in the company.
- For students: A graduate does not leave school "blindly" — they have concrete practical experience, know the working environment, and often already have an employment contract signed even before completing their studies.

A typical scenario is that, after finishing school, the student immediately joins the same company where they completed their practical training. The company gains a prepared employee, the student gains job security, and the state gains more stable youth employment. This closed circle — school → company → employment — is considered the main economic advantage of the dual system.

A change in the culture of education

The dual system is not only a reform of schooling — it is a change of culture that reconnects the world of education with the world of work.

When a student learns in an environment where their knowledge immediately finds meaning, their relationship to education changes; they shift from a passive recipient to an active participant.

This is exactly the shift that the education system in the Czech Republic needs. Not more subjects, but more connections. Not more grades, but more experience. Not more theories, but more cooperation.

Career centres, mentoring, and lifelong learning

A modern education system does not end with a secondary school leaving examination or a diploma. At a time when technologies and the labour market change every few years, education becomes a lifelong process.

Successful countries have understood this: they invest not only in schools, but also in infrastructure that supports people throughout their entire careers — from choosing their first profession to retraining at a later age.

The Czech Republic needs a similar system. Instead of a one-time "start in life," the education system must create long-term bridges between education, career, and personal development.

Career centres as a link between school and the labour market

Most Czech students leave school with minimal awareness of what professions exist, what skills they will need, or how to prepare for a job interview.

By contrast, in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Finland, career centres operate already at the level of secondary schools, often connected to local enterprises and universities.

We propose that every secondary school and university in the Czech Republic have a mandatory career and talent centre that:

- Helps students identify their strengths and professional orientation,
- Connects them with regional employers, startups, or research institutions,
- Organizes internships, workshops, mentoring, and professional coaching,
- Provides access to digital databases of vacancies, trends, and future skills.

These centres should operate in cooperation with Labour Offices, chambers of commerce, and universities, thereby creating an integrated network for the career development of young people.

Mentoring and the role of practical experience in personal growth

No theory can replace experience. Therefore, systematic support for mentoring—the relationship between a student and a professional from practice—should be part of education policy.

Companies, universities, and public institutions can involve their experts in the "My Mentor" program, which connects young talents with professionals from various sectors.

Mentoring has several benefits:

- it helps students understand the real demands of a profession,
- it develops self-confidence, motivation, and work ethic,
- it strengthens interpersonal links between the educational and economic spheres.

Such an approach supports not only professional growth but also social mobility—young people from smaller towns or less stimulating environments gain access to inspiration that they otherwise would not have.

Lifelong learning as a new norm

The traditional model "first study, then work" is definitively outdated.

According to the OECD, labour market requirements are changing so rapidly that workers will need to regularly update and adapt their skills throughout their careers, which highlights the necessity of lifelong learning, retraining, and continued education.

Technological innovations, automation, and changes in the labour market require people to continuously supplement their skills.

The Czech Republic should therefore introduce a comprehensive lifelong learning strategy that connects:

- Digital platforms for retraining (online courses, MOOC, micro-certifications),
- Cooperation with companies that offer training and upskilling of employees,
- Public subsidies and tax incentives for individuals and enterprises that invest in education,
- A system for recognizing non-formal education, so that skills acquired outside traditional schools can be certified.

The goal is to create a culture in which learning becomes a normal part of life, not an exception.

Education should be accessible, flexible, and relevant—whether a person is 18 or 58 years old.

Education of teachers and school leadership

No reform will take place without the people who implement it.

Teachers, principals, and school psychologists need both space and support for their own professional development. Countries such as Estonia and Finland demonstrate that investments in teachers yield the greatest returns.

Therefore, it is essential to:

- Ensure regular training programs for teachers focused on new methods, technologies, and work with motivation,
- Support the creation of communities of practice where schools can learn from one another and share experience and innovations,
- Strengthen the role of school leadership as managers of change, not merely administrators.

High-quality teachers are the backbone of the education system—without them, even the best strategy will remain only on paper.

Education as the engine of the Czech future

Czech education stands at a crossroads. It can either continue in the traditional model based on grades, tests, and formal diplomas, or transform into a living ecosystem of skills, innovation, and partnerships.

Education reform for the 21st century is not only a matter of education policy, it is an economic and civilizational necessity. A country that wants to be successful must be able to develop the potential of its people, connect schools with business, digital technologies with ethics, and education with the realities of life.

The aim of this study was to show that a modern education system:

- Is built on respect for craftsmanship (“the famous Czech skilled hands”),
- Develops digital and AI competencies,
- Connects schools with practice through dual education,
- Supports career development and lifelong learning.

The vision is clear: education should prepare people for life, not for tests.

Let us connect schools with practice, technology with vision, and talents with opportunity.

Such an education system will not merely be a service of the state—it will become the foundation of a strong, confident, and innovative Czech Republic.

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