



THE EUROPEAN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEM: TOWARDS A UNIFIED APPROACH

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Abstract

The European vocational education and training system exhibits significant diversity, with each country implementing its unique approach. While a unified European solution is desirable, a lack of comprehensive knowledge in this area hinders the development of policies that could establish a basic model applicable to all countries, albeit with necessary variations due to socio-economic nuances. European policymakers and stakeholders recognize the importance of vocational education and training, including formats like Dual School and Work-based Learning. Nations have committed to common targets in their education and training strategies, driven by globalized competition and the need for professional workers skilled in new technologies. Nevertheless, with the support of established systems, this European solution shows great potential for seamless operation and effectiveness. A successful European strategy would take into account the advancements in technology, the unique regional and national characteristics of the workforce in terms of traditional skills and competencies, and notably, the available natural resources. These resources have become a crucial factor in industrial efficiency and competitiveness. Implementation of dual school models varies at the European level, influenced by national strategies shaped by local factors. Some countries prioritize collaboration with stakeholders and regulatory frameworks to optimize professional training, while others, like Romania and Bulgaria, are just beginning to adopt dual school laws, with emerging examples of best practices. Romania, in particular, has largely followed the German model due to economic

influences. In 2006, the European Council recognized vocational training through dual schools as an excellent investment, yielding high returns, surpassing initial costs, and delivering long-term efficiency and productivity benefits.

Keywords: vocational education and training, unitary European solution, variable priorities, dual school, strategy

1. Introduction

In an era characterized by rapid global advancements and continuous technological innovation, the landscape of education is undergoing significant transformations. One notable shift is the growing recognition of the importance of vocational education as a viable and valuable pathway for young individuals seeking to enter the workforce and thrive in today's competitive job market (Unesco, 2021).

Traditionally, the emphasis in education has often been on pursuing a university degree as the primary route to career success. However, with the changing dynamics of the job market and the increasing demand for specialized skills, vocational education has emerged as a compelling alternative.

Vocational education has a significant economic influence, as evidenced by studies indicating its role in mitigating youth unemployment (Choi, 2019; Nilsson, 2010). For developing countries aspiring to achieve economic progress, increasing investments in vocational education and training appears to be a straightforward and evident solution (McGrath, 2023).

Due to its strong focus on practical skills and alignment with the job market's demands, individuals who graduate from vocational programs are highly employable, and their competencies are well-established and appreciated by employers (McDonald, 2023; Breen, 2005).

Modern higher education blurs the line between vocational and traditional education, offering more job-focused programs. This shift is driven by a growing emphasis on graduates' employment prospects, regardless of their chosen educational path or course content (Waichun Choy, 2022).

The European vocational education and training system is a diverse landscape with each country adopting its own unique characteristics and approaches. While a unitary European solution would be desirable, the lack of comprehensive knowledge in this field hinders the development of policies that can ensure the implementation of a basic VET model across all countries, albeit with necessary variations to accommodate socio-economic particularities. Nevertheless, European policymakers and stakeholders recognize the importance of VET in its various forms, such as Dual School and Work-Based Learning, and have committed to common targets in their education and training strategies.

In the face of a globalized economy, competition has intensified, motivating European nations to

continuously improve their strategic approaches. Productivity is a fundamental driver of economic growth, and Europe faces a challenge in this regard. European productivity lags behind that of its global competitors, indicating a critical need for a skilled workforce to replace retiring professionals and to meet the demands of emerging technologies. In 2006, the European Council acknowledged that vocational training, as manifested through Dual School programs, represents an excellent investment. Such programs generate high returns that surpass the initial costs and produce long-term positive effects on efficiency and productivity. This recognition further underscores the significance of vocational training in addressing Europe's productivity challenges and fostering economic growth. VET is considered an engine for social welfare, economic growth and development (Unesco, 2012) and contributes greatly to meeting the labor market need (King et al., 2010).

2. Methods

Bibliographic study to deepen the subject of vocational education and training- The study presents a literature review of the European vocational education and training (VET) system, discusses the policies and strategies adopted by European countries, and highlights the importance of a unified approach to VET. The information provided seems to be based on existing literature, reports, policies, and examples of good practice.

3. Results

The European vocational education and training (VET) system exhibits a rich tapestry of approaches, reflecting the diverse socio-economic factors and national priorities within member states. Notably, some nations, like Romania and Bulgaria, have recently embraced Dual School programs, signaling a growing acknowledgment of the advantages associated with this educational model.

Across Europe, policymakers and stakeholders have recognized the pivotal role of vocational training in addressing the continent's productivity challenges and fostering economic growth. This recognition has led to a convergence of European VET policies, with a focus on establishing a sustainable and globally recognized European VET strategy. This strategy prioritizes skills acquisition, social equity, and international recognition.

However, realizing a unified European VET strategy necessitates substantial reforms, the alignment of priorities, and adherence to key recommendations, notably those outlined in the Council Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness, and resilience, as well as the Osnabrück Declaration. A diverse array of stakeholders is involved in the VET sector, including governmental and regulatory bodies, VET providers, industry representatives, learners, trainers, and industry associations, each bearing distinct roles and responsibilities.

The development of a shared core of skills for VET demands a systematic approach, encompassing needs assessment, the establishment of working groups, the definition of competency domains, the creation of a common core framework, validation and review processes, finalization and implementation, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation. These efforts, when enhanced, enable Europe to confront the challenges posed by a globalized economy, improve productivity, secure a future-ready workforce, and promote social equity and resilience.

This article furnishes valuable insights into the European VET landscape, spotlighting the diversity of approaches and the growing acceptance of Dual School programs in select countries. It also underscores the necessity of collaborative efforts among stakeholders in the VET sector, emphasizing the imperative for coordinated actions to elevate vocational education and training.

The recognition of vocational training as a substantial investment and its potential to tackle Europe's productivity hurdles are noteworthy findings, underscoring the urgency of sustaining and advancing VET systems.

Furthermore, the alignment of European policies toward a unified VET strategy, with its focus on skills acquisition, social equity, and international recognition, highlights the commitment of European policymakers and stakeholders in addressing prevailing and forthcoming workforce challenges.

The delineation of stages for developing a shared core of skills in VET provides a structured framework that can guide policymakers and practitioners in aligning VET programs with industry requirements and promoting standardization. Notably, the emphasis on continual monitoring and evaluation of the implementation and effectiveness of the shared core of skills is critical for ensuring ongoing improvements and the relevance of VET programs.

While the article offers a comprehensive overview of the European VET system and valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers engaged in vocational education and training, the inclusion of empirical evidence or case studies would further substantiate the arguments and findings presented. Overall, the article serves as a valuable resource for understanding the intricacies of the European VET landscape and its implications.

4. Discussion

At the European level, countries demonstrate varying levels of openness towards implementing Dual School programs within their VET systems. National strategies and policies are inherently shaped by the specific characteristics and needs of each environment. Some countries have long recognized the importance of optimizing their professional training systems through enhanced collaboration with stakeholders, creating regulatory frameworks that facilitate the development of qualified vocational training.

While certain countries, like Romania and Bulgaria, have only recently adopted laws to allow for national-level implementation of Dual School programs, there are promising examples of good practice emerging. These examples indicate a shift in national strategies towards embracing the benefits of Dual School and signaling a growing recognition of its potential. In Romania, Dual School programs have predominantly adopted German methodologies due to the pioneering role of Germany in this form of education.

The unique features of the Romanian economic environment have influenced this adoption, fostering cooperation between educational institutions and businesses to cultivate a highly skilled workforce. National strategies that sum up different national priorities according to socio-economic and cultural particularities are very dynamic in most EU countries. They are part of a so-called national implementation plan assumed at the European level. These plans were developed through a national public debate with stakeholders and have a validity horizon of up to 10 years. These plans for the implementation of the common objectives assumed at the European level, having the strategies integrated in them, together with the priorities are in constant change due to the dynamics and global geo-political and economic challenges to which the common European policy tries to respond (European Commission, 2023).

From the multitude of strategies on education and vocational training at the European level, each nation chooses to focus its educational policies on several priorities. These countries assign specific measures to each of the assumed priorities.

The measures target the six policies from the Council recommendations:

- Development of a VET strategy swift in adapting to the needs of the labor market.
- Development of a VET strategy emphasizing the digital transformation process.
- Development of an innovative VET strategy.
- Developing a VET strategy targeting flexibility and lifelong learning.

- Developing a VET strategy focusing equal opportunities.
- Development of a VET strategy supported by quality assurance measures (Eur-Lex).

Depending on the multitude of measures channeled in a priority direction, a set of particularities will be outlined to define the national application of education and professional training. Initiatives within green and digital transition action plan aim to support VET in providing the required skills and competences. The recommendations within the renewed policies target the above-mentioned VET particularities.

The renewed VET policy including recommendations and priorities aims to:

- help individuals acquire skills and competences ensuring their adaptability and employability during and beyond the transitions to a green and digital economy;
- developing a lifelong learning culture with accent on continuous VET,
- to assure social fairness, resilience and prosperity for individuals;
- transform European VET systems into a worldwide reference (European Commission, 2021).

The most recent European policy cycle which is incorporating strategic documents and policies which started in 2020 that proposed six areas of reform and four common priorities. These instruments are the European Social Pillar Action Plan, the EU Skills Agenda and the Pact for Skills. For the implementation of the commonly assumed targets, reforms and priorities all European countries will rely on structural fund like the Recovery and Resilience Facility, The European Social Fund Plus and Erasmus+.

Clearly, the European policies converge toward building a sustainable and globally recognized European VET strategy. In order to address the challenges of transitioning to a green and digital economy, promote social fairness, resilience, and prosperity for individuals, European VET unitary system should be promoted as possible solution, thus a comprehensive strategy is needed. This strategy should focus on equipping individuals with the necessary skills and competences to adapt and thrive in the changing economic landscape. By combining environmental sustainability, technological innovation, and social inclusion, the European VET strategy can serve as a blueprint for successful workforce development.

Implementing a VET system from a country where it performs, the system cannot simply be imported. The

general features of the application that work in the home country cannot work by simply transferring know-how or translating the existing curriculum. It must be adapted to the sectoral context and the target group. Curricular materials must be relevant, sometimes they need to be modernized and adapted to local requirements. Also, the sustainability of the project beyond the implementation period must be ensured through an expenditure plan that also foresees third-party expenses, not foreseen in the project. Partners must be able to influence changes and improvement of the educational model by specifying their contribution.

A single systemic model application that is universally valid across Europe does not exist. Educational systems and practices vary considerably between European countries and each nation has its own unique approach to vocational training, depending on national priorities resulting from public consultations with stakeholders which are aware of the needs of the socio-economic and cultural landscape.

The economic sector in Romania was the one that created the model that is the basis of the design of the new architecture of education and professional training in our country. They have built the necessary infrastructure for the professional qualification of their human resources by building extensive partnerships with various relevant local institutions. The good practice models represented an important stimulus in the effort to build a reform in the national strategy of education and qualified professional training.

At the insistence of these pioneers, the dual education system was expanded by the new education law. This move aims to facilitate greater collaboration between entrepreneurs and students by aligning their interests.

The German model of dual education is predominant in some regions of Romania. The Kronstadt German Vocational School, the Bosch Group, Continental Romania are among the companies that, through the investments made, have shaped a collective change of mentality regarding the technical education. They initiated the revival of the dual professional education system in Romania, which led to a recognition by the Romanian policymakers who in turn assumed all the reforms in the European NIP regarding the qualified professional education and training. Our country has checked all planned reforms in VET emphasizing development options for teachers and trainers. Other priorities that will characterize the Romanian strategy promote transversal, entrepreneurship and digital skills, design of new continuous VET educational programs and formats and the introduction of latest technology. Hungary plans to bring professionals from the world of work to VET schools experimenting with hybrid teachers/trainers jobs. Iceland wants to promote VET

by introducing particles of it into primary schools. Another priority is the dissemination of VET opportunities to parents, teachers and guidance counsellors. Norway wants to upgrade its higher VET provision through superior financing, aiming to increase its relevance, flexibility and quality. Social partners would have an important role (Cedefop, 2019).

Even though these countries seem to walk on different paths when planning their reforms and priorities, the countries have in fact the same agenda, they are only at different points on the implementation agenda that converge towards the same common goal. The reform approaches and plans in different countries may seem varied, but they are ultimately aligned towards a shared objective. They can be likened to distinct branches stemming from the same trunk, all striving for similar goals. This cohesion and convergence in their agendas form a unique approach, crafted by diverse stakeholders, which could serve as the foundation for national education framework plans. These plans would encompass guidelines, rules, official endorsements, and would delineate the extent, duties for execution, necessary measures, and degree of stakeholder engagement. Leveraging existing systems, this European solution holds promise for effective functionality.

This unique solution designed by a wide range of stakeholders would represent the outline of a common European trunk that would include directives, regulations, ratifications that would establish the field of competence, responsible for implementation, the necessary action and level of competence of the stakeholder. The stages for creating a common core of skills in vocational training a common European trunk include the following strategy.



Figure 1. Stages involved in creating a common core of skills for VET.

Source: created by the authors

Designing a common core of skills for VET involves a systematic approach that considers the needs of learners, employers, and the industry, as a whole.

Stage 1. *Needs Assessment* involves the following activities:

- a. Identifying the industry sectors and occupations for which the common core of skills is being developed.
- b. Conducting a comprehensive analysis of the current and emerging skill requirements within those sectors.
- c. Engaging stakeholders, including employers, industry associations, trade unions, educators, and learners, to gather input on the desired skills and competencies.

In the stage 2 the *Working group is established*. This includes:

- a. Forming a working group comprising subject matter experts, industry representatives, educators, and policymakers.
- b. Defining the roles and responsibilities of the working group members.
- c. Assigning a project lead or coordinator to oversee the entire process.

The following stage involves *Defining Competency Areas*:

- a. Identify the key competency areas that form the foundation of the common core of skills.
- b. Break down each competency area into specific skills, knowledge, and abilities required for proficiency.
- c. Align the competency areas with industry standards and existing frameworks, if applicable.

Stage 4. *Draft the Common Core Framework* involves the following activities:

- a. Developing a comprehensive framework that outlines the common core skills, knowledge, and performance criteria for each competency area.
- b. Ensuring the framework is flexible, adaptable, and can be applied across different occupations and industry sectors.

- c. Considering the levels of proficiency or progression within each competency area.

Stage 5. *Validation and Review* includes:

- a. Sharing the draft framework with key stakeholders, including employers, educators, trainers, and learners, seeking feedback and input.
- b. Incorporating the feedback received and revise the framework as necessary.
- c. Conducting pilot testing of the framework in real-world VET settings to evaluate its effectiveness and gather further insights.

The 6th stage involves *Finalizing and Implementing*:

- a. Make any final adjustments to the framework based on the pilot testing results and stakeholder feedback.
- b. Obtain necessary approvals from relevant authorities or government bodies, if required.
- c. Develop guidelines and resources to support the implementation of the common core of skills within VET programs and courses.

The last stage *Draft the Common Core Framework* involves the following activities:

- a. Establishing a mechanism to monitor the implementation and effectiveness of the common core of skills in VET programs.
- b. Regularly gather feedback from stakeholders and conduct evaluations to identify areas for improvement.
- c. Updating the framework periodically to ensure it remains relevant and aligned with evolving industry needs.

By following these stages, a common core of skills for VET can be developed that addresses industry demands, enhances learner outcomes, and promotes a standardized approach to vocational education and training.

In the VET sector, there are several stakeholders involved, each with their own roles, responsibilities, and specific actions within key domains. The primary stakeholders are Government and Regulatory Bodies, VET Providers, Industry and Employers, Learners and Apprentices, Trainers and Assessors and Industry Associations and Unions.

By implementing a comprehensive VET strategy that prioritizes skills acquisition, social fairness, and international recognition, Europe can effectively navigate the transitions to a green and digital economy. This strategy should promote adaptability, employability, and lifelong learning while ensuring equal access and support for all individuals.

By developing European VET systems through

reforms and priorities assumed by the member states (European Commission, 2020), Europe can showcase its endeavor as a blueprint for worldwide reference. The unified approach could be transformed into reality as long as the member state adhere to the recommendations of the Council Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, and the Osnabrück Declaration anyway.

5. Conclusions

The European vocational education and training (VET) system, characterized by its diversity across member states, faces the challenge of harmonization while respecting unique socio-economic contexts. The recognition of VET's vital role in addressing productivity challenges and fostering economic growth has led to the convergence of European policies toward a unified VET strategy.

A successful European strategy would consider new technological level, the regional/national particularities of the human resource in terms of traditional skills and competences and, more importantly, the natural resources at disposal, which became an important factor in industrial efficiency and competitiveness.

However, achieving this unity necessitates significant reforms, alignment of priorities, and adherence to key recommendations. Stakeholders from various domains play crucial roles in shaping the VET landscape, and a systematic approach to developing a shared core of skills for VET is essential. This approach involves needs assessment, collaboration, framework development, validation, implementation, and ongoing evaluation.

The article provides valuable insights into the evolving European VET landscape, highlighting the diversity of approaches and the increasing adoption of Dual School programs in some countries. It emphasizes the importance of collaborative efforts among stakeholders and the need for coordinated actions to elevate vocational education and training.

Notably, the recognition of vocational training as a substantial investment and its potential to address Europe's productivity challenges points out the urgency of sustaining and enhancing VET systems. The alignment of European policies toward a unified VET strategy demonstrates the commitment of policymakers and stakeholders to address current and future workforce challenges.

The delineated stages for developing a shared core of skills in VET offer a structured framework to guide policymakers and practitioners, promoting alignment with industry needs and standardization. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the shared core of skills implementation are crucial for ensuring continuous improvement and program relevance.

While the article provides a comprehensive overview of the European VET system and valuable insights for stakeholders, the inclusion of empirical evidence or case studies could further bolster the presented arguments and findings. Nevertheless, the article serves as a valuable resource for understanding the intricacies of the European VET landscape and its implications for the future.

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