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Problems of VET Governance and Scope for Improvement - a Comparative View

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Abstract

The panel aims at the analysis of problems in VET governance, according to the framework of VET research proposed at the Vocational Skills Week, Brussels. Issues of multilevel coordination were identified as a main challenge. Examples from four countries (Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy) are discussed, to illustrate the challenges in governance of VET. Different methodologies are used, and issues of the relationship of central control and local delivery, and about strategic guidance and operative freedom of action are tackled. The German and Austrian examples point from different angles to issues of cooperation between the many involved stakeholders. The Hungarian and Italian examples both give emphasis to apprenticeship policies and show some pitfalls of VET policies because of too weak or too strong power policies.

Keywords

governance, centralisation, responsibility

1 Introduction

This paper includes the contributions to a panel at the ECER conference. The panel aims at the analysis of problems in VET governance in a comparative perspective. It builds on the discussion based on the framework of VET research proposed at the Vocational Skills Week,

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Brussels, 2017. Issues of multilevel coordination were identified as a main challenge. Examples from four countries (Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy) are discussed, to illustrate the challenges in governance of VET. The examples are sketched in the following sections.

The authors use different methodological approaches, some are more based on literature review, others on reflection of policy evaluations.

2 Comparative Governance studies into dual VET with Germany in the focus (Ludger Deitmer)

In my short reflection I want to study the question why is it so difficult to implement a more integrative governance practise which follows the question: How to improve the quality of dual VET in Germany? Three studies give some input to formulate a first strategy by reflecting some dimensions in VET: allocation operative and strategic functions, balances output and input orientation, consistent legal frameworks and involvement of bodies and actors as well as adequate resources.

The Bertelsmann study (Rauner & Wittig, 2013) studied and compared the governance of dual training systems of Denmark, Switzerland and Austria in contrast to Germany, based on four evaluation workshops involving different country experts. Strong governance follows a concentration of strategic functions on national level and locally more operative flexibility for local VET actors. The study comes to the conclusion that Germany follows a less integrative governance strategy while there is an in-balance of central and local functions. This is notified in several elements of the system, such as: re-configuration of curricula, dysfunctions within the vocational examination process. As regards the allocation of strategic and operative functions, the results suggest that a higher autonomy of the local bodies (companies and schools and intermediate institutions like Chamber) concerning the implementation of vocational training represents a specific advantage of the Danish, Austrian and Swiss system but not for the German VET (Rauner & Wittig, 2013).

A recently finalized CEDEFOP Study (Hauschildt & Wittig, 2015) applied a specific expert driven evaluation approach and developed the methods of the study above one step further. The result of these workshops is a 'Governance equalizer' that shows first an ideal configuration based on 6 main and 22 sub criteria. Second, country VET experts developed configurations of the actual status of VET systems in the countries Italy, Spain, Sweden, Latvia and Portugal during five evaluation workshops. These configurations are far away from the optimum and are indicating priorities for strategic attempts. For Italy (Hauschildt et al., 2015, p. 51) it was shown that a more consistent structure of the legal frameworks is needed, and the allocation of the strategic functions should allow a better balance between regional and central functions and support; the quality development and assurance is in need of an more dynamic approach, and more shared financing of public as well as private financial resources is necessary. This study delivers for an action-oriented evaluation approach which could integrate more actors into the governance policies.

Fremy (2018) analysed the governance of an important part of VET: the final examinations. He interviewed examination teams of the German North West region in several group discussions. Two of the examiners came from VET training mechanical engineering companies, and one from the local VET school (VET teacher with professional background in mechatronics). In 90% of the cases the examiners themselves had completed an apprenticeship in their domain and in most cases also attained higher vocational (e.g. Technician or Meister) or academic education (e.g. Engineering).

The apprentices select an innovative and challenging company work order which they have to develop for being tested. Examiners acceptance and rating of the order follows certain assessment criteria: the difficulty level addressing innovative mechatronic workers' skills, but also manageability in terms of time, material, production etc. The interviewees expressed the

need for a better balance between central and local responsibilities. The central regulations are not fitting well to the practices, while clear regulations are also missing. Other parts of the regulation are too much binding the local users, e.g. too concrete criteria. Examiners, moreover, judge them not as being applicable. For example, the given time frame with 20 hours was found as too narrow. In reality, it is exceeded by at least 100%. Other critique points are concerning the assessment sheets and missing attention weight for documentation.

The hypothesis of a balance between central and local functions was agreed. The examiners should have more freedom to expand – if needed – time and frequency of local inspection visits such as meetings with trainers and the apprentices within the training company (Deitmer et al., 2015).

2.1 Conclusions 1: sustaining more integrative governance strategies

A sustainable and integrative governance strategy would mean that the different actors (e.g. trainers, teachers, apprentices who are those ones taking responsibility) coordinate their teaching to allow for a better cooperation of the different learning venues e.g. companies, VET schools, training centres, chambers (Deitmer et al., 2015; Gessler, 2017). More details for an integrative governance strategy addressing legal frameworks, actor cooperation, allocation of strategic and operative functions, as well as innovation strategies are to be found in the INAP memorandum (Deitmer et al., 2013). The above valorised action evaluation methods could support for a better coordination of the local and central actors.

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3 Centralization and dualization of the Hungarian VET. Concerns and worries (Magdolna Benke)

The level of democratization in the society, the autonomy and responsiveness of different groups, the dialogue and partnership between the key actors, the role of the social partners, the power of the civil sector, all determine the governance of the education and training system of a given country and the degree of centralization in the system (Billett & Seddon, 2004; Rainbird, 2010; Benke, 2015a; Loogma, 2016).

In Hungary the previously decentralized education system has become centralized again. In January 2013, all schools previously maintained by local or county governments were taken over by the state. With regard to VET, the role of the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MKIK) has been increasingly significant; it has become a key actor in shaping VET policy and performs important duties in accordance with its 2010 agreement with the government. The MKIK is now responsible for developing standards, framework curricula and examination procedures for the majority of qualifications required for blue-collar jobs, it participates in the organisation of IVET examinations, and performs quality assurance functions, among others, in cooperation with entrepreneur associations and advocacy organisations. The state is now responsible for providing education, hiring teaching staff (including the head teachers) and paying their salaries. From September 2015, the maintenance of public VET schools had been taken over by the Ministry of National Economy. The number of VET schools (currently around 7-800) is also to be radically reduced, based on a one-by-one review of their training profiles (Cedefop Refernet, 2014a).

The aims of the Government are to make the maintenance and professional management of VET schools more efficient; make VET even more responsive to the needs of the economy; and further strengthen and increase dual VET. The Government expressed its commitment to raise the share and prestige of VET by making manual skilled worker training programmes less theoretical, with more training conducted at enterprises. The most important differences in comparison with the former system are the following: the 4 to 5 year-long vocational school programmes have been replaced by a uniform 3-year programme, the so called ‘dual VET model’. The proportion of practical training in these new programmes is significantly higher, while that of vocational theoretical education and particularly general education have been reduced.

Encouraging the participation of the enterprises in training provision, i.e., increasing the share of practical training provided at the workplace vis-à-vis school workshops is one of the main objectives of the VET policy of the government. Since 2011 several steps have been made to increase the financial incentives related to practical training. Companies can be reimbursed for the majority of their training costs from the training sub-fund of the National Employment Fund. The new approach that emerged in recent years, the increasing ‘dualization’ of VET aims to retain young people in education and training and ensure the supply of skilled workers by starting VET earlier – just as before 1998 – at the age of 14 (year 9) in their first VET grade.

In the case of ISCED 3 level professions, which typically train for blue-collar jobs, the larger share of practical training has already moved to enterprises. At the same time, the involvement of enterprises in post-secondary VET is still insignificant; economic actors do not yet show an interest in increasing dual training at this level, therefore it is still mostly provided in school-based training.

The majority of manual skilled worker training programmes students participate in enterprise-based training, usually based on a training contract. Since 2001 the number of training contracts has quadrupled. The availability of apprenticeship training contracts varies by sector/occupational field/occupation. In May 2014, practical training based on a training contract took place in more than 200 professions. However, 58% of apprenticeship training offered at ISCED 353 level qualification covered only 10 occupations.

There are different opinions about the dualization process in VET. According to the official opinion the idea itself that the dual system should be strengthened and expanded enjoys broad support (Cedefop Refernet, 2014b). At the same time, trade unions in the education sector and some VET experts have expressed serious concerns about the above reforms. They are afraid that a forcefully, overly practice oriented VET will lead to a weaker, downgraded VET, which does not prepare students for lifelong learning. The growing emphasis on practical, work-related training, and the stronger ties to labour market needs, all express the intention to train better skilled workers in the new types of VET schools rather than preparing them for further education. According to the trade unions, there is no doubt that a sharp increase in vocational school enrolment (and, in parallel, a sharp decrease in grammar school enrolment) could better serve the acute, short-term needs of the economy. The longer-term, knowledge-based future of the economy and society might then, however, be at risk (Kunert, 2016).

There is growing dissatisfaction in the society towards the Hungarian vocational education and training system. Teachers and students worry about the immoderate centralisation of the education system (European Trade Union Committee for Education, 2016). Politicians (of the opposite) and education experts are increasingly concerned about the excessive centralization of VET and the inadequately prudent dualization process.

3.1 Conclusions 2

My research attempts point to the circumstances the government has not taken into account while forcing dualization. The research demonstrates the negative effects of excessive centralization and the hasty dualization. At the same time, some lessons from the 'Learning Regions' research project in Hungary give a good example how local innovative agro-product development by learning communities can bring together local people and appears as a good starting point to develop strong local governance which maybe can support to set up efficient local VET governance (Benke, 2015b).

The employed research methods are literature review, secondary processing of research results and expert interviews.

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4 The Italian VET system: between reform and stabilization processes (Marco Perini and Giuseppe Tacconi)

Since 2010 the rate of Italian youth unemployment remains above the 30% (Istat, 2018). In order to counter this problem and the early school leaving, the Italian government reformed the apprenticeship regulations introducing the Dual-System in 2015 (State-Regions agreement of 24 September 2015). These arrangements have been integrated in the Italian VET system in place, named Istruzione e Formazione Professionale (IeFP). IeFP was introduced in the school year 2011/2012 through several regulations issued by the state-region conference. IeFP is mainly focused on initial VET activities providing three and four years programs which allow students to get, respectively, the professional operator certificate (Level 3 EQF) and the professional technician diploma (Level 4 EQF). Also, one and two years higher technical education and training programmes are provided but, the number of participants is still low.

The elements that lay the foundations of the IeFP system are (CEDEFOP, 2014): a set of training standards for basic skills to be developed during three and four years programmes; a set of minimum standards (valid at national level) for technical and vocational skills in relation to the occupation profiles included in the national qualifications register (the occupation profiles are currently around 22) and a set of intermediate and final certifications that are valid at national level. Despite these efforts, the IeFP system includes only 10% of the entire population of the secondary level (MIUR, 2016). The management of the system is divided up between the central government and regions. Consequently, there are many differences region by region in terms of participants' number, and courses' quality (CEDEFOP, 2014). Through the analysis of the last INAPP report about the Italian VET system (INAPP, 2017a), the following critical elements seem to emerge:

- the unclear shared management between central government and local administrations;
- the territorial heterogeneity of the available training due to the differences of the local economic and social contexts;
- the dangerous separation between the production system and the educational system, with the risk of leaving unanswered the new demands of the labour market (e.g. additive manufacturing skills) despite the high unemployment;
- the poor visibility of the system (Scalmato, 2015).

Furthermore, the apprenticeship reform, mentioned above, is still in the experimental phase and does not yet cover the whole national territory. Indeed, according to the monitoring actions conducted by INAPP (2017b), 15 regions (Abruzzo, Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Lazio, Liguria, Lombardia, Marche, Molise, Piemonte, Sicilia, Umbria, Toscana, Valle d'Aosta, Veneto) declared that dual-system programmes have been activated at the end of 2016. Others, Basilicata, Calabria, Puglia, Sardegna had not yet activated any kind of activity related to the reform. On the one hand that's due to the different local policies, on the other hand, that is because in some regions the productive fabric is weak and the company partners for apprenticeship are lacking (Tacconi & Gomez, 2018).

At the end of 2016, the total number of students enrolled in the Italian dual-system experimentation was 23247: 59% of these students were enrolled in order to obtain the qualification (3 years programmes), while about 29% were enrolled in 4th year IeFP courses (to obtain the technician diploma). More than half of them were situated in Lombardia Region. The students enrolled to IFTS (Higher Technical Education and Training) are also located in the same

geographical area and they represent only about the 5%. Only the remaining share (about 7%) was enrolled in apprenticeship (INAPP, 2017a).

4.1 Conclusions 3

The picture emerging from the monitoring reports shows that the Italian dual-system is still taking its first steps while the IeFP system is also being strengthened. Maybe, the implementation of dual-system could offer new opportunities for young people, especially to those who plan to continue beyond the three and four years programmes (Tacconi & Gomez, 2018). However, the new Italian dual-system seems to grow over time, but the available data are still few, and it is too early for judging the reform effectiveness. Perhaps, to better plan the next actions, both at a regional and at a national level, it would be useful to collect qualitative data on experiences made by students, teachers, company trainers and tutors during the system experimentation.

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5 Bridging multilevel problems by the Austrian lifelong learning strategy? (Lorenz Lassnigg)

In Austria the governance of VET is strongly fragmented to different sectors (full-time school and apprenticeship, labour market policy, higher education institutions), different actors (state bureaucracies, social partners, enterprises, the public employment service) and different levels of government (local, regional, central). Overall, education is governed by separate systems that do not allow for overall coordination. In periods of demographic decline the different sectors are competing for applicants, and it is not possible to find agreements about clear priorities about improving the matching of supply and demand – each of the sectors chooses its own priorities. The core area of VET is situated at the upper secondary level in a dualistic structure of a strong apprenticeship system in parallel with a strong full-time school-based VET system

(Lassnigg, 2011). Moreover, the responsibilities for the apprenticeship system are distributed between the social partners (mainly chambers of commerce) and two ministries (economic affairs for the enterprise part and education for the part-time school part), whereas the responsibilities for most of the full-time VET schools are situated in the ministry of education (some sectors still govern to much part their own education systems, health and agriculture). Until now the VET schools have been governed by a separate directorate, organised by vocational sectors (engineering, business, services), who also ran different policies.

On this background and influenced from European policy proposals a government based lifelong-learning-strategy (Republik Österreich, 2011) was set up during the 2000s to coordinate lifelong learning across the different policy silos: four ministers have taken responsibility for this strategy: education, science, labour and economic affairs. The strategy was build up in a long stepwise consultation process that involved the several actors of the field and tried to cover the whole process of lifelong learning from early education till post-employment education of older people. Main elements of the strategy were (i) some guiding instruments (principles, guidelines, goals and benchmarks) laid down in the written document, (ii) a content structure that proposed ten lines of action ('Aktionslinien') according to certain sectors combined with priorities (e.g., improvement of equality of opportunity in compulsory education; or three action lines for adult education (AE): employment related non-formal AE, enterprise based learning conditions, community education; or support of mobility to name a few), and (iii) the main element was a social platform organised by the ten action lines that should bring together the interested stakeholders to develop feasible policy measures; (iv) a regular monitoring process should support the efficacy of the strategy.

This strategy can be analysed as an exemplary attempt of how the various NPM tools (definition of goals and indicators, involvement of actors in temporary working groups and projects, open fund raising, etc.) might work in such an open and flexible governance structure, and it can also be analysed as an approach of experimenting policy learning. The experience with this well meant complex and comprehensive strategy after about six years shows a terrific disaster. It has only integrated measures that were under way anyway, and the stakeholders in the actions lines have found no way of action, or some initial attempts have faded away. In 2017 the last of the four ministers went out of office, and the platform does not meet any more. What can we learn from this attempt about governance (Lassnigg, 2014, 2017)?

5.1 Conclusions 4

- First, a NPM strategy that is not based on a legal basis, can fade away without much ado, despite many stakeholders are involved;
- second, a (public) strategy without a budget, that instead tries to collect resources from the stakeholders, seems not feasible, even if it is based on good ideas and an experimenting approach;
- third, maybe this is a most fundamental point, if public policy makers are involved at key positions, they will try to control a broader collective process and try to push their agenda through;
- finally, a professional approach, even if it is started quite carefully with consultation, and structuring of work, is too weak vis-à-vis politics.

Indirectly commenting on some ideas brought forward in contributions to the panel, this experience shows the dominating role of the power structures in governance. Ideas about good structures, content, and instruments, and about (central) strategy and (local) delivery must consider the interest of the political actors today to mainly stay in office and use power for this purpose. In fact, the basic structure of the strategy was disastrous wrong, as the policy makers tried to engage the stakeholders who should also pool their resources, without providing

additional financial means from the political level (strategy without budget), and at the same time trying to control the activities of the stakeholders. This was attempted through a task force of representatives of the four involved ministries that was given central coordinating power.

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Conclusion

Based on the conclusions of the individual contributors, some more general points can be made. The contributions take quite different perspectives, and to some part a silently underlying topic is the relationship of politics to governance issues, which are more directly related to policies.

The German contribution points to pitfalls in the integrative coordination among actors and sketches some approaches towards using evaluation for a more systematic analysis and a better understanding of how governance works and should work. The Austrian contribution also deals with the coordination among actors, but the experience with the lifelong learning strategy leads to less optimistic expectations about the potentials of NPM-oriented governance. A main message is that politics must be taken into account and seems to be stronger than a quite carefully developed 'soft' governance strategy.

The Italian and Hungarian contributions are situated on the edge of politics and governance. They try to give some assessment of recent policies towards VET in the countries. The pitfalls they find point to some extent in opposite directions. In Hungary politics seemed to fail because of too powerful interventions, in Italy the interventions seem rather too weak to provide results. Both underline qualitative micro level aspects as being very important for successful policies: collecting qualitative data on experiences of the involved actors, and local learning communities are hoped to improve governance and politics efficacy. The Austrian experience makes us rather cautionary in this respect.

Biographical notes

Lorenz Lassnigg works as Senior Researcher at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Vienna, Austria. His research interests are about VET policies and governance and the development of lifelong learning, more recently he has started to work about social progress in education and the relationship of VET to democratic education.

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Magdolna Benke is a researcher of CHERD at the University of Debrecen, Hungary. Her research interests focus on vocational education and training, the regional dimension of VET, learning regions, the role of social partners in VET, workplace learning, adult education. She

participated in international projects, organized by the EU and the OECD. She coordinated several national research projects on different fields of VET.

Ursel Hauschildt works as Senior Researcher at Bremen University's TVET Research Group (I:BB) and at the Institute Technology and Education (ITB). She is involved in several international comparison projects, notably in competence diagnostics and vocational identity development of apprentices. Moreover, two European governance studies in vocational education and training were conducted in recent years, in which I:BB took part as consortium member.

Giuseppe Tacconi is researcher at the Department of Human Sciences of the University of Verona. He is the coordinator of the Center for Action Research in Vocational Education and Training (CARVET: www.carvet.org); he is also member of the Scientific Committee of Italian Journals for VET ("Rassegna Cnos", "Professionalità studi"). He has focused for years on issues related to the VET system. His interests are about the epistemology of practice based upon reflection in/on action, the relevance of work practice and personal experience for the improvement of continuous VET practices and Teacher Education, and the relationship between learning and work.

Marco Perini, PhD student, enrolled in the third year of the PhD program in the Human Sciences at Department of Human Sciences, University of Verona. His main area of interest and research include Vocational Education and Training, educational technologies, work-based learning and teacher education. Prior to enrolling at University of Verona he worked for four years as freelance Moodle and IT teacher in VET centers and schools. He also worked as training manager and tutor in several projects funded by the European Union