

TRANSITIONING TO A UNITARY EUROPEAN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEM

Cristina VERES^{1,2}, Miklos-Marius VERES^{3*}

- 1 Department of Industrial Engineering and Management, Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology, George Emil Palade University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science, and Technology of Targu Mures, Nicolae Iorga Street, 1, 540088 Targu Mures, Romania
 - 2 Doctoral School of I.O.S.U.D., George Emil Palade University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science, and Technology of Targu Mures, Gheorghe Marinescu Street, 38, 540142 Targu Mures, Romania
 - 3 "Gheorghe Șincai" Technological High School of Târgu Mureș, Bld. 1848, 55, 540406 Târgu Mureș, Romania
- *Correspondence: mariusveres@yahoo.com

Abstract: The European VET landscape is very variate where member states adapted their approach to the economic and social reality. However, there is a tendency towards creating a more unified, cohesive European VET system. In the current geopolitical and economic landscape, the E.U. must reassess its VET strategy to address the challenges posed by Asian countries, which benefit from more efficient productivity due to lower production costs, easier access to raw materials, and a large, readily available workforce. This work highlights that the transition towards a coherent European system of education and professional training can be implemented with the systems already in operation. Vocational education and training are adaptable, evolving to meet the unique goals and needs of each organization or community they serve. This article aims to develop a shared framework, while still allowing for national adaptations to meet specific national and regional needs and characteristics like traditional skill and competences, natural and human resources. When aiming to implement a high-performing VET system, it must be tailored to the specific sectoral context and target group. Additionally, sustainability should be guaranteed through a plan that allows all partners to actively contribute to the adjustments and enhancement of the educational model by clearly defining their roles and input.

Keywords: unitary European VET, algorithm, stakeholders, framework, common targets, strategy

1 INTRODUCTION

In these transitional times of the technology and economy, VET has an important role in instructing a workforce that is skilled and adaptable. The European Union (EU) confronts the task of unifying its diverse vocational training

systems to create a cohesive and competitive labor market on a global scale. This process involves collaboration among all stakeholders and aligning educational goals with the current and future needs of the economy.

As noted by Stomp and Móri, the importance of VET has been increasingly

recognized within the framework of European economic integration, particularly since the Lisbon Summit, which emphasized education as a key component of competitiveness in the EU (Stomp & Mór , 2021). Despite the EU's establishment of numerous regulations for managing legal migration and processing asylum applications, these issues continue to pose significant challenges. Many migrants will eventually settle as future residents who will need support integrating into the labor market, thereby creating additional challenges alongside concerns about productivity and efficiency. This underscores the importance of streamlining European VET, which can be best accomplished by developing a unified structure for governance, strategic planning, organization, and funding.

The 2002 Copenhagen Declaration established the EU's policy direction for VET, highlighting the importance of fostering cooperation in quality assurance, with a specific emphasis on the exchange of models and methods, as well as on common criteria and principles for the quality of education and vocational training. (E.E.A.)

Europe's vocational education system has historically been fragmented, with each country implementing its own curriculum, qualifications, and methodologies. While this approach has allowed flexibility, it has also resulted in inconsistencies across borders (Salajan & Roumell, 2021). A unified system would streamline processes, making qualifications recognizable across Europe and ensuring that vocational training meets a high standard of quality. Studies highlight the integration of VET into the socio-economic strategy of the EU has been critical over the past 25 years, with efforts focused on modernizing curricula and enhancing the attractiveness of VET (Gordon, 2015).

Each EU country is at a different stage of VET development, with varying needs and demands for education and workforce training. Since the

European Union has signed trade agreements with the majority of the world's countries, it is important that it can produce goods competitive on the global market (Velasco, 2023). In order to achieve this, a centralized strategy is relevant to increase the efficiency, sustainability, and quality of European production. Standardization of education and professional training on the territory of the EU supports the achievement of this objective. on a global scale (Velasco, 2023). To achieve this, a unified strategy is essential to enhance the efficiency, sustainability, and quality of European.

The main objectives of creating a unified VET system are:

- The development of a common skills framework recognized across the EU should focus on both technical skills and transversal skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and adaptability.
- Engaging all relevant stakeholders is essential for the success of a unified system. This requires close collaboration between governments, educational institutions, agencies, employers, and civil society. Active participation from Ministries of Education, universities, high schools, schools, and businesses is imperative to making this process work.

Reaching these goals depends on strong collaboration and good communication between education and industry. Aligning training programs with labor market needs and promoting international partnerships are important steps to harmonize qualification standards across member states.

Good management at every step—from designing the curriculum to implementing it in schools and training centers—is essential for this initiative to succeed. Regular evaluations and clear indicators help programs stay in line with job market needs and economic changes. Listening to stakeholders and adapting to new

technology and economic trends keeps the system up-to-date.

The systemic optimization of VET depends on the dynamics of the labor market and current skill requirements. The European strategy considers shifting economic and social trends, such as workforce aging and digital and green transitions, examining how these factors create new skill demands and mismatches, reshaping the future of work across jobs within the EU (Cedefop; Bano et al., 2022).

Implementing VET standardization across Europe will undoubtedly face challenges. In countries that have recently joined the European Union, such as Romania and Bulgaria, reforms will need to be accelerated. For example, Romania recorded a loss of €10 billion in 2018 and €13 billion in 2019 due to an increasing shortage of skilled personnel and the insufficient competencies of school and university graduates. Additionally, technological transfer between training institutions and companies,

skills needs and competences arising from public negotiations with the social partners, as well as curriculum content, may require updates or localization to align with current industry demands and regional economic conditions.

This comprehensive solution, developed through the collaboration of a diverse group of stakeholders, would form the framework for a unified European foundation, encompassing directives, regulations, and ratifications that establish standardized guidelines.

2 ORIGINAL FRAMEWORK FOR A UNIFIED VET SYSTEM

The stages presented in developing a common core of skills for VET, outlined in Table 1, represent an original contribution by the authors, based on an extensive analysis of the needs and demands of the European labor market.

Table 1. The systemic stage for shaping a common European core of vocational training

FIELD	RESPONSIBLE	ACTION	LEVEL
Legislative and regulatory framework	European Commission, ministries, supplying institutions, social partners	Creation of legislation and regulatory framework commonly valid throughout the EU	European
European funds intended for financing VET	European Commission, ministries, supplying institutions, ATUs (Administrative-Territorial Units)	Establishing European funds for the implementation of VET reforms according to national priorities	European
Mutual recognition of qualifications	European Commission, ministries, the economic agents	Extending the competence of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)	European
The common European core	European Commission, ministries, supplying institutions, the economic agents	The creation of the common European core as a foundation for the development of national education framework plans	European

FIELD	RESPONSIBLE	ACTION	LEVEL
Specific application methodologies, processes and structures	Ministries, supplying institutions, the economic agents	Development of methodologies, processes and specific application methods	National/ Regional/ Local
Modularization of skills and knowledge	Ministries, supplying institutions, the economic agents	Development and implementation of a flexible, modular curriculum for continuing professional training	National/ Regional/ Local
The level of stakeholder involvement	Ministries, ATUs (Administrative-Territorial Units), supplying institutions, the economic agents	Determining the level of involvement of stakeholders in securing financial, material resources and educational content	National/ Regional/ Local
Planning and sizing	Supplying institutions ATUs (Administrative-Territorial Units)	The planning and structuring of qualified training programs at the regional and local levels. Curriculum development, both in local development and in school-based curriculum decisions, according to regional and local priorities	Regional/ Local
Counseling and guidance	Supplying institutions, economic agents	Assurance of career guidance and counseling service by experts	Regional/ Local

This framework was developed by the authors to provide a practical and adaptable approach for harmonizing vocational training across the E. U.

The table presents the main areas and accountable entities engaged in the creation and execution of a unified European VET system. It specifies the steps to be undertaken and the level at which these steps will be carried (European, National/Regional/Local).

The European Commission (E.C.), the national governments, and social partners will work together to establish a shared legislative and regulatory framework that is applicable across all member states. This foundational work lays the groundwork for establishing standardized guidelines that ensure quality and consistency in VET.

Additionally, the allocation of European funds for VET reforms will be managed by the

European Commission, national ministries, and Administrative-Territorial Units (ATUs). These funds will be directed toward initiatives that align with national priorities, further supporting the goals of the European VET system. A key element of this initiative is to foster greater cohesion in vocational standards across Europe by mutually recognizing the qualification, thus enhancing the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

The efforts carried out under the coordination of the European Commission, ministries, and economic agents will lead to the development of a common European core for national education systems, creating a cohesive foundation upon which individual countries can build their specific VET systems.

At the National, Regional, and Local levels, specific methodologies, processes, and structures will be developed to ensure effective

VET implementation. Ministries and economic agents will play strategic role in creating these tailored approaches. Additionally, breaking skills and knowledge into modules will make it easier to create a flexible curriculum for continuous VET. This approach ensures that educational programs stay relevant and can adapt to the changing needs of the workforce that wants to be adaptable and employable.

The involvement of stakeholders is important, as ministries and local authorities will determine the level of engagement needed from different parties to secure the necessary educational resources. This collaborative approach helps create an environment where everyone can actively contribute to the system's success.

Finally, educational institutions and local authorities will be responsible for dimensioning, planning and organizing the VET programs, so that they meet regional needs. At the same time, schools and other entities will offer career guidance and counseling, helping students get the support they need to navigate their educational and career paths.

This framework sketches a collaborative plan for building a cohesive vocational education and training system across the E.U., while also allowing flexibility to address specific regional and local needs.

This systemic phase is viable and achievable, representing a realistic scenario. Its implementation will depend on the European agenda pursuing competitiveness, efficiency, adaptability, and sustainable productivity of the E.U.

Making the shift to a unified European vocational education system will take teamwork from everyone involved—national governments, schools, businesses, and students. This cooperation is essential to ensure that vocational education aligns with labor market needs. Industry plays a particularly significant role by providing the infrastructure for practical training and helping to shape the curriculum to

reflect real-world demands. Conversely, students need to participate actively in the process to ensure that the system serves their long-term professional goals.

We aim to emphasize a concept currently being implemented in Romania, which is modeled on established European frameworks and developed through an integrated consortium for dual education. This initiative is designed to address the needs of all stakeholders involved. European policymakers and stakeholders understand how important vocational education and training is, including programs like Dual School and Work-Based Learning. They're committed to pursue common objectives as part of their education and training strategies.

However, European productivity is falling behind global competitors, emphasizing the need for a skilled workforce to fill the gaps left by retiring professionals and to address the challenges posed by new technologies. Actually, reports show that approximately 75% of employers across 21 European countries reported difficulty in finding workers with the necessary skills in 2023 (ManPowerGroup 2023 Report) and, as if that wasn't enough, the working population is expected to decline to 168.5 million individuals aged 20 to 64 by 2050. One of the main contributing factors to the shortage of skilled workers is the misalignment between the curriculum and the current demands of the labor market (Business Europe).

Studies show that vocational education and training produces economic benefits by reducing youth unemployment (Choi, 2019; Nilsson, 2010) and that the investments made by developing countries in this field are a good strategy (McGrath, 2023).

The implementation plans of the common educational objectives adopted at the European level, together with the integrated national strategies and priorities must be flexible because the European policy must respond to the complex geopolitical and economic

challenges. Therefore, the implementation of a unified European strategy for VET would be very beneficial for accelerating progress and efficiency.

Establishing a unified European VET strategy demand important reforms, synchronization of national priorities, and adherence to the recommendations, such as those outlined in the Council Recommendation on VET, as well as the Osnabrück Declaration. The VET sector involves many stakeholders, including government ministries, VET providers, companies, learners, each fulfilling distinct roles and responsibilities. Guiding European policies toward a unified VET strategy—focused on high standards of quality internationally recognized—highlight the E.U.'s commitment to respond to current and future workforce challenges.

3 COMMON CORE OF SKILLS FOR VET

The strategy involves creating a common set of core competencies for VET by establishing a structured framework that aligns educational programs with industry needs and promotes standardization.

The continued development of this common core ensures that VET programs remain relevant and capable of continuous improvement. These efforts are part of the national implementation plans resulting from public consultations and are designed to be adaptable, reflecting the dynamic nature of the common European policy. (European Commission, 2023). National implementation plans, although tailored to each country's specific priorities, have a common direction. For example, Romania assumes all the chapters emphasizing transversal skills, entrepreneurship, digital skills and technological infusion. Hungary relies on the involvement of industry professionals in VET schools, experimenting with mixed roles for educators and trainers. Norway aims to widen its VET offer. (Cedefop, 2019).

Although these countries appear to be following different paths to implementing reforms, they are moving towards the same general goal, the difference being that they are at different stages of implementation. The diversity of national strategies can be seen as distinct rivers flowing towards the same destination. This alignment brings together a range of perspectives from different stakeholders, creating a unique approach that could serve as the basis for national education framework plans. These plans would outline guidelines, regulations, formal approvals, and clearly specify responsibilities, required actions, and the degree of stakeholder involvement. By exploiting existing systems, this unitary solution has the potential to operate effectively and deliver meaningful outcomes.

At the European level, while there are numerous strategies for education and vocational training, each nation tailors its policies to prioritize a few areas. Specific measures are assigned to these priorities, aligning with national objectives. The most recent European policy cycle, which began in established six key areas for reform along with four shared priorities Tools like the European Social Pillar Action Plan, the EU Skills Agenda, and the Pact for Skills steer these initiatives. (EUR-lex). To achieve the shared targets and carry out essential reforms, European countries will depend on structural funds such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the European Social Fund Plus, and Erasmus+. European policies are clearly aligning toward building a sustainable VET system with global recognition. Given the challenges of transitioning to a green and digital economy, along with the need to foster social equity, resilience, and prosperity, a cohesive European VET strategy is crucial. (EUR-lex). This strategy must concentrate on equipping individuals with the skills and competencies necessary to adapt and succeed in the evolving economic landscape, positioning the European VET system as a key solution for the future.

Table 2. Stages involved in creating a common core of skills for VET

STAGE	DESCRIPTION
Needs assessment	Analyze current and emerging skill requirements
Establish a working group	Form the group and define roles and responsibilities
Define competency area	Break down competency area into skills, knowledge, and abilities
Draft the common core framework	Develop a comprehensive, flexible, and adaptable framework
Validation and review	Present the framework, incorporate feedback, and test the framework
Finalize and implement	Obtain approvals and develop implementation guidelines
Continuous monitoring and updating	Monitor effectiveness, gather feedback, and upgrade

This solution, crafted by diverse stakeholders, outlines a common European framework, incorporating directives, regulations, and ratifications to define competencies, implementation responsibilities, required actions, and stakeholder roles. The strategy for developing a shared core of vocational skills follows the stages mentioned in Table 2.

The process of creating a common set of competencies in VET offers a clear framework to support policymakers and other professionals, helping to align with industry needs and promote consistency across the sector. Ongoing assessment of the implementation process help maintain program relevance and supports ongoing improvements.

4 CONCLUSION

The path towards a unitary European VET system comes with its own set of challenges.

Nevertheless, by harnessing the collective strengths of member states and building strong collaborations between governments, educational institutions, and industries, Europe has the potential to develop a resilient, flexible, and inclusive VET system. Such a system will both elevate the quality of VET and also enhance the mobility and employability of European citizens across the continent.

We aim to emphasize that, at the EU level, academic and policy approaches to VET are well-aligned. In this context, we will underscore what we view as a notable effort to alleviate the inherent tension between the educational and economic dimensions of VET (Allais and Wedekind, 2020).

Through the reforms and priorities implemented by member states, the European VET system (European Commission, 2020), has the potential to position itself as a global model. This unified approach can become a reality if member states adhere to the guidelines set forth in Council Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social equity, and resilience, along with the Osnabrück Declaration.

The expected outcome of this research is to enrich comprehensive and systematic knowledge within the European context, supporting the creation of an effective and unified solution. A holistic understanding of the field is essential for shaping this cohesive European approach.

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