



POLICY BRIEF

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INVOLVE project

Fostering social partners' involvement in dual vocational education and training (VET) in Greece, Spain, Poland and Portugal

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Introduction

This policy brief is based on fieldwork research outcomes. It also draws on national ‘visions’ developed by INVOLVE partners, based on a scenario workshop methodology in which different stakeholders (policymakers, scholars, trade unions and employer organisations/companies) discussed desirable changes in governance structures to improve social partners’ involvement in dual VET in the four countries studied. In addition, they take into consideration recent literature on the revitalisation of social dialogue institutions, identifying relevant conditions that contribute to explaining the effectiveness of national social dialogue institutions (Guardiancich & Molina, 2021).

In line with the conceptual approach followed in the INVOLVE project, which drew on the concept of ‘systemic governance’ (Streeck & Schmitter, 1985; Emmenegger & Seitzl, 2020), policy recommendations are formulated considering the overall dual VET system, where three key governance levels can be distinguished in the four countries studied. First, the political-strategic level, where stakeholders make decisions on the system’s long-term developments which need of political legitimation. Second, the technical-strategic level, which is equally concerned with system’s long-term developments but involves technical specialists because decisions rely on expert knowledge. Third, the technical-operational level, which focuses on efficient policy implementation on the ground (Emmenegger & Seitzl, 2020). Our departure point is that trade unions and employer organisations should be highly involved in the three levels, which are interconnected, to ensure that the governance of dual VET is designed to meet economic and social goals in a balanced way.

As highlighted in the literature, dual VET is one of the policy domains in which the interplay and tension between economic and social goals is most acute (Di Maio et al., 2019; Scepanović & Martín Artiles, 2020). On the one hand, dual VET systems are designed to meet economic goals – skills mismatching is a significant impediment to national competitiveness and dual VET systems contribute to satisfying employers’ skills demands. On the other hand, these systems are also aligned with social goals, such as equal access to quality education, the provision of transferable vocational skills and a smooth school-to-work transition for disadvantaged young people (Di Maio et al., 2019). In this regard, previous literature has stressed the challenges faced by dual VET systems to offer apprenticeship places to candidates with fewer qualifications, lower socio-economic status (Bonoli & Wilson, 2019) and/or special educational needs (Granato et al., 2015). Gender represents another factor of academic and labour exclusion under dual VET (Dämmrich et al., 2015; Mariño & Rial, 2019).

Tensions between economic and social goals within dual VET systems have been exacerbated in recent years for several reasons. In this regard, three key challenges deserve particular attention: economic crises and recessions; digitalisation; and Europeanisation of dual VET.

First, successive economic crises and recessions represent a challenge for dual VET programmes. Previous research has shown how the 2007–2013 economic crisis negatively impacted the availability of apprenticeship places offered by businesses (Alemán-Falcón, 2015; Baldi et al., 2014). The crisis also reduced public funding for VET (Ajuria et al., 2018; Alemán-Falcón, 2015). At the same time, the economic crisis and the rise in youth unemployment, which was particularly dramatic in southern European countries, led European institutions to sponsor dual VET programmes in countries where dual training schemes did not exist or were not as effective as they should have been. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has had significant effects on apprenticeships. Lockdowns and mobility restriction measures hindered in-company training possibilities. The reduction in apprenticeships offer was particularly high in sectors such as hospitality and tourism, which in Spain, Greece and Portugal are particularly significant in the economy and the range of VET training programmes on offer (OECD, 2020).

Recessions and crises can have different effects on the involvement of social partners in policymaking. Several studies highlighted the deterioration of industrial democracy in the aftermath of the financial crisis (2007–2008), particularly in central and eastern, and southern European countries, where social dialogue was comparatively less institutionalised (Cumbers et

al., 2022; Eurofound, 2018; Sanz de Miguel, 2020). In relation to dual VET, section 4 showed that key policy reforms regulating dual VET (Spain) or developing new dual VET schemes in the years following the financial crisis (Greece and Portugal) were the result of either unilateral government decisions (Spain) or informal consultation processes without tripartite agreements (Greece and Portugal). In the context of the pandemic, some studies have shown that tripartite social dialogue increased in many countries, as governments had an interest in cooperation to integrate expertise from social partners to develop effective policies and strengthen the legitimacy of their decisions (Brandl, 2021; Eurofound, 2021). In this regard, INVOLVE research outcomes have also shown that in Greece, Portugal and Spain, recent VET policy reforms developed in the pandemic context (2020–2021) have been partially agreed upon with the social partners.

Second, digitalisation poses new challenges and raises the question of whether dual VET can adapt successfully. Digitalisation is considered the fourth industrial revolution (Valenduc & Vendramin, 2017). While there is not a general consensus on the exact definition of digitalisation (Degryse, 2016), scholars generally agree that a key defining feature of the emerging digital economy relates to the quantitative and qualitative leaps in the collection and exploitation of Big Data (Charrier & Janin, 2015; Valenduc & Vendramin, 2017). Digitalisation is also linked to new business models and employment relationships (such as digital platforms and platform work), as well as novel forms of work organisation that increase both working time and space flexibility (including virtual work and hybrid work) which sharply increased in the pandemic context (EU-OSHA, 2021). Digitalisation is also increasing the speed of technological change in an unprecedented way. Empirical evidence has been inconclusive about the relationship between technology and jobs due to the impact of several mediating factors (Valenduc & Vendramin, 2017). However, EU institutions, EU agencies and scholars generally agree that digitalisation is resulting in faster changes in skills profiles and demand for skills, and an overall high global need for digital skills to study and use in workplaces (DESI, 2021)

From an economic perspective, digitalisation requires dual VET systems to analyse how skills requirements are changing to ensure that VET provisions meet the demands for new skills, including the provision of general digital skills. From a social point of view, it is necessary to work against the existing risk of digital exclusion, and to ensure a fair and equitable digital transition. In this regard, skills indicators show significant inequalities which strongly influenced by socio-demographic factors (DESI, 2021).

Third, attention must be drawn to the Europeanisation of VET. Although the Treaties do not mandate legal powers in VET to European institutions, the EU has become a key actor alongside the national Member States. Several European initiatives have promoted dual VET schemes. These initiatives coexist with other European projects (such as the European Qualification Framework) which aim to persuade the Member States to adopt common policy objectives and frameworks through soft governance mechanisms.

Even if the impact of VET Europeanisation is conditioned by national characteristics which are mediating that impact (Martín Artiles et al., 2020), the Europeanisation process has been criticised for neglecting European and national social dialogue processes, and being generally biased towards economic objectives (Clarke et al., 2021). In this context, it has been shown that in those countries where social partners' involvement is more institutionalised (such as Germany), domestic discussions on European initiatives were more internally conflicted (Emmenegger & Seitzl, 2020). Social partners' involvement in the discussion of European processes at different levels could contribute to reinforcing legitimacy and effectiveness in the implementation of EU initiatives (Eurofound, 2021, 2022).

Given these current tensions between social and economic goals in dual VET, our policy recommendations outlined under the next heading have two aims. First, reinforcing social partners' involvement within the governance of the overall dual VET systems. Second, ensuring a mutually reinforcing pursuit of economic and social goals. In terms of recommendations, there is a particular focus on the social partners' roles within existing social dialogue and technical institutions and processes.

Policy recommendations

Political-strategic level

Compared to unilateral policy intervention, social partners' involvement at the political-strategic level can positively influence the development of more balanced strategic priorities and policies – with equal recognition for the goals of employers and employees.

Desk research and fieldwork results show that social partners' involvement at this level is highly erratic. This is partly because existing social dialogue tripartite institutions dealing with VET issues do not have an important role in policymaking or setting strategic priorities. For example, in Spain, Greece and Poland, social dialogue mainly works through ad-hoc settings which ensure a less institutionalised and regular involvement. Among our case study countries, the only exception is Portugal, where a recent social pact was partly implemented through a social dialogue institution (CPCS) – although the social pact did not get the necessary support from the main trade unions.

In light of this evidence, we recommend reinforcing the role of social dialogue institutions through granting them the following VET policy powers:

- Providing the institutions with an effective statutory mandate to deal with VET issues that are of interest to the social partners. This statutory mandate should provide social partners with co-decision rights or, a minimum, mandatory negotiation and consultation rights on dual VET policymaking – this would also prevent government unilateral actions, including in the context of external crises. This mandate should also be extended to cover all processes linked to the Europeanisation of VET.
- Providing social partner institutions with a statutory mandate to develop regular research and policy reports to influence the policy agenda (for example, on national strategic priorities for VET). In particular, priority should be given to those trends having a more disruptive impact, such as digitalisation.
- Creating procedures to monitor and enforce the translation of tripartite institutions' opinions and recommendations into public policies on VET.
- Ensuring that trade unions and employer organisations represented in the social dialogue institutions have enough technical and personnel resources to analyse dual VET policy problems and make recommendations. This will contribute to ensuring that the institutions play an effective and constructive role in policymaking.

Technical-strategic level

Social partners' involvement at the technical-strategic level is also crucial for aligning economic and social goals. Employers' involvement in the identification and definition of qualifications contributes to ensuring that training provisions are aligned with actual company needs. Trade unions' involvement is also very important, as they can effectively advocate for creating quality and transferable qualifications. They are also key actors who can ensure that the needs of disadvantaged groups are considered in the process of defining and updating qualifications. They also have in-depth knowledge of labour processes and, accordingly, can contribute to ensuring that these are properly acknowledged in the qualifications frameworks. In addition, it is vital that trade unions and employer organisations are involved on an equal footing in the evaluation processes. This can positively influence the development of a balanced selection of indicators for measuring the quality of dual VET systems in terms of both efficiency (economic goals) and equity (social goals).

Desk research and fieldwork results reveal important cross-country differences at this governance level in terms of the institutional governance framework– including differences in the level of institutional fragmentation, the involvement of sectoral/regional bodies and the role played by social partners. Overall, social partners' involvement at this level is comparatively less

institutionalised in Poland, where social partners are not represented within the main technical bodies; however, there are some sectoral examples where social partners (mainly employers) were involved in the definition of sectoral qualifications through relatively informal processes. In Portugal and Greece, social partners are represented in the governing boards of key technical institutions; although in Greece, the social partners were excluded from newly created technical bodies. In Spain, social partners are formally engaged in the processes of defining and updating qualifications. A common feature of the four countries examined is that social partners are barely involved in the process of evaluating the quality of dual VET. Noting that the evaluation process is assessed by the social partners interviewed in the fieldwork to be insufficiently developed. In addition, collective bargaining plays no role in the processes of defining or updating qualifications in any of the four countries.

In light of this evidence, we make the following general recommendations:

- Provide formal representation for the social partners in the governing boards of the main technical bodies, to ensure that they play a role in setting the agenda and supervising its activities.
- Reinforce the role played by trade unions and employer organisations in the processes of skills forecasting at different levels (national, regional/local, sectoral). This should be done in parallel with the development of a stable forecasting methodology which would systematically analyse the impact of digitalisation on skills development and employment.
- Ensure a balanced involvement of trade unions and employer organisations in the processes of defining and updating qualifications, to avoid these processes being exclusively aligned to economic goals. This should be considered in all the bodies and processes operating at the national, sectoral or regional/local level. The involvement of social partners in the process of defining and updating qualifications should be routinised, defining clearly the different steps in which trade unions and employer organisations are engaged.
- Ensure that trade unions and employer organisations have enough capacity in terms of technical knowledge, structure and staff to support state authorities in all processes related to the definition and updating of qualifications.
- Reinforce the role to be played by collective bargaining, ensuring, in particular, that sectoral and company collective bargaining effectively regulates and recognises dual VET qualifications as they are defined in the national qualifications frameworks.
- Reinforce social partners' involvement in the evaluation process for the quality of dual VET systems, ensuring a balanced representation of trade unions and employer organisations. In particular, trade unions and employer organisations should be highly involved in the process of defining analytical dimensions and indicators to make sure that the evaluations are addressing both the social and economic objectives which are relevant to the social partners.
- Ensure consistency and coordination among the different institutions and feedback mechanisms for the different dual VET and general VET schemes, making sure that social partners are equally involved in all the different existing processes.

Technical-operational level

Finally, social partners should also be highly involved at the technical-operational level to ensure efficient policy implementation on the ground. Social partners and, in particular, employer organisations can contribute to motivating companies to participate in dual VET. They can also facilitate cooperation between VET schools and training companies, and support employers in the processes of delivering, supervising and evaluating in-company training, which can be particularly complex for SMEs who have fewer resources and capacity.

Trade unions can also contribute to engaging more companies in dual VET by negotiating apprenticeship opportunities at the company level. In this regard, there is evidence that the willingness of companies to train and provide apprenticeships has positively correlated with trade union density (ILO, 2021). They can also ensure good quality in-company training by negotiating pay rates and general conditions for apprenticeships, and enforcing training and working conditions (ILO, 2021).

Social partners' involvement at this level varies in the four countries studied, particularly in terms of the role played by trade unions and employer organisations in the provision and evaluation of training. However, one factor which is common to all four countries is the absence of a tripartite institution facilitating cooperation between VET schools and training companies, and evaluating apprenticeships outcomes – there are precedents for such tripartite institutions in some collective skill-formation regimes (Emmengger & Sitzl, 2020). Moreover, in the four case study countries, state authorities or teachers play the main role in the processes of identifying and engaging companies for apprenticeship schemes, and enforcing the training and working conditions for apprentices. Bearing this in mind, we propose:

- Developing tripartite bodies operating at sectoral/local level, mandated to identify and engage companies in dual VET. These bodies should also be mandated to support companies with the implementation and supervision of in-company training, the evaluation of in-company training results, and articulating VET schools' demands in relation to in-company training.
- Reinforcing the role played by collective bargaining in defining the dual VET positions on offer, and in regulating the working and training conditions for apprentices. In some cases, this should be supported by better regulatory approaches towards apprentices' contracts, ensuring that they are properly covered by social and labour rights applicable to general workers in standard employment relationships.
- Strengthening the role played by trade unions at the company level in the process of enforcing apprentices' training and working conditions. They should have statutory information and consultation rights in relation to these processes. Sectoral trade union federations should also be involved in enforcing the working and training conditions for apprentices, particularly in the context of SMEs lacking trade union representation. Moreover, cooperation between VET schools and trade union bodies at the company level should be explicitly visioned and outlined.

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