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The Handbook of Policy Transfer in TVET and beyond Palgrave

Part 1: Framing policy transfer in TVET: governance and political economy issues

Chapter: VET Policy Transfer within the European Union

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses different mechanisms that have conveyed the transfer of VET policies within the European Union in the last decades. A brief theoretical framework introduces the concepts of agency, structure, ideas and social relations, and spells out how these components of social action have woven certain patterns of policy transfer. Then, several sections about the EU education policy and the transfer of apprenticeships as well as of career guidance and skills validation analyse an interesting contrast between the driving mechanisms. While apprenticeships seem to circulate between European countries by means of policy learning, career guidance and validation seem to spread by means of emulation. This conclusion of the previous literature suggests several avenues for further research.

KEYWORDS

Policy transfer. Europeanisation. Apprenticeships. Prior learning recognition.

MAIN TEXT

This chapter will discuss the interaction between the European Union and the member states around VET in the last decades. The general theories of policy transfer posit very relevant research questions about this interaction. At the same time, it seems plausible to ponder in which ways the unique European configuration may not easily fit with the

¹ Notice that the published version of the chapter includes a much longer title by mistake. Here, I have deleted the following sentences: “Framing Policy Transfer in TVET: governance and Political Economy Issues”

hypotheses that previous research has elaborated on the relationship between international organisations and national governments.

The European Union has become a node of policy borrowing and transfer of vocational education and training (VET) policies. The *Centre Européen pour le Développement de la Formation Professionnelle* (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Education and Training- CEDEFOP), the agency that supports member states in this area, was created in 1975. The European Training Foundation (ETF) started advising neighbouring states on VET in 1994. Later on, the inception of the Lisbon Treaty and the Open Method of Coordination led the European Commission to convene working groups of experts in the area during the initial decades of the twenty- first century. Over time, governments, employers' associations, chambers of commerce, trade unions and VET providers have engaged in a variety of discussions in Brussels. Many of these policy actors have deployed lobbying strategies to steer VET in their preferred direction. Eventually, the European Semester has integrated the issue in the yearly recommendations that the European Council addresses to the member states.

Comparative education and VET studies have analysed how authorities borrow foreign policies, and how certain governments persuade other ones to adopt the premises of their own education policies. Although these processes were already active in the nineteenth century, the inclusion of education in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights triggered multilateral education policy transfer since the 1940s. UNESCO was founded to become the principal actor in this area, although other organisations have disputed this role afterwards. Remarkably, when many low- and middle-income countries went bankrupt due to the debt crisis in the 1980s, the World Bank also entered the field by adding requirements regarding education and training to the conditionalities of its loans. In the nineties the World Trade Organisation engaged in the politics of education when education and training became an object of the negotiations on trade in services.

Within the EU, policy transfer resembles the normal functioning of some Federal states insofar as the central government (i.e., the European Commission and the European Council) designs the crucial features of the framework in which the member states must operate. But policy transfer also resembles the normal functioning of the international organisations that assist governments to design and improve their education and training systems, sometimes requiring them to implement certain reforms in exchange for recognition and resources.

While the next section will describe the official procedures of policy-making that convey transfers within the EU, the following one will outline the main theoretical debates. Two more sections will account for the mechanisms whereby EU member states have adopted apprenticeships, career guidance and validation of prior learning. The conclusion will take stock of the general theories and these specific dimensions to propose questions for further investigation.

The European arrangements and discourses of VET policy transfer

The European Union steers education and employment indirectly by defining 'spaces' in several policy areas and setting performance indicators. Since 2011, the European Semester has attributed more explicit competences on education and training to the

Council (European Council, 2021). First is the construction of European ‘spaces’ in several sectors of education. Research and higher education were the tokens of these spaces at the time of the Bologna process, although the emphasis on qualifications frameworks and quality assurance also shaped a similar European space of VET. All these principles have been eventually integrated in the broader imaginary of the European Education Area (EEA). The second instrument is the adoption of performance indicators as a transparent framework that must guide the decisions of all member states and set criteria for a common assessment of the outcomes. The Lisbon process and the Europe 2020 Education and Training Strategy aimed at meeting statistical benchmarks that were expected to keep early leaving and low performance under control as well as to foster graduation at the tertiary level. The EEA also relies on an analogous set of indicators. Finally, negotiation procedures were vague initially but have been systematically codified in the yearly cycle of the European Semester (Alexiadou, & Rambla, 2022).

The European Commission has also convened several working groups of experts that systematically discuss priorities and propose an agenda of reforms in a variety of sectors including VET. The member states join the committees at will and decide which officers and independent experts will attend. These experts participate in open debates as well as in the elaboration of policy briefs. Normally, while the initial debates are wide-ranging, the Commission officers write working documents that encourage the experts to focus on certain aspects, on which they normally issue general guidelines (Papanastasiou, 2019). So far, the Commission working groups have inspired new stances on qualification frameworks, quality assurance, youth guarantee schemes, prevention of early leaving by means of pedagogical innovations and improved career guidance, wide apprenticeship schemes, recognition of prior learning and comprehensive reviews of skills.

The Commission has the power to address the resulting policy briefs to the Parliament and the European Council. Since 2011, the Council has increasingly taken these reflections into account to draft, review and approve the recommendations that it sends to all member states each year. The bulk of the initial recommendations had to do with fiscal consolidation, whereas the same procedure has given leeway to social issues afterwards (Verdun, & Zeitlin, 2018). Thus, recent recommendations have put vocational education and training high in the agenda as far as validation of prior learning, quality of apprenticeships, guidance and support for low-skilled citizens, learning outcomes and the youth guarantee are concerned (European Council, 2012, 2018a, 2018b, 2020b, 2020a). It is noticeable that the themes of the Commission working groups broadly coincide with the themes of the Council Recommendations.

But these thematic recommendations eventually hinge on the country-specific recommendations that are approved for each fiscal term. During the initial months of the year, the country-desk officers visit all the member states to discuss draft proposals with the government and the main social partners. Afterwards, the presidents decide on the final version drawing on this feedback as well as on the working documents of the Commission, and sometimes, certain resolutions of the Parliament. Finally, the Commission supervises the actual implementation of the recommendations in each country. Besides, all the stakeholders take the Education and Training Monitor into consideration. This yearly report builds on the statistical trends reported by EUROSTAT and the conclusions of the European Council after each cycle of the Semester.

The Semester also draws on the Skills Agenda, which has been sponsored by the DG Employment (European Commission, 2021). Remarkably, the scope of employment policy overlaps with education and training policy in most of the actions of this agenda. Thus, the Skills Agenda aims at fostering skills intelligence, inducing the low-skilled to achieve higher learning outcomes (upskilling), regulating VET, promoting the European Universities Initiative, widening the set of relevant skills (thus expanding green, digital, entrepreneurial and STEM skills) and strengthening lifelong learning (e.g., by means of individual learning accounts and micro-credentials). Clearly, the Agenda deals with very similar themes as the Commission working group on VET and the Council Recommendations on this area.

In a nutshell, the member states, the Commission and the Council negotiate which reforms will be prioritised each year. Since the presidents sit in the European Council, they decide to recommend certain policies to themselves, and then commit to a given pace of reform in the specific recommendations for their country. In this way, many VET policies have travelled from Central European countries to the core of the Union, and then from Brussels to the capitals of the member states. The Council Recommendations have become a sort of educational legislation, but they are a type of soft law that does not set compulsory standards of compliance. The final institutional arrangement has reproduced some guidelines of international organisations such as UNESCO- UNEVOC broad understanding of vocationalism and the principles of fiscal adjustment sponsored by the International Financial Organisations. However, unlike these other cases, the European Union has created forum of continuous debate and negotiation between the stakeholders of policy transfer. This outcome resembles the federations that give leeway to the regional governments to design relatively different educational systems (e.g., Belgium or Canada), but it is not advisable to simply assume that the legal procedures of the EU replicate some but not all the procedures of these federal countries.

Analysis of VET policy transfer within the European Union

VET specialists have unpacked the key mechanisms that drive the transfer of apprenticeship schemes (Graf, & Marques, 2022), career guidance (Sultana, 2012) and validation of prior learning (Villalba- García, 2021) within the European Union. This section will draw on such state of the art to bring together this literature and sociological theories of policy transfer. A dialogue between the two strands of scholarship can inspire fresh and promising insights that push our knowledge forward, whether the final conclusions confirm or significantly qualify the initial claims.

Agency and social fields

The sociological concepts of agency and social field invite VET researchers to ask further questions about the channels of transfer within the European Union. While agency is instrumental in spelling out the role of ideas and social relations, social fields articulate the levels of interaction between the stakeholders of VET.

The worldwide dissemination of discourses about skills development and vocationalism has certainly impinged on the potential to diffuse VET policies from one country to another. Skills, competences, and lifelong learning pervaded international debates on education when the Sustainable Development Goals were approved in 2015 (King, 2015).

But ideas have not certainly been the only driver. The specialism of VET studies has convincingly argued that the adoption of single measures does not deliver seamless transfer but normally provokes disruption and disfunctions. VET works within institutional regimes in which teachers and students interact with each other as well as with wider educational systems, external spheres of activity such as employment or fiscal policy, and eventually the whole of a society (Gessler et al, 2021). A vocational education and training strategy works when an institutional system can link education programmes, apprenticeships, qualification frameworks and career guidance in coherent ways that are actionable and meaningful. To put it simply, one-dimensional approaches do not work when a policy exclusively trains workers for a certain job, classifies secondary students according to their academic performance or informs prospective graduates of the trends of the labour market.

Crucial to my argument is that not only has sound evidence of such complex processes weakened ungrounded prophecies of dissemination of technical training throughout the world, but it has also revealed the role of social agents in the transfer of wider policies that align technical training with vocational education. Social agents are sentient subjects that share certain ideas and elaborate new ones, on the one hand, at the same time as they engage in actions that establish social relations with other agents, on the other hand. A key premise of mainstream sociological theory is that changes of ideas (or cultural changes) are independent of changes of social relations (or social changes). Correlations between these changes do not entail the same mechanisms of causation. The former hinge upon discussion and hybridization of worldviews whilst the latter are originated in the realm of practice and habits (Archer, 2000; Tilly, 2001; Schmidt, 2008). Exhaustive accounts, then, must take both policy imaginaries and everyday routines into consideration.

Moreover, the abundant comparative literature on VET institutional regimes have shed light on the formation and delimitation of social fields. These regimes articulate teaching practices with broader arenas of standardisation and stratification as well as with higher societal levels (Pilz, 2016). In general, Anglo-Saxon countries have shaped VET according to the characteristics of liberal market economies, while Scandinavian and Central European countries have done so according to the characteristics of coordinated market economies. The continuous exchanges between policy-makers, employers' boards and trade unions on apprenticeships and professional qualifications in Austria, Germany and Switzerland are outstanding examples of coordination between businesses and governments (Busemeyer, & Trampush, 2011; Green, Green, & Pensiero, 2015). Further research has noticed that the distinction is not so clear after several decades of open coordination in the EU (Desjardins, & Ioannidou, 2020; Verdier, 2018), with most countries shifting to a type of collectivist skills development that has institutionalised negotiations between governments and employers but only allowed unions to play a secondary role (Graf, & Marques, 2022). The ideas and the social relations that convey VET policy transfer eventually take root on the functioning of the institutional regimes, which have been path-dependent for a long time but may be undergoing substantial transformations as global and European agendas of education and training gain momentum.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu systematised definitions of fields of activity or social fields, which some authors also label as social domains (Wimmer, 2021). These fields are not units that can be easily classified by typologies of institutional regimes and channels of transfer, but the outcomes of processes whereby social agents draw and re-draw the limits within which they are active. Thus, politics entails conflict, negotiation and deliberation, and simultaneously, interaction between policy actors fashions the range of politics itself (Jenson, & Mérand, 2010). Instead of insisting on the discrepancies between the previous theories that distinguish the types of VET systems and the main mechanisms of transfer, a more promising intellectual approach lies in exploring the synergies between these theories. In this vein, VET policy transfer within the EU challenges some assumptions of previous research on education policy transfer but also suggests further questions that highlight the interaction between social agents that borrow and lend policies from different positions in national and supra-national governance.

Policy transfer

Previous research has distinguished mechanisms or causes of policy diffusion and transfer² that range from hard power to soft power. In general, financial and fiscal conditionalities have become coercive external influences on policy-makers. Expectations of competitive advantages have driven the dissemination of certain policies, particularly around trade. The social construction of problems and policies has also induced many governments to implement reforms in favour of liberalisation and quasi-markets (Dobbin et al., 2007). The array of mechanisms is also wide in the field of education policy. The World Bank Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed spending cuts to highly indebted emerging countries in the 1980s and the 1990s. Conscious harmonisation disseminated student-centred pedagogies and standard tests in those decades. Simultaneously, ideological frames convinced many governments of the benefits of school choice, performance-based management, parental involvement as well as VET and higher education quasi-markets (Dale, 1999).

So far, the specialists have documented harder and softer modes of VET policy transfer from country to country. Global corporations often reproduce their own methods of continuous training regardless of the places in which they operate. On many occasions donors require governments to implement VET courses, apprenticeships and qualifications frameworks in exchange for assistance in a wider variety of areas. At the same time, the international development community has generally assumed that these measures eventually build on the institutional capacity of states, small and medium enterprises and schools in low- and middle- income countries. On the ground, policy transfer normally occurs through circuitous channels of coercion, negotiation and persuasion (Pilz, & Li, 2014).

A closer examination of VET policy transfer within the European Union invites researchers to qualify the general distinction of policy transfer mechanisms. A global stance must consider the uneven legacy of coercive neocolonial patterns at the same time as it traces the influence of ideas. Uneven relations and hard power are also an ingredient

² While political science normally uses ‘policy diffusion’, comparative education often adopts ‘policy transfer’. The chapter will conflate these two terms into a single concept, which is more widely known as ‘transfer’ in educational studies.

of transfer within the Union, but there a massive reliance on transfer through ideas has inevitably triggered the curiosity of researchers. While the worldwide landscape indicates that these mechanisms lie at one end of a wide spectrum of harder and softer processes, the European landscape invites specialists to spell out the types of soft power at stake. In my view, Lange and Alexiadou (2010) captured this point when they distinguished imperialistic, competitive, surface and mutual learning among the practices of the working groups that the European Commission has convened in the 21st century to elaborate an education policy.

Research on education policy transfer within the European Union has noticed that member states make conscious decisions to adopt foreign policies on the grounds of a relatively accepted view of coordination. With regards to education, the Commission, the Council, the Parliament and the bulk of member states have converged on a common ground made of shared concepts and milestones (Gornitzka, 2005; Pépin, 2011). Interestingly, the Commission has convened the activity of specialised working groups in school education, digital instruments, early childhood education and training, VET, higher education and other themes. These groups have translated the knowledge of researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to the terms of official communications and recommendations. Therefore, a type of policy learning has prevailed over other modes of transfer, but this *modus operandi* has struck a subtle, perhaps fragile, balance between intellectual worldviews, practical considerations and sheer political interests (Lange and Alexiadou, 2010; Papanastasiou, 2019; Souto-Otero, 2016). This is not an idiosyncratic feature of the EU but the normal way in which mainstream politics draws on expert knowledge nowadays, as the social studies of science have convincingly shown (Jasanoff, 2017).

Remarkably, a simple conclusion on the predominance of subtle mechanisms of transfer would be flawed. In fact, the Commission put huge pressure on some countries to adopt certain VET policies in the aftermath of the Great Recession (Baumann, & Vossiek, 2022). Neither the general adherence to dialogue and negotiation is a neutral medium for the search and recommendation of VET policies, nor the EU has avoided forms of hard power in critical circumstances. Even though mainstream European politics transfer VET through soft mechanisms of persuasion and negotiation, key pieces of available evidence have convincingly argued that research should not overlook the role of hard power in certain circumstances.

Policy transfer through learning and emulation

Wimmer's (2021) theory of the domains of diffusion (or transfer) integrates these previous contributions and encourages researchers to inquire about the influence of ideas and social relations in the changes of VET policy across layers of governance in the European Union. Basically, the author states two hypotheses that attempt to spell out the several (maybe contradictory) faces of VET policy transfer in the continent.

This theory invites researchers to carefully analyse the appeal of the German apprenticeship schemes for foreign decision-makers. Coming from a very long tradition of medieval guilds and industrial companies, apprenticeships are a cornerstone of VET institutional systems in Austria, Germany and Switzerland nowadays. In the last decade several EU member states have drawn on this model. Diverse stakeholders have engaged

in relationships and shared ideas in such a way that the Commission, the Council and certain member states have invited other member states to observe “their peers in order to determine which of the available institutional templates appears to be most effective”. This is policy learning (Wimmer, 2021: 1407). It is plausible to think that exchanges in the Commission working groups and the debates in the European Council have induced the governments of certain member states to look for some better alternatives abroad. At the same time as skills development and vocationalism parlance became fashionable worldwide, the EU encouraged all the member states to respond to their educational challenges in this vein.

A further argument on the shape of the social field is also telling. Wimmer (2021) points out that polycentric and overlapping fields are prone to policy learning. This architecture of the field apparently encourages social agents to engage in the search of alternatives for their own sake regardless of the power and the prestige of the proponents of these alternatives. Below, I will explore to what extent Graf and Marques’ (2022) work on the transfer of alliances for apprenticeships illustrates this hypothesis, and how both strands of literature can create synergies for further research.

Additionally, Wimmer’s (2021: 1405-1409) hypothesis on policy transfer driven by emulation posits interesting questions about the spread of lifelong guidance across the EU. In general, emulation consists of “actors adopting a new organizational or cultural template because it conforms to an accepted normative standard”.

By lifelong guidance I mean career guidance and validation of prior learning altogether. Emulation entails conformity to an accepted normative standard. At the inception of the EU Open Method of Coordination in the terrain of education in the Lisbon summit, these policies were only developed in a few member states. Twenty years later, most of the participants in that meeting and the countries that joined the Union afterwards either have passed some pieces of legislation or have implemented programmes that institutionalise these policies. Since the underlying ideas have become quite consistent policy frameworks, and so many governments have adhered to these principles, it is interesting to investigate to what extent the social partners and the students and workers of these countries have eventually participated in institutional schemes that bring about guidance and validation.

The form of the field is relevant too. Wimmer (2021) hypothesises that monocentric fields induce many participants to emulate the practices of more prestigious participants. I wonder to what extent the need of governments to comply with the recommendations attached to the European Semester has induced a common reaction, that is, if they have emulated the expected practices to show that they were active in VET policy making. Below, I will discuss the contributions of Sultana (2012), Cedefop, European Commission and ICF (2019), Meghnagi and Tuccio (2021) and Villalba-García (2021) to the analysis of these policies through the lens of emulation.

It is necessary to remind the reader that this theoretical section only suggests hypotheses for further research. For the sake of clarity, the chapter focuses on a selection of VET policies that illustrate a telling contrast between the policy areas of apprenticeships and lifelong guidance. Below, two sections draw on the empirical literature to explore the main

symptoms of this contrast as well as to point out some nuances that must be taken into account.

Apprenticeships and the policy learning hypothesis

Traditionally, in Central Europe VET students acquire theoretical and applied knowledge in large-scale apprenticeships whereby they engage in work-based learning for relatively long periods of time. Although many member states of the EU have implemented internships that complement school-based VET, the larger apprenticeship schemes organise learning in such a way that students can spend about half of their time in each setting. The European Council Recommendations have progressively endorsed the transfer of apprenticeships to all member states, normally with the support of peers from the Commission working group as well as of experts from CEDEFOP. The German Ministry of Education and Training has also assisted some countries in this endeavour, which is popularly known as the German model of dual VET.

The main challenge for stretching this institutional arrangement lies in convincing employers and students simultaneously. Employers need good reasons to invest in facilities, tutors, time and job designs that require significant changes of an organisation. Although a few students may accept this option if they are paid a wage, many also expect high-quality tutoring and educational conditions in the workplace. This requirement is indispensable to make apprenticeships appealing for high-performing students. As a consequence, the literature has detected a variety of small-scale, successful initiatives but has also noticed the challenges of scaling up these small innovations so much so that large apprenticeships become a mainstream pathway of education and training in a country (Valiente, & Scandurra, 2017).

Such state of the art strongly suggests that policy learning may be the key driving mechanism of the transfer of apprenticeship schemes. During the Great Recession many experts and governments realised that Germany did not suffer from so severe employment setbacks as other countries. The proliferation of small-scale initiatives is likely to have shaped a multi-layered social field that cuts across administrative territories. Firms, unions and authorities have woven particular networks of collaboration in different sectors at local and regional scales, which often transcend political boundaries. International connections between firms operating in a sector have probably produced overlaps and a polycentric landscape that stimulates exchanges and learning (Wimmer, 2021). Therefore, it is relevant to ask whether the stakeholders of apprenticeships have learnt to design such policies through an array of experiences across Europe.

The European Alliance for Apprenticeships is the biggest of these innovative experiences (European Council, 2018a). This is a platform that attempts to underpin the quality of apprenticeships and facilitate the mobility of students. Each participating country issues a national commitment, and a variety of local stakeholders propose their voluntary pledges. Since 2020 the Alliance aims at building national coalitions, involving small and medium enterprises, connecting with local and regional authorities, broadening the social dialogue with diverse partner organisations, creating committees that enrich the existing sectoral pledges, and facilitating the representation of apprenticeships in a Europe-wide network (European Commission, 2023).

The Alliance has constituted a multi-level coalition of stakeholders that have deliberated on the responses to societal challenges related to economic policy, digitalisation and ecological transition. In this vein, this experience has certainly enabled many companies and educational authorities to borrow and elaborate on new ideas (Graf, & Marques, 2022). The regional spread and the diversity of stakeholders also meet Wimmer's (2021) theoretical criteria of transfer through learning. Thus, the emergence of regional alliances within Germany and the significant involvement of Southern countries such as Italy and Spain suggest that a variety of initiatives are going ahead. The participation of educational institutions, big companies, small and medium enterprises, non-profit organizations, regional and local authorities and other stakeholders shows widespread interest and suggests that apprenticeships make sense for very different stakeholders (European Commission, 2023).

A systematic CEDEFOP (2023) catalogue of innovative apprenticeships has mapped out several transfers of apprenticeships in Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Portugal, Spain and the UK. So, it confirms that the EU policy has attempted to extend the reach of this policy well beyond the core of the Central European coordinated market economies.

Thus, a review of the previous research on the transfer of apprenticeships indicates that these schemes have become a fertile ground for policy learning. If this observation is plausible, further research can deepen into the characteristics of many initiatives that have converged in the Alliance. However, further research must also be cautious to avoid overgeneralisations that coin a simplistic image of quick fixes.

Remarkably, a comparative analysis of Girona (Spain) and Vienna (Austria) observed that the location of these initiatives in certain places posits huge challenges. In the former, some innovative policies that widened career guidance and the duration of apprenticeships clashed with lack of public transport and competition between underfunded third-sector providers. In the latter, the city was quite resilient in responding to the needs of a huge number of young newcomers, but these very needs forced the public employment service to experiment with apprenticeships that were organised outside firms. Some non-profits catered to the needs of the most vulnerable youth by simulating the conditions of real work in social programmes that were not really producing for a market (Rambla et al., 2020). Another important caveat must remind the reader of the rapid pace of decision-making in the aftermath of the Great Recession and the euro sovereign-debt crisis in 2010. At that time, some countries such as Greece and Italy were practically compelled to adopt dual VET as a compensatory measure for the drastic fiscal cuts that the mainstream policies imposed to their citizens (Baumann, & Vossiek, 2022).

Lifelong guidance and the policy emulation hypothesis

Since the Lisbon targets committed all member states of the European Union to promote lifelong learning actively, the Council and the Commission have elaborated on the main themes of educational research and practice that can contribute to this general principle. Then, a core initial concern was defining the allegedly indispensable knowledge for the new economy such as digital and social skills, entrepreneurship and foreign languages (European Council, 2000). The proclamation of those targets also opened conversations about the educational practices that might foster the development of such skills. Over time, the official focus has revolved around the breadth and length of guidance and the

connection between education and training and qualifications frameworks through recognition or validation of prior learning. The full integration of both components remains a meaningful aspiration twenty years later (Cedefop, 2019).

In the decade following the Lisbon summit, the European Commission collaborated with the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network. Drawing on a spate of publications by the OECD and several EU agencies, this network vindicated that guidance required a better integration within the objectives of lifelong learning. Although the initiative was successful in popularising the idea, the EU did not approve an official framework of lifelong guidance. A long series of publications argued for a broader understanding of the concept that articulated vocational guidance and career management skills for everybody's whole span of life. But this official discourse has not established clear definitions of operational aspects such as the profile of the target groups, the training of practitioners and the evaluation of guidance programmes (Sultana, 2012).

Lifelong guidance and validation of prior learning became the cornerstones of Council Recommendations in the 2010s. The former was expected to prevent early school leaving (European Council, 2011), underpin youth guarantee schemes (European Council, 2013) and accelerate upskilling pathways (European Council, 2016) at the same time as it prepared candidates for validation. In 2012 the Council set a deadline for all member states to design validation procedures by 2018 (European Council, 2012). Later on, further pieces of European legislation encouraged member states to articulate the components of lifelong learning in order to build a Bridge to Jobs. This scheme was supposed to tackle youth unemployment and curb the percentage of NEET youths (European Council, 2020b).

Apparently, the Council envisions encompassing institutional systems that articulate employment, education and training, and welfare policies, but the resulting measures have only brought about some piecemeal innovations. First, school ethnographies have detected successful strategies to reduce early leaving by mixing guidance with alternative learning arenas. But these studies have also reported that the expectations to prevent drop out from educational programmes have not been fulfilled. The mix of guidance and diversity- friendly pedagogies is mostly a reactive practice. The recommendations to introduce an appealing curriculum and consolidate links between second-chance education and mainstream VET pathways have not been fully implemented (Praag et al, 2018)

Second, an analysis of lifelong learning policies addressed to young adults found out that the perspectives of street-level practitioners of career guidance were biased in some countries that were borrowing guidance practices from other member states. The research interviewed 164 young adults and 121 professionals in 2017. In several Central European and Scandinavian countries, the professional interviewees retrieved official, objective-driven theories of change, which essentially expected to enable young adults to develop autonomous life plans by either engaging in apprenticeships or taking advantage of holistic approaches to guidance. However, in Southern (Eastern and Western) countries the findings noticed that authorities had reproduced similar approaches, but many of the interviewed first-line professionals had not appropriated the rationale of these programmes. Among the interviews conducted in these countries, explicit formulations

of the expected impacts of the programmes on the opportunities of the beneficiaries were relatively uncommon. In fact, many professionals either hinted derogatory observations about young adults or simply stuck to the terms of the administrative procedures (Rambla et al., 2019).

Third, recent assessments of validation in the EU have recorded disparities and non-take-up problems as well as uneven development of some dimensions (Cedefop, European Commission, ICF, 2019; Meghnagi, & Tuccio, 2021). Although official frameworks are pervasive throughout the Union, the reports can hardly conclude that early school leavers, NEET youth, long-term unemployed adults and low-skilled adults have real opportunities to overcome the shortcomings of their previous education. When the statistical benchmarks of the European Education Area will be assessed in 2030, it is uncertain whether the bulk of these target groups will have been really encouraged to draw on their previous experience for either undertaking further education and training or obtaining a professional qualification.

All the governments of the Union and some neighbouring countries have already designed and implemented their validation schemes. However, neither report claims that the coverage of these services really reaches the whole of the national territory. At the same time, despite some improvement of the participation rates, the majority of the disadvantaged population has not yet had access to them (Cedefop, European Commission, ICF, 2019; Meghnagi, & Tuccio, 2021). As a rule, validation certifies that prospective students have already completed part of an education and training programme that they want to finish during their adult life. More often validation is an outcome of work-based learning (Cedefop, European Commission, & ICF, 2019; Villalba-García, 2021). A key point is that the main initiatives seldom recognise prior learning in a general sense that might capture the potential of the worst-off, who are currently excluded from both education and employment.

The bits and pieces of the available information indicate that the social field in which the decision-makers and the practitioners of career guidance and validation operate is relatively more hierarchical than the field of apprenticeships. At least, the bottom-up features of many alliances contrast with the gaps between the official rhetoric and everyday challenges of guiding people and recognising their previous knowledge. At the same time, these gaps suggest that career guidance and validation of prior learning seldom reach the most disadvantaged target groups.

So far, we lack systematic research on policy transfer in these areas of VET. However, it is relevant to ask about the social field in which career guidance and validation of prior learning are eventually enacted. On the one hand, while belief in the tenets of these programmes is a prestigious idea, the actual social norms of everyday professional practice are not really committed to these principles. On the other hand, top-down decision-making and the mismatch between discourse and implementation probably lead policy actors and practitioners to simply adhere to the normative value of career guidance and the validation of prior learning. If member states endorse the Council Recommendations but do not implement effective programmes that deliver guidance and validation to the most in need, the architecture of the social field has likely contributed to enact emulation. At least, these hypotheses are promising entry points for further research.

Conclusion

Vocationalism is deeply embedded in multi-party social relations between employers, schools, authorities and the third sector. In the European Union, the current state of our knowledge on international transfer in this policy area suggests that the main measures root in certain contexts depending on the interaction between all these actors. Thus, mainstream policy-making has persuaded most governments that large-scale apprenticeships will bring progress to their economies and their education and training systems. All of them have also underscored lifelong guidance and validation of prior learning.

The transfer of apprenticeships, career guidance and prior learning validation between member states of the European Union is a particular case. Preparatory discussions, soft law and negotiations fashion modes of policy transfer that do not replicate the patterns of neither international organisations nor federations.

Current research on this theme may benefit from an open dialogue with some contributions of sociological theory. Careful accounts of agency and social fields help to track the processes and identify very significant nuances. In general, it is interesting to deepen our current knowledge of contrasting transfer mechanisms in the domains of apprenticeships, on the one hand, and guidance and validation, on the other hand. The fact that learning seems to drive the former while emulation sets the pattern of the latter, at least, seems to be a promising entry point for further research questions that inspire relevant projects.

In this chapter I intended to identify such an entry point. If some researchers find this suggestion helpful, their further inquiries will probably qualify this contrast in a few years' time. If they expand the scope of policies, they may even conclude that another theory accounts for the evidence much better. But they will have improved our knowledge on this theme.

So far, it is necessary to conclude with caution. The previous argumentation has focused on two areas of VET policy for the sake of brevity and clarity. In doing so, it has not been able to discuss the multilevel governance of VET. This conclusion must raise awareness to the fact that previous research has found out certain regularities of policy transfer between the European Union and the governments of the member states, but until now it is hard to see the big picture of the relationship between the EU, the member states and the sub-national cities and regions. On the other hand, the breadth of the considered policies does not endorse straightforward conclusions. Although an observation of contrasts between the transfer of apprenticeships and the components of lifelong guidance may be revealing, it will also be necessary to include other policies in ulterior and more systematic reviews. A tentative list of these areas must mention qualifications frameworks, quality assurance, institutional itineraries and clusters of VET providers and employers in different economic sectors.

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