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Promoting VET by Implementing a “Dual System” in Ukraine

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Abstract

In the course of recent history, the Ukrainian vocational education and training system (VET) system has evolved from a system with a large share of work-based learning to a school-based model. Both models struggle(ed) with a lack of appreciation among the population and in companies (Braun, 2022; Melnyk, 2021). Currently, attempts are being made to upgrade marginalised VET by moving work-based learning back to the centre of it. Specifically, Ukraine implemented a dual VET system in a pilot project in 2015, which has since expanded. While three VET institutions were involved in 2015, 217 were recorded in 2021 (MES & Institute of Educational Analytics, 2021).

This is not only associated with hopes for demand-oriented, recognised VET, but also with challenges such as creating a working legal framework for the dual forms of education, encouraging and creating incentives for all actors to participate and contribute to the development of the skill formation and overcoming long-established stereotypes about VET in Ukraine (e. g. Boichevska & Veremiuk, 2020; Deissinger & Melnyk, 2019).

The aim of the paper is to analyse these issues and come to an up-to-date assessment of the reform implementation, its possible prospects and pitfalls.

To achieve this goal, it is first necessary to consider why it is important to promote VET in Ukraine in the first place and where its low esteem results from. This is primarily due to historical-political developments and cultural causes (Braun, 2022; Melnyk, 2021).

Finally, the dual system approach is analysed in concrete terms, taking into account the previously explained background, and the challenges are worked out. For example, it is difficult to convince employers to participate in VET, which they usually see as the sole responsibility of the state (cf. Prytomanov et al., 2018).

The results present a summary of the diverse research activities of the authors connected with VET in Ukraine conducted during 2018-2021.

Keywords

dual training, work-based learning, (standing of) VET, Ukraine



1 Introduction

In the course of recent history, the Ukrainian vocational education and training (VET) system has evolved from a system with a large share of work-based learning to a school-based model. Both models struggle(ed) with a lack of appreciation among the population and in companies (Braun, 2022; Melnyk, 2021). Currently, attempts are being made to upgrade marginalised VET by moving work-based learning back to the centre of VET. Specifically, Ukraine implemented a dual VET system in a pilot project in 2015, which has since expanded. The paper evaluates the idea of the dual VET system as a solution to the problem of the low standing of VET against the background of historical and cultural reasons for and effects of this problem. The focus is on non-academic VET as an alternative to university studies.

2 Standing of VET in Ukraine

The question of how VET is valued in Ukraine can only be answered comprehensively if one takes into account the historical and political developments of the past decades as well as cultural characteristics (Deissinger, 2001). In particular, the period of belonging to the Soviet Union and the relatively sudden turn to new principles and forms of social coexistence in the transition period have left their mark.

In Soviet times, VET had a politically intended high significance (Roberts et al., 2000). While only a few study places were available (Braun & Glowka, 1975; Glowka, 1986; Pennar et al., 1971), work education was already part of regular schooling (Helmert, 1994; Pennar et al., 1971) and participation in different forms of VET was the norm for the majority of the population. The latter was not always voluntary (Anweiler & Meyer, 1979; Melnyk, 2021; Pennar et al., 1971). Through reforms in secondary education, which narrowed down specialised work teaching (polytechnic education) (Anweiler et al., 1976; Tatur, 1977; Wiessner, 1963) and increasingly integrated propaedeutic elements (Braun & Glowka, 1975; Schmidt, 1973), the hope of studying was raised in the students. The hope of a study place at university was linked to the hope of a demanding, broadly specialised job (Braun & Glowka, 1975; Glowka, 1970; Scharff, 1977). Vocational schools and enterprises maintained close links so that work-based learning played a central role and VET was strongly oriented towards the needs of enterprises (Melnyk, 2021; Roberts et al., 2000). VET programmes tended to lead to relatively narrowly specialised, monotonous activities that offered little room for self-fulfilment (Braun & Glowka, 1975; Glowka, 1970; Scharff, 1977). Only a small percentage of the high number of holders of the higher education entrance qualification were admitted to universities, so a certain dissatisfaction arose (Braun & Glowka, 1975; Glowka, 1986; Popovych & Levin-Stankevich, 1992).

With independence and the introduction of a market economy, Ukraine's transformation period began. The (meritocratic) conviction quickly spread that in the new form of society, the highest possible educational qualifications were the prerequisite for further life opportunities (Braun, 2022; Pohorila, 2011; Roberts et al., 2000). The government swiftly opened the universities to the masses (Braun, 2022; Kremen & Nikolajenko, 2006) and thus continued a policy strategy that had already been initiated during the Gorbachev era (Savelyev et al., 1990). At the same time, VET faced massive problems. On the one hand, many companies that had previously served as places of learning were no longer available, and on the other hand, there was a lack of financial resources (Hellwig & Lipenkova, 2007; Melnyk, 2021; Roberts et al., 2000; Zinser, 2015). The government treated VET in a step-motherly manner and was primarily concerned with other, supposedly more important areas of education (Braun, 2022; Farla, 2000; Melnyk, 2021; Raimondos-Møller, 2009). Soon, VET became education for disadvantaged respective low-performing students (Braun, 2022; Del Carpio et al., 2017; Suprun et al., 2012).

3 Effects of the low standing of VET

The massive loss of importance of VET reflects in a sharp decline of VET schools and participants, while the higher education sector took the opposite development (Klein, 2018; Rumyantseva & Logvynenko, 2018; State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 2022a, 2022b UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2013-2020; Zimmermann & Schwajka, 2018). It took a long time for the government to pay more attention to VET and to seek sufficient, specific legal regulations and support – a process that is still ongoing (ETF, 2019b; Farla, 2000; Melnyk, 2021; Suprun et al., 2012). Nonetheless, it suffers from underfunding and teacher shortages (ETF, 2019a; Melnyk, 2017). For trained teachers, VET schools do not seem very attractive - because of their poor reputation and low salaries (Melnyk, 2017). It is proving difficult to rebuild closer links between VET schools and companies (Prytomanov et al., 2018). Last but not least, the companies see the state, that means the Ministry of Education and Science (MES), which centrally directs the fate of the education system (Braun, 2022; Želudenko & Sabitowa, 2015), as having a duty to ensure that the education of the population is in line with demand. Overall, the Ukrainian education system is considered to be extremely theory-based, and activity-based, vocational education inferior (Braun, 2022; Friedman & Trines, 2019; Prytomanov et al., 2018). Because of the high rates of university graduates, there has been an inflation of academic qualifications, which further devalues vocational qualifications and is linked to the currently prevailing shortage of skilled workers (Braun, 2022; Długosz, 2016; MES, 2017–2019; Suprun et al., 2012; UNESCO, 2008).

4 Concept of the dual system as a solution for skill formation in Ukraine

The introduction of the concept of dual education is not only associated with hopes for demand-oriented, recognised VET, but also with challenges such as creating a working legal framework for the dual forms of education, encouraging and creating incentives for all actors to participate and contribute to the development of the skill formation, and overcoming long-established stereotypes about VET in Ukraine (e. g. Boichevska & Veremiuk, 2020; Deissinger & Melnyk, 2019).

The piloting of the concept of a dual form of education began in 2015 as a part of a national experiment implemented by the MES during 2015-2018. According to the Order of the MES No. 298 dated 16.03.2015 "On conducting research and experimental work on the topic 'Vocational training of skilled workers using elements of the dual education system on the basis of vocational education institutions'", the main goal of this experiment was to scientifically substantiate and experimentally check the quality of VET using elements from the dual system. Important actors who fostered the piloting of the elements of the dual system were the Federation of Employers of Ukraine and international organisations like the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation Representation in Ukraine (FEFR UA, 2020; Tütlys et al., 2021). After completing the experiment, a legal framework for implementing the dual system was introduced. Thus, the Order of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 660-r dated 19.09.2018 "On approval of the concept of training specialists in the dual form of education" and Order of the MES No. 1551 dated 12.12.2019 "On approval of the regulation on the dual form of vocational (vocational-technical) education" provided legal grounds for vocational institutions and companies and enterprises to cooperate and train VET students with increased practical orientation.

According to these legal documents, VET institutions are responsible for establishing cooperation and partnership with companies and enterprises and ensuring communication between all involved sides. Companies and enterprises may also initiate such cooperation; however, their main task is to provide a place for an apprenticeship with adequate work conditions. Both parties must cooperate in designing training programmes within respective occupations but VET institutions must ensure that the designed programmes comply with the occupational standards defined by the MES. In addition, both parties must be involved in the

evaluation of knowledge and skills and final state examinations. VET students must conclude a three-party contract to undergo practical training at an enterprise or a company. The last must pay remuneration to a VET student according to achieved results at work.

While only three VET institutions were involved in 2015 in the piloting experiment, in the 2020-2021 academic year 217 from the total of 711 vocational institutions offered dual training to 12 395 VET students (i.e. approximately 5% of total VET students). The number of students in dual training during the three years of the implementation (2018-2020) remains relatively small and insignificant. Most VET institutions engaged in dual training are situated in Central and Western Ukraine (Khmelnyska, Lvivska and Vinnytska regions) (MES & Institute of Educational Analytics, 2021). The latest available data from the MES states that over 300 employers were involved in dual training in 2017-2018 (MES, 2017-2019).

The prospects of the successful implementation of dual training in the Ukrainian VET system remain vague. Together with the introduction of the dual approach in the VET system, the higher education sector has begun actively discussing the application of elements of the dual system in training offered by higher education institutions (HEIs), i.e. universities, institutes and colleges. In 2019, the MES together with international partners launched a new experiment on the implementation of the elements of the dual approach in higher education. Consequently, the rivalry between the two sectors may further intensify and the efforts to make VET more attractive and relevant for the labour market by introducing the dual approach may fail. Another challenge that hampers the implementation of dual training is the weak social dialogue between different stakeholders (Deissinger & Melnyk, 2019; Tütlys et al., 2021). As evident from the legal framework, the responsibility for finding partner-companies and enterprises lies with VET institutions. They must also encourage companies and enterprises to conclude cooperation agreements and in such a way secure apprenticeship places for VET learners. As a result, VET institutions get a subordinate role and can hardly be considered equal partners in dual training. Other social partners, which traditionally are important players in VET systems of countries where the dual system is well-established like for example chambers in Germany (Deißinger, 2001; Deissinger, 2010), are not involved in skill formation in Ukraine. There is no independent public body or agency that can overtake the function of supervising and monitoring the quality of training and competences acquired by VET learners at both learning venues. The absent feeling of shared responsibilities for skill formation in the country from employers' side, who see it as the sole responsibility of the state (cf. Prytomanov et al., 2018), remains problematic. In addition, companies are not particularly interested in being involved in dual training due to financial investments, fear of losing VET graduates after the training and ill-defined understanding of the concept of dual training (FEFR UA, 2020). Since there are no uniform training programmes at companies and enterprises and no mechanisms of independent quality monitoring, they also offer quite specific training that contradicts the principle of mobility and comprehensive vocational training but becomes on-the-job training. It creates a risk of narrow vocational specialisation, once experienced in the Soviet Union that had a negative impact on the enrolment of students in the VET system in independent Ukraine and encouraged aiming at studies in higher education.

5 Conclusions and outlook

The new dual training in VET can be interpreted as an approach to increase the appreciation of VET in Ukraine. In terms of numbers, it remains to be seen how the dual system will develop and whether it will succeed in establishing itself. On the one hand, the fact that some companies have been won over and participate in dual training is promising; on the other hand, the absence of a systematic understanding of the dual system with its mechanisms that clearly assign roles and responsibilities to the actors can threaten the success of its implementation. Ultimately, the success of the dual system will also depend on whether it proves to be complementary or

competitive to higher education. Within VET, it can be a high-quality alternative alongside full-time school-based courses. However, as we have shown, there are difficulties and risks that need addressing.

The ongoing war in Ukraine has already heightened the importance of VET for the post-war rebuilding of Ukraine in the minds of policymakers. The MES approved a strategic document titled “Conceptual framework for the development of human capital in the field of vocational education and training” within the “Reconstruction Plan of Ukraine” (MES, 2022). However, changes must occur in the social perception of VET as a driver for economic development and as an instrument for increasing the human capital of a country. The biggest industrial enterprises, which are crucial for the Ukrainian economy and consequently potential partners of dual training, are situated in occupied Southern and Eastern regions of Ukraine. The outcome of the war is a decisive factor for the further implementation of the dual approach in the VET system: Ukraine’s victory is a precondition for the realisation of the Reconstruction Plan.

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