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Reform perspectives for the Ukrainian VET system – a critical analysis

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Abstract

The contribution focuses on current reforms of the Ukrainian VET system, mainly on decentralization and the “import” of a dual system, as well as on the hindrances for successful implementation of these reforms. The context hereby is neoliberalism, which has influenced Ukraine generally, including the development of vocational education, and modernisation theory, which explains the involvement of international organisations in the VET reforms and liberal attempts of the Ukrainian government. The theoretical findings suggests that although Ukraine has a potential to improve its skill formation system, activities so far seem fragmentary and isolated, and they apparently do not take into account the complex environment in which they are meant to function.

Keywords

reforms; vet; ukraine; decentralisation; dual system.

1 Introduction

According to globalization theory, educational systems are undergoing revolutionary changes (Green, 1999). Against this background, VET, apart from its traditional function to develop skills for a particular occupation or a particular enterprise (Cedefop, 2017, p. 7), is expected to promote employability among secondary education graduates in order to enable them to shape socio-economic development as well as to cope with ecological issues (Wallenborn, 2010, p. 181). For Ukraine, this implies a change in the direction of the current development of its VET system, which is characterized by stagnation, low competitiveness and obsolescence (Korzh, 2013). Even more, its weakness to compete with academic qualifications and meritocracy deeply rooted in Eastern European societies seems to be a major factor.

Reforms in VET are prompted by three factors, namely ‘concerns, within or outside the training system, about the relevance of training being provided in the country; concerns about the effectiveness and the efficiency of the national training system; and concerns about paying for training and being able to sustain the necessary effort over time’ (Fluitman, 1999, p. 57). All three preconditions are present in Ukraine and some reforms have already been initiated, such as the internal reshaping of the system in 1996, the introduction of the ‘Law on Vocational Education’ in 1998, as well as the beginning of decentralisation of VET in 2016 (European Training Foundation, 2002; European Training Foundation, 2017a). Moreover, the country has taken a strategy for an introduction of a kind of dual system in 2015 (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2018). However, the envisaged success of these reforms raises some doubts. Against this background, the questions discussed in this paper are (i) whether the Ukrainian VET system really possesses the potential to undergo reforms that could really change the direction of its current development, (ii) how the state could manage and imple-



ment such reforms, and (iii) whether there are factors which still are strong enough to impede reforms in Ukraine and therefore might lead to potential failure.

2 State-administered VET and the Transition Economy

Since vocational education is embedded within the respective national economy, industrial relations and status systems (Bosch & Charest, 2008; Deissinger, 2008), the theoretical reference we use to describe these problems and challenges in the case of Ukraine is neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism broadly means the agenda of economic and social transformation under free market conditions (Connell, 2013; Harvey, 2005). However, the shift to neoliberalism for the countries with liberal economies was an expected stage of their evolution. For the countries of the former USSR, it was a plunge into the unknown. Neoliberalism so far has had a drastic impact on the Ukrainian educational system, causing commercialization and expansion of higher education, and with it the decay of vocational education (Korzh, 2013, p. 52).

Historically, Ukraine has a school-based VET system, which it inherited from the USSR. Such a system functioned effectively as part of the administrative economy and centralised management (Nychkalo, 2004), but under free market conditions it failed in quickly reacting to needs of employers and with respect to demanded skills and competences of school-leavers. The liberalisation of the economy, which started in 1991, created imbalances in the social sphere, devaluating norms as 'work' and 'profession'. Vocational schools remained under state control and gradually declined in numbers (Nychkalo, 2008). Also, the deterioration of the economic situation undermined the ability of the state to provide VET with sufficient financial resources which led to bad and insufficient equipment in vocational schools. VET was no longer capable to correspond to the work reality in industry. Moreover, the remuneration of vocational teachers, trainers and instructors now is one of the lowest among professional categories (European Training Foundation, 2017b). Reforms that were initiated by the government, such as the internal reshaping of the system in 1996 and the introduction of the 'Law on Vocational Education' in 1998, were designed to align the VET system to the expectations of the employment sector. However, these steps did not stop the negative tendencies in the VET system.

Rostow's modernization theory rests on the liberal expectation of gain spillover from the economic elites to the whole society due to the expansion of the market economy (Ish-Shalom, 2006). This idea corresponded to the liberal intentions of the government to introduce free market principles within the VET system in Ukraine. Since 2016, decentralisation tendencies in Ukraine influenced all spheres, including the VET system. The developed countries attempted to make their contribution to the development of VET in Ukraine by providing modernisation assistance. The European Training Foundation worked out a Green Paper to lead discussions on reforms and capacities needed for an attractive high-quality VET system in Ukraine (European Training Foundation, 2017a). The recommendations also include public-private partnerships. So far, this idea exists only on paper. One of the consequences of decentralisation was the adoption of a new law ruling the budgeting of vocational education and aiming at its liberalisation. Financing vocational schools has been shifted to the regional level and also includes other stakeholders, e.g. companies. However, for vocational schools such measures have turned out to be a shock therapy. Although the intention was to make VET more liberal and to match qualifications with the needs of a particular region, schools appeared not to be ready for such radical measures and many were on the edge of extinction (European Training Foundation, 2017a). The government had to urgently subsidise VET in order to save it and to avoid massive protests (Pokidina, 2016).

3 Importing the Dual System in Ukraine

Ukraine, experiencing economic challenges and increasing unemployment since 2008 (Ministry of Finance, 2018), searched for the best practice to combat these problems. The government of Ukraine came to the conclusion that ‘the world leader of skilled workforce training is the European Union due to its dual system of education and training’ (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2018). Although this is a too generalistic perception, it resulted in the decision to implement dual vocational training in Ukraine. Since 2015, the government of Ukraine started to pilot the implementation of ‘the dual system of vocational education’ in 3 vocational schools and as of 2018, 52 vocational schools out of 758 launched the implementation of elements of dual training with respect to 52 qualifications (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2018).

The results of this experiment encouraged the government to approve the concept of dual training. The problems, which are to be solved according to the concept, are low readiness of VET graduates to work according to their qualifications, low satisfaction of the labour market with the quality of education, ineffective usage of students’ learning time regarding the acquisition of competences. The steps taken for the implementation of the dual system were accompanied and supported by international and German organizations, such as Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in Ukraine, Deutsch-Ukrainischer Agrarpolitischer Dialog, Eastern Partnership (Cabinet of Ministries of Ukraine, 2018).

Although in Germany and Ukraine the term ‘dual training’ is used, it is obvious that Ukrainian officials who pushed the realization of this reform, and German scholars who do research on the dual system, educational transfer and policy borrowing, have different understandings. Duality of vocational training in German-speaking countries is characterized not only by bringing theory and practice or learning venues together, namely the vocational part-time school and the company, but also on the responsibility of various stakeholders and a specific understanding of “occupations” (Deissinger & Gonon, 2016). This important fact seems to be non-existent in Ukraine as such stakeholders in the dual system, traditionally represented by chambers, employer organizations and trade unions, either do not exist or have different goals. For example, trade unions hardly play a substantial role in the economic and social life of the country and are considered as undeveloped elements of the labour market in Ukraine (Doronina, 2013; Kolot, 2000). Chambers perform mainly supportive functions such as searching business partners, issuing product quality certificates, assessing property and other actions connected with the economic activity, but are not part of the VET system as such (Ostroumova, 2015). Therefore, the notion of a dual system in Ukraine has so far been reduced to the issue of learning locations.

It is considered a specific feature of the German vocational training system that at the target level three dimensions are connected with each other: individual, social and economic expectations. The interactions between these three dimensions normally lead to a consensus between institutions and stakeholders responsible for education policy on the level of the federal states and on the level of the central state (Euler, 2013). In the Ukrainian case hitherto, two dimensions out of three have not demonstrated sufficient potential to transform the current vocational education system into a dual one.

Pilz has worked out an instrument for VET transfer (Pilz, 2017). The ‘6 P Strategy for VET export’ comprises six core factors to be taken into consideration in any transfer project. These factors are priorities, which should be based on training needs and perspectives of those involved; power, which implies resources needed for qualitative and quantitative training needs; people, which means qualified trainers/instructors and adequate pay for them; poaching avoidance, which implies loyalty to companies involved, progression, which stands for progression routes for VET graduates to higher education; and privileges for adequate working conditions and pay for skilled employees (Pilz, 2017). The implementation of a dual sys-

tem in Ukraine was driven by the needs of both employers and trainees. As a matter of fact, in the Ukrainian concept of dual training, it is mentioned that the equipment in vocational schools is outdated and worn out up to 100 %, so there is hope among those working on the operative level in the VET system that the situation might improve due to the implementation of a dual system by the government.

However, still there are no clear regulations for the qualifications of trainers and vocational teachers. Universities which offer vocational teacher training programs experience a constant shortage of students because of low social attractiveness of and bad financial perspectives in this profession. Although companies articulate an interest in a qualified labour force, the absence of a clear legal base which would outline their rights and obligations make them reluctant to participate in the state initiatives. Now graduates of VET can progress to higher education, because they can attend secondary education at vocational schools and receive a respective certificate (Verkhovna Rada Ukrainy, 1998). How the situation will change with a dual system in which it is expected that theoretical learning will just amount to around 30 % of the learning time is difficult to predict at this early stage of its implementation. Higher education attainment is still strongly associated with better salaries, working conditions and social status in Ukrainian society (Del Carpio, Kupets, Muller, & Olefir, 2017; Korzh, 2013). Looking at criteria such as those by Pilz makes clear that the challenges with respect to a dual system approach are more than just demanding.

4 Conclusions

The problems that have so far blocked reforms in vocational education in Ukraine from being successful lie in three areas: policy definition, setting (the right) objectives, and implementation (Fluitman, 1999). The reforms initiated have been in line with the policy of establishing a modern democratic and prosperous country. The assumption referring to the deficiencies of these first reform steps is that they were aimed solely on vocational education as such, leaving aside economic, social and cultural realities of the country. In order to make VET transfer successful, the experiences of different countries ought to be compared and, if necessary, those elements ought to be picked up and adapted which harmonize best with the national goals, structures and cultures (Euler, 2013). Against this background, the term “policy learning” might be more adequate than the term “transfer” of “policy borrowing” (Deissinger, 2015; Raffe & Spours, 2007).

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