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ANALYSIS OF THE EU'S DUAL VET PROMOTION STRATEGY AND ITS IMPACT ON SPANISH VET STAKEHOLDERS

ANÁLISIS DE LA ESTRATEGIA EUROPEA DE DIFUSIÓN DE LA FP DUAL Y SU IMPACTO EN ESPAÑA

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the European Union has positioned Dual Vocational Education and Training (VET) as a benchmark for modernisation across Member States. This study systematically analyses the dissemination actions undertaken by this international organisation and their impact on VET governance actors in Spain, specifically at the central level, in Andalusia, and in the Basque Country. To achieve

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this, the research examines a total of 35 EU-generated VET references including recommendations, conclusions, and declarations; and draws on 13 semi-structured interviews with representatives from the business, trade union, government, and educational sectors involved in VET governance.

The findings reveal that various EU institutions have focused their efforts on four main areas: non-binding policy documents, peer learning, funding, and the European Alliance for Apprenticeships. Among these, the most impactful mechanisms for Spanish actors have been the issuance of recommendations and the use of conditional funding.

KEYWORDS: Vocational education and training, international organisations, apprenticeships, European convergence, policy transfer.

RESUMEN

En las últimas décadas la Unión Europea se ha erigido como promotora de la Formación Profesional (FP) dual en los Estados Miembros. La presente investigación analiza y sistematiza las acciones de difusión desplegadas por esta organización internacional. Asimismo, analiza la incidencia de las mismas en los actores de la gobernanza de la FP en España. Para ello, se analiza un total de 35 referencias en materia de FP generadas por esta institución internacional y un conjunto de 13 entrevistas semiestructuradas a representantes del colectivo empresarial, sindical, gubernamental y educativo implicados en la gobernanza de la FP. Los hallazgos concluyen que las distintas instituciones de la Unión Europea han desplegado su actividad en torno a cuatro focos: recomendaciones, aprendizaje por pares, financiación y la Alianza Europea para la Formación de Aprendices. De estos,

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los dos mecanismos con mayor impacto en los actores españoles han sido las recomendaciones y la financiación condicionada.

Palabras clave: *Formación profesional, organizaciones internacionales, FP Dual, convergencia europea, transferencia de políticas.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Dual vocational education and training (VET) has emerged over the past decades as a benchmark for best practices in Europe (see Ministry of Education and Research of the Federal Republic of Germany et al., 2012) and as a key recommendation by the European Union (EU) for the reform of national VET systems (Scepanovic & Martín-Artiles, 2020, pp. 16–17). In this regard, EU institutions have exerted pressure on Member States with school-based systems to promote their transition towards Dual VET, considering it a more effective model for improving quality, outcomes, and labour market relevance. This position is exemplified by the European Commission, which described school-based systems as "lagging behind in terms of participation, quality, outcomes, and attractiveness" and highlighted dual models such as those in Germany and Denmark as "world-class VET systems" (European Commission, 2012, pp. 5–6). Recent research suggests that this pressure strategy, which became more intense following the 2008 financial crisis and its subsequent recession and varied in intensity depending on each country's economic context, led Southern European countries such as Spain, both at the national and regional level (Martínez-Izquierdo & Torres Sánchez, 2024, pp. 9–12), Greece or Portugal (Baumann & Vossiek, 2022; Sanz de Miguel et al., 2022), to incorporate Dual VET models into their VET systems.

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Despite this evidence, existing research on the EU's agenda for promoting Dual VET remains partial and fragmented, often focusing on specific activities rather than the broader strategy. Notable studies, albeit briefly and with varying degrees of depth, highlight initiatives such as the implementation of financial support measures (Martín-Artiles et al., 2020, pp. 79–80; Psifidou & Ranieri, 2020, p. 14), the creation of the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) (Psifidou & Ranieri, 2020, p. 9; Scepanovic & Martín-Artiles, 2020, p. 17), and the development of policy recommendations (Martín-Artiles et al., 2020, p. 76; Psifidou & Ranieri, 2020, p. 9; Scepanovic & Martín-Artiles, 2020, pp. 16–17). This article aims to address this fragmentation by systematically analysing the EU's comprehensive soft pressure strategy for promoting the adoption of Dual VET.

In addition, Jakobi (2012, p. 402) highlighted the lack of scientific evidence regarding which specific mechanisms most strongly affect the capacity of international organisations to influence national education policy. Addressing this research gap, this article examines the impact of EU mechanisms on a sample of VET governance actors in Spain, encompassing the central, Andalusian, and Basque levels.

1.1. The EU and its VET policy in recent decades: general insights

Article 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union states that the EU shall develop a VET policy that strengthens and complements Member States' initiatives while fully respecting their authority over its content and organisation (Member States, 2016, p. 121). It also empowers the European Parliament, the Council of the EU, and the European Commission, without granting them legal harmonisation competencies, to take actions and issue recommendations aimed at adapting VET to industrial transformations, improving initial and continuing

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training, promoting intra-European mobility, fostering public-private cooperation, and enhancing the exchange of information and best practices among Member States (Member States, 2016, p. 121).

As part of this coordination framework and as a key mechanism for its implementation, the European Commission, Member States, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), and the European Economic Area (EEA), along with candidate countries and European social partners, including employers' organisations and trade unions engaged in EU-level social dialogue under Articles 154 and 155 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, launched the Copenhagen Process in 2002 (European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training et al., 2002). This process has served as a tripartite platform to enhance, complement, and operationalise European VET policy (European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training et al., 2020, p. 3). The Copenhagen Process is structured around four dimensions aimed at policy coordination, mutual learning, the development of common tools for transparency and mobility, and the integration of social partners to enhance the relevance and quality of VET systems across Europe. It has had such an impact on Member States that, for example, in the case of Spain, Zaunstöck et al. (2021) conclude that, in terms of discussing the intentions and directions of VET, Spain "has not only adopted the wording behind the Copenhagen Declaration but also aligned itself in the same direction: the foundation of its current VET system can be clearly correlated with the Copenhagen principles and pillars" (p. 330).

2. METHODOLOGY

This research relied on two main sources: European VET-related texts and semi-structured interviews with VET governance actors in Spain. To collect

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EU documents related to VET, a systematic search was conducted on the EUR-Lex repository. Due to technical issues with Boolean operators (e.g., "vocational education" and "apprenticeship*") which limited the combination of search terms, the search was divided into two phases: the first used the quoted term "vocational education", while the second used "apprenticeship*" to capture both singular and plural forms. The search was limited to English-language documents published between November 2002, following the signing of the Copenhagen Declaration (European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training et al., 2002), and 30 June 2021. EU court case resolutions were excluded due to their specificity, and texts related to "Erasmus" were discarded as they generated a high number of irrelevant results. After the initial search, documents unrelated to recommendations or reforms of VET systems regarding modality and governance were manually excluded, as were texts focused solely on professional qualifications, migration, or labour regulations. Additionally, references cited within the collected documents that were not identified in the initial search were retrieved from the Publications Office of the European Union and the Document Library of the European Education Area. This process yielded 50 references, from which 35 texts were selected after thorough reading. These texts mainly comprised communications, recommendations, and statements from major European institutions, such as the Council of the European Union, the European Commission (including its Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion), the European Parliament, the European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training, and the European Social Partners. The final dataset was organized by institutional author, date, and main conclusions, followed by an in-depth content analysis based on their format and content suitability.

For the interviews, a total of 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with actors involved in Dual VET governance in Spain, both at the central level and

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in the Autonomous Communities of the Basque Country and Andalusia, as well as with a representative from the most active national foundation promoting Dual VET in Spain. In terms of governance actors, the sample included representatives from each territorial level, consisting of a representative from the main employers' confederation, a trade union representative (except in Andalusia), a representative from VET centres through the relevant educational associations, and a representative from the institution responsible for VET policies, either the ministry or regional ministry, during the period from 2012, when Royal Decree 1529/2012 of 8 November, on the regulation of the training and apprenticeship contract and the establishment of the bases of Dual VET, officially introduced Dual VET in Spain at the central level, to 2021, when Organic Law 3/2022 of 31 March on the Organisation and Integration of Vocational Education and Training established Dual VET as mandatory for all VET modalities.

The content analysis of both the interviews and the collected texts followed the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) approach, which identifies, analyses, and reports patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Reflexivity involved continuous reflection on both the knowledge generated and the research process itself (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 13). The study adhered to the ten fundamental assumptions of RTA and followed its six analytical phases.

3. RESULTS

The analysis shows that the dissemination agenda of Dual VET developed by various EU institutions relies on a set of interconnected mechanisms that combine non-binding policy documents, policy learning, financial incentives, and network mobilisation. Each of these dimensions reflects a specific way in which

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the EU exercises soft influence on national VET systems, as explored in the following sections.

3.1. Dual VET in the non-binding policy documents

The most significant milestones of the Copenhagen Process have been achieved through the adoption of various declarations over time. These documents reflect the commitment of the signatory actors to align their efforts around a series of shared objectives and principles. Since 2002, participants have endorsed six key declarations, each named after the city where they were signed: the Copenhagen Declaration (European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training et al., 2002), the Maastricht Communiqué (European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training et al., 2004), the Helsinki Communiqué (European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training et al., 2006), the Bruges Communiqué (European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training et al., 2010), the Riga Conclusions (European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training et al., 2015), and the Osnabrück Declaration (European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training et al., 2020).

The influence of these declarations is evident, as they are frequently cited as justifications in the preambles of related policy documents (see Council of the European Union, 2018, p. 2). Beyond these declarations and communiqués, the Copenhagen Process has generated a substantial body of recommendations, conclusions, and other non-binding texts formulated by various EU institutions to guide national VET systems. As outlined in the methodology, this study identified 35 EU policy documents directly related to this topic.

As highlighted in previous publications by this research team, the RTA of this corpus of texts confirmed that EU institutions have consistently promoted a VET

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model centred on work-based learning (WBL) and governed through cooperation among a broad network of social partners (Martínez-Izquierdo & Torres Sánchez, 2022a, 2022b). Moreover, the analysis showed that Dual VET has been supported both in general terms (covering aspects such as philosophy, governance, modalities, and structure) and through specific recommendations such as establishing a clear regulatory framework, formalising the relationship between companies and apprentices, ensuring apprentices' social protection, maintaining real alternation between companies and VET centres, and adapting training content to labour market needs. EU institutions have further strengthened this approach by highlighting Dual VET models from Central European Member States as illustrative examples of good practice (see European Commission, 2012, pp. 6–7; European Parliament, 2014, p. 4).

Regarding the influence of this non-binding policy documents on Spanish actors, these texts are explicitly referenced by national and Andalusian stakeholders when identifying the EU as the driving force behind the initiation and development of Dual VET. As a representative from a national association of VET centres explained, the EU's influence "is highly significant" because declarations such as Riga "clearly show how the European Commission pushes the entire system towards ensuring that companies play an active role in training processes", reinforcing the shift towards cooperative, company-involved governance. A national-level trade union representative expressed a similar view, highlighting the persistent role of the EU in promoting Dual VET: "In the European documents they all kept talking about dual training, fundamentally...I mean that within the framework we are in, like the General Council and the EU Advisory Committee...They steer you towards Dual VET".

Similarly, although Basque actors do not recognize a fundamental role of the EU in the adoption of Dual VET in their Autonomous Community, they acknowledge

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that these texts served as a reference throughout the entire process (see Viceconsejería de Formación Profesional del Gobierno Vasco, 2011, p. 8).

The most frequently cited recommendation as influential by Spanish actors, explicitly mentioned by the foundation, the Ministry of Education at the national level, and trade unions, is the *European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships* (Council of the European Union, 2018).

3.2. Peer learning activities

Beyond the publication of non-binding policy documents, the EU has also relied on additional instruments to facilitate the circulation of these ideas among Member States. The most prominent of these are peer learning activities, which operationalise the coordination principles established under the Copenhagen Process. European texts explicitly refer to formats such as “the multilateral surveillance process of the European Semester, the Mutual Learning Programme, and the Copenhagen Process, as well as the Open Method of Coordination applied within the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET2020)” (European Commission et al., 2013, p. 3). In this context, the findings indicate that all European agencies have actively promoted Dual VET through peer learning activities involving representatives from national ministries responsible for VET. These peer learning and exchange processes have taken place, and continue to take place, primarily within the framework of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), Euroguidance, and the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop).

Throughout these peer learning sessions, each country reviews other Member States' models in light of the European priorities outlined earlier, ultimately formulating

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individual recommendations aimed at fostering a certain degree of convergence. As explained by the Spanish Ministry representative, these reviews are conducted according to shared European priorities and lead to recommendations intended to promote gradual alignment among national systems.

When they tell me, 'Oh, you are off on a European trip again', it is because we are doing peer reviews, which are peer-to-peer evaluations. I review another Ministry just as foreign Ministries review mine, and if you think about it, that is the idea: to make it homogeneous while allowing each country to shape and organize its model according to its legislation and national structure. (...) There, we have learned how to structure Dual VET or any work-based VET. (Ministry of Education-Head of Service).

3.3. European funds linked to progress in Dual VET

While peer learning encourages voluntary convergence through the exchange of experiences, the EU also uses more tangible instruments to steer national reforms: financial incentives. These funding mechanisms constitute a third pillar of the EU's strategy, linking progress in Dual VET to access to European financial resources. The European Commission highlights these initiatives in its communication *European skills agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience* (European Commission, 2020a), where it acknowledges that the Next Generation EU funds will encourage Member States to use EU financial resources to implement national reskilling and upskilling plans (European Commission, 2020a, p. 22). In this context, the Commission outlines several funding programmes for VET, emphasising that they will receive increased support through mechanisms associated with this temporary recovery instrument, endowed with more than €800 billion (Directorate-General for Budget of the European Commission, 2021).

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The Commission specifically refers to initiatives such as the European Social Fund, Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, the Digital Europe Programme, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and the InvestEU Programme. Furthermore, it stresses that, in order to access direct *Next Generation EU* funding (such as resources from the Recovery and Resilience Facility) Member States “will prepare to access funding from this Facility should reflect skills as a priority for the programming” (European Commission, 2020a, p. 22).

With regard to Dual VET, among the recommendations and clauses for receiving these funds, the Commission calls on Member States to “create quality employment opportunities, support an adequate offer of apprenticeships, and strengthen VET. By 2025, at least four in five VET graduates should be employed and three in five should benefit from on-the-job training” (European Commission, 2020b, pp. 9–10).

In addition, the Commission provides a non-exhaustive overview of operations that may be supported under the future EU budget to achieve the objectives of the *European Skills Agenda* by leveraging *Next Generation EU* resources. These include “implementing VET and apprenticeship reforms (...) direct subsidies for apprentices in SMEs, including remuneration, recruitment bonuses, and temporary coverage of social contributions (...) as well as trainers’ wages and/or their social contributions to stabilise and increase the supply of quality and effective apprenticeships” (European Commission, 2020a, pp. 22–23).

In this context, national and regional authorities also recognise the growing influence of EU funding mechanisms on the configuration of their VET policies. According to representatives from the Andalusian Ministry of Education and from the Ministry of Education at the national level, the EU has consistently pursued a clear and sustained strategy to link funding conditions for projects and activities to duality

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criteria, such as WBL and the co-responsibility of companies in management and training. In their view, the progressive incorporation of these funding conditions is gradually shaping national VET landscapes towards dual formats. One official from the Ministry of Education summarised this strategy as follows:

From many angles, many working groups, the EU has been telling Member States: 'Let's work on dual VET, and now I will launch projects to fund specific activities'. The eligibility criteria for these projects are highly conditioned. (Ministry of Education-Head of Service)

According to central and Andalusian actors interviewed, this conditioning of EU funds has been decisive in promoting measures that initially supported WBL and later the expansion of Dual VET. A representative from the Andalusian Ministry of Education summarised this dynamic succinctly:

In the end, what was decisive? The same factor for all of Europe. The EU finances VET, so 'if I finance it, I decide the model'. (Andalusian Ministry of Education-Dual VET Coordinator)

This perception was echoed by a national-level trade union representative, who highlighted the same financial leverage as a key driver of reform:

And besides, there's money involved. If the EU calls for reforms and backs them with funding to boost WBL, support company involvement, and promote the model, that is decisive. (National-level trade union representative)

Together, these testimonies underscore the strong consensus among Spanish stakeholders regarding the instrumental role of EU financial conditionality in steering national and regional VET policies toward dual formats.

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3.4 The EAfA: a tripartite alliance for the promotion of Dual VET

In addition to non-binding policy documents, peer learning and financial tools, the EU has sought to mobilise collective commitment among social partners and public authorities. This effort culminated in the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA), a governance arena that pairs reputational incentives with technical support to diffuse dual formats (European Commission et al., 2013). The alliance pursues two core objectives: improving the quality and availability of dual VET across the EU and reshaping perceptions through broad partnerships spanning education and employment (European Commission et al., 2013, p. 1).

Rather than a single programme, the EAfA institutionalises cooperation around a shared template: effective training partnerships with clear roles, meaningful involvement of social partners and intermediary bodies, robust quality assurance, integration within national and regional systems, and a clear regulatory framework that specifies responsibilities, rights, and obligations. Its 2020 renewal aligned priorities with the *European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships*, adding emphasis on SMEs, the European Apprentices Network (EAN), which represents apprentices' voices at EU level, and cross-cutting priorities such as inclusion and gender equality (Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2020a; 2020b; Council of the European Union, 2018).

In practice, interviewees portray the EAfA as episodically influential in Spain: useful for networking, visibility, and legitimization, yet secondary to formal recommendations and funding conditionality in driving reform. As one employers' confederation from the Basque Country explained, they "actively participate in EAfA meetings and share progress on instructor training and the expansion of dual VET", which illustrates the alliance's role in peer signalling and agenda maintenance.

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4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, the four pillars identified in this study (non-binding policy documents [declarations, conclusions, and recommendations], peer learning, financial conditionality, and network mobilisation through the EAfA) form a coherent dissemination strategy through which the EU shapes national VET reforms despite its limited formal competences. Rather than operating through a single instrument, these mechanisms function in a complementary manner: texts provide strategic direction, peer learning facilitates the exchange of practices, funding aligns incentives, and alliances sustain visibility and stakeholder engagement.

The evidence gathered suggests that two of these mechanisms have exerted the strongest influence on Spanish VET stakeholders, thereby addressing the question raised by Jakobi (2012, p. 402). The first mechanism concerns the formulation and dissemination of conclusions, recommendations, and frameworks, elements already identified in the discourses of stakeholders by Martín-Artiles et al. (2020, p. 76), Psifidou and Ranieri (2020, p. 9), and Scepanovic and Martín-Artiles (2020, pp. 16–17). The most cited in the discourse of actors is the *European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships* (Council of the European Union, 2018). While Andalusian and national-level actors explicitly recognise the EU's driving role in the development of Dual VET, Basque stakeholders tend to downplay its direct influence, emphasising instead the region's own policy trajectory. Nevertheless, their frequent use of EU documents as reference points suggests an indirect yet sustained alignment with European priorities. Policymakers across all three levels demonstrate a particularly detailed understanding of the various Copenhagen Process declarations and related recommendations.

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The second mechanism is the use of European funding instruments such as the European Social Fund, Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, and the ERDF, also acknowledged by Martín-Artiles et al. (2020, pp. 79–80) and Psifidou and Ranieri (2020, p. 14). Many Spanish actors emphasise that access to European funds has been the most decisive lever for promoting Dual VET; a perception aptly summarised by the statement: "If I (the EU) pay, I (the EU) decide the model" (Andalusian Ministry of Education-Dual VET Coordinator). However, in countries such as Greece and Portugal, the influence of EU funding has been even more explicit and less aligned with the logic of soft power, since the EU itself imposed the implementation and expansion of Dual VET within the economic bailout memoranda (Baumann & Vossiek, 2022; Sanz de Miguel et al., 2022).

Future research should advance along three lines of inquiry. First, it should examine each mechanism in greater depth, analysing its evolution, internal functioning, and mutual interactions within the broader EU policy framework. Second, it should evaluate the impact of this dissemination agenda across other Member States and regional contexts, identifying patterns of convergence and divergence. Finally, subsequent studies could explore how this soft-pressure strategy unfolds over time, focusing on its long-term implications for governance and for the balance between European coordination and national autonomy.

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