

Vocational Education and Training Policy Development for Young Adults in the European Union: a thematic analysis of the EU trend of convergence towards integration, drawn from the brief presentation of the VET policies adopted in three Member States

GEORGE K. ZARIFIS

Independent Continuing Education Researcher, Thessaloniki, Greece

ABSTRACT In this article the author looks at the extent to which European Union (EU) suggestions for Vocational Education and Training (VET) policy development for young people, are translated in the context of convergence, as the result of an international trend for adaptation of common policies towards integration. The article traces issues that describe the relation of VET to convergence and integration, and questions the feasibility of socioeconomic integration in the EU, by presenting a short thematic analysis of issues and trends in three Member States, that have conformed to a large extent to the EU policy framework for VET. It is suggested that integration, as a multidimensional process, relates more to the pressure exerted by adults on young people to conform to predetermined standards, whether in working or social life, and argues that if there is to be a change, there will be a need for new methods of integration into a society which is not fixed and immutable, but in fact in the process of upheaval and of being constantly restructured.

Introduction

The Maastricht Treaty initiated a new era for the European Community and the policies to be adopted, in respect of political and socioeconomic life, by the Member States. One of the objectives of the treaty was to achieve *convergence*. Convergence was defined as a global trend that was initiated by competitive, rather than comparative, advantages for the creation of a worldwide market

(European Commission White Paper, 1993). This trend created the need for the Member States to align their socioeconomic policies in order to assist the economic, political and social *integration* of the European Community, and outdistance their competitors, namely USA and Japan.

One of the aspects to which convergence was linked, is Vocational Education and Training (VET). In the past decade the European Union (EU) targeted on the development of training systems that would enable EU citizens to enhance and transfer their professional skills between jobs and countries, in order to combat unemployment and social exclusion, and create a flexible and competitive labour market. The Member States came to agreement that these links may resolve the long-term problems, especially among young people. Initially however, there was no specific plan on how this framework should be developed. Only general suggestions that are presented in the 'White Paper for Growth, Employment and Competitiveness', which indicates the EU standards for vocational training and prescribes activities and VET programmes, in regard with the long term objective of economic and monetary union, which took its first shape very recently with the European Monetary Union (EMU) and the introduction of common currency: the Euro.

It is arguable, however, whether the alignment of VET policy in the Member States, with EU economic policy, as this is prescribed by the Central European Bank, can assist further socio-political integration in the EU. Or is it? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to understand the relation between VET, as a socioeconomic condition, and convergence and integration as this is translated in the policies adopted by the Member States. The interpretation of convergence and integration that is given by the Community, is in itself called into question as over-simplified and individualistic (see Rose & Pottier, 1993). It is a fact that convergence – as a trend that relates to political procedures – which at the moment targets on economic integration in the EU, affects the development of VET policy in the Member States and to a certain extent affects the process of integration – perhaps not as obviously as it should. What does the EU mean by integration in the context of VET? Integration is considered as a route, as opposed to an almost instantaneous point of transit, as a process, a socially structured transition and a differentiation factor between groups of young people, one of a number of forms of mobility. The elements describing this process are multidimensional (Rose & Pottier, 1993, pp. 10–11).

In this article I attempt to cast some light on the complexity that characterises the relation between VET policy for young people in the EU, and the concepts of convergence and integration, by describing three dimensions of this multidimensional process and analysing their related issues in three Member States: Germany, Greece and the United Kingdom. The dimensions that I describe are: the *Institutional/Educational Dimension*, the *Social Dimension* and the *Economic Dimension*. These dimensions are seen in relation with each other and with reference to EU suggestions for political and socioeconomic integration.

EU Framework and Country Development of VET Policy for Young Adults: issues and trends towards convergence and integration

During the 1970s, the interest in youth training grew in response to the rapid growth of unemployment. The policy for the development of VET in the Member States was restricted in few phrases. The term 'education' does not appear in the European Treaties. However, mention was made of Vocational Training. For example, in the Treaty of Rome it is stated that the Commission has the responsibility to promote cooperation between Member States in the area of basic and advanced vocational training (see Article 118).[1] The Treaty of Rome was in essence a blueprint for action in the field of economic policy; educational and training issues were viewed almost entirely from this perspective (see Field, 1994).

In the 1990s the European Community in order to show its social – as opposed to economic – face, adopted a 'Resolution' that provided the formal basis for all subsequent EU education measures. To meet the challenge of preparing for the future, in 1989 the European Commission agreed on five objectives for the period up to 1993 and beyond.[2] The way these provisions would affect the development of VET in the Member States and its contribution to integration were not clearly defined. In some cases, the emphasis was on equal opportunities for all individuals. In others the proposed response was the provision of training capital or cheques financed by the redistribution of public resources (see Maastricht Treaty, Articles 126 and 127). In most cases though, advanced vocational training was linked to firms' needs. The main framework therefore stayed relatively the same as in the 1970s. The demand was for competitiveness, economic development and sustainability in order to keep ahead of EU competitors [3] (Preston, 1991, p. 49).

This led industrialists and economists, to bring education and training to the forefront as an investment in the future. This type of investment was becoming the key element in bringing about growth that is durable, creates skilled jobs and is economical in its use of resources. It was claimed that public and private efforts must be married to create the basis in each Member State for a genuine right to ongoing training (see European Commission White Paper, Chapter 7, 1993). In this context Vocational Training appeared to have two main goals: to pave the way to successful career for young people, and to guarantee a skilled workforce for the economy. This view was shared by Member States. Training, along with a number of factors, was grouped under the heading of 'non-physical' (i.e. knowledge-based) investment, to which government policies must in the future, accord at least the same priority as they do to physical investment.[4]

The parameter that was defined as the link between VET and the economy, was labour market. Its segmentation and the creation of the youth labour market, initially justified its relation to education and training in the process of transition to work.[5] The mismatch however, between the economic

demands of the labour market and the 'social face' of the EU as this appears in the 1989 provisions, suggested that it is necessary to create the appropriate conditions for a balanced connection between the labour market and training policies, if the EU aims at socioeconomic integration. This connection was defined as 'social partners'.^[6] One would expect that social partners have a social, as the name implies, character. However, social partners have a strong economic character. The definition given in the Council's decision, LEONARDO (1994), referring to the role of social partners is that at national level, social partners are the network of organisations of employers and workers in accordance with national legislation and/or practice. At EU level, social partners are the organisations of employers and workers in the social dialogue.

Consequently, the interest in training in the 1990s, grows in response to economic factors and is market led, although it is strongly related to the extended social problems of unemployment and social exclusion. In practice however, economic development is the main objective with social development as a secondary priority. It is clear that economy affects considerably the development of VET policies, since programme planning is related to the investment of financial resources. VET is considered to be the most expensive form of education in the EU. The Community financial resources deemed necessary for the implementation of VET programmes, have amounted to `620 million between 1993 and 1999. The concept of training has been largely detached from that of education and is firmly embedded in the economy. This has already affected Member States educational policies overall.

In the following paragraphs I present very briefly the VET policies for young adults adopted in three Member States, and the extent to which these policies reflect the spirit of EU provisions for convergence and integration. The presentation, aims at providing a general idea of the trends and the issues that relate to VET policy development in three Member States that have already adopted the EU proposals.

The 'Dual System' in Germany

Germany has had a 'dual system' of training since 1969 because of the enormous wave of emigrants seeking jobs at that time. The dual system differs considerably from any other type of vocational training in the country, since the larger part of the learning process takes place not in schools but in production facilities or service enterprises in industry and commerce, and is economically oriented. In effect the German system seems to be moving towards integration in terms of social solidarity as far as the relation between the economy and the role of the social partners is concerned, as identified by the EU. The main characteristics of the directives towards integration are:

defining *primary objectives* of vocational training policy within the community;
guaranteeing *freedom of movement* in the context of gaining access to education and employment;

further improving and intensifying the *exchange of information and experience*, as well as the transfer knowledge and qualifications in practical vocational training, and research into vocational training;
 promoting close cooperation and *mutual support* between the different regions in Europe with the aim of guaranteeing an adequate offer of education and training in all regions of the Community (Federal Minister for Education and Science, 1992, p. 53).

The two traditional forms of training for young people, apprenticeship and initial training, are decentralised as far as practice is concerned. Once they have left school most young people are obliged to attend State-recognised vocational training in the dual system. In the dual system the most learning takes place not in school, but in production facilities where training is divided between establishments responsible for providing it: the company and the vocational school. High quality vocational training is provided by the companies rather than by the state although the state sets the framework on which the training is based. The Dual System is based upon the 'principle of voluntariness' (*Grundsatz der Freiwilligkeit*). To provide training, a company has to be accredited as a training firm by the self-governing Chambers of Industry and Commerce. The majority of companies in Germany choose not to be training firms although the State encourages them by funding part of the training. There are no direct financial incentives however, to encourage employers to provide training. Yet, there are a number of cogent reasons why it is advantageous for a company to be accredited as a training firm.

Typical in the dual system is the combination of practical trade training at a company and practice at the work bench, with theoretical instruction at a part-time school. In practice however, the dual system is often no longer confined to only two places of training. What is interesting in the context of institutional change, is that involvement in the production process and with it learning at the work bench is only a step away from a comprehensive system of training involving different institutions. Institutional change is designated by external factors. For example, as far as apprenticeship is concerned, it is the larger companies in Germany that implement a selection procedure for apprentices. This is thorough and systematic unlike the 'dual system' which is open to all. In social terms the system is related to the transition from education to the labour market. This transition is part of the process of integration but not in EU context. Economic integration is implicitly there, but it is mostly attached to the phenomenon of the 'choice of an occupation'. Therefore integration is seen as coherence between occupational choice and life course (Schweitzer & Wolfinger, 1994, p. 3).

The dual system has placed much importance on vocational counselling for the transition to employment. However, the way it performs shows that the lack of EU demand for standardisation or general reciprocity, in terms of the type of training courses and qualification documents, is not relevant to a system that designates standardised courses for special groups of people according to their level of performance. This affects the distribution of jobs and the

Figure 1. Structural features of the German 'Dual System'. Source: Federal Minister for Education and Science, 1992.

allocation of the money that goes to training programmes as well. The German policy framework also suggests that transferability of vocational skills, will promote competition, but it does not identify at what level this should be or at what specific areas. In Germany it is expected that VET will be guaranteed on the basis of mutual trust as part of the quality of each country's national vocational training system. But to what extent can this take place in practice since the German training system is so job related and oriented towards specific forms of economic development more than in any other country in Europe?

The Greek IEK (Vocational Training Institutes)

In Greece Vocational Education and Training was introduced to compulsory education in 1977. Since that time what was of concern for the development of VET for young people was vocational orientation. Serious attempts towards this direction were made with the establishment of the National Organisation Vocational Education and Training (OEEK) in 1992, and the introduction of Vocational Training Institutes (IEK) that comply with the notion of social and economic integration in Europe promoting a set of provisions. The general mission of IEK is:

to *assist young adults* who have completed the upper level of secondary education,
to either *develop* or *enhance* their practical skills and knowledge,
evaluate the learning they had so far with the prospect of becoming competitive professionals in the future.

The prospects of IEK are:

to *provide* trainees with specialised training that might be initial or subsidiary.
to *ensure* trainees with the appropriate qualifications such as
to *cultivate* and *increase* the variety of different skills through extrinsic, technical, vocational, and practical knowledge.
to *facilitate* trainees to their professional careers and
to *enable* them to adjust to society and the changing needs of production processes. (Terzis, 1994b) [Italics mine]

The framework suggested by OEEK is supposed to assist a flexible model of VET that is related with high quality training. The two forms of training for young unemployed people, apprenticeship offered by the Manpower Employment Agency (OAED) and initial training provided by Integral Multidiscipline Lykea (EPL), whose role has been upgraded very recently (1998) with the new Educational Reform Act (1998), and IEK, guarantee high quality training only if they are seen in relation to formal compulsory education (Terzis, 1994a). Educational reform is feasible in the context of cooperation and coordination between the public and the private sectors IEK follow EU provisions, by giving the opportunity to young people to undertake special courses. The paradox with the development of VET in Greece though is that the contents and methods are too blunt-edged to meet the specific needs and

demands of any one group satisfactorily (see Zanni-Teliopoulou & Stathakopoulou, 1994).

Figure 2. VET structures for young people in Greece.

Nonetheless, the introduction of IEK enhances the already growing tendency for convergence between State policy and firm policy. Financing of VET for young adults is concentrated on job specific areas such as tourism, shipping, health-care and trade. The State invests in these areas considering them as the most profitable. There are special vocational schools for these expertises based on a dual system which involves theory and practical training. Newly introduced educational reforms encourage apprenticeship by the self-employed and small and medium enterprises, by investing in OAED trainees and supporting their training financially (approximately 40% of the total cost of training). Until recently Greek industries have shown little interest in taking trainees or school leavers in order to train them and invest in them since the academic-oriented education system gives them no financial incentives, and has never related to competitiveness since it was highly centralised and its function was always taken for granted, apart from the institutional pluralism that characterises Greece even at the regional and local levels. IEK introduced a new dimension in the relations between the state and the private sector since they function on both a public and private basis. However, IEK should not aim at replacing the already existing providers of vocational training on the same or lower level. Coordination is the most appropriate mission of IEK at the moment. In this context educational reform and institutional change is more or less related with internal factors concerning theory development and orientation of young people to vocational education.

Probably, the biggest concern regarding VET policy is vocational counselling and guidance services which is not strongly established, although vocational guidance is provided in the form of a mandatory course in secondary education (Zanni-Telliopoulou & Stathakopoulou, 1994, p. 51). The gaps in provision are most marked for those groups of young people facing the most difficult education-employment transitions: drop-outs/unqualified school-leavers and those having only upper secondary general education diplomas.

The Role of NVQs in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom follows a similar path regarding provisions and general principles of VET although it has the longest tradition in the area. The United Kingdom's response to the education and training issues of the single market was that to introduce a system that is competent and efficient and offers high quality education and training. More specifically:

In 1989 the then Training Agency demonstrated the inadequacies of training in the UK. (...) The lack of competent middle skills has been identified by the National Institute for Economic and Social Research as a crucial British failing. This view is upheld in the government's White Paper Education and Training for the Twenty-First Century. These weaknesses will be aggravated by demographic trends. In the years to come, school-leavers may be tempted to join the job market rather than move into higher education. In

addition, there will be need to place greater reliance upon retraining the existing workforce. (Preston, 1991, pp. 268, 270) [Emphasis mine]

There is a tendency for integration and coherence between industrial demands and education outcomes. At policy level a flexible system with social extensions that provides a wide range of opportunities is identified. In 1985, for example, the UK government issues a White Paper, 'A New Training Initiative For Action' (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1985a). In May 1991 the government announced its intention to make available in colleges and schools a high quality vocational alternative to GCE A-level examination with the introduction of GNVQs which were supposed to provide young people with good general education, since they are not limited to providing narrow job specific training. The main development work has been undertaken over a very short period by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) in conjunction with the main awarding bodies. GNVQs have a wider focus than NVQs, embracing skills, knowledge and understanding which underpin a range of NVQs within a broad occupational area. However, like NVQs, they are described in the form of outcomes and assessed according to specified criteria from NCVQ and the awarding bodies.

In the context of coordination, educational integration and institutional reform the situation is more diverse. Educational reform is strongly attached to the introduction of young people to new technologies in the compulsory years of schooling and the training of teachers to deal effectively with this. Vocational training is offered by many different providers with different character and background. Yet the common point of reference is essentially the responsibility of individual firms.

The United Kingdom pays much attention to the relation between VET and individual firms. In 1980s in the United Kingdom, employers were estimated to be spending around £2.5 billion a year on training. Central and local government provides about £4 billion a year for further, higher and adult education, all of which directly or indirectly prepared young people for employment. The Government has also been drawn more and more into the financing of training. Training is an investment and as such it must be seen to pay for itself by making people better able to produce the goods and provide the services that other people are prepared to pay for.

The report 'Competence and Competition' commissioned by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) and the National Economic Development Council underlines that vocational education and training are not marginal activities, but are central to economic growth and prosperity. The report recommended that public expenditure on education and training should be maintained while expenditure by employers and individuals is increased (see DES, 1985b). Thus, the decisions as to who is trained, when and in what skills, are best taken by the employers who have to satisfy the needs of the market, rather than by central direction. If training costs are excessive or if there are unnecessary institutional obstacles, the quantity and quality of the training provided will be inadequate.

Figure 3. A typical NVQ procedure for a single occupational area and qualifications at levels 1 to 4. Source: NCVQ, 1987.

So investment in training needs to be attractive financially. This means keeping training costs down, including the acceptance by trainees of levels of income which reflect the value to them of the training given. These improvements are all attainable, provided industry and commerce play their part. Most depend on the decisions of employers. It is for them to make the investment in training people to do the work that they require; to see that the training they buy is provided economically and to a standard and to act collectively through employers' organisations (see DES, 1985b). The structure of the labour market however, underlines the need for vocational guidance (see Howieson et al, 1994), since young people still make their occupational choices at a relatively early age often on the basis of inadequate guidance and information, and with little prior opportunity for socialisation into the occupation concerned.

Thematic Analysis of VET for Young Adults and the Nature of Convergence: the way forward towards integration?

After the very brief presentation of the general trends in the EU and the three Member States, I have identified three dimensions of VET for young adults that relate to the process of integration: the *Institutional and Educational Dimension* which relates to institutional policies and educational reform; the *Social Dimension* which concerns to vocational guidance, motivation for learning for life and transferability of skills; and the *Economic Dimension*, which relates to VET for young adults to EU economic and labour market policies. None of these dimensions can be seen separately. The issues are constructed around the same area and can only be seen interactively. In the following paragraphs, I approach these dimensions in relation to the general EU suggestions, the trends and the issues that relate to VET in the three Member States that I used as examples of policy convergence, in order to see the extent to which adaptation of common VET policy implies further socioeconomic integration.

The Institutional/Educational Dimension

In the EU there is an ever-growing concern about high quality education, the coordination of VET with formal education and the reform of education institutes. High quality education, which implies the introduction of new technologies to young people, is a trend identified in all three EU countries. It is the demand for high-quality education that has led to re-examination of the structures of education systems and entails institutional change (see OECD, 1994). As countries entered the 1990s, the pursuit of quality was the most important demand in vocational training, more so since lifelong learning is to become a reality for all. It is realised, however, that education and training must not only be good in their own terms, they must also be relevant to the clientele they serve, notably the pupils, students and trainees. Narrow definitions of

relevance are unlikely to be useful. Relevance implies the need to foster creativity, synthesising and problem-solving competencies, social and personal skills, and the knowledge and abilities to make broader informed choices, as well as those that are narrowly vocational.

EU VET policy suggestion however, does not specify these factors. Institutional change and reform is specifically related to the rising involvement of the private sector in education and training and has a strong economic character. This can be translated as an educational reform that is based on huge financial investment, but it does not entail reform of the training initiatives. It is more likely VET policies affect formal education. This trend is identified in all three Member States. Does the trend imply further socioeconomic integration in any sense? For the time being it does not, although it is a prerequisite for economic convergence. If the EU targets towards socioeconomic integration, and if VET policy development is to contribute to this, the policies to be adopted by the Member States may be re-examined in order to:

Approach EU education and training policy altogether in the same context, based on democratic values. This means that the EU should encourage its Members to prioritise their own 'social face' in the policy they develop for education overall, including VET, and not the other way round.

Reconsider the relation between education systems and industry in the context of educational reform. This means that the EU should encourage private initiative that will not confront in a straightforward manner the philosophy and the structure of the educational systems in the Member States.

Re-value the concept of high quality education both in national and EU context in order to create linkages not just to new technologies but to other aspects of social, cultural and educational life.

Finally, the EU should prioritise economic development in the context of an extended social reform that will embrace all aspects of VET, especially counselling and vocational orientation.

The Social Dimension

Although the social area is quite complex and it gets more complex considering the lack of certain policies concerning the social extensions of young people's VET in the EU, I have identified at the level of convergence and policy development in the three Member States, issues in regard with vocational guidance, unemployment, motivation for employment, mobility and transferability of skills. It is my observation however, from my brief encounter with VET policies in the Member States, that the social construction of young people's life course has been affected considerably by the structure and the demands of the labour market, and by the social and cultural norms that also affect their occupational choices:

Firstly, changes in labour market structuration mean that even for those who achieve stable employment, job contracts are both becoming less secure and

demand greater flexibility of work tasks and rhythms. Secondly, people themselves are placing greater value upon opportunities for change and new challenges in their lives and less upon long-term security and predictability. Thirdly this flexibilisation of cultural norms and social practices also impinges upon gender relations, especially in the family, as women opt out of the straitjacket of traditional roles and activities as a taken-for-granted allocation of duties and responsibilities to which men still contribute only a fairly minor part. And, fourthly, the lengthening of life expectancy places an individual's projection of the life course and its constituent phases into a new perspective'. (Chisholm, 1994, pp. 45–46) [Emphasis mine]

This is not necessarily bad, but it seems to me that there is an extensive variation of issues that overlap although the conclusion is that the labour market is the one who sets the framework in which VET is organised. At the same time the relation between VET and the labour market, is approached in so many different, and not necessarily well-defined, ways in each country, depending on social and cultural factors. This gives to the social side of VET policy development a rather radical appreciation of how integration may be interpreted.

Initially the contribution of VET, as a practice that is set on economic patterns, to social change is linked to individual development and guidance. The latter is also relevant with social orientation and the concept of European citizenship. The adopted policies however, do not define this relation very well as Field (1994) observes. The issues of social exclusion and unemployment for example are not approached in social terms. Motivation at EU policy level is related to European citizenship which ensures freedom of mobility and transferability of vocational and social skills, but only typically.

As it is suggested in the White Paper, unemployment and social exclusion threatens the social and economic progress of Europe, threatens European and national unity and ultimately could threaten democracy itself. To what extent is this a realistic appreciation, and what is the 'democracy' to which the Commission refers? In effect, European thinking on social cohesion has drawn on the social partnership approach to citizenship. This view is quite controversial, since social exclusion is the broad term used within the EU to denote what it sees as the most significant social effects of imbalances in the market for goods, labour and services. Can we rely on this controversy in order to interpret integration as 'consumership'?

Rising unemployment is the biggest problem in EU and is related to the urgent demand for vocational guidance and training for access to the labour market although the reasons of unemployment in each country vary considerably. Youth unemployment however, is not related only with lack of jobs. There are two explanations for youth unemployment. The cyclical explanation suggests that youth unemployment is the result of the recession, that is to deficient aggregate demand. Youth unemployment levels have changed closely in line with adult unemployment in recent years. Youth

unemployment though tends to have risen faster. The second explanation suggests that structural shifts in the composition of the labour demand have disadvantaged young people relative to adults. These shifts are seen as linked to industrial change, occupational change or a switch from full-time to part-time employment.

Apart from the VET policy framework that was adopted in the Member States, which I have briefly presented, youth unemployment is still rising high. This is not strictly connected with the effectiveness of the training process in those Member States, but with the extent of coherence between VET policy and practice and coordination between the social factors involved. These social extensions initially refer to freedom of movement and the need for vocational guidance. It must be specified here that freedom of movement in EU context does not mean migration. Freedom of movement is related with European citizenship and transferability of vocational and social skills.

Chisholm (1994) further acknowledges that EU policy perspectives on education and training place equal priority both on unemployment and its socially marginalising consequences and on the need to upgrade workforce qualification levels in the context of rapidly changing labour market requirements. In this context three groups of young people in need of vocational guidance and orientation are identified: those who leave school at or before the end of compulsory education with no certificates or diplomas (the unqualified), those whose vocational training qualifications are poor (the underqualified) and those whose education and training qualifications do not match labour force requirements (the inappropriately qualified).

There is however, a large proportion of people who stay in education (full or part-time) and do not enter the labour market. This decision is not always taken voluntarily, but it is affected by school or family. These people are not yet considered to be in need of vocational guidance, although unemployment threatens them probably more than those considered to be in need. It is in this context that vocational guidance is related to high specification and specialisation on the work-bench and not with the process of socialisation in the labour market. This is not at all a new observation. It is arguable, however, whether improved vocational counselling and guidance services could achieve more than marginal improvement in this situation, so long as there remain too few jobs.

Vocational guidance's mission is to act as a springboard for development. It is obvious that, when a system does not provide education and occupation openings, vocational guidance has no function to perform. (Zanni-Teliopoulou & Stathakopoulou, 1994, p. 74)

EU must re-consider the role of vocational guidance by approaching the whole topic as a preparation process, an integrated mixture of skill training, general and social education and personal counselling designed to help young people progress from school to working life (see Harris, 1982). At the same time transition, which is identified as the transition from education to labour market

and employment, is not related to the background and inception of the technical vocational education initiative, something that might inhibit the provision of high quality education. The general objective of the Member States' policy for VET could be:

... to widen and enrich the curriculum in a way that will help young people prepare for the world of work, and to develop skills and interests, including creative abilities, that will help them to lead a fuller life and to be able to contribute more to the life of the community ... What is important about this initiative is that youngsters should receive an education which will enable them to adapt to the changing occupational environment. (Dale, 1985, p. 42) [Emphasis mine]

Consequently, VET policy in the EU can target to:

Informing young people about their own abilities and the relevance of these to the labour market.

Offering young people some real experience of work in order to give them the opportunity to be socialised for an occupation.

Informing young people about the labour market operation and the ways in which work is organised.

Providing counselling and person support.

Clarifying the relation between school, work and society to young people in order to assist them to their occupational decisions.

However, vocational preparation cannot by itself offer complete skill training, although it is possible to integrate vocational preparation and vocational training leading to a recognised qualification in one programme. It cannot change the conditions of the labour market or alter social conditions, neither can it enable or guarantee by itself entrance to the labour market. Therefore, policy makers in the EU should consider that this transition process, as integration was identified in the beginning, should not be seen as transition from training to the labour market, but as a transition from one phase of young people's life to another.

The Economic Dimension

With the emergence of increasingly intensive global competition for the world's trade markets EU cannot be complacent about the security of its own market. In manufacturing goods, most EU Member States are now net importers, with substantial proportions of their imports coming from outside the EU. Then it is not surprising if policy makers tend to take education and training's contribution to economic growth as a given. This contribution is seen as primarily taking the forms of improved dissemination and application of science and technology to economic life and the increased flexibility and mobility of the European workforce. The intention is thereby to improve EU's ability to compete with third nations, mainly USA and Japan, and help restructure the economies of the Union in directions which will lead to sustained growth of the

Union. This remains the primary objective of EU policies on education and training, and whether it is intrinsically desirable or not, this is the logical goal for the EU to pursue.

Today Vocational Education and Training, is supposed to prepare the entire workforce for a flexible future of rapid and unpredictable change (...) Indeed to acquire the new skills needed for the new work with the new technology throughout (working) life is now held to be essential for everybody. It is important not just for the individuals but for the future and international competitiveness; for, despite all the efforts that has been put into training and retraining in recent years, 'skill shortages' are everywhere reported as still putting the brakes on economic advance and industrial modernisation. (Ainley, 1990, pp. 5, 7) [Emphasis mine]

The output of education and training systems, in terms of both quantity and quality of skills at all levels, is the prior determinant of a country's level of industrial productivity and hence competitiveness. It is the issues of productivity and competitiveness which concern most of the EU Member States. Education and training policies remain primarily economic in their objectives, and that will remain the position for the foreseeable future. In this context I have identified three main concerns in the countries, whose VET policies I briefly presented, which seem to converge in terms of the interests they represent.

EU member state	1970	1980	1990
Austria	4.6	5.5	5.4
Belgium	—	—	5.4
Denmark	6.7	6.6	7.2
Finland	5.9	5.4	5.8
France	—	5.1	6.3
Germany	3.7	4.7	4.2
Greece	2.1	2.2	2.9
Ireland	5.0	6.3	6.1
Italy	4.6	5.0	4.9
Luxembourg	4.6	7.4	5.9
Netherlands	6.8	7.6	6.8
Portugal	—	4.1	4.8
Spain	—	—	5.3
Sweden	7.2	9.0	7.1
United Kingdom	5.3	5.5	4.9

Table I. Public expenditure on education in the EU as percentage of GDP at current prices. Source: OECD, 1992.

The first is competitiveness. This explicitly relates to the role of the national government in financial support of VET programmes, and the role of the industry or the involvement of the so-called 'social partners' which explicitly represent the labour market. At policy level the State designates the framework

for action. In practice, however, the provision of VET programmes is designated by the firms involved in the process of programme development and therefore the focus is on the economy. The only area in which convergence seems to have effect is that of cooperation between training policy and firms' needs. Although most Member States invest in general education more than in the past, the public money that goes to vocational training for young adults is relatively less than before. This means that the role of the State as far as vocational training is concerned has been taken by the private sector which aims at economic growth. It also means that vocational training has been divested from its educational mission and therefore it is seen to offer more to the economy.

The main theoretical problem in this area lies in questioning the 'matchist' approach (see Rose & Pottier, 1993). If integration is analysed as a long, complex process, as it was identified in the beginning, it is no longer possible to seek a fine and instantaneous match between training and the economy. Moreover, with reference to the current debate among labour economists, one could also question the nature of the relations of VET policy and the economy on the basis of the problem of integration. Does the market category reflect mobilities, notably among young people? Are there specific youth markets and how are they developed? Is the deployment of the workforce by market or socio-institutional rules? Who supports vocational training for young people and for what purpose?

EU member state	1985	1990
Austria	0.03	0.01
Belgium	—	0.01
Denmark	0.23	0.26
Finland	0.05	0.05
France	0.17	0.20
Germany	0.05	0.04
Greece	0.03	0.04
Ireland	0.51	0.30
Italy	0.32	0.69
Netherlands	0.04	0.06
Portugal	0.04	0.12
Spain	—	0.08
Sweden	0.21	0.05
United Kingdom	0.25	0.18

Table II. Public expenditure on special youth labour market training programmes as a percentage of GDP at current prices: 1985 and 1990. Source: OECD, 1992.

VET is seen as one of the critical success factors in the achievement of business strategies and plans. Most companies aim to make training more flexible, respond more rapidly, adopt a long-term economic policy and link VET with economically profitable strategies. Companies are keen to ensure that their

current operational capability is not impaired by people who cannot adequately perform the tasks which need to be done. In countries like Germany where apprentice training or some other form of general youth training covered almost all young people, companies strengthened and often expanded such training (see ERT, 1989). The responsibilities for training are close to and respond to the wishes of their line managers and business units. Programmes which train people to perform specific sets of tasks well and handle specific types of situations, whether simple or more complex, are tailored to specific purposes. The direction in many companies that provide training is towards a growing pre-occupation with policies that eventually aim at economic growth than anything else, which is quite understandable if it is seen in its own context.

... key aspect is analysis of 'firms needs'. Constantly used in spontaneous reflection on the integration process ('schools should adapt to the needs of the economy'), this concept is highly contested by researchers. The hierarchy of quantitative needs conceals a high degree of qualitative diversity. Short-term needs, sometimes imperative, which are more supple, but often unclearly identified due to the lack of genuine forward planning. The needs at the stage recruitment are not necessarily the same as the actual needs on the job, since the former stem from a market logic and the latter from technical and social labour organisation. (Rose & Pottier, 1993, p. 4)

This might imply that there is no automatic link between economic growth, which is a long-term aim especially for the companies and social progress (see UNDP, 1990) which is an aim attached to VET policies. There is a contradiction in other words between the aims of the EU and the suggestions by the policy makers. The value of VET for the EU labour market is clear although in many cases it is covered by declarations and claims for social development. However, it is difficult to quantify its financial benefits where the alternative is simply that young people move directly from school to work without benefiting from it (see Harris, 1982).

Conclusion

In the European Union the movement towards integration is designated by economic factors and is reinforced by a political thread. The country studies, although very brief and incomplete, show the general trend which is the economic intentions of the Member States and their alignment with the EU policy that promotes the idea of an integrated Europe. However, the consequences of the development of a VET policy that encourages competitiveness, employment and growth cannot be strictly economic. The problems young people are facing today, such as unemployment and social exclusion, cannot be approached only in economic terms. The EU is very much aware of this situation and besides its attempts to promote a training policy with a 'social face' that will contribute to integration, it is still missing those factors that will strengthen convergence at this level and enable integration.

Germany, Greece and the United Kingdom are among those Member States that have already adopted a VET policy framework that complies to the economic demands of the EU. The idea of European integration though, which translates to a very complex process and it cannot be easily defined, little can be affected by such policies. Economic convergence is more likely to happen and as the recent introduction of the Euro-currency has shown, it has already been achieved to a large extent.

The question is of whether the suggested VET framework can contribute to socioeconomic integration, as long as the aim of convergence is economic. The answer is not and it cannot be a simple one, because besides its aims, the impact of convergence is social with the general meaning of the term, and includes many aspects of the life of EU citizens. European citizenship may give the incentives for the implementation of the concept of transferability of vocational skills, but can it fully support integration? Can the adoption of the proposed VET policy prescribe a social change that is initially predetermined by economic interests?

Social changes are the result of numerous, sometimes contradictory, factors. They cannot be exhaustively described. It is not always possible to identify all the forces at work. To which of the aspects-social, economic, technical, cultural, political-should we give most weight? The (...) immense reconfiguration of Europe, in both East and West, has taught us to be suspicious of some too immediately technicist or economicist trends. (Bogard, 1993, p. 9)

The EU accepts this notion, but it does not consider the social role of VET as a priority. Terms as flexibility, competitiveness, growth and employment, do not imply anything, since the development of VET is not a matter of flexibility anymore, but that of coordination and balance of its aims and practice. It is not a matter of economic growth alone, because primarily what are affected are people's lives and not the economic indicators. The role of VET in the context of convergence should be re-examined if it is to contribute to integration. A policy framework that is based on economic criteria can only guarantee effective practice for the economy, but can it imply social integration?

For young people the impact is even more obvious. They are threatened by unemployment and social exclusion, they have changed their life course, and now they are considered as a threat of the democratic values and socioeconomic structures of the EU. However, their life course has been determined by the demands of the labour market and not of education or training. VET was just the medium that could enable them to satisfy these demands. Some labour-economists talk about the segmentation of the labour market and the creation of a youth labour market that has different structure and therefore different needs. This is partly the case. If it is seen in strictly economic terms, the case might be as it was described before. In social terms though, it is difficult to segregate the labour force since the contribution to the society cannot be measured only with numbers.

Young people must be perceived both as individuals, a set of categories, and a unified group. Similarly, 'the enterprise as an agent' covers sectoral differences and the complex relations between the social partners. Relations between these agents must also be specified. (Rose & Pottier, 1993, p. 7)

In this article I have only described briefly three parameters of the relation between VET and policy convergence in the context of integration. There are many other agendas that can be included: demographic, geo-political, technical, cultural, historical. It must be understood that VET can contribute to convergence as long as it preserves its economic character. However, it cannot and it will not uphold integration unless it is seen to balance its policy with its practice and emphasises its social extensions. This will reveal the real meaning of the relation between convergence and integration since EU policy has not yet given any clear definition of this.

Correspondence

George K. Zarifis, Pirgou 20, GR-544-53 Thessaloniki, Greece
(gkzarifis@yahoo.com).

Notes

- [1] Without prejudice to the other provisions of this Treaty and in conformity with its general objectives, the Commission shall have the task of promoting close cooperation between Member States in the social field, particularly in matters relating to: employment; labour law and working conditions; basic and advanced vocational training; social security; prevention of occupational accidents and diseases; occupational hygiene; the right of association, and collective bargaining between employers and workers (Treaty of Rome, Article 118, 1957).
- [2] *A multi-cultural Europe*, to be achieved through a European dimension in education, including the promotion of multi-lingualism; *a mobile Europe*, promoting student and teacher exchanges at all levels and enhancing the principle of mutual recognition of qualifications; *a Europe of training for all*, offering equal opportunities and equality in training and education, and contributing to a reduction in scholastic failure; *a Europe of skills*, through adequate basic and continuing education and teacher training, adapted to change; *a Europe open to the world*, through collaboration with international educational organisations and reinforced links with non EC countries, lesser developed countries, especially countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Preston, 1991, p. 49).
- [3] Capitalizing on the Community's industrial strengths, so as to safeguard productive and innovative capacities as well as a diversified, job-creating industry that is spread throughout Europe, particularly on markets with a high growth potential, such as health, the environment, biotechnologies, multimedia activities and culture. This aspect must take account of changes stemming from

the globalization of markets, production and operators and from the industrial policies of the Community's main competitors (European Commission White Paper, Chapter 2, Paragraph 2.3, 1993).

- [4] We are convinced that the European economies have a future. Looking at the traditional bases of prosperity and competitiveness, Europe has preserved its chances. It possesses assets which it has only to exploit – assets such as its abundant non-physical capital (education, skills, capacity for innovation, traditions), the availability of financial capital and highly efficient banking institutions, the soundness of its social model, and the virtues of cooperation between the two sides of industry (European Commission White Paper, Preamble, 1993).
- [5] 'In order to ensure a smoother and more effective transition from education to working life, formulas of apprenticeship and in-service training in businesses which allow people to gain skills in the world of work should be developed and systematized' (European Commission White Paper, Chapter 7, Paragraph. 7.4, 1993).
- [6] The optimum operation of the labour market calls for a large degree of decentralization within 'employment areas'. In return, the national authorities should focus on the quality of training and compatibility between different types of training, to make it easier to move from one specialization to another. The successful experience of several Member States shows the importance of effective participation of the social partners in the decentralized management of employment areas (European Commission White Paper, Part A, 1993).

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