

Exploring VET Attractiveness in Greece through OAED Vocational Schools

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Abstract

Vocational Education and training (VET) is an educational route which ought to be designed so as to become an attractive choice. Improving the attractiveness of VET has been a major item on the European agenda for economic and social development. The European Parliament's Resolution urges the member states to promote the attractiveness of VET. The latter investigated through the opinions of 100 students of the vocational schools of OAED in a specific geographic region in Greece. The aim of the research is to measure the degree of acceptance of the policies set out in the European framework to improve the attractiveness of vocational education. The dependent variable is the attractiveness of vocational education provided through the schools of OAED and the independent variables are the policies focusing on European strategies to improve the attractiveness of VET. The first three positions were classified as related to the educational staff ($M=4.375, S=0.850$), the training infrastructure ($M=4.345, S=0.951$) and the provision of advisory support to students ($M=3.995, S=1.112$).

Keywords: Vocational education, VET attractiveness, OAED

1. Introduction

A key vision of the European Union (EU) is to provide all European citizens with the basic knowledge and the technical skills they need to claim more and better jobs (European Commission, 2002). This vision combined with the fact that Europe is recovering from a serious financial crisis, which has changed the working environmental conditions and necessitates workers with different qualifications, leads us to the assumption that the key role is vocational education. Furthermore, if we consider the high levels of unemployment among young people, who are graduated from higher general education, then we are led to the conclusion that in order to satisfy the EU's vision, vocational education should be designed as an attractive option, through which citizens of a country will find clear choices that enable them to respond to the changing conditions of today's knowledge economy (European Commission, 2016). But how do European policies which are already aimed at enhancing the attractiveness of VET, will lead to an improvement of the image of vocational education in Greece?

In the last 25 years in the EU, efforts have been made at policy level to modernize VET curricula, teaching and training methods and to improve the transparency of its learning outcomes, so as to make it recognizable between different education systems (Gordon, 2015), and to be chosen by young people and recognized by society as an alternative attractive educational route. The political discourse in Europe for VET has been shifted from the creation of a stable and solid framework to the supplying quality VET programs and to the linking of them to the labour market. Also because of the need for quality vocational education, the interest has now turned to the development of its human resources. The milestones of the European Union policies are included in table 1, from which derive the general axes for the improvement of VET attractiveness.

Maastricht communiqué (2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing public and/or private investment in VET • Development of VET systems to meet the needs of people who are at a social disadvantage. • Development of learning environment supplies. • Promoting the continued development of VET trainers ' capacities.
Helsinki Communiqué (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of common European frameworks and tools for VET. • Establishment of EUROPASS as a single framework for the transparency of qualifications and competencies • Working on the EQF, ECAVET, EQVET.
Bordeaux communiqué (2008)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of European tools and VET systems to promote cooperation to European and national level • Creating a better link between VET and the labour market. • Consolidation of European cooperation procedures.
Bruges communiqué (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for flexibility and high quality. • Facilitating and encouraging transnational mobility of learners and teachers.
Riga conclusions (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting learning in the workplace. • Development of quality assurance mechanisms in VET. • Further strengthening of key competencies in VET curricula and giving more effective opportunities of acquiring or developing these skills through initial and continuing VET. • Provision of systematic approaches and opportunities for the initial and continuous professional development of VET teachers. • Offering consultancy into school and workplace environments.

Table 1. European policy priorities for VET(2004-2015).

2. Attractiveness of vocational education

Tchibozo (2009) states that attractiveness means that VET is of interest to people: they are knowledgeable about it, have curiosity about it, see it as part of the educational landscape and finally its graduates are prestigious. *In a more demanding sense, it is the tendency for people to see the vocational path as a way to reach their personal goals or as a source of recruits for employers* (p.5). The improvement of the attractiveness of VET can be achieved by adopting and imbedding into its policies and curricula, its stakeholders' views and priorities. Such priorities may increase VET attractiveness and are linked with the quality, the transparency, the accessibility and the provision of VET programs (Leneyet. al., 2004). Among the most important perspectives of attractiveness in the literature are the relevance to the labour market, the access to higher education, the high awareness, the status and the guidance of students (Watters,2009;Lavendels,Sitikovs&Uhanova,2012). In the same line, personal development and the professional career of the graduates (Siikaniemi,2005), the supply of quality learning environments and finally the degree of attracting investment in it (Lasonen&Gordon,2009) are the factors that affect VET attractiveness. Chankseliani et al. (2015)and Atkins and Flint (2015), highlighted the need to diffuse professional excellence and successes of VET graduates through skills competitions to up rate its image. Finally, another aspect of the VET attractiveness lies on its relationship with the general education and relates to the incomes (Brunello&Rocco,2017)and the employability (Backes-Gellner&Geel,2014)of its graduates in contrast to those of general education.

In Greece, according to Paidousi (2016), attractiveness of vocational education is interpreted through the perceptions of society regarding the negative school performance of students who are attending vocational schools and the low educational level of their families. Furthermore, attractiveness is altered from the limited opportunities for social mobility and the gender of the students. The key axes for enhancing the attractiveness of VET in Greece in line with the European Union's proposals (Cedefop,2014), can be classified in eight fields (table 2). These fields are the basis of our research methodology.

1. Improve quality processes; adopt quality framework (including EQAVET)	2. Improvements to guidance and counselling	3. Campaigns to raise awareness
4. Improve transition from VET to higher education	5. Financial incentives	6. Improve teachers or teaching (also trainers)
7. Revise,modernise IVETcurriculum	8. Improvements to/introduction of apprenticeship system	

Table 2. European Strategies for VET attractiveness in Greece

3. Research methodology

In Greece about 10,000 young people between 16-23 years old graduates of at least eleventh grade school (in Greece this stand for A` Lyceum),choose to study in the vocational schools of the Manpower Employment Organization(O.A.E.D.). At this point we should mention that O.A.E.D. is the official public organization and its operation is based on the following three pillars: (i) promotion to employment; (ii) unemployment insurance and social protection of maternity and family; (iii) vocational education and training. Education is based on the apprenticeship system, which combines in-class vocational education with remunerated on-the-job training in businesses. In such system students aimed to acquire professional experience in real work conditions so as to facilitate their subsequent integration into the labour market (Fuller&Unwin,2011). Consequently, it is tempting to measure the degree of influence of the attractiveness of vocational schools of OAED by the European policies that aimed to reinforce VET attractiveness, as there is not such a research approach in Greece. By enriching the available information regarding the factors that affect vocational education attractiveness, we assume to improve the policies that will eventually be implemented. Therefore, the purpose of this research approach is to measure the acceptance degree of the policies that European strategies sets out to improve the attractiveness of vocational education, through the student’s opinions of OAED schools in the prefecture of Kozani in Western Macedonia. This research approach is a quantitative one. The dependent variable is "the attractiveness" of vocational education provided through the schools of O.E.A.D. and the independent variables are the eight individual dimensions in which European strategies are focused for improving the attractiveness of VET in Greece. The eight dimensions are explained by individual policies that make up concrete actions to enhance the attractiveness of VET (Figure 1).

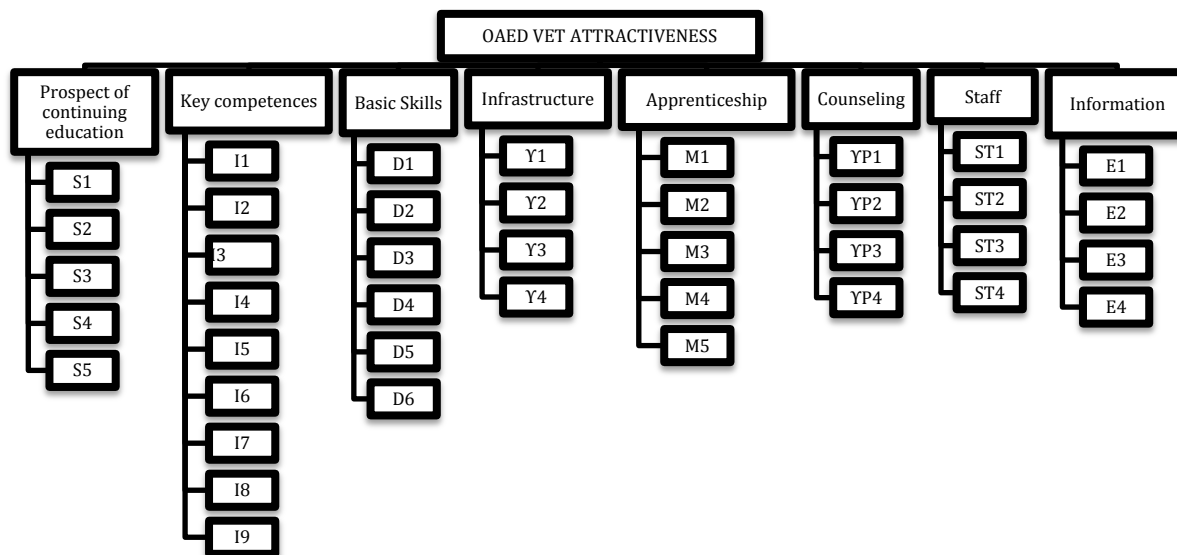


Figure 1.: Research Hypothesis

The research questions based on the purpose of the research are the following:

To what extent does it affect the attractiveness of VET:

1. To provide students with the prospect of continuing education at next educational stages?
2. To include in its curriculum, lessons that enhance key competences?
3. The skills that students acquire during their studies?
4. The infrastructure and the necessary equipment of schools?
5. The apprenticeship system?
6. The provision of comprehensive monitoring of its graduates in the labour market and their support in the context of continuing education?
7. The professional and pedagogical competence of educational staff?
8. The structured information to the public and to the potential students?

3.1. Participants

We conduct a random stratified sampling approach in order to increase the accuracy of the measurements, as there was additional information about the population structure. Specifically, students of the OAED schools in the two cities of the prefecture of Kozani present the following structure based on their number and gender.

	Kozani		Ptolemaida	
Totalnumberofstudents	375			
Numberofstudents	235	62.67%	140	37.33%
Males	157	66.81%	105	75.00%
Females	78	33.19%	35	25.00%

Table 3. Population structure based on gender and number per school in Kozani prefecture

The sample size is based on the size of the population to which the research intends to generalize its results, the desired level of confidence, which was set at 95% and finally with the assumption that all potential participants are a representative sample for this study. We evaluate that all students are able to respond on the questions of the surveys as they are active members of this educational structure. The size of the participants was calculated by the national Australian statistical service tool, to satisfy the principle of representativeness (table 4).

	Students
Population size	375
Sample size	100 (63 Kozani – 37 Ptolemaida)
Confidence level	95%
Standard error	0.02585

Table 4. Determination of sample size Source: [http://www.nss.gov.au/nss/home.nsf/pages/sample + size + Calculator](http://www.nss.gov.au/nss/home.nsf/pages/sample+size+Calculator)

Participants' demographic characteristics are as follow.

Demographic variable	Rates
Sex	
Male	70%
Female	30
Age	
21-25	39.0%
18-20	61.0%
Parents' EducationLevel	
Compulsoryeducation	19.0%
Secondaryeducation	66.0%
Tertiaryeducation	15.0%
Parents' Occupation	
Privateemployee	31.0%
Publicemployee	23.0%
Freelancer	15.0%
Farmer	11.0%
Retired	5.0%
Unemployed	15.0%
Familyincome	
Until €1000	58.0%
From 1001 to €1500	20.0%
From 1501 to €2000	12.0%
Over €2001	10.0%

Table 5. Population Demographics

Population demographics confirm the previous research data (Robert,2010;Paidousi,2016), which stated that students who choose VET schools are most males (70%), they come from families with a low level of education (Compulsory education 19%, Secondary education 66%), and their parents are mainly private employees (31%) with earnings up to €1000 per month (58%). In addition, a significant proportion of students' families appear unemployed (15%).

3.2. Researchtool

As a data collection tool, a closed-ended questionnaire wasdesignedwhich answered through a five-pointLikert scale.Attractiveness of the VET schools of OAED wasexamined through 41 proposals that express different aspects of the study concept. The selection of the proposals was based on the areas in which European policies focus on to improve the image of vocational education and training. The participants called to express their degree of agreement or disagreement in each of the proposals expressed in the questionnaire.Reliability was assessed by Cronbach a. In situations normally considered satisfactory the coefficient shows a value equal to or greater than 0.70 (Bryman,2015). In this empirical approach the coefficient was very high (Cronbacha=.922).At the same time all the dimensions of attractiveness interconnectboth with high and with statistically significant correlation.

	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6	D7	D8
D1	1	,564**	,385**	,421*	,376*	,622*	,354*	,364*
D2		1	,393**	,353*	,393*	,580*	,411*	,486*
D3			1	,458*	,427*	,503*	,291*	,465*
D4				1	,493*	,487*	,509*	,490*
D5					1	,436*	,344*	,431*
D6						1	,472*	,567*
D7							1	,537*
D8								1

** Correlation is significant at level 0.01 (2-Tailed)

Table 6. Pearson correlation coefficients between the dimensions of the research tool

Finally, according to the content validity, two academics and five professional training executives evaluated the measurement tool. In addition, it was confirmed that the research tool is directly related to the concept that is being investigated. Moreover, a pilot survey was made to formulate the questions so as to be understood by the participants.

4. Results

According to the students' opinions, all European Union policies affect VET attractiveness from a moderate (research question 1,2,3,5,8) to a high degree (research question 4,6,7) level.

Research questions	Degree of Influence
1 st : Continuation at next educational stages (D1)	Relatively high
2 nd Enrichment of curriculum (D2)	Medium
3 rd Learning outcomes (D3)	Medium
4 th VET infrastructure (D4)	High
5 th Apprenticeship (D5)	Relatively high
6 th Students Counselling (D6)	High
7 th VET Human resources (D7)	High
8 th Information to stakeholders (D8)	Medium

Table 7. Degree of influenced attractiveness of VET

Particularly, table 8 gathers total average scores of students' opinions per attractiveness policy, where is clearly stated that all of them are significant.

Factor attractiveness of vocational education that related to	M	SD
D.1. The prospects that VET supports the continuation of its graduates, at the next educational stages.	3.732	1.185
D.2. The acquisition of key competences which will form an integral part of the curriculum.	3.538	1.180
D.3. To provide its graduates with skills that will enable them to meet the demands of "new" jobs.	3.593	1.094
D.4. The provision of proper infrastructures and equipment by VET providers.	4.345	0.951
D.5. The effective promotion of learning in workplaces.	3.648	1.155
D.6. The integrated monitoring of VET graduates in the labour market and supporting them in the framework of continuing VET.	3.995	1.112
D.7. Improving the quality of human resources in VET structures.	4.375	0.850
D.8. To intensify and systematically inform the public and the potential students in the field of VET.	3.642	1.073

Table 8. Average scores of students' opinions of OAED schools

Among the European policies that affect the attractiveness of the vocational schools of OAED, students distinguished those linked to the proper infrastructures during their apprenticeship and the proper linkage between their educational sector and the industry they are practice in. Furthermore, the quality of the educational staff and students mentoring so as to be effectively introduced into the labour market are the most important dimensions.

Attractiveness policy	Dimension	M	SD
Adequate infrastructure in apprenticeships	D4	4.470	0.904
Professional experience of educational staff.	D7	4.470	0.771
Necessary materials (components, consumables);	D4	4.460	0.892
Cognitive ability of educational staff	D7	4.460	0.771
Laboratory equipment	D4	4.380	1.052
Pedagogical training of educational staff	D7	4.330	0.842
Skill recognition of traineeships	D1	4.310	0.950
Support (Ethics and technical) by the school's administrative staff	D7	4.240	1.016
Acquisition in the apprenticeship of knowledge and skills requested by the labour market	D5	4.210	0.935
Providing counselling guidance on the prospects of residency prior to registration	D6	4.140	1.092
Proper linkage between specialty and apprenticeship	D5	4.090	1.016
Image and proper infrastructure of classrooms and communal spaces	D4	4.070	0.956
Gaining knowledge of the labour market	D3	4.000	0.921
Guidance and counselling within the faculties for career prospects	D6	4.000	1.092

Table 9. Policies with high impact on OEAD school's attractiveness

5. Discussion

Students stated that the most important factors that affect VET attractiveness are the teachers, indicating their pivotal role in the image of the OAED educational institution, followed by school infrastructure and counseling. Teachers' prior professional experience considered as a very important variable of school attractiveness ($M=4.500$, $SD=0.842$). Similarly, students' counseling the administrative staff is also at the discretion of the participants an important attractiveness factor ($M=4.156$, $SD=1.273$). These observations confirm educational policies that suggest personnel's continuous training in order to respond to modern educational challenges. Supporting teachers acquiring new competences such as collaborative skills, team teaching approaches and co-operative techniques are in need.

If educators had more time "*planned in their schedules for these activities, much more could be done to help young people thrive and learn in classrooms*" (Besson, et.al, 2015, p.29) and this would increase the attractiveness of the schools they teach.

Furthermore, the infrastructures of the schools equally assess as a meaningful dimension which affects the attractiveness of OAED schools ($M=4.345$, $SD=0.951$). The link between the quality of the educational outcomes and the quality of the school infrastructure has been extensively explored by the scientific community were the results affirmed that there is a statistically significant correlation between school infrastructures and the effectiveness of the training outcomes (OECD, 2003; Barrett, et.al, 2017).

Especially in vocational education where most of its curriculum includes laboratory courses and so it is very crucial to provide both the necessary infrastructures and the appropriate materials in order to implement effectively the educational process.

Offering counseling and support to the students was ranked third in the ranking scale of the variables that affect attractiveness of the OAED vocational schools ($M=3.995$, $SD=1.112$). Career guidance is related to the quality and effectiveness of vocational education through two distinct stages. Before the selection of a program and during the vocational training (Watts, 2009). The advisory support functions effectively as an additional bridge between vocational education and the labour market (Field, et .al., 2009). It ensures that students are well informed about the conditions prevailing in the labour market. This means that they must be supported by high-quality information which will be provided by specialized education executives and many times even by the employers themselves.

The dimension of apprenticeship as a variable of the attractiveness of vocational education ranked fifth by the students. The results show that students recognize the importance of professional knowledge they receive both in school and in workplaces. Students are taught in a different way at school because they can transform theoretical knowledge into applied based on the experiences they derive from the traineeship (Baartman, et. al., 2018).

Finally, curriculum enrichment is being ranked last by the students ($M=3.538$, $SD=1.118$), seeming that they are not prepared to accept such a reform. Curriculum enrichment is on high priority on the agenda of the European strategy for the upgrading of vocational education (Cedefop,2014). The schools of OAED operated in the past as T.E.E. (Technical Vocational Schools) and they had in their curricula, courses of general education, that is Greek, Math's, History etc. Nowadays students, who choose these vocational institutions, seek only the acquisition of technical experience and any effort to enrich the curriculum with additional courses is viewed with skepticism compared with the general secondary education.

5. Conclusion

Vocational education can contribute in improving social welfare in the sense of developing professional skills among young people and helping to reduce disparities between groups of a country's population (Powell,2012). Therefore, the need to promote it to young people, as a credible alternative educational route is undeniable. From our research it has emerged that the policies promoted by the European Union in terms of improving the image of vocational education are moving in the right direction. However, as in any other policy promoted by Europe to its state members, need to be adapted to the specific conditions governing the country of application. The European Union's proposals can therefore be a benchmark for the development of national strategies and common areas of cooperation between member states.

The vocational schools of OAED play a significant role in the Greek educational system, as they are the only schools that belong to the formal secondary educational level and offer two-year apprenticeship. However, they are treated as a structure of non-formal education and this affects negatively their image. This approach is incorrect and the reason, in our opinion, lies on the fact that their administrative responsibility belongs to the Ministry of Labour, when the entire educational system of the country is under the administration of the Ministry of Education. The latter promotes its vocational schools(EPAL) in which apprenticeships offered in some educational sectors for 9 months only, when schools of OAED offers a two-year apprenticeship in all sectors.

The present work focuses on the exploration of the policies that affect attractiveness of the vocational education through the schools of O.A.E.D. in the prefecture of Kozani, in western Macedonia. However, to extent the research conclusions, it must be expanded to all vocational schools of O.A.E.D. in Greece. Furthermore, in order to approach holistically all the structures of vocational education and training, it is proposed to extend the research to the other structures of vocational schools (EPAL) that are operating in the country with the simultaneous use of a qualitative research method.

In conclusion, it should be noted that special care should be taken to ensure that all the experience and know-how that has been developed in the OAED institutions through the 60 years of their operation, must be a point of reference for all the policy makers in the field of vocational education.

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