

# Conflicting roles of vocational education: Civic, Industrial, Market and Project Conventions to address VET scenarios

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## THEMATIC ARTICLE

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## ABSTRACT

Vocational education and training is more complex than academic education. It is also subject to important differences among countries due to at least two factors: a) the particular fabric of the productive system of the country and b) the involvement of social actors (employers and unions) as well as the labor market relations and the balance between capital and work.

Historical and comparative vocational education and training has deployed a series of analytical tools which have contributed to identify different patterns of existing vocational education systems. Some institutions have also worked in order to help vocational education advance in the past decades: among these, the European Center for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) has twice devised future scenarios in Vocational education, at the turn of the 20th century and right before the Covid-19 pandemics.

The combination of current VET systems and suggested scenarios indicate that transformations are subject to negotiation among actors within countries (administration, employers, unions, teachers) and across countries; as well as subject to legitimation of decisions before the wider society. The sociology of conventions is a useful approach to analyse processes of negotiation and legitimation behind historical developments in VET systems; we suggest applying it to tackle current VET scenarios.

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## KEYWORDS

vocational education, apprenticeships, education work relationship, economics of conventions

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## INTRODUCTION

This article intends to be a limited academic exercise by a Spanish pedagogue applying a French sociological approach to the reading of a European policy report edited in Greece. If approved, the article will be published in a Hungarian journal. A foreigner writing for a Hungarian audience might seem perhaps weird. However, there are at least a couple of common stand-points for both of us, writer and reader: First, Hungary got rid of the Soviet regime in 1989 and Spain got rid of a Fascist regime in the mid 1970s. With hardly 11 years difference, both countries share a constitutional change addressing a multipartite system and, therefore, they are both young democracies after a period of more than 40 years of dictatorship. Second, both the writer and the reader are presumably academic educationalists.

Let me start with a joke inspired by one of János Lackfi (2013) tales: *Where should the Belgians stand?* and, for those who have not read it, the tale begins with the split of the Leuven University into a French and a Flemish section in Belgium in the 1970s, when a Hungarian Jesuit economist was the only lecturer that kept teaching on both sides of the new border. My assumption in this article is that some borders can be crossed and they can also be moved, they don't just happen to be there: the Cedefop report on scenarios sets the ground for this assumption, as borders and distinctions among vocational education and training systems seem to be on the move.

In the first section of this article, I contend that vocational education and training systems are complex and that the question of where they stand is something that most countries ask themselves, particularly preoccupied by economic global competition. The complexities are such, however, that it is not enough to know where you stand, but which direction you are taking as a system, where you want to stand in the future. That is the question that Cedefop (2020) has tried to clarify. I finish this section by briefly describing the Cedefop scenarios for VET in 2035 and freely taking their invitation on how to use them.

In the second section, I explain why the sociology of conventions (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) may be appropriate when reading these scenarios. This theoretical framework has been developed in France and has been applied to several disciplines; and it has already been used to analyze vocational education in enlightening ways (Bernad, 2007; Berner, 2017; Martínez, 2006; Zehnder & Gonon, 2017). I will describe some of the intellectual notions and tools of this approach so that those not familiar with it may grasp some of its essentials.

In the final section, I will conclude my paper with a few questions that are the result of a first approach towards the Cedefop scenarios through the sociology of conventions. I am aware that both are rather complex in themselves; that is why I come to my initial words: this paper intends to be a limited academic exercise, one that the writer has enjoyed (not without pain) and one that I invite the reader to engage with.

## VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING, BEYOND EDUCATION POLICIES

The history of education is a very well-established discipline among educational sciences, perhaps for being part of historical studies. Comparative education is a discipline connected to history insofar it needs to look back and to provide context. It has gained relevance in the past decades as part of the impulse to extend and universalize the right to education for all people all



over the world, an aim still to be accomplished, as the Sustainable Development Goal number Four (SDG-4)<sup>1</sup> reminds us. However, comparative education has also become popular thanks to the evaluation of education systems that have become common among international institutions in an attempt to shape educational policies worldwide: PISA<sup>2</sup>, TIMSS<sup>3</sup> or PIAAC<sup>4</sup> are the best-known examples.

Even if vocational training can be traced long before most primary and secondary education systems, with the master-apprentice relation within the guild system being an axis in the vocational education original myth, diversity is probably its best-defining feature: The diversity of occupations served by vocational education and training in different countries is impressive. Furthermore, multiple occupational levels within the same occupational fields also contribute to this diversity. The different production systems of each country as well as the ways their labor markets are structured is another element that brings diversity into vocational education and training, as it is always related to production systems. We must take into account, furthermore, that several production systems may coexist in a given region and country, ranging across a vast line whose extremes can be identified from traditional agriculture to information capitalism. Vocational education is also diverse because it serves the needs of young and adult people in search of a vocational qualification.

The diversity behind vocational education and training has made it an appealing site for comparative education studies particularly in recent decades, as can be seen not only in academic (Gonon & Deissinger, 2021; Pilz & Li, 2020) and institutional literature, but also in most conferences with a focus upon VET, even within Europe<sup>5</sup>. Very often, apprenticeships have been pointed at as a paradigm of successful vocational education, while other vocational education and training systems should give proof of their own worth.

Comparative studies have contended about convergence and divergence of vocational education and training systems (Green, Wolf, & Leney, 1999) and trends in both directions have been analyzed (Stenström & Lasonen, 2000). In my education, relevant contributions have been those by Greinert and Hanf (2002), Greinert (2004) or Heikkinen (2004), pointing to the cultural dimensions behind systems and debating about the appropriateness of using that notion or rather others such as models or regimes of vocational education and training. The notion of regime has also been used by Esping Andersen (1993) applying it to welfare and by Walther (2006) applying it to transitions from education into adulthood and, indeed, vocational education and training are firmly linked to transitions and to welfare arrangements within a given society.

Comparative education has an academic interest, but it cannot avoid a certain aspiration to contribute to shaping policy trends. That aspiration is shared by institutions that have worked in order to help vocational education advance in the past decades: among these, the European Center for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) has been a keystone in the development of vocational education and training in the European Union since its foundation in

<sup>1</sup><https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.oecd.org/pisa/>.

<sup>3</sup><https://nces.ed.gov/timss/>.

<sup>4</sup><https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/>.

<sup>5</sup><https://vetnetsite.org/conferences/>.



1975. In the past decades, it has also worked twice in devising future scenarios in Vocational education (2002, 2020). To this last effort we enter the next subsection of the paper. Of course, the reverse is also true and politics has an impact upon education; perhaps there has been a certain blurring of institutional and academic interest in the past decades that has contributed to strengthen these relations and to make it sometimes difficult to differentiate the aim and scope of the research that is produced, sometimes closer to consultancy. Evidence-based policy is perhaps replacing international comparison when it comes to the use of research in order to support policies, and the establishment of rankings is playing a relevant role in these movements.

### Cedefop scenarios for VET in 2035

Cedefop (2020) published the first stage of a long-term research work on the future of vocational education and training in Europe with the attempt to ‘illustrate and clarify the challenges and opportunities faced by VET stakeholders in the coming years and decades’ (Cedefop, 2020, 5). Chapter 6 of the volume introduces three basic scenarios based upon the assumption of ‘the relative independence of VET as a system or entity of its own’ (Cedefop, 2020, 198). These three scenarios are the result of the combination of two-dimensional analytical model: on one hand, how vocational education is positioned within the education system as a whole and, on the other hand, the changing features of vocational education. The result of the combination of these two axes is shown in Fig. 1<sup>6</sup>.

It is not the purpose of this paper to go into detail of these three scenarios, nor the six variants that are also deployed in the Cedefop report (2020, 206–220). Nevertheless, I need to

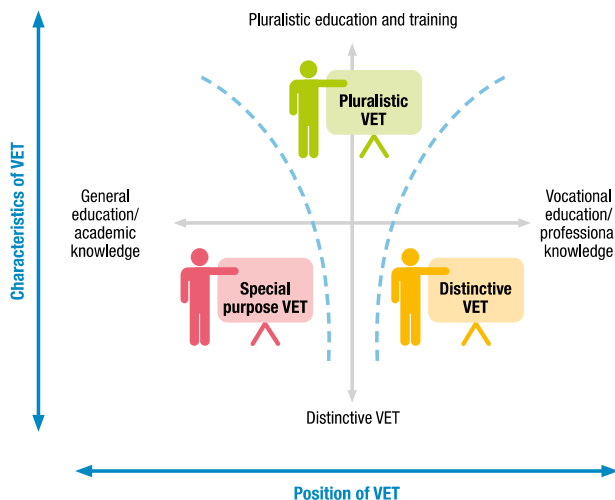


Fig. 1. Three basic scenarios and their position in the two-dimensional model (Cedefop, 2020, 200)

<sup>6</sup>The same figure is also displayed in this monograph in the article by Bjornavold and Markowitsch.



refer to two issues around them for my initial purpose: The questions that lead to the differentiation of the scenarios, and the assumption of the relative independence of VET in relation to other education alternatives that lie behind these questions themselves.

First, the questions set by Cedefop and that help us understand the differences among the scenarios are the following ones (Cedefop, 2020, 205), that I have dared to translate into my own words:

- ‘How is VET understood?’ - Or, in my own words, where does the focus lie and what is the purpose of vocational education.
- ‘What is VET’s position in the wider education and training system?’ - Again in my words, whether vocational education is really that independent or the extent to which it is considered a required component of the education system as a whole.
- ‘What is VET’s key organising principle?’ - Where does the keystone lie to define the process of the curriculum design of vocational education, where is the object to which the representation implied by the curriculum must refer to.
- ‘Who is it for?’ - Which population is considered worth attending vocational education, or what is the role of vocational education in social stratification, if any.
- ‘What type of pathways?’ - What are the possibilities, in terms of transitions from education into work, that vocational education provides and how are these chances rated among young people, their families and employers in different countries. Is VET becoming a better gate into working life and continuing education than higher education and where and why is this happening?
- ‘What type of provision?’ - What are the organizational arrangements that political frameworks allow to make of VET an educational offering? How do education and training providers handle and move around these in order to make vocational education successful in terms of the aims the society assigns to it?

Second, these questions are the result of the declared assumption of the relative independence of vocational education, and the answers provided to these questions yield to the three basic scenarios: Two of them might be well known to the reader, while the third one is a hybrid of the previous ones although it is introduced in first place (Cedefop, 2020, 200): ‘These future basic scenarios are fundamentally different from one another and imply distinct policy choices in the years to come:

- a) pluralistic VET has lifelong learning at its heart; the distinctions between vocational and general education become increasingly obsolete;
- b) distinctive VET has occupational and professional competence at its heart; VET clearly differs from general education and dominates the education system, so we can speak of a ‘VET hegemony’;
- c) special-purpose or ‘marginalised’ VET has job-oriented training at its heart; specific forms of VET have survived in an education system which is dominated by general and higher education’.

The way these scenarios are presented and the questions that lead to differentiating them speak about ‘policy choices’, ‘hegemony’, ‘marginalised’, ‘domination’ or ‘survival’. These are notions that have reminded me of the possible interest of the sociology of conventions as an analytical lens to look at the scenarios, a topic that I address in detail in the next section: the



understanding of policy as the result of negotiations of power among different actors who stand in positions that are not equal but who are able to express their own justifications, raise criticism and are ready to defend their positions as well as to demand proper legitimacy of the positions held by other actors. Boltanski's contribution relies upon the assumption of a democratic political establishment based on a culture of debate and non-violent persuasion, and this is perhaps one of the main weaknesses of the theory, as different actors are in different positions of power and, furthermore, different societies/countries have different traditions and very diverse degrees of actual possibilities to engage in negotiations of meaning. Ideally, negotiating is engaging in a conversation among actors but also publicly available among the wider society, and therefore legitimation becomes an aim, and the conversation involves tensions through criticism but also acceptance of other sources of legitimation, therefore ready to reach a compromise. Certainly, the way in which negotiation occurs in many social matters is distant from such ideal circumstances and different positions of power often interfere behind the meanings being negotiated. In the case of VET, actors are employers, trade unions, teachers, Chambers, education and labor administrations at regional, national and supranational level; as Zehnder and Gonon's (2017, 274) have clarified: 'vocational education and training systems (are the) result of different actor-driven claims'. In a way, Cedefop scenarios are possible futures as such, and they will only become enacted if there are actors able to struggle for them and, along these struggles, the futures will evolve not necessarily in the same way they were foreseen. It is also essential that the actors be in a position to fight, therefore relying upon a democratic leeway that is perhaps too much of an assumption or an overstatement. First, we need to agree on who the actors are (at national and international level, not only policy-makers but also researchers and practitioners) and then identify their ability to shape policies and their position to negotiate.

I turn to the basic notions of the sociology of conventions in the next section.

## THE SOCIOLOGY OF CONVENTIONS

The sociology or economics of conventions<sup>7</sup> is a theoretical framework mainly developed in France (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2002; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) that is being actively applied to several scientific disciplines<sup>8</sup> like sociology, political science, administration, but also energy, finances or urban studies among others. It has also been employed for the analysis of educational policies (Derouet, 1989, 2005; Derouet, Mangez, & Benadusi, 2015) and practices (Bernad, 2007; Martínez, 2006) and its use has been enlightening in the analysis of vocational education and training (Bernad & Molpeceres, 2010; Berner, 2017; Leeman, 2019; Martínez & Molpeceres, 2010; Marhuenda, 2017; Marhuenda & Molpeceres, 2020; Verdier, 2009, 2013, 2016; Zehnder & Gonon, 2017).

Boltanski & Thévenot and Boltanski & Chiapello attempt to provide an analytical grid that allow social analysis of discourse by way of emphasizing the performative dimension of discourse and anchoring them in sociohistorical roots, those of Western capitalism, as Bernad (2007) has made clear. This is relevant for my purpose because the Cedefop report on scenarios

<sup>7</sup>Both terms, sociology and economics, are used by the authors of this approach and by academics who work with it.

<sup>8</sup><https://conventions.hypotheses.org>.



is situated within those roots, and this may be of particular relevance insofar it has implications in terms of power relations and ability to criticize, confront, dispute and agree that are typical of Western democracies. In other words, this framework is useful to explain how social groups behave in contexts of uncertain situations, which may result in conflict but have no pre-determined decision or result. Zehnder and Gonon put it in this way: ‘Opposing actors are questioning lines of argumentation and frames of reference (...) there is the possibility to come back to one single convention or frame of reference (...) The second way is to accept a kind of compromise (...)’ (2017, 278).

The complexities of changes in the worlds of work and education around the shift of the century are huge and they are an invitation to go beyond reform and continuity of the system and to take active position in order to remain as an actor with the capacity to intervene. VET is subject to this demand far more than compulsory education and also to a greater extent than higher education: The former has guaranteed continuity for its universal feature, it will be subject to change, but it cannot be deleted. The latter was the first level of education being structured and one very consolidated throughout the world, and it has been in the past decades under the sight of financial investors. If uncertainty has become a feature of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), VET needs to seek for its own certainties more than its competitors in education. The works of Cedefop during the past 20 years go in this direction, and the struggles around the internationalization of certain systems of VET can also be understood as part of this quest for the competition in the global education market.

### Criticism and compromise

In the origins of this proposal is the debate in the French critical sociology of the 1970s over power, violence -including symbolic violence-, resistance and confrontation, a debate also addressed by other scholars like Basil Bernstein trying to escape from the thesis of reproduction by way of providing theoretical basis for reinterpretation; these approaches may have nowadays been replaced by debates and struggles over the notion of agency. Our authors suggest that negotiation and compromise are possible among different actors and viewpoints. Here we need to remind ourselves that this is a framework produced in France, with a tradition of two centuries of political and ideological discussion, where the civil society (mainly through its representatives, though not only) deserves respect in front of the absence of other sources of sacredness; it holds a position of privilege that may not be the case in many other countries. Here they come to consider other dimensions than mere strength, those that ordinary citizens have, that refer to their notions of morality and justice: What is acceptable, what makes social change acceptable, too. Any actor or stakeholder is able to produce reasonable arguments that may prove objective and therefore attempt to be universal, and that may enter in dialogue with the positions of other actors. The model embeds the possibility of the critical ability that every actor possesses despite inequalities, which can be considered somewhat naïve, but which in fact concedes certain agency to all those actors who are part of the mechanisms of society, as they can obey and reproduce but also confront and resist usual practices. Boltanski stresses the chance of anyone becoming an actor, at individual or collective level, and being an actor implies the possibility to defend one’s own values, be they weak or strong. The expression of criticism forces other actors to justify their decisions when these seem unjust and, in social life, these actors even advance their own sources of legitimation in order to prevent the critique.





Fundamental to this framework is the notion of compromise: whatever the position of any social actor, it relies upon an agreed belief of what is common good. Of course, there are different ways to define the common good, but this theory assumes that disputes over social issues rely upon the understanding that there is a common good behind any position, not just an individual interest. It is the common good that serves to hold the dispute at a societal level, not the individual one. This level allows the dispute without violence, as the negotiation consists of trying to convince the other, through justifications and legitimation, instead of attempting to annihilate it. This is how Zehnder and Gonon explain it: ‘The justification of decisions towards third parties requires the actors to coordinate their actions, although, using a specific mode of justification and referring to the corresponding convention, actors are aiming for common welfare as a rule (. . .). Therefore, the concept of convention allows to mutually question other frames of reference and to reject them or to agree with (. . .). With the *économie des conventions* we are able to visualize contexts of reasoning that could push through other modes of justification. This leads to a kind of order of justification (as a cognitive format) and makes actors and objects comparable’ (2017, 216–217).

### Conventions applicable to vocational education and training

A further clarification may be enlightening: ‘This approach does not represent a specific new paradigm, but a basic theory for transdisciplinary empirical analysis of economic institutions (. . .) It is important to note that the term convention does not stand for standards or customs, but for culturally established logics of coordination’ (Berner, 2017, 67). It is clear that vocational education is subject to transdisciplinary analysis (economy, sociology, education) and also that vocational education systems, models and regimes are conventions about what is desirable and appreciated in terms of preparing young people for adulthood and working life.

Even though Boltanski & Thévenot refer to six conventions, that Boltanski & Chiapello widen to a seventh one, I will only present here the four conventions that have been used in analyzing vocational education and training systems, and I will just present a few of their features, as these can be found in detail in the original sources.

Several dimensions help the authors define the differential features of conventions. Principles of judgement and hierarchies, principles of justice and principles of anthropology. I will not address these now, but these principles underlie the definition of what is worth struggling for (quality claim; the foundations behind what is understood as the common good), which actors are valued (subjects considered worthy or relevant within that source of legitimation and who will help achieve the quality claim), what kind of relationships (between subjects and between subjects and objects, what kind of exchanges are considered legitimate and appropriate in order to achieve the common good), and what the sources for harmony are (which notion operates that convention to its best in order to guarantee the common good).

The four conventions that have been commonly used in the literature on vocational education (Bernad, 2007; Berner, 2017; Bernad & Molpeceres, 2010; Leeman, 2019; Martínez, 2006; Martínez & Molpeceres, 2010; Marhuenda, 2017; Marhuenda & Molpeceres, 2020; Verdier, 2016; Zehnder & Gonon, 2017) are the following: Industry, civic, market and project. The examples provided by these authors upon which we rely -all of which consist of the application of the lenses of the sociology of conventions to actual examples in different countries (Spain, France, Switzerland and Germany)-, vary in range from VET systems to VET providers, and all





of them show in different depth empirical data analyzed through that lenses. In this paper, however, the use I suggest of these four conventions is a mere speculative exercise, to consider whether they are useful in order to review the scenarios reported by Cedefop. Below I offer a brief explanation of each of these four conventions to encourage the reader into such a speculation.

1) Industry: modern vocational education is rooted in the industrialization process. Common good is defined around production, specialization, efficiency and expertise. 2) Civic: modern educational systems are rooted in the principles of the French revolution, equality of opportunities and universal education. Common good is shaped by solidarity, equality and covering for the needs of the minorities, democratic principles and inclusion. 3) Market: vocational education has always attempted to satisfy the requirements from companies since the birth of the industrial revolution. While almost all other levels of education claim the right to provide education for its own sake, there is no doubt that vocational education prepares people to enter the labor market instead of attending further education. Common good in this convention is built around competition, prize and cost analysis. 4) Project, aligned with the hybridization suggested by [Zehnder and Gonon \(2017\)](#) or by [Cedefop's \(2020\)](#) pluralistic scenario. The project convention is not a convention like all others in Boltanski and Thevenaut's framework, and it was added at a later stage, in order to cover the ways in which successful people navigate a liquid world. Therefore, instead of a fixed set of rules, the project convention is characterized by its capacity to readapt and change according to circumstances. Connections and networks are key elements behind this convention, and so are flexibility, mobility and employability; notions that have been part of the vocational debate in the past three decades. The notion of common good is at stake in this convention, given that those involved within the 'common' vary according to the project, and therefore the compromise upon what is defined as 'good' is also subject to frequent variations ([Riesco, 2001](#)). It is the ability to change what counts, and that is rather individual than collective.

## HOW CAN THE SOCIOLOGY OF CONVENTIONS BE USED TO ANALYSE VET SCENARIOS

The work on VET scenarios conducted by Cedefop indicates that VET all throughout Europe is undergoing change, that all countries are addressing reforms or introducing innovations that move them out of the position where they were located. There is no stability in VET, and movements provoke tensions. The sociology of conventions is a valuable tool to address how different actors deal with tensions, and how these actors compromise in order to overcome them. Compromises are an indicator of instability.

Several authors ([Berner, 2017](#); [Zehnder & Gonon, 2017](#)) have contended that in the past two centuries vocational education and training has been seeking balance between industrial and civic conventions, while distancing itself from domestic convention which applies better to compulsory education, while yielding room to market conventions towards the final quarter of the 20th century ([Martínez & Molpeceres, 2010](#)): private training providers have entered the scene which turns complex due to the global and local competition among providers. This has forced prestigious national VET systems to think beyond their country borders ([Gessler, Fuchs, & Pils, 2019](#); [Molzberger & Wahle, 2015](#)).



Some also argue that in our world the convention of project is a major legitimation to be considered in relation to education and training regimes (Leeman, 2019; Marhuenda & Molpeceres, 2020; Verdier, 2011, 2016) and that is indeed the idea behind its introduction by Boltanski, as literature on management from the early 1990s refer to mobile, changeable projects where links are loose and temporary. Of course, reforms and transformations in vocational education and training systems are possible through the alteration in the equilibrium of compromises among conventions, as the result of criticism and negotiation (Marhuenda, 2017). In other words, governance of vocational education and training can be properly analyzed through the lenses of the sociology of conventions, as some have successfully done (Leeman, 2019). This approach is merely one analytical tool, and one that has proved useful so far in order to address tensions at national level; so it might be also valuable in the case of supranational level like the scenarios approach.

Compromise among conventions is possible as the result of how actors involved in compromising tackle the tensions arising from their positions of power and their sources of legitimation. An overview of patterns of change is indicative of the tensions and trends that vocational education and training systems go through: rather than standing on a fixed point, they are moving in different directions. Indeed, there is no talk about convergence any longer, and hardly any country remained stable between 1995 and 2015, as Fig. 2 shows. The fact that national or regional VET systems are characterized or located in a certain position and under

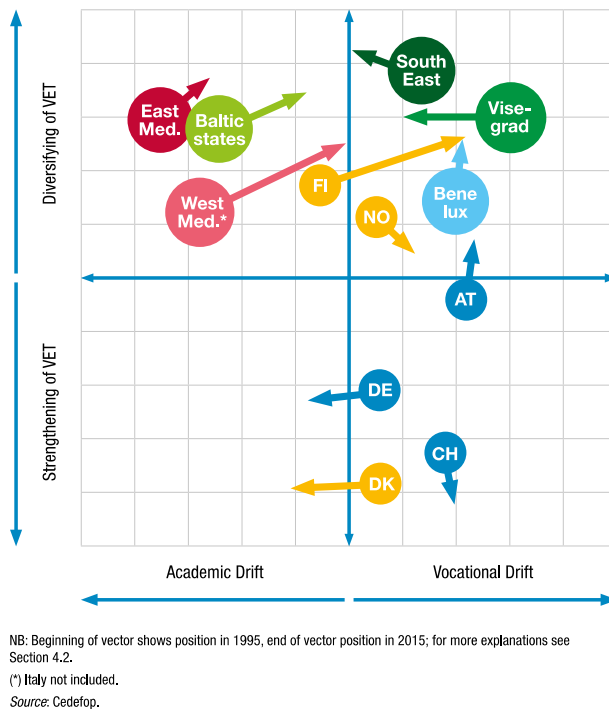


Fig. 2. Schematic representation of change in VET in Europe, for selected countries and country groups, 1995–2015.

Source: Cedefop, 2020, 156



reform processes in order to change that position is behind our assumption: that a VET system is already legitimized before the society it serves, and that reforming it happens through tensions and therefore the reform process requires a compromise between the current source of legitimation and its adaptation to new demands that may even drive either to a compromise or to a change in the source of legitimation, hence resulting in a society holding a new view on its VET system. The debates between continuity and reform in educational policies are strongly rooted upon sources of consensus and legitimation behind those political and societal efforts, and these are the result of power relations that contend for the sources of legitimation.

Figure 2 is an invitation to reconsider the future scenarios for vocational education and training as a dynamic of change rather than a fixed picture of possible positions. The fact that the three basic scenarios evolve in six different variants<sup>9</sup> (Cedefop, 2020, 207) supports the idea that there is a good amount to be negotiated within countries (and the different actors struggling to define its VET system) and across countries (some of which may appear as successful ones in terms of the prestige of VET) given the growing interest in internationalization of VET, too. Actors in each country and actors in neighboring countries, as well as actors in countries with larger control over transnational policies are looking at each other and struggle to hold the relative amount of power that each has.

The direction, the pace and the extension of the reforms that the arrows in Fig. 2 indicate vary according to the capacity to negotiate and compromise of the actors involved, which means that future scenarios of VET depend upon positions of power of those who decide it and those who implement it as well as those who enroll in VET. That is the reason why the sociology of conventions is useful, because it enlightens unresolved tensions that demand compromises, and these happen at times of change.

The three scenarios (Cedefop, 2020, 206–220) show that tensions vary and that chances to end up in a certain scenario are open to legitimation able to convince others around the sources of values for the common good. The scenarios are a hint that several compromises spread across different sources of legitimation are therefore possible, that actors have to be aware of the discourses of other actors and react to criticism no matter which positions of power the actors occupy: at a time of change, there is a need to control not just decisions but also the rationale that provides a narrative for them.

Another question raised by the sociology of conventions is about the role played by the project convention: Will it be able to overcome the historically rooted dual, liberal and school-based vocational education and training traditions and their role within youth transition systems (Walther, 2006) and welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1993)<sup>10</sup>? How will the project convention alter the tensions and subsequent compromises among the other conventions and how will it affect the balance between civic, industrial and market ones? In a context of increasing precarization, Bernad (2007), Martínez (2006) and Marhuenda and Molpeceres (2020) found evidence in Spain among training provision of the risk behind the extension of the project convention both for training practice but also for trainers and, indeed, for trainees.

Considering the scenarios from the perspective of the economics of conventions, vocational education seems to be trapped between the comprehensive past of secondary education

<sup>9</sup>These variants are illustrated in the Cedefop report, accessible here: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news/scenarios-european-vocational-education-and-training-21st-century>.

<sup>10</sup>These are issues addressed by Marhuenda-Fluixá (2021).



(Bernad, Martínez, Molpeceres, & Marhuenda, 2015) in which it was shaped in European countries with a strong civic approach, and the governance of political and social issues taken over by economic-grounded decisions related to productivity and competitiveness that underlie the industrial convention at the basis of most VET systems. In such a context, market convention applies in suitable ways to notions of choice, employability and individualization, all of which are portrayed in three of the six-scenario variants. Conversely, civic convention seems also suitable to keep and reform national systems, to keep nation-pride brands (Cedefop/OECD, 2021) such as dual vocational education and apprenticeships, as well as to fight for collective education and equality and, in a certain way, provide VET for all (a universal claim raised by the civic convention); notions that are representative of four of the scenario variants. The industrial convention explains highly specialized quality VET appropriately and reinforces and legitimates work-based learning as an efficient way to provide education; however, only two of the six variants reflect it, both under the scenario labelled as distinctive VET, which is surprising given the industrial legitimation in the origins of most dual VET systems. The extent to which the economics of conventions are suitable to interpret the scenarios is something that would be useful in analyzing processes of negotiation of the critical junctures (Cedefop, 2020, 220) both at country and at European level.

The reference to the European Deal behind the VET scenarios portrayed in the Cedefop document provides hope to make of vocational education and training a pillar for social and economic cohesion within Europe. Applying the sociology of conventions to the VET scenarios can be considered as an invitation to reconsider the strongly rooted civic values of Europe being a space for freedom, citizenship and democracy ruled by human rights and equality. Actors of VET in European countries and at European level have the chance, at a time of instability and change, to search for their sources of legitimation and to compromise in ways that might prove relevant to develop inclusive and equitable societies through VET. In the global competition, the European Union argues that civic values are firmly rooted in the European project, hence taking them as a source of legitimation. In the 20th century, tensions were balanced differently in each European country, and vocational education was part of the deal. Nowadays, in front of the challenges pointed out in the Cedefop document, vocational education has also the same chance, perhaps even more responsibility as tensions remain unresolved and actors have to play their cards in order to reach compromises among civic, market, industrial and project conventions.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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