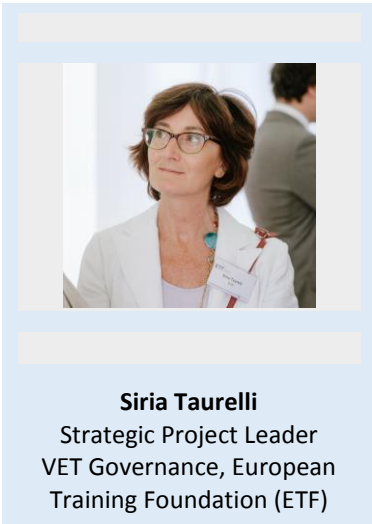




Multi-level governance for cooperation and coordination in skills systems

Vocational Education and Training (VET) reforms and governance in partner countries

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Governance matters when reforming VET and skills systems

The ETF's¹ work on VET governance is centred on the outcomes of public policies in the field of VET and skills in partner countries with which the agency cooperates².

Within the context of this article and its focus on skills systems, governance refers to the institutional settings devised to steer the planning, implementation and review of national offers of education and training. This is a role primarily attributed to the state; however, contemporary definitions of governance take into account a wider range of factors and stakeholders.

According to Oliver (2010:262)³, governance can be defined “as the interactions among institutions, processes and traditions that determine how power is exercised, how decisions are taken on issues of public and private concern, and how stakeholders, including citizens, have their say”.

VET and skills form a complex sector, which intersects economic and social policies, competitiveness and social cohesion. This complexity is often reflected in the range of actors involved in the sector's governance. VET and skills stakeholders include representatives of government, with typically Ministries of Education in the lead, national agencies, social partners, other employers and employees' organisation, civil society, and VET providers.

These actors operate at national and sub-national level, while their role in policy-making and implementation is also influenced by international agreements and guidelines. This is the case, for example, of the sustainable development goals (SDG), internationally agreed upon, which have an influence on the design of national policy goals and action plans.

¹ The European Training Foundation (ETF) is a specialised agency of the European Union (EU) that supports the EU as a global actor in the field of human capital development. The ETF works together with partner countries in the reform of their education, training and labour market systems.

² The ETF's partner countries are: Albania, Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo (UNSCR 1244), Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Libya, Montenegro, Morocco, Palestine (without prejudice to EU Member States individual position), Republic of Moldova, Russia, Serbia, Syria, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan.

³ Oliver. D., 'Complexity in vocational education and training governance', *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 5(3), 2010, pp.261-73.



In a skills system, the interactions and processes are therefore both horizontal, within each level, and vertical, across levels. The governance arrangements should clearly define stakeholders' respective roles and areas of accountability, and the mechanisms that must be in place to ensure shared responsibilities and coordinated actions.

VET and skills system reforms provide an excellent opportunity for reviewing governance arrangements and assess whether existing actors' role, institutions' mandate and coordination mechanisms fit the reform purposes.

One relevant lesson from two decades of VET reforms in ETF's partner countries was that these roles, mandates and mechanisms should adjust to the new policy goals, otherwise moving from the policy design to the implementation stage can prove difficult.

VET and skills governance to help link the world of education to the world of work

The ETF's work on VET governance follows, in general, two lines: a review of the existing governance arrangements; and, support for change and improvements.

In Serbia, for example, the ETF has worked with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, and the information and communication technologies (ICT) cluster, which is one of the sectors leading Serbia's economic growth, to review the institutional coordination and cooperation mechanisms that underpin skills needs assessment and the subsequent updating of skills provision.

This undertaking has highlighted that communication and coordination between the national and sub-national levels of the VET system needed to be developed; and, that the interaction between these and the ICT sector level was below expectations, especially in light of the skills shortages reported in ICT.

The next stage involved discussing the findings and identifying possible solutions in consultation with all key stakeholders. This resulted in a proposal to set up a Knowledge Hub, a collaborative platform for public and private, national and sub-national actors to create skills intelligence, communicate about skills needs and act together to address the skills shortages.

In other countries, the ETF has been helping to scale up social partnerships in VET for a specific sector from the pilot level to the national level. For example, in the Republic of Moldova the initial status of 'working group' given to sector committees on skills has changed to one that now formally recognises them as a credible partner in designing occupational standards and currently involves them in a legislative process that will institutionalise sector committees with a defined role in the country's VET system. This evolution has been accompanied with support provided by the ETF for several years.



It should come as no surprise that these changes may take a long time. They reflect the overall processes of VET reforms, which may last years because transformations affect the whole system, and also touch upon how power is exercised and decisions are made.

How does a well-balanced, good governance ensure that skills needs are met?

Good and multi-level governance settings should adapt to different country contexts, and there is no blueprint model from which to copy and paste. There are, however some shared principles that are inspired by both theory and practice. They include:

Empowering VET and skills stakeholders, which implies recognition of all actors that play a role in the system, supporting capacity and trust building, and ensuring that decisions are taken at the most appropriate level.

A transparent attribution of responsibilities. This involves defining who is accountable for what, who has the power of initiative, who manages and who executes, who provides binding advice and who is simply consulted, who contributes resources or knowledge, depending on each system's key functions.

Defining the financing sources and the responsible actors. Different policy options are possible in VET financing: either the state is the only source of funding, or private contribution is envisaged from the business sector and/or families. The choice made will carry along with it responsibilities in terms of mobilising financial resources and how these have been utilised. In mixed systems, the cost-sharing mechanisms should be formalised, such as fiscal incentives, among others. Yet, another important decision is the level of decentralisation across the state's administrative levels down to the school level, where different options are to be considered as regards to the degrees of autonomy.

Managing partnerships. Partner countries' reform experience show that balancing the role of the state with the private sector (social partners, other economic actors, civil society), and with the sub-national level (regional and local public authorities, schools, training centres) is a more realistic scenario. Eventually, these actors and the government together have to turn the agreed reforms into practice. While there is no golden rule or model, the multi-actor and multi-level nature of VET and skills systems call for inclusive and participatory governance approaches.

For more information on ETF's work on VET governance:

www.etf.europa.eu/web.nsf/pages/Publications_catalogue keyword search "governance", or write to siria.taurelli@etf.europa.eu

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