

The role of social partners in reforming social dialogue for vocational education and training in Greece

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Abstract

The Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Greece needs reforms that are related to accessibility and connection with the labor market as well as the recognition of professional qualifications in order for horizontal and vertical transitions to get facilitated into national and European qualifications systems. In this follow-up paper, we discuss the role of the social partners in the social dialogue on the existing operational framework for Vocational Education and Training, apprenticeship and workplace learning. Based on a set of desired measures as these are expressed in a recent manifesto for social dialogue in VET launched by the representatives of social partners, we present and analyse some of the key results of a recent study that was carried out on behalf of the Hellenic Institute for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (IME-GSEVEE) as part of the social partners' plan for joint actions to restore public confidence and strengthen their effective participation in a targeted and meaningful social dialogue for VET.

Keywords: social dialogue, social partners, vocational education and training, labor market, apprenticeship, workplace learning, Greece.

Introduction

Social partners' involvement in a targeted and meaningful social dialogue on Vocational Education and Training, apprenticeship and forms of learning at the workplace is limited in Greece. They do not play an important part in decision-making although their contribution is considered to be a key precondition for educational policy reforms. The need for exploring the participatory basis of social dialogue in Greek VET and answering fundamental questions regarding its quality is considered imperative due to the implementation of a new institutional and organizational framework for VET that

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is prescribed in the seminal Law 4186/2013 (IME GSEVEE, 2015: 25-27). In the current framework apprenticeship as a form of VET is highly emphasized. Yet, systemic inadequacies and changing political and economic priorities have created more gaps than those the system was supposed to fill. Social partners' representatives, namely the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE), the Hellenic Confederation of Professionals, Craftsmen and Merchants (GSEVEE), the Greek Tourism Confederation (SETE), the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises (SEV), and the Hellenic Confederation of Commerce and Entrepreneurship (ESEE), have recently expressed their opinion in a common policy manifesto for a tripartite social dialogue in VET in order to set new priorities. These priorities are the following:

1. Organization of an operational decision-making model for VET, so that the dynamics of the cooperation between institutional and social partners, businesses, employers, chambers, and providers are completely understood.

2. Revision of the way of governance and financial support for VET as well as the apprenticeship, and reinforcement of the sectoral, cross-sectoral and tripartite social dialogue at local and national levels.

3. Revision of the existing institutional and organizational framework with simultaneous update of the existing VET curricula, in order to increase the attractiveness of VET and youth participation in apprenticeship programmes.

4. Quality assurance and certification of VET and apprenticeship programs, and development of valid and reliable tools for quantitative and qualitative assessment of trainees' learning outcomes.

5. Formation of a reliable framework for validating skills that are acquired in non-formal and/or informal educational and/or learning contexts, with building on existing European tools (ECVET, EQAVET, EQF, Europass).

So far the apprenticeship system is implemented only as part of the Manpower Agency's (OAED) training programs. After the ongoing economic crisis began (2010 onwards) trainees' participation in any apprenticeship program, as well as employers' contribution, has severely declined. The Law 4186/2013 attempts in an erratic and inconsistent manner (Karatzogiannis & Panazis, 2014: 259) to introduce a new apprenticeship system in vocational high school as part of the final year of studies. This initiative, however, contradicts if not undermines the existing long standing (since

1954) and certainly more reliable apprenticeship system which is implemented by OAED and includes traineeships with workplace learning and specialization courses (GSLLL, 2013). Social partners opposed to this new initiative as being non-feasible due to the already low investment in apprenticeships by employers, but also because they were never invited to participate in a social dialogue regarding this matter, as the decision was made unilaterally by the Minister of Education without previous consultation or deliberation with social partners. This decision resulted in an expressed criticism that was articulated in a manifesto (policy paper) published by social partners in February 2017 (Zarifis et al., 2017) after the publication of a study on social dialogue for vocational education and training issues in Greece¹. The aims of the study were:

- to propose an up-to-date and comprehensive agenda for a continuous, dynamic and targeted social dialogue regarding apprenticeship issues (in addition to actions related to professional experience acquisition in general and transition from education to employment);
- to provide sufficient documentation with regard to formulating policy proposals to the competent Ministries of Education and Labour and the implementing bodies, in order to improve the existing institutional and operational framework for the implementation of apprenticeship;
- to draft documents and proposals to be adopted and established by political leaders and government, which, after being agreed by the social partners, shall be incorporated in common texts thereof (especially in the National General Collective Agreement).

¹The study was coordinated by IME-GSEVEE and was completed in a period of 2 years (2015-2017). A research team was assigned with the task to complete the study. Prof. G. K. Zarifis was the coordinator of the team. Mrs C. Manavi, Prof. N. Fotopoulos and Dr. L. Zanola (representing ILO) were the members of the team. The study was divided in the following parts: Part 1: Short presentation of the key points and characteristics of efficient social dialogue examples on VET and/or apprenticeship schemes in Europe or/and internationally with indications (for possible conditions for their effective implementation in the Greek context). Part 2: Collection of existing studies and surveys, review and processing of the contents and findings. This was a meta-analysis of existing studies aiming to capture the key points regarding the agenda for social dialogue on apprenticeship in Greece. Part 3: Review of the social dialogue on the existing institutional framework for apprenticeship, aiming to formulate improvement proposals (indication of weaknesses, lack of prerequisites, clarification of responsibilities of the relevant stakeholders etc.). Part 4: Ad hoc research mapping the existing situation and evaluation of social dialogue on VET and apprenticeship based on the views of the social partners (with a questionnaire and a focus group). The research aimed to formulate proposals for improving the general social dialogue on VET framework with focus on the role of social partners and propose key points to the relevant agenda emphasizing the development of a reliable operational framework for the formulation of planning, specifications, available means and human resources, administrative and educational coordination etc. Part 5: Drafting of final documents-proposals to the partners in order to be included in regulatory documents or/and joint documents (such as the National General Collective Agreement). A thematic agenda was projected along with proposals on how to activate the participation of social partners in actively contributing to the social dialogue in VET in Greece as well as suggestions for improving apprenticeship and work-based learning as part of the relevant social dialogue agenda. The full study with the annexed policy manifesto is available in Greek at http://www.imegsevee.gr/images/ekdoseis/biblia/koinonikos_dialogos.pdf.

Drawing from examples from other European countries, the study argues for a quality tripartite social dialogue that addresses a shortlist of critical issues for the future of apprenticeship and workplace learning in Greece. In the following paragraphs, we present and analyze some of the major issues that social partners suggest they must be part of a focused social dialogue. These issues are also highlighted in the study based on the findings of the desk and field research we conducted with representatives of social partners in the period between June 2015 and February 2017.

Need for revising the existing governance and funding model

The National System for connecting Vocational Education and Training with Employment (ESSEKA), is the coordinating body for all VET initiatives as well as the apprenticeship scheme. It typically operates on the basis of the tripartite and equal representation of the state, the employers, and the workers, and aspires through the national policies' coordination to contribute to a substantive revision of the social partners' role in the decision-making process in VET. However, it is estimated by the representatives of the social partners that it has failed to correct the dysfunctions of the First National Action Plan for Employment, which was mainly due to the lack of coordination of its operatives and the inefficiency of its structure (Hellenic Labor Inspectorate Corps-LIC, 2012).

With regard to the review of the current governance model in VET, the social partners set as priorities the effective connection between vocational education with the training, and their direct connection with the employment (GSEVEE, 2014; Voss, 2011). They further propose a model of consistency between all vocational education and training systems, the certification of professional qualifications, regardless of the ways these have been acquired, the restoration of the term 'apprenticeship' in Greek society, the creation of a mechanism which predicts skills, and the promotion of a cooperative governance model which gives an active role to each participant (OKE, 1998, 2002 & 2003). More specifically according to IME-GSEVEE (2015: 122) the governance model in VET needs to be reformed in order to:

- Strengthen the relationship between the cross-sectoral and sectoral social dialogue, to increase the 'transparency' of this dialogue and improve the way its results are disseminated to local communities.

- Improve the transparency of the mechanisms for decision-making in the national social dialogue for VET.
- Develop a common way of understanding the role and the specific nature of the different types of apprenticeship and their means for implementation.
- Develop mechanisms in order to exploit new financial tools, attracting investments and optimizing financial resources.
- Support SWAT development promotes mutual learning and exchange of experience between the social partners for determining the benefits, the weaknesses, the opportunities and the threats for the national social dialogue for VET and apprenticeship schemes.
- Understand and support through social dialogue the specific needs of each social partner.

Prioritizing a competence-based approach in curriculum development in VET

According to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) in the present institutional framework there is no prediction mechanism for skills mismatching and therefore organizing the VET in a compatible way to the labor market's requirements or social needs is (CEDEFOP, 2014^a: 2; also see Hellenic Labor Inspectorate Corps-LIC, 2012: 43;). Furthermore, the rapidly developing and evolving industry compels companies to require their staff to be able to successfully deal with modern technology and anticipated performance in dealing with major organizational problems by increasing its skills (BusinessEurope 2013, 2014; Mouza-Lazaridi, 2013: 251; SEV, 2014). The current VET framework, however, is defined from top to bottom and limits to a large extent the way the curricula are organized (in terms of specialties, learning outcomes, selection of competent trainers, etc.).

A recent report published by Randstad (2012) shows that the number of people with more qualifications than the ones their current job is demanding in Greece, is higher than in other parts of the world (68% vs. 47% on average) when at the same time half of the Greek employers face difficulties finding the appropriate workforce. In the future, it is expected that the lack of highly skilled workers will reach up to 44% for Greek workers (compared to the 47% global average). An important finding is also that in Greece employers invest less than average in (additional or continuing) education and

training (32% in Greece vs. 54% on average worldwide) when fewer workers believe that their employer provides them with the adequate career opportunities (36% in Greece vs. 54% on average worldwide).

Therefore, the relevant bodies (state and privately funded) involved in VET provision should develop the respective learning outcomes for each training program and activity drawing from a competence-based model approach than the existing content-based model. This means that the curricula must be reformed on the basis of a sustained dynamic and targeted dialogue that will gradually lead the vocational training towards obtaining know-how (professional and general skills and abilities) (see Law 3191/2003). This is probably more evident for many technical professions in Greece. According to GSEVEE (2014: 257), in order for the technical professions to offer competitive advantages, VET must provide programs that support cutting-edge technology and following the European framework, relevant programs should be expanded to include new-basic skills. What must be clarified in the current framework, however, is that learning and educative objectives differ from the “learning outcomes” in terms of their departure point and their orientation¹. This practically means that whereas the trainees today at the end of the learning process are ‘capable to explain, define, distinguish, design, solve, use, etc.’, on the basis of the learning objectives set by the system itself and followed almost religiously by their trainers’, the reformed VET curricula need to focus on the trainees’ ‘ability to use, to design, to develop, to solve, etc.’, based on the learning outcomes approach (Zarifis et al., 2013). The idea is that their definition at a national level will contribute to a more precise description of qualifications linked to occupational frameworks and systems, while at the international level it will serve transparency, comparability, credit transfer and recognition purposes.

As GSEVEE (2014: 278) points out, skills are a dynamic and changing concept and their matching with the changing needs of work and occupations will be always required, so the system needs recording and forecasting mechanisms regarding skills needs at local and sectoral levels. It is also crucial according to GSEVEE (2014) for VET curricula to focus on quality assurance. For the qualitative upgrading of the curricula, it is also appropriate to employ good practices from other European countries that have

¹The concept of learning outcomes is multidimensional and their identification is not a simple assumption, as it encompasses the ability of individuals to combine in a self-guided, tacit or explicit way, and in a specific environment, the various elements of their knowledge and skills.

already adopted the learning outcomes approach, as well as to develop counseling and mentoring systems to support trainees and enterprises (Kerckhofs & Koutroukis, 2006; Papadakis, 2014).

Nonetheless, some social partners (GSEE) have expressed some reservations on how much these VET policies (turnover to the learning outcomes, the qualifications framework, the European Quality Assurance Framework in VET and the Accumulation and Transfer Credit Training Units System), equally satisfy all European VET systems and national labor markets needs. In some cases, these measures are being reversed and practically abolished, because the political decisions and the business practices in each country are regulated by funding principles, which are determined by relevant governing bodies and European authorities through 'strategic programming frameworks' and 'operational programs' (also see GSEVEE, 2014: 285-286).

Quality assurance and accreditation of VET and apprenticeship programs as a necessity

The common conviction among all social partners is to improve the quality assurance system for VET from curricula to program evaluation and certification with the already agreed national quality assurance framework the Π3 (Ministry of Education, 2011). This framework responds to the clause on quality assurance in article 19 of the Law 3879/2010 that takes in the establishment of a system for continuing education and evaluation of all educational staff in nonformal education and second chance education, as well as a monitoring and evaluation system of all programmes operated under the auspice of the National Network for LLL (Law 3374/2005). This tool sets a framework of priorities and principles on quality assurance in nonformal adult education learning. This covers all forms of educational and learning provision for people over 16 years old and includes initial VET, all apprenticeship schemes, continuing VET, basic skills education and all liberal and/or popular adult education programs (EOPPEP, 2014). It further provides to all relevant structures a tool for organizing and delivering the evaluation of learning outcomes for those participating in any of the programs provided. This is essentially delivered on the grounds that π^3 :

- defines quality by setting a number of principles and criteria in all three dimensions of education and learning, namely inputs, processes and outputs, and

- provides a large number of measurable quantitative and qualitative indicators for the evaluating the degree implementation of quality assurance principles by all relevant providers.

Nonetheless, social partners suggest that this framework was again not the result of a decision-making process based on social dialogue. The development of a quality system aiming at the credibility and attractiveness of the VET is a national and social necessity as they claim (Goulas & Fotopoulos, 2010; GSEE, 2014) with the condition that certain basic criteria are fulfilled. These criteria need to include:

- Real and, as far as possible, clear orientation of the productive model of economic development, so as to feed the vocational education and training system along with the developing and declining sectors based on long-term forecasts.
- Development of a diagnostic system for labor market needs, as well as for occupational specialties and skills.
- Flexibility of the vocational education and training system in covering these needs by providing the skills requested by the labor market, and through the development of modernized curricula, educational material, and workshops.
- Extension and upgrading of the business profiling registries and creating relevance of those to VET curricula and educational material.
- Creation and development of a registry for VET trainers who are highly competent and follow changes taking place in their field.
- Development and expansion of specialized laboratories, especially for apprentices in technical professions, and corresponding IT laboratories.

In addition, GSEVEE (2014) emphasized that apprenticeship has a very important role to play in linking theory to professional practice and promoting employment of the VET graduates as long as it is properly organized and does not become a 'reservoir' of workers with medium skills. Along the same line, SEV (2014) considers that strengthening the role of internships and apprenticeships should be promoted through more targeted placements in organizations and businesses that meet certain quality criteria, such as efficiency and reliability (Dimoulas *et al.*, 2007).

Furthermore, the social dialogue needs to readdress the development of a National Qualification Framework (NQF) that is compatible with the European framework and ECVET (Goulas & Fotopoulos, 2013). Their main argument in

readdressing the scope of NQF lies on the premise that the current NQF is not flexible enough as it is not focusing on skills and competences as it should but on accredited knowledge based on formal qualifications only. The 'flexibility' in the way trainees obtain knowledge, skills, and competences will enable the examination of the essence and the quality of the learning outcome, and not the way these are obtained. So in order to apply the new or innovative teaching methods and the evaluation of the expected learning outcomes properly, the ability of VET training instructors to systematically upgrade their relevant skills and their collaboration must be somehow ensured (Law 3369/2005).

As a final remark, social partners stress that a key criterion for setting the foundations for a quality assurance system for VET is the consultation with the educational community because this can help to identify the training needs of VET trainers and teachers and improve their performance (GSEVEE, 2010).

A reliable validation framework for skills and competences acquired in non-formal or informal settings needs to be negotiated

Over the last few decades, international organizations such as the European Union and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2007, 2009, 2013) have turned their attention to non-formal and informal learning and have increased the necessary actions and policies for its recognition and validation (CEDEFOP, 2013: 11). In 2009, CEDEFOP presented its proposal on developing the certification of non-formal and informal learning (European Guidelines) a practical tool designed according to the common European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning adopted in 2004 by the European Council (CEDEFOP, 2009: 7).

According to GSEVEE (2014), the latest seminal Law 4186/2013 allows the trainees to be upgraded to Level 4, by following an annual apprenticeship program in the final year of training. Level 4, correspondingly, is awarded to an Institute of Vocational Training (IEK) graduate. Therefore, the apprenticeship year offers the advantage to a high school graduate to obtain a Level 4 degree by investing in another year of study. Conversely, as it mentioned by GSEVEE (2014), what should be recorded is the vagueness of the law regarding the kind of international classification of the educational qualifications to which it refers (ISCED or EQF). This sort of classification

concerns many social partners involved in training forms, including apprenticeships. GSEE, SEV, GSEVEE and ESEE in a common report, emphasize that certification should be implemented either through evaluation of ad-hoc learning experiences (examinations, tests, observation at work) and validation of prior learning (comparison of the evaluation results with the reference framework) or by evaluating the monitoring of a training program, specific modules and learning outcomes (Dimoulas et al., 2007: 49).

Social partners concur that the concept of the workplace as learning field requires appropriate planning. Complexity of tasks, teamwork, autonomy and accountability in decision-making, combined with conditions requiring the enhancement or improvement of skills, mainly through the introduction of technological innovations, sectoral changes, restructuring and new organizational processes are only some of the variables that need to be part of the social dialogue before any decision on validation of non-formal and informal learning is discussed (Technical Chamber of Greece-TEE, 2009).

In addition, small and medium sized businesses are questioning the rigidly structured forms of training. These businesses due to their structural characteristics and the limited innovative challenges they face, cannot support any validation frameworks. They need external support, mainly consultative, and an appropriate framework for developing partnerships between them and with other organizations in a local frame in order to create a learning-based process of recognition and validation of their employees (CEDEFOP, 2014^b).

By taking into consideration the current crisis conditions, the following measures are proposed by all social partners as part of an ongoing social dialogue with the government:

- a) Upgrading the role of businesses and other social partners' role in the central management of the available resources (human and financial).
- b) Need for reforming social partners' VET providers, into learning and support centers.
- c) Organizational and coordinating role of trade unions in the design and provision of learning actions.

d) Merge the sectoral and local VET structure in order to strengthen professional organizations in learning actions.

According to the Technical Chamber of Greece (2009) however, there is still a primary confusion in the definition of functional terms such as 'assessment', 'validation' and 'recognition' due to the lack of a 'linking mechanism' with the framework of a national VET certification system. It is estimated that the conditions that should be fulfilled for the successful development and implementation of the nonformal education and non-formal learning outcomes certification system are the following:

- Development of a national strategy. Ensuring a social agreement (state, social partners, professional associations, chambers, education and training providers, educational community), with the cooperation of the parties involved and with public consultation.

- Quality safeguarding, monitoring and evaluation of the non-formal learning and non-formal learning process so as to build mutual trust between VET providers, employers and state bodies such as the National Organisation for Certification and Vocational Counseling (EOPPEP).

- Linking the validation procedures to the National Qualification Framework.

- Ensuring the consistency of learning outcomes and their response to standards that are identical or equivalent to the standards of the professional qualifications acquired through formal education programs (e.g. educational standard, professional standard, evaluation standard, validation standard, certification model).

- Ensuring the adequate human and financial resources.

- Education and training of the staff involved in the design and implementation of the non-formal and informal learning validation process.

In the study, most social partners agree that EOPPEP needs to ORGANISE vigorous evaluations by taking actions to promote the creation of a valid national qualifications framework as well as a reliable system for the recognition, approval, validation, and accreditation of learning outcomes that were acquired through non-formal and informal learning (i.e. in the workplace). Due to the criticality of the matter and since Greece does not have significant experience in qualification issues, it is

important to highlight the basic points, that are useful in shaping a modern and European-oriented implementation framework (Goulas and Fotopoulos, 2013). The social dialogue on qualifications and validation of skills acquired through non-formal or informal learning is non-existent. The Greek authorities have not yet comprehended the economic benefits of validation as it permits human resources to be distributed more rationally to the economy, by giving to people access to jobs that best fit their skills, facilitating the restructuring of economic activity by capturing and highlighting the capacities of those who become redundant and the ability to use this workforce in other areas of the labour market. Furthermore what has never been an issue for social dialogue but is eagerly proposed by social partners is the degree to which validation provides incentives for investing in training and leads to the strengthening of the framework for lifelong learning (Karatzogiannis & Panazis, 2014).

To summarize, the social partners' common position is that a reliable and qualitative system for validating non-formal and informal learning may provide many people who lack formal qualification the opportunity to make their skills more visible to the labor market. Certification, however, must fulfill the terms and conditions that ensure that a certified qualification responds to commonly accepted standards, adds value, and offers the opportunity for equal treatment in the labor market for those who wish to acquire a qualification and those who wish to validate a skill regardless the way through which they acquired it. Within the framework of the reservations expressed and according to GSEVEE (2010), it is estimated that there is yet a risk of developing a speculative market around validation of non-formal and informal learning, that will lead to the increase of private expense for training and certification, to the increase of certifications, the decrease of their unit value, as well as the increase of the professions practice costs, some of which are likely to be passed on to the consumer (also see Zarifis *et al.*, 2017: 102).

Building an agenda for a functional decision-making process is required

Last but not least a functional social dialogue in VET requires the organization of a constant communication and dissemination of the information between the parties involved, aiming at forming a commonly accepted social language (Cassell & Bickmore, 2003; Koutroukis, 2011). In Greece, however, the decision-making process on VET

issues in general and more particularly in apprenticeship schemes and workplace learning initiatives, is not the result of a targeted social dialogue that focuses on the current national VET and skills needs (IME-GSEVEE, 2015). Neither is there any negotiated strategy that formulates primary and alternative action plans. Social partners' position is not at all evident in the decision-making process.

However in a number of occasions during informal meetings with government officials and Ministry representatives social partners expressed their concern regarding the functional determination of the VET system's fixed characteristics, its controlled variables (e.g. number of trainees), the relevant environmental parameters (e.g. demand for qualifications), the relation between the variables and system constants that describe its function under the environmental restrictions; as well as the available resources (economic and human), the structure of the system, the use of technology and the objective function, which describe the performance of the system (profit, cost) as reliable indicators and evaluation criteria already used in other countries in Europe.

Nonetheless, these positions were fragmented, partial, and certainly not part of a tripartite social dialogue between the government, representatives from the employers' associations and representatives from the employees' associations. Neither was there any previous consultation among the social partners' themselves in this respect. Essentially, in order for the social partners to co-modify actively policies that lead to a new productive model for VET in Greece, they have to build a culture of mutual understanding and respect and be willing to make balanced compromises among themselves and the government (Kyriazis, 2015).

Conclusion

Examples of the coherent and dynamic involvement of the social partners in VET policy and apprenticeship come from countries belonging to the so-called 'social partnership status', such as Austria, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Denmark. Although, due to the economic crisis to the Scandinavian countries as well, which traditionally have a high level of tripartite approach to the policy development process, the involvement of the social partners has been under severe pressure (Eurofound, 2013; European Commission, 2002; European Training Foundation, 2011; BusinessEurope 2013, 2014). Therefore, as social dialogue has been

'challenged' by current demographic and economic changes, policy issues on national social dialogue on VET are important in many European countries today -both to those with higher and those with lower levels of social dialogue, even those countries that are in the starting point and try undergoing structural adjustment.

The role of the social partners in the process of decision making for VET in the frame of a targeted social dialogue has not yet been recognized in Greece. A basic condition for promoting change in education policy and for creating conditions for growth and social cohesion is to strengthen the involvement of the social partners in the social dialogue for VET. The development of apprenticeship programs is related with commitments made by employers to provide workplace learning as well as their participation in VET program development (CEDEFOP, 2014^b: 3-4). Providing apprenticeship training can increase an enterprise's ability to innovate, grow and compete. Training by high-qualified workers promotes the intergenerational learning and can increase young apprentices' ability to adapt to changing professional demands and challenges. In addition, workplace training should be an integral part of tertiary education curricula, at least 25% of the training period, combining learning in the educational structure and workplace training. A typical example is that of the Netherlands where two-year courses in tertiary education are provided and that is leading to the obtainment of preparatory qualifications (Eurofound, 2013).

Even though in the current unfavorable institutional and organizational framework that characterizes many aspects of Greek education and society, social partners underline that apprenticeship can operate as a supportive scheme to the existing formal education. However, the existing deficiencies, the declining attractiveness of VET, its limited connection with the labor market, the lack of coordination between different training levels, the lack of a reliable national qualification framework and validation system are all issues linked with the deficient social dialogue between the social partners and the relevant national authorities.

According to GSEVEE (2014: 276-277), within the Law 4186/2013, no substantial provision has been made for an apprenticeship to fulfill in a positive way any market dynamics and help complete students' basic knowledge by acquiring the experience from related professions, in order to facilitate their transition from school to work. The inadequate institutionalization of the VET system and the limitations it besets (e.g.

matching apprenticeship with a relatively short practical training after the completion of studies), the inadequate funding of laboratory facilities, the lack of modern VET programs and educational material, the inadequacies of the teaching staff, literally undermine the apprenticeship system.

A significant progress in this deficit framework would be the development of a meaningful, yet qualitative, social dialogue on training and employment issues through the active involvement of the social partners for the creation and operation of effective practical training with a goal for a more effective transition to employment. The response to the crisis and the redeploying of the productive forces of the country presuppose a new framework for reforming the policies regarding the development and management of human resources. This framework should emphasize not only business support and reinforcement of a new business model through innovative and competitive productive activities, but also the development of new business financing tools and rules for the development of human resources and vocational training, to support 'cooperative development' rather than individual actions, and create new support mechanisms for businesses based on learning results.

In the context of neoliberalism, new ideas, such as the knowledge society, excellence, competitiveness, employability and other ideological mechanisms, have been adopted in both formal education and VET. The aim of the current inadequate and poorly targeted social dialogue is to make them 'compatible' to the functioning of the 'markets'. This status, however, could not be the only dominant one in times of economic crisis and high unemployment. This means that the social dialogue, which must be carried out in conditions of mutual trust, in the context of developing social capital, must be orientated towards developing the basic conditions for upgrading and reforming the coordinates that define the scope of VET. Such an outline includes the issue of developing a stable, reputable and reliable qualifications framework and a transparent system for validation of non-formal and informal learning. However, this process should also include measures relating to the recognition, transfer, accumulation and certification of skills in a transparent and objective manner, providing equal opportunities for training, certification and employment for all, by emphasizing those with low educational qualifications and at risk, or the ones that are directly affected by unemployment, poverty and social exclusion.

In addition, the social dialogue on apprenticeship programs, in particular, must include the following topics as well:

- The role of the learning environment, which should alternate between the workplace and education or training body.
- Whether apprenticeships should be integrated into the formal VET system or operate as a stand-alone scheme.
- The way in which, after successful completion of a training program, trainees acquire a specific qualification compatible with a professional standard as well as an officially recognized certificate.
- The way in which apprentices are placed under an official employment status during their apprenticeship and are paid for their work.
- The circumstances under which apprenticeship agreements or formal agreements between the employer and the apprentice is drawn up, as well as the relevant contract with the educational institution.
- The way in which previous knowledge and experience gained in a non-formal or informal manner are validated.

Actions or initiatives or workplace learning programs in which the quality of the final outcome is questionable and the social security is not guaranteed can degenerate into contemptible job-creating systems without any chance of acquiring skills. Empowering the workplace as a learning field could work effectively to the transition of young people from education to the labour market, with a prerequisite, however, for creating a holistic and structured apprenticeship system that focuses on learning outcomes, taking into consideration the needs of trainees as well as the employees and respecting the conditions and procedures that would ensure both the required quality and the desired results.

Social partners in Greece –a country that is more than ever in need for a serious restructuring of its VET and apprenticeship system as well as a reform of its social dialogue practices– point out that the basic development feature of an adequate and effective VET system is the necessity for a close and continuous cooperation between the educational system and the labor market to ensure the complementarity or synergy between practical training, which is usually provided at the end of the formal educational process and aims to the understanding and adjustment of the trainees in

everything they have learned in theory, and the work experience so as to access the or re-enter the labor market.

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