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## **The Undeserved Marginality of the Initial Italian VET System: Searching for Key Actions for Promotion**

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### **Abstract**

Even after the establishment of the Italian dual system, the opinion and level of knowledge of the population about the Italian VET system (in particular, the parents of the lower secondary school students) do not seem to correspond to the increase in awareness by the Italian Government and Regions. The study is conducted by mixing qualitative and quantitative methodologies. In the first exploratory part of the research, the opinions of students' parents and teachers were collected through an online survey (91 participants), while the second part (still in progress) involves the administration of semi-structured interviews to teachers belonging to the student guidance networks. The results analysed so far show that most survey respondents do not know the characteristics of the VET programs and the possibilities available for the students. In particular, 75 % of the sample is unaware of the existence of a fourth year, or approximately 60 % are unaware of the existence of the dual system and of the possibility of undertaking an apprenticeship. Considering that 40 % of the surveyed people deal with guidance in schools, it is possible to assert that the situation is worrying. Several proposals for action have been identified for the promotion of the VET system in Italy. The study confirms the dichotomous form of the visibility of the Italian VET system. On the one hand, the strengths and potentials of the training offer and learning contexts are valued; on the other hand, a widespread misunderstanding of the VET system, including by key people in guidance systems, emerges. As already mentioned, in the next stages of the research project, we intend to identify specifically what are the possible actions to unhinge this situation.

### **Keywords**

guidance networks, vocational education and training, promotion, system visibility

### **1 Background and aim of the study**

According to the report of CNOS-FAP and Noviter (2018), the actual political-cultural season could favour the consolidation and development of the Italian Vocational Education and Training (VET) system. The connection between the school system and the VET system introduced by Legislative Decree 61/2017 represents, on the one hand, a recognition of substantial parity between the two Italian training paths (School and VET system), on the other hand, the acknowledgement of the value of the methodological and didactic aspects typical of the initial Italian VET, such as the active teaching, the laboratory work, the competencies and work-based



approach, the personalization of courses, and the intrinsic learning potential of an alternation between training and work (Nicoli, 2018; Tacconi, 2015; Tacconi & Messetti, 2018). However, the opinion and level of knowledge that the population have of the initial VET system (in particular, the parents of the lower secondary school students) does not seem to correspond to the increase in awareness on the part of the government and the Regions. Indeed, the lack of knowledge of the initial VET system, already documented in the past (Scalmato, 2015), could be the cause of the lack of growth in enrolments in VET centres (MIUR, 2019). As a result, the research questions that guided the present study are as follow: what information struggles to reach stakeholders? What could be the key actions for promoting the initial Italian VET system? What role does the lower secondary school student orientation service play? On this basis, this exploratory study aims to involve teachers, parents and guidance operators of the lower secondary school with a threefold purpose: 1) to collect information regarding the knowledge and opinions about the courses of the initial Italian VET; 2) to identify possible actions able to promote the IeFP system among the interested parties, 3) to activate the research participants in strengthening the system through the collaboration of the networks for students guidance.

## 2 Methodology

The study is conducted by mixing qualitative and quantitative methodologies. This choice is due to the different nature of the set aims. In the first exploratory part of the research, the opinions of students' parents and teachers were collected through a survey (91 participants). The questionnaire consists of the following three sections:

1. collection of personal data including gender, age, geographical area of residence, role (teacher and/or teacher responsible for guidance), and last title conferred;
2. level of knowledge about i) the Italian VET system, ii) the regulation on the right and duty to education and training, iii) the presence of schools or centres that offer VET on the territory;
3. opinions and statements relating to the Italian VET system (in this section, the free writing of keywords in response to stimulus questions was requested).

The second part of the study (still in progress) involves the administration of semi-structured interviews with teachers and executives belonging to the student guidance networks. The interview track was developed based on the results that emerged from the first part of the study, which have also been shown to the participants of the second part as a trigger element for the interview. This methodological choice aims to give the possibility both to collect information and to involve the interviewees in promoting VET courses, referring to the principles of action research. The analysis of the interviews follows the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser et al., 1968).

## 3 Results

### 3.1 Survey results

From the analysis of the data collected in the first part of the research, the following descriptive statistics emerged. The sample is mainly composed of women (85.87%), aged between 28 and 65 years ( $M = 47$  years), with a qualification equivalent to a diploma or higher (96.74%). More than 76% of the participants have children, 69.57% of these are teachers. Furthermore, among the participating teachers, almost 44% are involved in guidance projects in their home institution. Concerning the information acquired regarding the VET system, more than 81% of the participants believe that the initial VET learning paths last 3 years, and only 25% of respondents are aware of the possibility of a fourth year. Moreover, only 18.48% knows the opportunity of

a further fifth supplementary year. About 72% of subjects believe that the qualifications and diplomas issued by VET courses are recognized nationally, more than 20% answered that qualifications are recognized at the provincial or regional level, and about 8% say they do not know. Moreover, 63% of the participants believe they are well aware of what is meant by speaking of a “three-year VET course” and professional qualification, while only 36.96% of the subjects state that they know the four-year VET courses for a professional degree. This percentage drops further (19.57%) regarding the “dual path”, but while most of the subjects (43.48%) have an idea, albeit vague, concerning the professional diploma paths. For more than half of the subjects (53.26%) the expression “dual path” is completely new. Almost 85% of subjects declared that they know the Higher Technical Institutes (*Istituti Tecnici Superiori* - ITS) well, 42% the concept of Higher artistic, musical and dance training (*Alta Formazione Artistica, Musicale e coreutica* - AFAM) and almost 47.83% knows the Higher Technical Education and Training courses (*Istruzione e Formazione Tecnica Superiore* - IFTS). Most of the study participants are aware that a young person can fulfil the right and duty of vocational education and training by attending VET courses (90.22%) or secondary school (86.96%) while only 38.04% also indicate dual apprenticeship paths (dual system) as an alternative. More than 33% of the subjects who participated in the study had difficulty in indicating at least three centres or schools that offer VET courses on their territory. About 56% of subjects declared that would enrol their child in a VET course, indicating as a positive element the practical preparation and the possibility of accessing the world of work in a relatively short time. About half of these participants emphasized the inclination and characteristics of the boy/girl as fundamental for the choice. Even among the participants who would not consider the VET option for their daughters and sons, the evaluation of the specific interests and abilities of the student seems to emerge as predominant. About 56% of respondents declared that would enrol their child in a VET course, indicating as a positive element the practical preparation and the possibility of accessing the world of work in a relatively short time. About half of these participants emphasized the inclination and characteristics of the boy/girl as fundamental for the choice. Even among the participants who would not consider the VET option for their daughters and sons, the evaluation of the specific interests and abilities of the student seems to emerge as predominant. Almost all of the sample considers VET pathways more practical than theoretical but able to prepare students for manual work by providing practical skills that can be immediately used in the labour market. 85% of participants believe that VET courses teach how to behave in the workplace by preparing for innovative jobs, including with the use of new technologies (86.96%). Furthermore, Two-thirds of the sample declared that these are easier paths than other secondary schools and although their duration is less than other paths. According to this group, VET courses allow fulfilling the compulsory schooling by guiding students in their study and work choices as well as entrepreneurial skills. On the contrary, more than half of the study participants answered that VET pathways offer a little chance of study continuation and that they are chosen by students unmotivated to study, at risk of school drop-out. Finally, the analysis of the results of the questionnaire third part shows that the words most frequently associated by participants to VET are *work*, *practice*, and *workshop*. The 276 total items spontaneously written by the participants are grouped as follow: i) 105 refer to joined *manual skills* and *practice*, *workshops*, skills and qualifications *acquisition*, professionalism; ii) 80 refer to work and occupation or indicate specific occupational profiles (e.g. *cook*, *mechanic*, *plumber*, *beautician*, *gardener*, ...) and occupational areas (e.g. *agriculture*, *catering*, *crafts*); iii) 30 cite *training/education* and *study*, *apprenticeship*, *traineeship* and *internship*; vi) 20 refer to characteristics of VET courses such as *brevity*, *speed*, *ease*, relationship with *attitudes*, *preferences* or *passions*.

### 3.2 Semi structured-interview (preliminary results)

From the analysis of the two interviews carried out so far, the first categories of proposals emerged regarding the promotion of the VET system in Italy. Specifically, on the basis of the data collected, the following five proposals for action are highlighted:

- promoting vet by drawing attention to the practical and experiential approach to learning and knowledge;
- promoting vet by highlighting the connection with the labour market, i.e. pointing out internships, collaboration within VET centres and companies etc.;
- disseminating information about VET system in lower secondary school, involving the teachers responsible for guidance;
- undermine the stereotype that vet courses are intended for unmotivated students;
- the VET system should be promoted by the regions in its entirety, giving equal importance to all types of courses offered.

Since this part of the research is still in progress, we plan to enrich the results by continuing with the data collection.

## 4 Conclusions

The information emerging from the survey's responses gives us an important clue as to what could be one of the causes of the poor visibility of the VET system. Indeed, the results analysed so far show that most of the participants do not know the characteristics of the VET programs and the possibilities available to students: 75% of them is unaware of the existence of the four-years programmes, and 60% is unaware of the existence of the dual system. Considering that 40% of the surveyed people deal with guidance in schools, it is possible to assert that this could be a critical point of the Italian guidance system, that makes the situation worrying. Other than that, results show a parallel and distinct line of motivations linked to the idea that VET paths can be more limiting in terms of subsequent choices and options, also about job prospects. It, therefore, seems that they are considered as less preferable training paths compared to others, albeit always technical/practical, evaluated more qualifying, less sectoral, and more complete. This double line of thought seems to recur. In fact, the study participants would recommend initial VET pathways partly based on their relevance to manual aptitudes or strong practices, clear interests in a specific work environment or desire to be able to quickly enter the world of work, partly generally considering them a good option for those students who feel frustrated by theoretical study, who have no interest in any longer study paths, university or who generally require a greater commitment "on books". The analysis of qualitative data, in addition to highlighting the first set of action proposals, confirms the problems shown by the analysis of the questionnaire. The analysis of further interviews and the involvement of stakeholders in the research project will allow enriching and better outline the actions to promote the Italian system. In summary, this exploratory study confirms the dichotomous form of the visibility of the Italian VET system: on the one hand, the strengths and potentials of the training offer and learning contexts are valued, on the other hand, a widespread misunderstanding of the VET system, including by key people in guidance systems, emerges. As already mentioned, in the next stages of the research project we intend to identify specifically what are the possible actions to unhinge this situation.

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