

A NEW MODEL OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN BRAŞOV COUNTY

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Abstract: *The purpose of the paper is to describe the vocational system and its benefits from both the economic and social perspective, and analyze its implementation in Romania, the German Vocational School Kronstadt being the first vocational school in our country. The results of the research at the Schaeffler Romania company, the top economic agent that provides the practical training for many students involved in this educational system, have emphasized the specific contributions of vocational education and training which are beneficial not only for students but also for the company itself, as well as for the entire society.*

Key words: *vocational education and training, youth unemployment, social inclusion, dual system in Romania.*

1. Introduction

Vocational Education and Training (VET) has received much appreciation in recent years in academic papers, but also in the political arena, for two major reasons. First of all, it is perceived as a suitable instrument of promoting economic growth. Secondly, it is regarded as a potentially powerful method to encourage social inclusion.

In the European context, it is seen as an important element in the transformation of the European economy and there are numerous examples of presumed effects in different countries. The purpose of VET is to provide individuals with skills that are applicable in the workplace. It is also superior to general education from a socializing point of view, as well as in

promoting access to the labour market.

The fact that such a vocational school was opened in the county of Braşov raised an interest to get an insight into what it actually vocational education and training means and what implications this might have on individuals and the society.

2. Vocational Education and Training

Vocational Education and Training aims to equip people with knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences required in particular occupations or, more broadly, on the labour market [5] UNESCO supports vocational education and training and sees it as being a tool to reduce poverty, recover the economy and develop sustainability. At the Shanghai UNESCO Congress the participants concluded that VET should be a top priority to deal with problems such as

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global unemployment (especially among the youth) and building a sustainable society (3rd TVET Congress, organized by UNESCO, Shanghai, May 2012).

2.1. Effects of VET

In order to reach EU's target of becoming a "smart, sustainable and inclusive" economy, characterized by social cohesion, and high level of employment and productivity in the educational field, the European Commission proposed to launch a "Youth employment framework" with the purpose of reducing the rate of unemployment and the early school leaving. One of the aims of this framework is to strengthen the attractiveness of the vocational education and training and to promote the transition of young people into the labor market through apprenticeships. Thus VET is thought to be "an engine for economic growth and a vehicle for social inclusion" [4].

2.1.1. Decreasing youth unemployment

One of the main topics debated in the field of vocational education and training is whether it truly represents a remedy for youth unemployment. The whole Europe is confronting with this major problem and is looking for possible ways out. In January 2013, 23% of active young people were jobless, with the rates ranging from 15% or less in Austria, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands to over 55% in Greece and Spain. The figures are quite high, with over 5.5 million people under the age of 25 unemployed in the European Union [7]. As for Romania, the annual average youth unemployment rate is almost four times the

rate of unemployment among adults, with 23% young people unemployed with ages between 15 and 24 [9]. Youth unemployment is a major problem from an economic and social point of view and vocational training and education gives the possibility to young people to get access to the labor market, since it increases skills and competencies which make young people more competitive.

In many countries, modern apprenticeships are seen as a superior form of VET as far as future employment is concerned. This form of VET is dominant only in few European countries, particularly Germany, Austria and Denmark. In these countries, the so called "dual education system" plays an important role.

In Fig. 1.1 it has been calculated the unemployment rate among youth (under 25 years of age) as an annual average in the European Union (EU-27), Germany, Austria and Romania. As the figure shows, youth unemployment has faced a better evolution in the countries where the dual system is implemented, the percentage being way below the European and Romanian average.

Also, according to Professor Eric A. Hanushek, from Hoover Institution at Stanford University, who studied the relationship between the proportion of students who are in some sort of vocational training and the youth unemployment rate for a selection of countries in the OECD, there is indeed a relationship between youth unemployment and vocational training. His studies showed that a 10% greater participation in vocational education leads to a 2% lower youth unemployment rate [1].

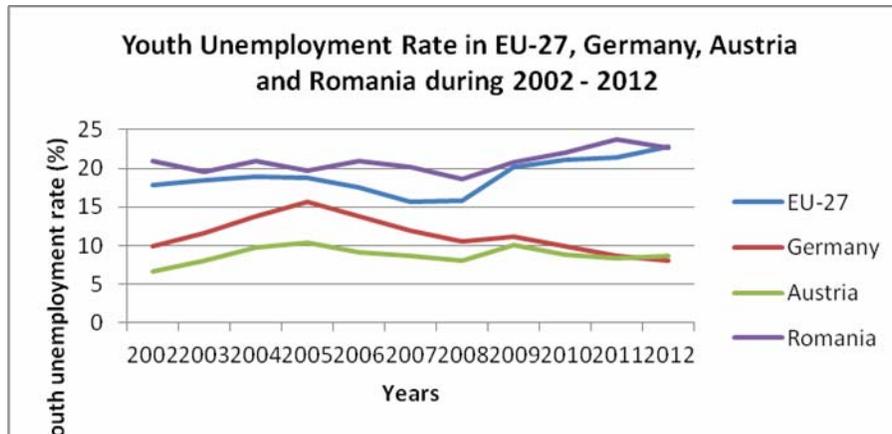


Fig. 1. *Youth Unemployment Rate in EU-27, Germany, Austria and Romania during 2002 – 2012*

2.1.2. Social inclusion

Social exclusion refers to “the complex processes that deny certain groups access to rights, opportunities, and resources that are key to social integration” (Institute of Social Inclusion at Adler School of Professional Psychology) [8]. This exclusion is many times connected to a person’s social background, living standards, educational status, and race or it might refer to certain groups, for example ethnic minorities, low-skilled workers and immigrants . The result of social exclusion is that it prevents individuals from taking part in the social, economic or political life as others do.

Among the key solutions that the European Commission (2010) came up with are improving access to work and education, making an effort to prevent dropping out of school and better use of EU funds to support social inclusion and combat discrimination. Therefore, vocational education and training comes as an important element which acts in opposition to social exclusion [11].

Examples from other countries prove that vocational education and training can help restraining the massive drop-out of

general compulsory school or lack of motivation in continuing the studies to a higher level can be controlled. Apparently around 60% of school-leavers in Germany choose to enter the Dual Education System every year [11].

3. The German Vocational School "Kronstadt"

Schaeffler Romania has made one first important step in this direction by being the top partner for practical training of the German Vocational School "Kronstadt", the first school in our country that adopted the dual education system from Germany.

This is the first vocational school in Romania that adopted the German dual education system. In February 2012 the Ministry of Education and Research approved the functioning of the 2 – year vocational education. In the same month, Braşov City Hall together with the Braşov School Inspectorate, the Economic Agents DWK Fit for Future and the Technical College “Mircea Cristea” signed the collaboration protocol to start the German Vocational School. The company Schaeffler Romania is the main partner in providing the practical trainings and was

the one who came up with the idea of a vocational school in the county of Braşov.

The main reasons for getting involved in the vocational system were the low level of qualification of those students who graduated from a technical institution, the inappropriate endowment of technical schools and also the faulty curriculum which could not be adapted to the latest technologies. The need for properly qualified work force in production was becoming greater and, at the same time, more difficult to find. Changes were clearly a necessity for the companies activating in the industrial sector. Thus, the German Vocational School Kronstadt came as a strategy to ensure the human resources needed in production and was part of the strategic corporate social responsibility activities that Schaeffler Romania engaged in.

The target group consists of graduates of the 9th grade, with ages between 16 and 18 years old. The duration of the vocational school is 2 years, compared to 3 years in Germany, due to the Romanian Legislation. The years of study are structured in the following way: 40% theory and 60% practical training in the first year, while in the second year the emphasis is even more on the practical trainings with 75% of the curriculum (25% theory).

The decision to support the continuous development of this type of educational system is a proof that private companies understand its importance.

The students can choose where they want to carry out their practical training. The 13 economic agents who provide the practical trainings are well-known companies from the industrial sector in the county of Braşov: Schaeffler Romania, Continental, Aerotec, Caditec, Draxlmaier, Ramoss, Preh, Rege, HIB, Stabilus, Hutchinson, Kronspan and Elmas.

The financial support for each student consists in 200 lei/month from the economic agent and 200 lei/month from the state, plus other facilities such as free transportation to and from the workplace, and a free meal every day. At the end of his studies, the student, after being examined, will receive an International Diploma of Qualification, level II. There is no obligation stipulated in the contract as far as employment is concerned, so after the 2-year training students are free to choose whether they want to remain as employees in the company, choose to work within another company or continue their studies in pursuing a high school diploma.

4. Current and future benefits of vocational education and training in Braşov county

This paper examines the effects of implementing the German dual system in Romania, namely in the county of Braşov. Benefits of this system can arise at different points in time and can take various forms, but many of them are not easily quantifiable, especially at this stage of its development. We have to take into consideration the fact that the German Vocational School Kronstadt opened only in September 2012. The main focus was on the practical trainings that take place within the company Schaeffler Romania, as a top partner of the German Vocational School Kronstadt. Therefore, the purpose of the paper was to assess subjective current and future benefits of vocational education and training and to identify possible areas for improvement. In order to do this it was resorted to a qualitative research.

The model used for the research was “Depth Interviewing” because “with no social pressure to conform to group responses, respondents can be questioned in-depth in a context that allows them to

really express how they feel [3]”. The interviews were taken in two phases: one with the instructors and the second one with the students. The reason for this was to better assess the opinions regarding vocational education and training from both perspectives, of the economic agent (in this case Schaeffler Romania) and of the individual (student).

The main objectives of this exploratory research were to: identify the reasons and motivations of the students for choosing the dual education system over general education, and for their option for Schaeffler as the provider of practical training; identify the benefits of this vocational education system for the students, the economic agent and the society, and determine problems and challenges that both students and instructors are confronted with during the practical trainings.

After interviewing the instructors and the students, the conclusion was that there is still room for improvement, the dual system adopted in the county of Braşov through the German Vocational School Kronstadt is indeed an important step towards economic growth and social inclusion due to the multitude of benefits it brings in the society and in each individual’s life. The research at the company Schaeffler gave an insight into what it means to start a battle against old mentalities and a faulty educational system.

The influence of this dual system goes in three directions: the individual (student), the economic agent and the society.

For the students the benefits are significant. The employment chances are considerably higher after graduating from the vocational school due to the baggage of skills and knowledge that they receive during their studies makes them better qualified and competitive on the labor market.

The economic agent, Schaeffler Company in this case, will select those students who performed better during their training and will offer them a job within the company. The expectation for the 2013 series is that 40% out of 79 students will become Schaeffler employees at the end of their studies, and the rate is anticipated to rise to 65% in the next generations (according to the coordinator of instructors). We do have to take into consideration that the number of students who will be accepted at the German Vocational School Kronstadt is expected to double in the years to come, compared to 2012.

Moreover, as many of the students said during the interview, they would like to become employees at Schaeffler because they have already got used to the environment and people. Also, the practical trainings helped them to accommodate to a strict schedule and receive an insight to what it means real work. This only makes the transition from school to work smoother and easier.

Many of them admitted during the interview that they prefer to do the practical work rather than studying only theory, thus the reason for choosing a vocational school. Nowadays this is another important factor to be taken into consideration because vocational schooling counteracts early dropping out of school among young people who claim to be tired of school (especially those who are categorized as “low-achievers”).

In Romania this has become an important issue that needs much attention because it involves not only the students, but also teachers, parents and the community. After studying this matter in detail, UNICEF presented a result that is quite worrying, only “19.2% of people aged 18 – 24 had successfully completed only eight grades. This means that roughly one out of five young people has no

qualification at all” in Romania in 2007 [10]. UNICEF reached the conclusion that the main cause of dropping out of school is poverty.

One of the methods proposed by UNICEF to combat school abandonment was to focus more on the achievement of competencies rather than just transferring information to children. We consider that vocational education and training represents that platform on which students can receive more than just information and therefore, it can play a key role in the fight against poor motivation and early dropping out of school.

The other major implication is the concept of social inclusion. It is no secret that in many countries, Romania as well, students enrolling in VET tend to be the lowest attainers at the end of compulsory education [2]. Many young people from the lower social class can benefit from specific education. Their acquiring of skills and competencies leads not only to employment but also to avoid social fragmentation. This is the case with the practical trainings at Schaeffler also. Out of 79 students who chose to do their practical training, 7 of them have some special cases. Three students are abandoned while four of them can be considered semi-abandoned since their parents are alive but cannot offer them financial support. Furthermore, only 40% of students are from the city of Braşov, the rest of 60% are from the areas surrounding Braşov, or even other regions like Iaşi, Maramureş, Covasna, Buzău or Vaslui. All of them benefit from these trainings by being provided also with transportation, food, shelter and money. Again, it is worth while to remember that the number of students who will apply in the next years at the German Vocational School Kronstadt (and implicitly at the practical trainings in Schaeffler) is expected to increase.

The company has also many advantages from these practical trainings which have a positive effect in the sense that qualified and well trained employees will lead to the increasing of labor productivity. Plus there is also the advantage of saving costs from recruiting external workforce, no need of training new workers in production, and less time spent on integration with each worker who has been previously trained within Schaeffler.

The continuous enhancement of the image of the company is not to be neglected. As students confirmed, ”they heard others speaking well of the company” thus their choice to do the practical training inside Schaeffler. The corporate image is bound to improve as more and more publicity is made through the German Vocational School Schaeffler. One conclusive example would be the participation at the high schools fair from April 2012, organized by Schaeffler company, where it really raised the standards compared to other technical high schools participation.

The German Vocational School offers a great opportunity to students from all social and educational backgrounds. It is the only one in the educational system in Romania that provides young people the chance to learn a trade, to apply the theoretical knowledge in a practical way, at the same time with the financial support of 400 RON/month which makes this experience as real as in a full-time workplace.

The students, being in their teens, are tempted to push the limits as much as possible and even break the rules (as in the case of smoking or unjustified absenteeism). It is the stage in their life when they are trying to discover their identity, to experience everything and to challenge the authority, breaking the rules giving them a sense of strength. To all of this we can add the faulty educational system from all

these years in terms of consistency and application of rules and sanctions. This has only approved the behavior of students who did not comply with regulations. This is why, as the coordinator of instructors had mentioned during our interview, a climate with clearly established rules, that are implemented by all instructors with consistency and that attracts sanctions, it's mandatory and it is beneficial to the teenagers' development.

Of course, changes will appear in time, that is why there is much need for patience and perseverance. We are talking about changing a faulty mentality and for this there is much time needed, even years. But with much determination and with the belief that when setting high standards for all students, they will rise to the expectation, in time we will see the results. The schooling system is a major venue for transmitting values, norms and codes of behavior to young people and the effects are of socioeconomic importance that affect the whole society. Education is the path towards a sustainable growth, and vocational education and training is a valuable instrument to shape the future of society.

5. Conclusions

Nowadays, there is a growing emphasis on the concept of vocational education and training (VET) and, as presented in this paper, the European Commission proposed this educational system as a tool for social, economic and human capital development. In today's European context, sustainable development is extremely important for preserving our society and for creating a better future for the generations to come. A fruitful development, from a social and economic point of view, requires qualified human capital and professional qualifications that cannot be achieved in the general secondary education or university. When it comes to emerging

industries and modern trades such as CNC operator, electro mechanic, or older trades like welder, or tool and die maker, the vocational education system is the way to achieve these skills. We must take into consideration, and actually draw the attention upon the fact that an industrial company cannot function only with university graduates but it also needs people in production.

The outcomes of VET are promising: qualified and skilled labour force which will improve the productivity of the company, thus making it more competitive, consolidated and able to develop from an economic point of view. The reduction of poverty is expected to happen through the increase of social inclusion along with the decrease of youth unemployment, and there is anticipation regarding the decreasing of school drop – outs.

Even more, the German Vocational School Kronstadt became an example for the authorities of other counties in Romania. The President of the German Economic Club, local counselor Werner Braun, mentioned that the local authorities from Piteşti, Sibiu, Alba, and Timişoara have been very interested to follow the model.

The renewed interest in VET, reflected in the amount of papers published in recent years, is a promising progress. There are still large areas where our knowledge is limited, including when these practical trainings will have an actual effect on productivity and circumstances under which institutional change is likely to take place, but the overall idea is that vocational education appears to have many advantages.

Europe has long approved the use of vocational education to prepare young people for entry into workforce and Romania has made a step forward in the right direction through the implementation of this system.

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