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Article

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International Journal for Research in Vocational Education and Training (IJRVET)

Provided in Cooperation with:

European Research Network in Vocational Education and Training (VETNET), European Educational Research Association

Suggested Citation: Baumann, Fabienne-Agnes; Vossiek, Janis (2022) : Changing skill formation in Greece and Italy: Crisis-induced reforms in light of common institutional legacies, International Journal for Research in Vocational Education and Training (IJRVET), ISSN 2197-8646, European Research Network in Vocational Education and Training (VETNET), European Educational Research Association, Bremen, Vol. 9, Iss. 3, pp. 340-362, <https://doi.org/10.13152/IJRVET.9.3.3>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/268526>

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Changing Skill Formation in Greece and Italy – Crisis-Induced Reforms in Light of Common Institutional Legacies

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Received: 27 April 2022, Accepted: 18 October 2022

Abstract

Context: After the Eurozone crisis unfolded a decade ago, comparative political economy has investigated reforms of public administration, labour market, welfare state and economic policy particularly in Southern European nations which were hit hardest by the crisis. However, analyses of skill formation reform, particularly vocational education and training (VET), have been scant, despite a common problem pressure for reforms emanating from stubbornly high rates of youth unemployment and similar legacies of statist VET.

Approach: We investigate VET reforms brought underway in Greece and Italy during and in the aftermath of the crisis, asking how far apprenticeship-like forms of learning within their VET systems were strengthened. Empirically, we base our analysis on primary and secondary sources, having conducted semi-structured expert interviews in Greece and Italy in 2019.

Results: We find that both countries attempted to strengthen the role of apprenticeship and work-based learning, but that politics differed across the two cases in the context of the Eurozone crisis. While in Italy, reforms were 'internalised' and shaped by domestic politics, Greek reforms were largely driven exogenously by the negotiations with the Troika.

Conclusion: Although Italy and Greece have undertaken reforms to reduce the dominance of the state in VET provision by expanding apprenticeships and work-based learning, these

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do not amount to large scale changes to the dominant logic of school-based VET provision. In order to boost their potential in terms of practical learning both countries would need to continue on their reform pathways.

Keywords: Apprenticeship, Economic Recession, Greece, Italy, Policy Analysis, Vocational Education and Training, VET

1 Introduction

Especially since the last decade, dual training systems have featured prominently in international discourses among policy experts and scholars as an attractive option to curb youth unemployment. Among the specific strengths of dual training systems, learning in authentic work processes within firms is found to be an important factor that eases the learning-to-work transition. Moreover, involving firms in the governance of skill formation systems can help to align training content to firms' labour market needs, while the standardisation of learning at the workplace can ensure that the developed skills have labour market value beyond the individual training firm. Well-developed dual training systems can also be a valuable alternative for youths, who do not (want to) enter higher education.

Yet, even among rich Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) democracies, there are few countries with extensive dual vocational education and training (VET) in terms of the number of learners and companies involved. In many nations, apprenticeships had lost significance during the second half of the 20th century and satisfying the coordination needs arising in dual VET, especially among vocational schools, firms and the state has frequently proven difficult (Busemeyer, 2015; Vossiek, 2018). In international comparison, many states opted for the expansion of school-based VET provision instead of shoring up apprenticeships, which led to the emergence of training systems that can be characterised as statist skill formation.

In this paper, we examine skill formation in Greece and Italy as cases of statist skill formation and ask in how far we can detect a revitalisation of apprenticeships and other forms of work-based learning in the last decade in the context of economic crisis. Both countries were hit hard during the external shock of the Eurozone crisis, which necessitated structural economic and labour-market reforms. Italy and Greece constitute extreme cases of youth unemployment in European comparison. For 2020, it was estimated that youth unemployment among those aged between 15 and 29 stood close to 30% in Greece and over 22% in Italy (Tamesberger & Bacher, 2021, p. 4). Against this backdrop, we analyse reforms in Greece's and Italy's skill formation systems. We particularly focus on changes to firm involvement and to the practical component of learning, which are internationally debated as promising factors to improve school-to-work transitions. The more recent developments in work-based

learning were not built from scratch, but upon institutional legacies of apprenticeships in both countries, even if their share in skill provision is not as extensive as the share of school-based VET. Our descriptive case studies cover reform initiatives from the first years after the crisis until roughly 2019¹ and mainly focus on policy outputs, while policy implementation remains a topic for further research. Furthermore, we only shed light on domestic reform programs and do not include European Union (EU) programs such as the European Youth Guarantee of the Alliance for Apprenticeships.

Our two main research questions are first, how different or similar the domestic policy outputs were in cross-country comparison considering similar statist VET systems. Second, we ask how far these reforms were connected to the politics of the Eurozone crisis.

Empirically, we draw our findings from primary and secondary sources, having conducted semi-structured expert interviews with VET stakeholders in Greece and Italy (see Annex 1 at the end of the paper for an overview of the interviews) while also compiling evidence from official documents such as Memoranda of Understanding, and reviewing relevant literature and statistical data. We triangulated these sources to arrive at our findings. The qualitative analysis of the material gathered was structured by two main categories: First, more recent VET reforms towards an increase of firm-involvement and of learning in the workplace in the two country cases, and second, the Eurozone crisis and its repercussions for Greece and Italy in the area of training policies.

The paper is structured as follows. Section two introduces theoretical perspectives on skill formation systems, which act as a framework to situate our cases and to discuss the potential reform options for Greek and Italian VET. Section three then presents our two case studies, outlining the impact of the economic crisis, the state of VET before the crisis and the reforms that were undertaken for each case. Section 4 then discusses how the reforms related to the Eurozone crisis and which factors might hamper their effectiveness in expanding work-based learning. The paper concludes by relating the main findings from our descriptive case studies to debates within the current comparative political economy literature on skill formation and points to questions for future research.

2 Comparative Political Economy and Skill Formation Regimes

Contributions to the comparative political economy of VET have devoted ample attention to collective skill formation systems (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012; Emmenegger & Seitzl, 2020), typically found in Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, Austria and the Netherlands. These systems are set apart from other skill formation regimes because the provision, financing, standardization and reform of dual VET are the collective responsibility of employers,

¹ 2019 represents the last year before the COVID19-pandemic, which constitutes another external shock that brought about distinct challenges for VET systems across the globe.

their associations, the state and, to a lesser degree, trade unions. Typically, a large share of employers provides training, which often comes in the form of dual apprenticeships and leads to standardised and certified skills, which are fully recognised in national labour markets.

In comparison, statist systems such as Italy and Greece integrate VET into the public education system and offer specific school-based vocational tracks alongside general education, commonly at the upper secondary level. Dual training programs are usually limited to very few sectors and employers. Given the extensive role for the state in funding, regulating and providing skill formation and, consequently, low firm involvement, statist regimes can experience difficulties in updating VET contents to changing labour market demands (Crouch et al., 2004). Moreover, in school-based VET practical learning and applying this knowledge in workplace environments often play a minor role. Hence, the fit between the contents of school-based VET and employers' skill needs in quickly changing product markets is often weak, which can lead to a prolonged school-to-work transition for VET graduates, thereby contributing to high rates of youth unemployment, which have been a long-standing problem in Greece and Italy.

For statist regimes it is thus a crucial question how to get more employers involved in skill formation, while at the same time expanding the role of employers and unions in training governance. While there is no explicit research on the question of how statist systems can be transformed towards collective systems, by now there is a rich literature dealing with the question how collective regimes shore up employer involvement in training in changing socio-economic environments that put the functioning of the training system under pressure (Busemeyer et al., 2022; Di Maio et al., 2019; Thelen, 2014; Unterweger, 2020).

Generally speaking, one way to get more employers to train is by creating new programs that combine general, school-based education with training in the workplace. However, the creation of programs alone is unlikely to be sufficient to generate more employer engagement, necessitating public policies to trigger firm participation. Based on Billett and Smith (2003), we can discern between compelling and encouraging policies in the area of VET. While compelling policies put constraints on firms' freedom to train, for instance by introducing training levies or regulating the requirements for firms to be allowed to train, encouraging policies try to support the voluntary engagement of firms in training, for instance by creating institutions that strengthen the coordination of employers. Busemeyer et al. (2022) point to the relevance of orchestration approaches for achieving this goal in their study of Switzerland and Germany. Faced with apprenticeship crises in the 1990s and early 2000s as manifested by a lack of apprenticeship positions, state policymakers in both countries eventually brought together employers and other stakeholders in institutionalised forums of deliberation, creating employer coordination by involving them more strongly in debates on the systems' future reform options, challenges and long-term goals. Another example of the state's relevance for reinforcing employer coordination in a collective skill formation system

is the introduction of short-term apprenticeships in Switzerland (Di Maio et al., 2019, 2020). Here, the state established two-year long apprenticeships out of the consideration to offer more apprenticeship positions to youth at the lower end of the educational spectrum. Yet, at the same time, the state "delegated key competences in the governance of short-tracks to the employers. For instance, employer and occupational associations decide autonomously if they want to introduce a short-track training programme in their respective sector or occupational field" (Di Maio et al., 2020, p. 17). In contrast to these examples of an active state, governments can also adopt a more hands-off approach to VET by giving employers more discretion in training. In Germany and Switzerland this has resulted in training becoming more geared to the preferences of large employers, pointing to segmentalist tendencies in collective skill formation (Emmenegger & Seitzl, 2019; Thelen & Busemeyer, 2012).

Turning to our case studies, we describe the impact of the financial crisis, the state of skill formation before the crisis and the main reforms that ensued up until 2019. We show that Greek reforms were driven by conditionality in negotiations with the Troika, while Italy rather 'internalised' the pressures emanating from the crisis and point to remaining challenges after the reforms. The final section then compares the reforms regarding employer involvement and work-based learning and points to questions for further research.

3 Skill Formation Reforms in Greece and Italy in the Age of the Eurozone Crisis

In the following sections, we analyse the main reforms within VET that took place in Greece and Italy during and after the Eurozone crisis. In section 3.1 we briefly describe the economic context of the crisis for both cases. Section 3.2 then presents the main characteristics of Greece's and Italy's VET systems before the crisis and section 3.3 highlights the main features of skill formation reforms.

3.1 Greece and Italy: Impact of the Financial and Economic Crisis

Greece

Shortly after the beginning of the global financial crisis in 2008 it became obvious that the state of Greek public finances would become unsustainable in the short term, bringing the country to the edge of bankruptcy. Due to a drop in its credit ratings, Greece became unable to attain fresh money on international financial markets at affordable conditions and turned to the "Troika" of European Commission (EC), European Central Bank (ECB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) for financial assistance. What ensued is well-documented by the EU (European Commission, 2022) and by research (Featherstone, 2015; Randall Henning, 2017; Sotiropoulos, 2020): In three consecutive rounds of programme negotiation, Greece received

loans from the EU and the IMF in exchange for public and financial administration reform. Inter alia, the latter contained several austerity measures in public spending, fiscal reform as well as labour and product market and welfare reforms. Among the reforms, the reduction of the minimum wage by 32% (to 511€ per months for full-time employees under the age of 25) in 2012 (Kougias, 2019) has direct implications for firms' costs to hire young apprentices, as apprentice remuneration is related to the minimum wage (see section 3.2 below).

In the third round of negotiations in 2015, changes in the Greek education and training system were stipulated as one of the conditionalities that Greece had to meet in order to attain further financial assistance. In a nutshell, Greece had to agree to follow through with ambitious reforms to its VET system under the conditions of a crisis-ridden economy with little financial leeway. Notably, many of the reforms with labour market but also educational implications were carried out without the consultation of the social partners and sometimes met fierce resistance, especially from Greek Unions (Kougias, 2019; GRE-8).

Italy

Italy' predicament centred above all on its high public debt that eventually amounted to a sovereign debt crisis in 2011/2012 due to which Italy became a major worry to the Eurozone (Bull, 2018; Sacchi, 2015). Thus, during the height of the crisis (2011-2013) the goal of fiscal consolidation that has majorly shaped policy-making in Italy.

In the summer of 2011 the ECB demanded measures from the Berlusconi government to achieve a balanced budget by 2013 (Sacchi, 2015; Sottilotta, 2020). While an emergency reform package was passed shortly after, the European Council felt that the measures were not reassuring enough. The European Commission, in "an unprecedented step", then came to assess and monitor planned structural reforms although Italy was not subjected to a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) (Sacchi, 2015, p. 89). The Italian government, accepting "implicit conditionality", also agreed to surveillance by the IMF as a pre-emptive measure against having to enter a conditional lending program and despite refusing IMF credit (Sacchi, 2015, p. 84).

Having lost credibility due to his handling of the events, Berlusconi resigned in November 2011 and made way for a technocratic Cabinet run by Mario Monti. This change sped up the adoption of structural reforms as Monti declared these a priority (Sottilotta, 2020). Monti's proactive stance on reforms, adopting structural adjustment and austerity measures akin to those demanded from countries directly subjected to MoUs, has been interpreted as an expression of "internalisation" in order to circumvent financial bailout and direct Troika oversight (Morlino & Sottilotta, 2017, 2019; Sottilotta, 2020, authors' captions).

Among the repercussions of the Eurozone crisis in Italy, two stand out particularly. Firstly, there are the much-discussed labour market implications. Italy has long exhibited comparatively high rates especially of youth unemployment, rates then peaked in 2014 at 42.7% and have stayed at 29% or above since then (OECD, 2022). Moreover, since 2010 the percentage

of youths not in employment, education or training (NEETs) in Italy has constantly been above 20% and among the highest in the European Union (Eurostat, 2022).

Secondly, the country has experienced governmental instability due to "[...] a crisis of confidence in Italy's political class" (Sottilotta, 2020, p. 92, citing Bosco & McDonnell, 2012).² In Italy, similar to Greece, administrations have been short-lived with five cabinets being assembled and dissolved in the past decade, none of them being able to finish their tenure. In addition, EU scepticism has increased and anti-establishment parties have gained in popularity (Bull, 2018).

3.2 Skill Formation in Greece and Italy Before the Crisis

Greece

Within the Greek education system, one important general aspect is Greek society's long-standing preference for general, academic education over VET (GRE-1; GRE-4; GRE-6; GRE-9). Perhaps consequently, vocational schools constitute the dominant learning venue for VET, while dual offers have been traditionally quite limited.

The two main pathways of secondary VET are EPAL (Eppagelmatiko Lykeio) schools under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and the EPAS (Eppagelmatiki Schole) scheme run by the OAED (Labour Employment Office) for the of the Ministry of Employment. Studies at EPAL schools usually last three years and entitle their graduates to proceed to higher education. The two year-long EPAS scheme offers work-based learning akin to dual apprenticeship, pupils have two hours of class-based theoretical learning, which takes place after six hours of practical training with an employer. Apprentices are entitled to a remuneration that amounts to 75% of the minimum wage and also counts for social security contributions. While employers are responsible for the content of practical training and the nomination of trainers, financing of the EPAS is mainly public, as the state finances the major part of apprentices' wages, which are either payed directly to the apprentices or to their employers. Moreover, apart from labour market aspects of the apprenticeship contract, training at the workplace has been rather unregulated in terms of learning content and the trainers' qualifications (GRE-3; Lalioti, 2019). One traditional complaint about the EPAS scheme is that its graduates are not entitled to enter into further education within the formal education system. Beyond secondary education, the bulk of post-secondary VET is organised at vocational training institutes (IEK – Institouta Epaggelmatikis Katartisis). Courses at the IEKs usually last two years and entitle their graduates to enter into further or higher education

Looking at participation in VET even before the onset of the economic crisis, the preference within Greek society for general education becomes evident. While the number of

² This is not an entirely new phenomenon in Italy, political shake-ups have been happening frequently during the 1990s, too (Afonso & Bulfone, 2019).

students in general secondary education (GEL – Geniko Lykeio) slightly increased from 230,165 in 2002 to 247,441 in 2010, during the same period the number of students attending school-based VET dropped by roughly 44% from 160,451 to 108,933 (KANEP/GSEE, in: Ioannidou, 2019). In 2015, 88,209 students were enrolled in EPAL, 10,500 in EPAS and 61,860 in IEKs (Athanasouli et al., 2016).

In terms of governance, the role of the social partners was quite limited, effectively making the Ministry of Education the dominant actor in VET policy in terms of curriculum development and reforming the system, despite the role for the Ministry of Employment in running the EPAS dual apprenticeship scheme via the OAED.

Italy

VET in Italy is embedded in a complicated institutional structure in which responsibilities are distributed mainly between national, regional or provincial governments and shared, to a certain extent, with individual firms, organised labour market interests and education and training providers. School-based VET pathways and apprenticeships co-exist. The bandwidth of Italian VET spans from the upper secondary to the tertiary education level. Currently, three different types of apprenticeship exist that have been introduced by Legislative Decree no. 276/2003 (Cedefop, 2017):

- Type 1 apprenticeships leading to a professional diploma;
- Type 2 occupation-based apprenticeships;
- Type 3 apprenticeships of higher education and research.

Apprenticeship types cater for different age groups: Type 1 is for those between the age of 15 and 25, Type 2 and Type 3 are geared at adult learners from the age of 18 to 29 (see table 1 for participant numbers in Italian apprenticeships). All three types combine some kind of formal learning with work experience in a company and are based on an apprenticeship contract that assigns the apprentice the status of an employee in the firm, from which social security and insurance rights/duties are derived for the signatory parties (Angotti, 2019). Hence apprenticeships are subjected to the domain of labour, rather than educational legislation (Cedefop, 2017; Rustico et al., 2020).

Type 1 can be offered as a three- and four-year program in the regional or national VET structures at the level of upper secondary education and time spent training in companies varies from 30% to 50% per school year (Angotti, 2019; Cedefop, 2017). Type 2 is mainly based on in-company training and leads to an occupational qualification recognized by collective agreements in the respective sector, and by the employer. There are no requirements for formal recognition at the national or regional/provincial level (Angotti, 2019; Cedefop, 2016).

Type 3 is divided into a subtype for research and another for higher education. The latter subsumes various qualifications ranging from upper secondary diplomas to non-tertiary post-secondary certificates or higher education degrees. Apprenticeships for research do not form part of the public education system and are commonly recognised through collective bargaining agreements. Depending on the mode of regulation (by regional/provincial level governments or collective agreements), Type 3 can be delivered completely in-company or be coupled with formal learning in an education and training institution (Cedefop, 2016).

Table 1: Participation in Italian Apprenticeships

Region/Year Apprenticeship	North (2017)	Centre (2017)	South (2017)	Italy (2017)
Type 1	7.281	1.260	1.996	10.537
Type 2	239.594	102.945	73.767	416.306
Type 3	631	135	216	982
All types	247.506	104.340	75.979	427.825

Note. Participant numbers by region and type of apprenticeship, absolute figures (INAPP, 2019).

School-based pathways of initial VET are run under the aegis of the national Ministry of Education, University and Research (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, MIUR) as technical and professional education (istruzione tecnica e professionale) or by the regional or provincial governments under the name of professional education and training (istruzione e formazione professionale, IeFP). School-based forms of VET vary with regard to time set aside for practical learning based on differences between qualification routes as well as individual schools.

The programs at the level of upper secondary schooling are offered either as five-year diploma qualifications (issued by MIUR) at technical schools (Istituti Tecnici) or professional schools (Istituti Professionali) or as IeFP by way of three-year vocational qualifications or four-year diplomas (see table 2 for participation in Italian school-based VET). In the case of five-year diploma courses, MIUR is responsible for policy-making, curricula development, examinations and funding. For the IeFP courses MIUR's national standards apply, too, but due to political subsidiarity regulations the Italian regions and the autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano have some leeway for adapting contents to local requirements and are in charge of planning the IeFP provision. The permanent Conference of the state, the regions and autonomous provinces (Conferenza Stato-Regioni) has a say in defining minimum standards for regional VET which can be offered by regional training centres, accredited non-governmental providers or the national technical and professional schools. Funding for IeFP

comes from the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, MLPS) and the regional/provincial governments.

Table 2: Participation in Modes of School-Based VET

Region/Year Mode	North (2018/19)	Centre (2018/19)	South (2018/19)	Italy (2018/19)
IeFP	19.877	7.899	7.943	35.729
Instituti Tecnici	182.153	79.972	197.089	459.214
Instituti Professionali	368.285	141.469	310.216	819.970

Note. Participant numbers by region and mode of school-based VET (MIUR, 2019a).

3.3 Main Reforms of Skill Formation

Greece

Greek VET experienced a very intense reform period between 2013 and 2016, affecting the structure and governance of VET (cf. Cedefop, 2018a), which was partly driven externally by the negotiations between the Greek government and the Troika. One central outcome leading up to a three-year MoU for European Stability Mechanism (ESM) funding in 2015, were five key deliverables within the VET system that had to be enacted by the Greek government (European Commission, 2017): First, to legislate a modern quality framework for VET/Apprenticeships, second, to set up a system to identify skills needs and a process for upgrading programs and accreditation, third, to launch pilots of partnerships with regional authorities and employers in 2015-16, fourth, to provide an integrated implementation plan from the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Education, and OAED to provide the required number of apprenticeships for all vocational education (EPAS and IEK) students by 2016 and at least 33% of all technical secondary education (EPAL) students by 2016-2017, and fifth, to ensure a closer involvement of employers and a greater use of private financing. In sum, these commitments signified a large number of legal and administrative changes, that had to be enacted in a swift manner.

However, the first reform initiatives started before the most intense phase of 2015/2016: The Greek government had already taken steps towards reforming the structure of its VET system with law 4186/2013. It introduced an additional apprenticeship scheme to be provided alongside the offer by EPAS by newly created vocational training schools (SEK – Scholi Epaggelmatikis Kartisis) in order to increase the number of apprenticeships and to potentially replace the EPAS pathway of VET (see Bohlinger & Wolf, 2016). However, SEKs only operated briefly until abolished by law 4386/2016 and had no lasting effect on the Greek VET landscape. Essentially the EPAS scheme stayed intact, thus preserving the longest stan-

ding programs of apprenticeships in Greece and preventing the VET system from becoming even more school-based. The 2013 law already included legal provisions to introduce apprenticeships at the post-secondary level of EPAL schools and IEKs as well as modernising VET governance mechanisms in terms of quality assurance, monitoring, skill identification and matching VET provision to labour market needs. Yet, the "operationalisation and implementation of the [2013] law [was] very slow and partial" (Cedefop, 2018a, p. 45), which might not only be traced back to the economic crisis dominating the political agenda and public administration, but also to the fact that VET has traditionally ranked low on the agenda of education policy-making (GRE-1; GRE-8).

Concerning formal educational structures, the most noteworthy development of the reform process is the extension of apprenticeship-like training into the programs of the EPAL and IEKs. Following Law 4186/2013 and being introduced in 2016, graduates of EPAL programs now have the option of a further year of post-secondary training, which is known as the apprenticeship class (Cedefop, 2018a). The law also created a new option of post-secondary VET so that IEKs can organize one among five semesters of their programs in the form of an apprenticeship, effectively complementing the former mode of placing their students in internships. Following a ministerial decision in 2015, IEKs are mandated to organize one practical semester either in the form of an internship or apprenticeship.

The new apprenticeship options at EPAL and IEK are modelled after the EPAS apprenticeships in terms of apprentice remuneration and the rights and duties of learners and companies. For the EPAL apprenticeship year, 28 hours of learning at the workplace alternate with seven hours per school on a weekly basis, while IEKs offering apprenticeships should offer workplace learning that is equivalent to one semester of learning, amounting to 960 hours. The EPAS certificates are situated at level 4 of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), while graduating from EPALs with one Apprenticeship Year and successfully finishing IEK-programs leads to certificates at level 5 of the NQF. Despite these substantial changes and the upgrading of the role of learning at the workplace in the Greek VET landscape, EPAS graduates can still not into higher education without attending more school-based, general education.

The new quality framework for apprenticeships of 2017 also addressed the regulation of learning at the workplace (i.e. learning agreements, role of company trainers), which only had been loosely regulated before and identified as one weakness of the EPAS apprenticeship scheme (GRE-3; GRE-5). In the future, Greek companies will have to ensure that in-company trainers will attain a training programme, but are not obliged to meet these criteria until 2020. Moreover, the new framework also introduced a new governance architecture, which stipulates a more extended role for the social partners at the central and local levels of VET, in order to tackle the limited input of labour market interests in the design and development of the VET system. Yet, even after the reforms, the decisions of VET-relevant committees,

which have strengthened social partner representation, are not binding for the two main ministries in charge of VET (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Employment) (Cedefop, 2018a). However, one positive side effect of the new role for the social partners was that all important stakeholders have expanded their divisions that are responsible for VET policy (GRE-6).

Italy

While VET has not been an immediate concern for Italy's government during the sovereign debt crisis, its larger national labour market effects eventually led to education and training being addressed in order to counteract youth unemployment and decrease NEET-rates. Particularly the Good School reform (Riforma della Buona Scuola, Law no. 107/2015) and a number of labour policies passed during Matteo Renzi's tenure as prime minister (2014-2016) are prominent measures taken since the onset of the crisis, aiming to increase the level of firm-involvement and degree of practical learning in VET.

Buona Scuola was intended to be a holistic approach to reforming the Italian education and (school-based) vocational system (Capano & Terenzi, 2019). One of its central pillars is the introduction of mandatory hours spent gathering work experience through 'alternation' between school and work (l'alternanza scuola-lavoro³, ASL) (Capano & Terenzi, 2019). ASL is obligatory for students in the last three years of upper secondary education (i.e., the third, fourth and fifth year), regardless of whether they are in a technical vocational or general education pathway.

Apart from aiming to reform the Italian education system towards more workplace-based learning, the Renzi administration followed its predecessors' initiatives to alter the country's labour market regulations. Consequently, several laws and decrees were passed with some provisions also impacting on apprenticeship schemes.

Law no. 78/2014 (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 2014) (in an earlier version Decree Law no. 34/2014) was passed in order to simplify parameters of employment contracts and to generate employment particularly for youths. Decree Law no. 34 established a new type of open-ended employment contract, the "increasing-protection contract" which is supposed to make permanent employment more attractive for employers by reducing "[...] the costs of dismissals during the first three years on the job, with severance pay that increases with employee seniority" (Lodovici et al., 2019, p. 32). Employers with more than 50 employees have to ensure that during the last 36 months, a minimum of 20% of the total number of apprentices is employed permanently after they finish their apprenticeship, only then can new apprentices be recruited (Article 2). In addition, employees with an apprenticeship contract receive a salary in accordance with the hours worked and it has to be ensured that 35%

³ This possibility of gathering work experience exists in Italy since 2003 (Law no. 53) (MIUR, n.d.-a).

of the hours worked are set aside for structured training and apprenticeship contracts to be signed with students under the age of 18 (Article 2).

The second part of the Jobs Act is framework Law no.183 of December 2014 that has been implemented by way of a number of legislative decrees. Particularly relevant with regard to VET is Decree no. 81/2015 (*Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana*, 2015) which introduced changes affecting Type 1 apprenticeships. Firstly, the qualifications obtainable through this type were expanded by adding an upper secondary education diploma and a post-secondary certificate of technical specialization (Article 42, 2(a)). With this, essentially a second Type 1 pathway was created that integrates with the national education system under the supervision of MIUR while the already existing options are part of the regional/provincial level *IeFP*. Moreover, responsibility for the regulation of Type 1 was shifted to collective bargaining. The Decree also calls for an individual learning plan for apprentices in Type 1 and Type 3 to be developed jointly by the education provider and the firm, thereby attributing the latter a greater role in determining learning contents (Article 42, 1).

Decree no. 81/2015 also introduced financial incentives for firms. An apprentice's wage category can be up to two scales below that of skilled workers in the same field of qualification (Article 42, 5(b)). Employers are exempt from paying wages for the time Type 1 and Type 3 apprentices spend in educational facilities and cover only 10% of the cost for the hours spent in in-company training (Article 43, 6, Article 45, 2; Lodovici et al., 2019). Further measures in this vein were brought underway by Law no. 232/2016 (*Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana*, 2016). This legislation introduced three-year-exemptions from social security contributions for firms which recruit on the basis of a permanent contract either students that they accompanied during the *ASL* scheme or those that apprenticed with them through Type 1 or Type 3 (Cedefop, 2018b).

4 Comparative Discussion

In this section we comparatively examine the impact of Eurozone crisis on VET reforms and discuss which challenges remain after the reforms.

4.1 The Impact of Conditionality (Greece) or 'Internalisation' (Italy)

Greece

Greek VET reform between 2013 and 2016 followed a fast reform pace that left little time for evaluation (GRE-4) and encompassed many aspects of the VET system, leaving one interviewee with the impression that, the "volume of reform was simply too big, while it would have been better to focus on a limited number of key priorities" (GRE-6). Notably, during this period there was little social partner involvement as politics were made under in the context

of the conditionalities negotiated between the Troika and the Greek government. While the expansion of apprenticeship places was made one central condition for financial assistance by ECB, EU and IMF, in fact there were little changes in the general incentives for firms to take on apprentices apart from financial incentives (such as lowering of the minimum wage for young Greeks, financing a large part of apprentice remuneration and social security contributions), which led on interviewee to doubt whether "firms are really interested in apprenticeships, when they are supported to a large degree financially following the policies of the memorandum" (GRE-2).

Italy

Different to Greece, Italy had not been subjected to direct intervention by the Troika during the Eurozone crisis. Instead, the country opted to 'internalise' reforms. While education and training did not feature in the early Italian reform packages geared at crisis-mitigation, they soon became central elements in policies addressing crisis repercussions like youth unemployment and elevated NEET rates.

The tumultuous political situation in the aftermath of the debt crisis derailed the full accomplishment of reforms. This is particularly true for the Renzi government's reformist agenda with its centrepieces Buona Scuola and the Jobs Act, both of which were to facilitate, among others, the hiring of apprentices by firms and increase work-based-learning opportunities for upper secondary students. Ongoing modifications of legislation and incoherence in reforms after Renzi's ousting prompted one interviewee to plead "please no more reforms" (ITA-2).

The most significant modifications include alterations of the Jobs Act framework under the Gentiloni and Conte administrations, that touched on the conditions under which firms could profit from tax exemptions when hiring apprentices, continuing to employ their former apprentices, or participating in ASL (Lodovici et al., 2019).

In addition, on the basis of the Budget Law 2019 and Decree no. 774 of 2019 during Conte's first tenure as prime minister, alternance between school and work was reframed as occupational guidance and transversal skills pathways (Percorsi per le competenze trasversali e per l'orientamento, PTCO) and the hours students are to spend learning in firms were reduced (Cedefop, 2020; MIUR, 2019b).

Hence, Italian internalisation must be viewed in the light of a major fallout of the crisis, that is governmental instability, making it difficult to follow through with reforms vis-à-vis an already complex institutional environment underpinning the country's skill formation system.

4.2 Remaining Challenges After the Reforms

Greece

In how far the reforms have strengthened employer involvement within the VET system in a sustainable way remains to be seen, but it seems probable that the system needs further reform in this respect. Private sector employers largely remain unengaged with the VET system. Among Greek companies, 97% have less than ten employees (OECD, 2020), while public enterprises are usually larger than private enterprises. Already before the crisis, the trend pointed towards sinking engagement of private sector companies in apprenticeships: Since 2009, 66% of all apprenticeship positions are located in the public sector, whereas between 2001 and 2008 66% of all apprenticeships had been in the private sector (Lalioti et al., 2018). Moreover, the total number of apprenticeship positions almost halved between 2000 and 2015: The number of available apprenticeships dropped from its peak of 20,360 between 1999 and 2000 to 10,374 between 2014 and 2015 (Lalioti et al., 2018). This trend might be partially explained by the economic crisis, but also by its side effect that many graduates from Greek higher education could not find a job in their respective field of studies and became available for companies at low labour costs, who chose to hire personnel with higher educational credentials and train them on the job rather than to employ apprentices (GRE-5).

Moreover, sticky and high youth unemployment and high NEET-rates are still evident in international comparison even after more than ten years since the economic crisis hit. Tamesberger and Bacher (2021) estimate that unemployment among 15- to 29-year-old Greeks still amounted to 30% of the active labour market population in 2020, while NEET rates for the same population stood at 18,7% in 2020, which was only surpassed by Italy (NEET rate of 23,3% in 2020) in European comparison. The enduring high level of youth unemployment is even more worrisome, when considering that an estimated 200,000 young, highly skilled Greeks have emigrated during the economic crisis (cf. Kougias, 2019). Despite the recent changes to the formal VET system, many firms still have limited knowledge about the new apprenticeship options (GRE-7) and the link between employers and VET design remains weak (GRE-3; GRE-5).

In general, the insertion of apprenticeship components into the EPAL and IEK programs, which are situated at higher levels in the NQF of the education system, can be seen as an attempt to make VET more attractive to students as EPAL and IEK might have a higher reputation than EPAS apprenticeships. At the same time, no evidence is available how the new programs affect the labour market chances of graduates. However, on the basis of unpublished data of his association, one interviewee pointed out the severe matching problems of apprenticeship graduates in the labour market, when asserting that only 20% of graduates find jobs afterwards, and out of those only 30% find a job in the occupational field that they learned (GRE-8).

Italy

Efforts to increase firm-involvement in VET, as introduced by more recent reforms, have been hampered by several issues.

The realisation of ASL (or PTCO) has proven tricky as the conditions of implementation vary greatly. Implementation of ASL occurred gradually between the school years 2015/16 and 2017/18 (MIUR, n.d.-b). Data gathered by MIUR for the school year 2016/17 shows that regarding ASL differences existed between regions, school types and with regard to the host entities (MIUR, 2018). The fact that most firms in Italy are micro- and small firms is an additional difficulty to overcome when organising the work placements (ITA-1; ITA-2). While in the work placement, students' experiences with the program are very heterogenous in terms of contents, didactical underpinnings, and supervision, despite common guidelines by MIUR. There are also concerns that students in alternance are exploited by firms as cheap or unpaid labour due to the government covering a large portion of the accruing costs for firms (ITA-1; ITA-3).

With regard to the modality of the apprenticeship Type 1 and ASL as compulsory element at upper secondary schools of any type, schools frequently feel that they are left to fend for themselves when it comes to realising requirements (ITA-1; ITA-2). In addition, schools fear that their own status as provider in VET could be undermined if too many youths opt for apprenticeships and therefore are sceptical (ITA-1).

The actual take-up of programs is another key issue. Despite introducing "higher educational value" (D'Agostino & Vaccaro, 2021, p. 13) to Type 1 and Type 3 apprenticeships by coupling them with diplomas at the upper secondary and the tertiary level, respectively, the overwhelming majority of learners remains in Type 2 apprenticeships. Type 2 is governed by collective agreements and does not entail an educational degree, thus, more attractive to firms as no time for schooling needs to be set aside. Firms also rather chose to cooperate in the ASL-schemes than Type 1 apprenticeships, as the latter is less attractive financially and regarding contractual obligations (ITA-1). In addition, there is a lack of awareness among learners about Type 1 and Type 3 apprenticeships (ITA-2).

5 Conclusions and Outlook for Further Research

As we have shown in the case studies, VET policy in Greece became subject to conditionality by the negotiations with the Troika, whereas Italy rather 'internalised' its reforms in the context of the crisis. Both countries expanded pathways of work-based learning and tried to increase employer involvement in their VET systems.

In Greece, plans to replace EPAS apprenticeships by school-based training in SEK-schools were discarded in the aftermath of the Troika negotiations, thus not further expanding state dominance in VET provision. Instead, new apprenticeship components were introduced to

EPAL schools and IEKs. Such new pathways were also introduced in Italy. For instance, the Buona Scuola reform introduced mandatory hours of alternation between schools and the workplace, which are obligatory for students in the last three years of upper secondary education in technical vocational as well as general education pathways. Also, Type 1 apprenticeships were expanded by adding an upper secondary education diploma and a post-secondary certificate of technical specialisation. Following the argument of Markowitsch and Wittig (2020), these changes would not result in more collective skill formation given their classification of Italian apprenticeships of Type 1 and 3 as "school/university education" and Greek EPAS as "public training schemes" being distinct from the "professional education" usually found in collective skill formation systems. However, such an assessment would require a thorough investigation of the changes within the educational content of these skill formation tracks, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Also, we cannot rule out the possibility that the recent reforms will incrementally transform the system towards more professional education.

Apart from the expansion of work-based learning, we also found interesting similarities in the use of encouraging VET policies. In Greece, the reduction of the minimum wage has directly lowered the cost of apprenticeship to employers, while Italian employers also enjoy lower costs for apprentices due to lower wage categories for apprentices, wage exemptions for the time apprentices spend in educational facilities and lower social security contributions and tax exemptions for firms hiring their former apprentices. Moreover, Italian Type 1 and 3 apprenticeships now attribute a greater role to firms in determining the learning content. In comparison, the use of compelling policies is more limited. In Greece, for instance, firms are obliged to provide training for their in-company trainers since 2020. In Italy, firms with over 50 employees must hire a minimum of 20% out of their apprentices in the last 36 months in order to be allowed to hire new apprentices. If the use of such incentives and regulations will be a viable pathway of increasing firm participation in both countries lies beyond the scope of this paper and would necessitate a thorough, quantitative analysis of company participation in training.

In terms of governance, we can detect differences among the two cases. The Italian case exhibits stability in its governance for VET, leaving room for improvement concerning the involvement of social partners. Also, Buona Scuola in principle foresees the adaptation of skill formation programs to regional realities, but lacks a national coordinating body that could bridge regional discrepancies, especially concerning funding and infrastructure. In contrast, Greece changed its VET governance in the aftermath of the 2015 agreement with the Troika. The new quality framework for apprenticeships of 2017 gave more importance to the social partners in committees working on the design and development of the VET system, but left the state in the driving seat as committees' recommendations are not binding. However, these changes in formal governance structures can be interpreted as a move akin to orchestration,

creating venues for the exchange between social partners as well as putting VET development more strongly on their agenda, potentially leading to an increase in their capacities to engage in VET politics. What we did not find, is a retreat of the state in training provision and governance by delegating more competences and responsibilities to employer associations or liberalising VET to become more market-based.

In sum, both countries have attempted to boost employer engagement in training by devising new approaches to work-based learning, sometimes adding them to existing programs, and by expanding financial incentives to employers who engage in training, developments which are rather similar despite the fact that Greek policymaking was influenced by negotiations with the Troika, whereas Italy 'internalised' reform pressures emanating from the crisis.

Of course, there is ample leeway for further investigations on VET in these two cases as we mostly focused on policy change and we want to point towards three avenues for future research. First, more evidence is needed on how the changes of VET programs and incentives to employers have really impacted skill provision by firms and the labour market chances of VET graduates. This would not only necessitate a detailed analysis of how firms of different sizes and located in different economic sectors participate in the VET system, but also which pathways lead to stable and well-paid employment for Greek and Italian Youths. Second, and closely related, future research could pay more attention to the interplay between educational, labour market and welfare state institutions in asking which combination of policies could lead to a dampening of youth unemployment and high NEET rates in both cases in light of their commonalities as Mediterranean Market Economies (Amable, 2003). Finally, newer literature within comparative political economy has put a strong focus on the politics of institutional change by investigating, mostly via process tracing, the balance of power between the state and employers, between employers and unions as well as among employers of different sectors and sizes (for examples see: Di Maio et al., 2020; Emmenegger & Seitzl, 2019; Thelen, 2014). Given that Greece and Italy are characterised by multiple cleavages within the camps of employers and unions, strong regional and sectoral differences and frequent government instability, more detailed research on the preferences of employers, unions and governments regarding VET reform is necessary in order to arrive at conclusions about whose preferences prevailed in these reform processes. This would enable researchers to gain a clearer understanding on whether and how the balance between firm involvement and state provision shifts over time in statist skill formation systems and make the cases of Italy and Greece more comparable with findings from newer contributions to the comparative political economy of VET, in which both cases are unfortunately absent so far.

Annex 1: Overview of Interviews

Interviewee Code	Interviewee Organisation/Institution	Date
GRE-1	German-Greek Round Table on Vocational Education and Training	10. 6. 19
GRE-2	OAED	11. 6. 19
GRE-3	German-Greek Chamber of Commerce	11. 6. 19
GRE-4	Ministry of Labour	12. 6. 19
GRE-5	SEV – Employers' Association	12. 6. 19
GRE-6	GSEVEE – The Hellenic Confederation of Professionals, Craftsmen & Merchants	13. 6. 19
GRE-7	Small Employer	13. 6. 19
GRE-8	KANEP-GSEE – Centre for the Development of Education Policy of the General Confederation of Greek Workers	13. 6. 19
GRE-9	Ministry of Education	14. 6. 19
ITA-1	German-Italian Chamber of Commerce	15.10.19
ITA-2	ANPAL Servizi - National Employment Service	16.10.19
ITA-3	CGIL Lombardy – Italian General Confederation of Labor	17.10.19

Acknowledgement

We gratefully acknowledge funding by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research, Grant-Nr. BU-01BE17018A.

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