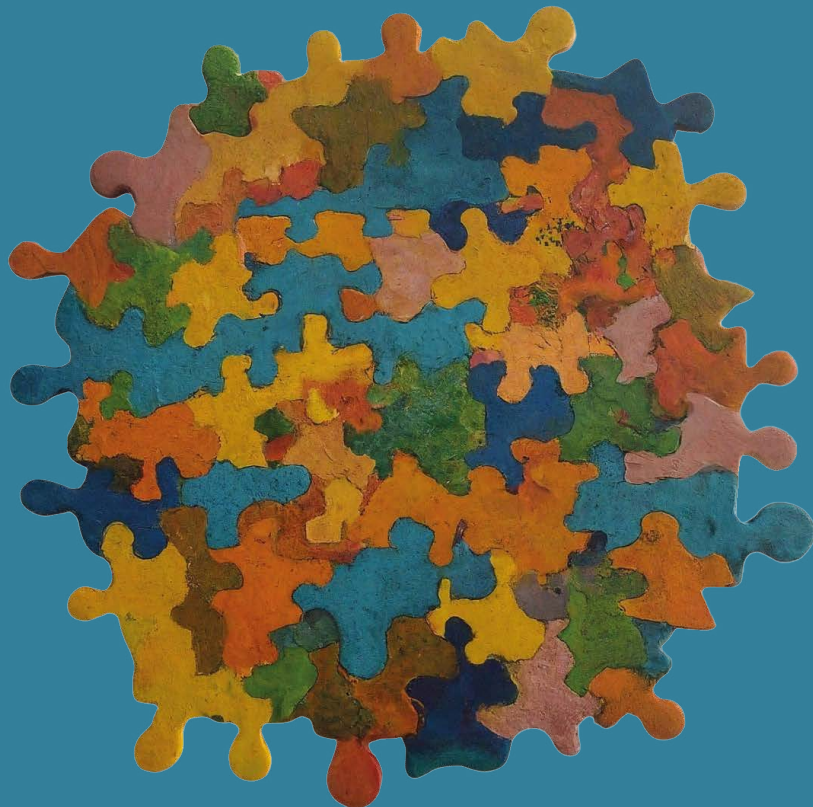


Paolo Bertuletti, Johannes K. Schmees, Fabienne-Agnes Baumann,  
Dietmar Frommberger & Francesco Magni (Eds.)



# Vocational Education in European Regions

## Lower Saxony and Lombardy in Comparison

DAAD

Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst  
German Academic Exchange Service

wbv

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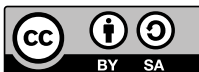
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# Vocational education and training systems in Italy and Lombardy: Between light and shadow

FRANCESCO MAGNI, VIRGINIA CAPRIOTTI<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This chapter explores the Italian vocational education and training (VET) system at the secondary level, with a particular focus on the Lombardy region, to highlight both its strengths ('light') and challenges ('shadow'). The VET system has long been the subject of attempts to strengthen its links with the world of work, increase the number of participating students, cope with early school leaving and educational poverty, and improve the quality of learning. Lombardy, one of the most industrially advanced regions in Italy, serves as a microcosm of the broader national trends. Through the course of our analysis, we consider the specific regional policies, institutional frameworks, and pedagogical approaches at play in the VET system. The paper ends with some recommendations for enhancing its efficiency and inclusivity, thereby ensuring that VET continues to meet the evolving needs of the workforce and the economy.

**Keywords:** Vocational Education and Training System; Strengths; Challenges; Education Policies.

## 1 Introduction

In these turbulent times, characterised by global uncertainty and economic instability, vocational education and training (VET) systems have gained importance throughout the world for providing younger generations with a quality education and the necessary training required for success in today's world (Pilz, 2017; Mulder, 2017; Guile & Unwin, 2019). VET in Italy has consistently been the topic of significant national discourse, which reflects the country's dynamic socio-economic landscape. Historically, Italy's commitment to fortifying its VET system has been evident through various legislative endeavours and innovative efforts, and especially so when considering its positive employment outcomes among graduate students (INAPP, 2019).

In February 2023, the National Institute for Public Policy Analysis (INAPP) published its latest report<sup>2</sup>, which contains the following valuable insights into current VET trends:

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1 Although this contribution is the result of a collaborative study by the two authors, Sections 2, 3 and 4 can be attributed specifically to Virginia Capriotti, and Section 5 to Francesco Magni. The Introduction can be attributed to both authors.

2 *XX Rapporto di monitoraggio del Sistema di Istruzione e Formazione Professionale e dei Percorsi in Duale nella leFP. A. f. 2020–21, Febbraio 2023.* Inapp – Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali. Available at: [https://oa.inapp.org/xmlui/bitstream/handle/20.500.12916/3936/INAPP\\_XX-Rapporto-monitoraggio-sistema-leFP-Duale\\_2023.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y](https://oa.inapp.org/xmlui/bitstream/handle/20.500.12916/3936/INAPP_XX-Rapporto-monitoraggio-sistema-leFP-Duale_2023.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y).

- Notable variations exist in training programme availability. For example, Sicily offers fewer courses, and enrolment is down in many regions. In general, the provision of courses is not stable, as regional tenders to fund them are typically issued on an annual basis;
- While most regions meet the required general service standards, some lag behind, which causes confusion due to the mixture of old and new specifications;
- There is inconsistency in regional data management. Specifically, informal databases in some areas could jeopardise accurate resource reporting;
- A mismatch between job availability and demand is evident. Sectors such as engineering and logistics face worker shortages, whereas wellness and catering have surpluses. This imbalance underlines the need for better job market strategies;
- Enrolments in IeFP (*Istruzione e Formazione Professionale*, or regional VET paths) are decreasing, especially in accredited institutions, which may be indicative of an increasing early school dropout rate;
- Raising awareness about the IeFP system's employment benefits is essential to addressing youth unemployment;
- Among the available IeFP pathways, there is a growing demand for those that follow a dual approach, either through dual apprenticeships, internships with on-the-job training hours ranging from 30 % to 50 %, or participation in a simulated work environment, with 27.8 % of students opting for this. Ensuring pathway quality and monitoring internship effectiveness are key objectives;
- Soft skills, such as problem solving, are vital for youth employability, and their prioritisation entails a national focus on transversal competencies;
- There is a need to clarify the technical-professional training standards and whether they cater to specific regional needs.

In a country such as Italy, where there is a significant number of individuals leaving education and training early (15 %), where there is a relevant number of NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) individuals aged between 18 and 24 years (22.5 %), and high levels of youth unemployment persist (approximately 28 % at the national level), VET is of paramount importance. There has been persistent demand in recent years, particularly from the European Union, for member states to improve their VET systems. These educational pathways provide a means of learning that integrates theoretical and practical approaches through innovative didactical methods (Bertagna, 2011; Potestio, 2020; Cegolon, 2019, 2020; Bertuletti, 2021; Massagli, 2023) and may be crucial in confronting the distinctive challenges of our era (Powell & McGrath, 2019). There is also a growing urgency to thoroughly reassess the pedagogical methodologies adopted by education and training institutions at large (Bertagna, 2020).

In today's context, a prominent status has been attributed to VET, since it holds the potential to effectively harness students' unique talents and potential while simultaneously aligning them with the demands of the professional world. Despite the progress made in recent decades, the VET system in Italy still has its shortcomings. Numerous regional disparities in educational opportunities continue to hamper the ability

to overcome existing educational inequalities and poverty (Salerno, 2019). Against this background, this paper aims to outline some of the main features of the Italian VET model, with a particular focus on the Lombardy region, to provide an overview of the current situation and, based on a first reading of recent reform attempts, to outline possible options for the future.

## 2 The vocational education and training system in Italy: A first look at the history from today's perspective

Italy is currently the second largest manufacturing nation in Europe. According to Unioncamere Excelsior, the demand for skilled personnel in various fields, ranging from mechatronics to computer science, will require the employment of at least 500,000 people by 2027<sup>3</sup>. However, the national VET system will not be able to train those people, as it has not yet been sufficiently developed for this purpose.

The Italian VET system exhibits a significant contradiction, as it is split between the national level and the regional level: specifically, there is the five-year state VET path regulated at the national level (*Istruzione Professionale*, IP) and the three- or four-year regional VET pathways regulated at the regional level (*Istruzione e Formazione Professionale*, IeFP). The first is 'school-based', with face-to-face lectures and a teaching approach still modelled on the high school and other upper secondary school tracks, while the second is 'work-based', implying more significant teaching and organisational flexibility, the implementation of workshops, and the systematic integration of work-based learning in the form of internships.

This twofold/two-track structure has distinctive historical origins that merit a brief description. In 1970, with the launch of regional autonomy (a constitutional provision dating back to 1948), the responsibility for professional training and VET was transferred from the national to the regional level. This shift led to the coexistence of a national system of state VET schools and a parallel, mostly autonomous system of VET institutions developed by the regions (Bertuletti, 2021; D'Amico, 2015; Salini, 2014). Lombardy, as a region, played a pioneering role in regulating the professional school system during the 1970s. Specifically, administrators in this region created the Territorial Centres for Technical and Educational Innovation (*Centri territoriali per l'innovazione tecnica ed educativa*, or CITE) and adapted its educational systems and legislation to changing times. This collaboration between public and private institutions allowed for the development of a widespread system of VET institutions in Lombardy to meet the region's social and economic development needs. The national *Framework Law on Vocational Training* (Law No. 845/1979) marked the end of the transition period, thereby solidifying the dualism between 'school-based' VET (IP) governed at the national level and regional VET (IeFP). This legislation still allowed for state financing of

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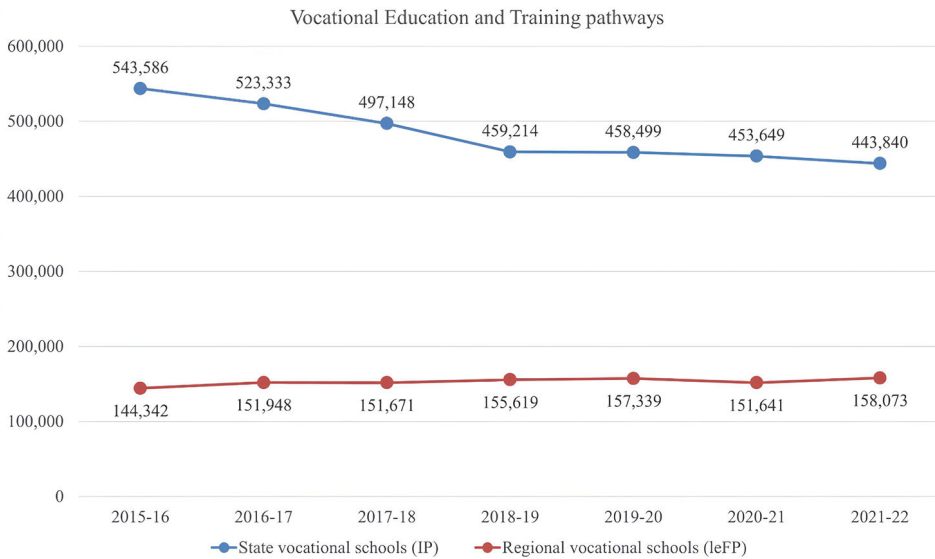
3 *La domanda di professioni e di formazione delle imprese italiane nel 2023*, Unioncamere-ANPAL. Available at: [https://excel.sior.unioncamere.net/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/2023/Domanda\\_professioni\\_formazione\\_imprese.pdf](https://excel.sior.unioncamere.net/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/2023/Domanda_professioni_formazione_imprese.pdf).

the regional VET system and the promotion of modular teaching and training activities, work-based learning and traineeships in this sector.

Constitutional reforms in the early 2000s granted regions extensive legislative power and administrative competence in specific areas, including the VET system, leading to the successful development of VET in Lombardy and some other regions. As no government has yet established how to enforce the so-called 'essential levels of performance' (LEPs) in this sector (since the VET system's standards and services should be guaranteed uniformly throughout the entire national territory, according to Legislative Decree 226/2005), regional VET is still uneven across the country. As Zagardo (2019, 2022) points out, in certain regions, especially in southern Italy, VET pathways either do not exist or are available only on paper or in a significantly reduced manner. Therefore, the current situation indicates significant regional variation, resulting in unequal opportunities for learners (Censis, 2018) and a general failure to meet the constitutional obligation of providing equal opportunities to attend VET.

Both systems (IP and regional IeFP) aim to prepare students for work through a means of instruction that exists at the intersection between theory and practice. However, these systems have different providers and, consequently, differ regarding their work-based training and vocational qualification outcomes. While IP is regulated by the Ministry of Education and delivers training through public VET schools, IeFP is governed by the regions in compliance with state-set LEPs and is provided either by private vocational training centres (CFPs) or only as a subsidiary option at state schools accredited by the regions.

Approximately 600,000 high school learners in Italy, or roughly 25% of the complete aggregate, participate in VET pathways. Around 440,000 of these learners are registered in educational pathways promoted by state VET schools, while over 150,000 are enrolled in regional VET centres. The latter courses have seen an increase in enrolment over time, while the state VET schools have experienced a sharp and rapid decline. In recent years, the percentage of students enrolled in IP has decreased from 18.6% to 12.1% of the total share of secondary students, with a decrease of almost 100,000 students within a few years (i. e. from more than 530,000 students in the 2015/2016 school year to around 440,000 students in 2021/2022).



**Figure 1:** Students enrolled in IeFP and IP pathways 2015/2016–2020/2021.

*Note:* Data obtained by Francesco Magni and Virginia Capriotti from INAPP (2023) and the Italian Ministry of Education (unified school data portal).

### 3 Challenges arising from two co-existing vocational education and training systems

The implementation of this two-track system has resulted in numerous contradictions, shortcomings, and weaknesses. First, the inflexible and rigid nature of the IP system frequently fails to encourage genuine interaction with the world of work and creative laboratory-based teaching practices. Conversely, regional disparities and inequalities have intensified and expanded through the IeFP models. The result is a nationwide landscape characterised by both strengths and limitations.

Establishing a robust VET system in Italy is not a new endeavour. Law 53 of 2003 already emphasised the importance of VET, which had long been overdue. Furthermore, it is crucial to recollect the various specific calls from European Union bodies, including the Council, Commission, and Parliament, to support such initiatives. These calls began with the European Council’s Communication in Bruges in 2010 and reached their culmination in the Riga Communication in 2015 (European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training, 2010). Together, they consistently underscored the need to strengthen and enhance the VET systems in member states to combat youth unemployment and achieve the goals outlined in the Europe 2020 Strategy. During the past decade, these calls have become more specific, especially since the establishment of the *European Alliance for Apprenticeship* in Leipzig in July 2013. This European shift

towards a work-based approach to education has led to increased attention to ‘dual system’ models and reduced confidence in traditional schooling methods.

In this context, the Italian IP system, which remains uniform throughout the country and is financed directly by the state, also recruits teachers according to the same bureaucratic rules of competition as other sectors in general upper secondary education. As such, it seems to be struggling increasingly to respond to current challenges. However, over time, it has drifted towards a more academic approach, focusing on theoretical and school-based VET, which are far removed from the pathways chosen in other European countries, where VET is characterised by the promotion of work-related learning didactics, inductive methods, contextualised tasks, and learning environments concretely linked to the world of work. This has led to an increasing rate of dropouts from these programmes, as there is a significant gap between the type of vocational education offered and the specific needs of students and companies. The state VET schools have thus proved to be a weak link in the education system, despite the fact that they should instead be playing a crucial role in reducing the dropout rate.

The reform of the IP system through Legislative Decree 61/2017 initially seemed promising, especially in its clear orientation towards a ‘European’ VET model. However, the limitations of this decree are now becoming clear. On the one hand, the renewed VET institutes still retain the typical constraints of the organisation of the education system, including fixed teaching posts, limited subject areas, and a teacher’s employment contract that is not adapted to an organisational model suitable for training pathways closely integrated with work. In addition, there is a lack of systematic support and the required teacher numbers to maintain permanent contact with companies. For these reasons, various regulations and bureaucratic-administrative processes need to be reconsidered. Specifically, learning activities should be organised in alignment with the dual system’s principles, starting with the establishment of relationships with companies and a focus on teaching real-world tasks<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, while the regional IeFP system seems to have had some success, it remains an incomplete and fragmented model.

There is thus a need to rethink the entire Italian VET system, both regionally and nationally, to overcome unnecessary duplication and ensure the harmonious improvement of the entire model.

## 4 The Lombardian model

Despite these broader limitations, in some cases, regulatory regional autonomy has enabled the successful implementation of an efficient VET system. An example is the Lombardy region (Magni, 2020), which stands out for two reasons. First, Lombardy’s industrial history and its vibrant socio-economic-entrepreneurial environment (with

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<sup>4</sup> This is exactly as it was at the beginning of the 20th century for the so-called industrial technical schools, which used to have their own regulations, a board of directors, direct hiring of teachers, etc., as an expression of full autonomy in responding to the local production system’s needs (see Bertagna, 2022).

over 10 million citizens contributing to more than 20 % of Italy's national gross domestic product, or GDP) are closely linked with VET institutions.

Second, Lombardy has experienced a greater diffusion and success of VET centres at the secondary and tertiary levels compared to other Italian regions, making it a compelling case study for this sector from a comparative perspective (Pilz & Li, 2020). In Lombardy, the youth population (aged 15 to 34) comprises almost two million people, with the majority (70.1%) holding a high school diploma. This has resulted in lower rates of early school leavers (12.9%) and NEET individuals (13.1%) compared to the national average (Polis, 2019). Notably, Lombardy's focus on excellence through pluralistic, autonomous, and differentiated approaches has played a key role in its achievement of these favourable outcomes.

#### 4.1 Vocational education and training pathways

Private or public VET centres accredited by the region or state VET schools offer the following:

- Three-year courses that lead to the achievement of the 'professional operator certificate' (*qualifica di operatore professionale*) at EQF Level 3;
- Four-year courses that lead to the achievement of the 'professional technician diploma' (*diploma professionale di tecnico*) at EQF Level 4, Enrolment requires at least a three-year qualification;
- One extra year to take a state exam that entitles the student to receive the general higher education entrance qualification. Enrolment requires at least a four-year diploma;
- One-year post-secondary courses leading to a 'high technical specialisation certificate' (*certificato superiore di tecnico*) at EQF Level 4. Enrolment requires at least a four-year diploma;
- Dual apprenticeship schemes (from 2016/2017 onwards);
- Customised pathways for disabled pupils, also offered in dual mode (from 600 hours to three years, with the option of a supplementary year).

The three-year and four-year pathways for qualifications/diplomas involve 990 hours of work per year. Currently, there are 36 qualifications and 54 diplomas awarded by the regions and recognised nationally. Each programme provides for a specific quota of learning activities identified by the single institutions with regard to the distinctive territorial peculiarities and educational needs of their students. In general, teaching units are divided by thematic areas, including languages and historical-socio-economic, mathematical-scientific, and technological subjects (35–45 % of the total hours); technical-professional subjects and work-based learning (40–50 %); and courses chosen individually by the respective institutions (15 %, corresponding to 445 hours). An internship is normally carried out in both the second and third years.

To those who already hold a four-year diploma, the Lombardian VET system also offers one-year post-secondary courses that lead to a higher technical specialisation certificate (still at EQF Level 4). These courses represent the so-called *Istruzione e forma-*

*zione tecnica superiore (IFTS)* and are designed nationally through a joint decree involving the Education and Labour Ministers, in coordination with the State-Regions Conference, which sets the minimum skill standards for each qualification. The delivery of these courses involves temporary associations of universities, higher technical schools, VET providers, job agencies, companies, and local authorities. These associations tailor the courses to meet the professional needs of the local area within each qualification sector. Financial support is thus limited, with funds being disbursed through annual regional calls. This limited funding contributes to the small and often unstable supply of these courses.

Furthermore, since 2015, with Regional Law 30/2015, Lombardy has implemented what is known as the 'dual system' for VET programmes. This system is characterised by a systematic, organised, and continuous connection between education and work. The law establishes a minimum and maximum proportion of work-based learning (internship or business simulation) within the annual hours of educational activities, starting from the age of 15. This proportion ranges from 15–50 % in three-year courses leading to the 'Professional Operator Certificate' and from 20–50 % in four-year courses leading to the 'Professional Technician Diploma'. Moreover, to receive funding through the dowry system (see below), accredited training centres must have a minimum of 5 % of their enrolled students as apprentices in the third and fourth years.

Educational institutions may also organise an annual extra course for access to the state exam, which allows students to enter higher education. However, this is only possible when the Regional School Office of Lombardy (*USR Lombardia*) ensures the placement of students in school institutions or under self-financing conditions. This is known as the VET 'fifth year' and was implemented starting from the academic year 2010/2011, with self-financing beginning in the academic year 2015/2016. This particular course of study has a duration of 990 hours. Annual courses can be activated only for students holding professional diplomas in the field of technology acquired in Lombardy. Basic or transversal skills (such as mathematics or communication in the native language or in English) range from a minimum of 70 % to a maximum of 80 %, while technical-professional competencies range from a minimum of 20 % to a maximum of 30 %. At the end of the programme, diplomas are awarded for entrance to a tertiary programme within the Italian educational system.

Here, we do not consider the non-academic tertiary technical education system, a sector that is on the cusp between higher VET and higher education, and formally under the jurisdiction of the Italian Ministry of Education (on this topic, see Bertuletti and Potestio in this volume).

## 4.2 Dual apprenticeship

In accordance with national law (Legislative Decree 81/2015) and ministerial regulations (Min. Dec. 18 October 2015), all VET courses in Lombardy can be offered as dual apprenticeships for individuals aged 15–24. Dual apprenticeships have a minimum duration of six months, and their maximum duration is determined by the length of the corresponding school-based programme in which they are enrolled. The exact duration

is to be agreed upon by the company, the apprentice, and their school. If the apprenticeship in a company is terminated before its natural conclusion and cannot be replaced by another company, the learner may resume his/her studies at school.

Apprentices are required to attend school lessons and receive vocational training in their respective companies. Contractual hours are divided into work, formal learning at school, and in-company training. In-company training can take the form of on-the-job training or formal learning, either on the company's premises or elsewhere, but under the employer's responsibility. The number of effective working hours depends on the number of school hours necessary to achieve the corresponding qualifications. Regional regulations stipulate that in-company training cannot exceed 60% of the learning hours at school in the second year of a VET programme or 50% in the third and fourth year, as well as in the courses for attaining the so-called *certificato superiore di tecnico* (Regional Decree 4676/2015).

The learning outcomes associated with the final qualification must be equivalent to those in the corresponding school-based programme. While the final assessment is discussed with the company, it ultimately remains the responsibility of the educational institutions accredited by the region. In contrast, the in-company training content is jointly determined by the employer and the school.

### 4.3 Teacher training

As national essential levels of performance prescribe, VET teachers in all regions must have either a national teaching qualification in a specific subject (which in Italy requires a special training programme for teachers that must be attended during or after obtaining a master's degree in the teaching subject) or professional experience of at least five years in a specific sector (Legislative Decree 226/2005 Art. 18). In Lombardian VET, teachers must have either a national teaching qualification in a specific subject or a bachelor's degree with sufficient teaching experience in the national educational system (e.g. as substitute teachers). Such experience is elevated to a minimum of five years when the candidate teacher has received only an upper secondary education leaving certificate. Teachers of practical subjects can have professional experience (of at least 5 years) only within the same field in which they intend to teach (General Director's Decree 10187/13 November 2012).

According to school law, VET teachers of general subjects, VET theory, and practical subjects do not have to attend any professional development courses, but the collective agreements in the VET sector prescribe the attendance of at least 100 training hours for the professional development of the teachers. VET providers normally concur with their employees on which programmes to follow.

It is important to note that public funds for these purposes are not consistently available. The Ministry of Labour allocates funds to manage and govern national private VET providers with schools in various regions, often including the financing of teacher professional development (Law 40/1987). Occasionally, regions may provide funding for specific courses and bilateral funds, managed jointly by social partners (VET providers and teachers' unions), and may also support courses and in-company

training periods. While it is generally permissible to hire professionals from the labour market, early-career teachers from an industry background, as well as professionals hired under part-time contracts, are quite rare, because teachers' wages are lower than those in other sectors.

#### 4.4 Financing

One particularly innovative feature of the Lombardian VET system is its method of financing (Salerno & Zagardo, 2015). The introduction of the 'dowry' system in 2008 marked a significant shift in the way VET programmes are funded and managed. There are two key aspects of this financing method:

- Transition from a supply- to a demand-driven approach: Lombardy VET evolved from a rigid supply model that primarily focused on the needs and requests of the territories to a more flexible supply system. This shift means that it is now more responsive to the dynamics of student demand, which means that it reflects students' actual choices and the specific economic and social characteristics of different areas of Lombardy;
- Quota per pupil financing: funding for VET courses is based on a 'quota per pupil' criterion, which means that the economic resources allocated for the courses are directly tied to the number of students enrolled. This approach ensures that financial support matches actual student enrolment.

The value of the dowry depends on the type of VET course, with an annual cost per student ranging from EUR 4,000 to EUR 4,600. The recipients of the dowry are students living in Lombardy. These funds will be allocated in the chronological order of receipt of student application requests until the funds are fully allocated. It is important to note that the allocation of resources is subject to the availability of funds within the priority group. Overall, this financing system emphasises the importance of student choice and regional needs in the allocation of VET resources. It promotes a dynamic and adaptable approach to VET funding, with the goal of providing relevant and accessible VET to the residents of Lombardy while optimising the use of financial resources.

Finally, to understand the dual characterisation of the regional system, it is important to remember that since 2018 (under Law 205/2017), the Ministry of Labour has transferred additional financial resources to the regions to fund VET courses that include 'strengthened' work-based learning activities. These activities should account for no less than 40% of the standard hours for the second year and 50% for the third and fourth years, totalling a minimum of 400 hours annually. The same applies to courses conducted as apprenticeships up until the attainment of one qualification.

## 5 Recent developments and reform proposals: Toward a unified system?

The Italian ‘double’ VET system is still weak and imbalanced all across the country, with precarious economic sustainability being the norm. The exclusive regional competence in this matter, in the absence of adequate monitoring and verification of the essential LEPs, has led to further fragmentation of the system, as only some regions offer an adequate VET supply. Many regions, especially in central and southern Italy, offer VET at the secondary level exclusively in state VET schools. On the one hand, there is a tendency toward a school-based and theoretical approach, with an increasing number of disciplines in the curriculum; on the other hand, there are difficulties in implementing work-based learning and competency-based teaching. At present, there are two ways to provide IeFP programmes:

- Training pathways implemented by VET centres, which are financed by the regions through their budgets, the European Social Fund (ESF), and an annual transfer from the Ministry of Labour;
- Educational pathways implemented by schools based on an agreement between the State and the regions since December 2010 and later regulated by Legislative Decree 61/2017. These pathways are funded by the Ministry of Education, as they are considered regular educational programmes, with teachers paid by the Ministry.

For these reasons, the relationships and coordinated efforts between VET schools run by the state and the training centres accredited by the regions should be reconsidered, starting with a determination of how the courses to be delivered, as well as key professional resources and organisational methods between the two systems, can be effectively shared. In September 2023, the Italian government approved a draft law on the technological-professional training chain, which seems promising. As pointed out by Bertagna (2023), this project first aims to bring Italian schools up to European standards to develop qualifications and competences. In addition, the legislative project is designed to involve VET institutions, schools, and other territorial actors (i. e. families, companies, regions, provinces, and municipalities) in a broader effort to respect the principle of subsidiarity according to Article 118 of the Italian Constitution and achieve a real impact.

One of the backbones of the proposal is the new concept of an individual ‘campus’ (each comprising a virtual or on-site VET), each of which is to be united with the others by a common didactical approach. This concept should be promoted by the regions that currently provide VET courses (IeFP) and higher technical training courses (IFTS), the foundations that manage the ITS Academy (*Istituti Tecnici Superiori*; Magni & Capriotti, 2023), the state technical and VET schools, the other general education high schools (*Licei*), and possibly the universities and academies, as well as all the public and private entities operating within the territories (e. g. local authorities, companies, company networks, foundations, and non-profit organisations).

The main point of the proposed reform is to reduce the IP pathways, as well as the other upper secondary courses, into a four-year programme, as can be found in most European countries. It also provides for the personalisation and flexibilisation of learning pathways, the promotion of specific career guidance facilities, and internationalisation and strengthening of activities aimed at acquiring basic skills. At the end of the four-year regional VET pathways (IeFP), students who have obtained a regional VET diploma and, at the same time, an evaluation of the results of these pathways by INVALSI (*Istituto nazionale per la valutazione del sistema educativo di istruzione e di formazione*) have direct access to the ITS Academy, which is the non-academic tertiary education system. If they want to enrol in a university course, they will have direct access to the state examination to obtain a high school diploma, which would afford them the opportunity to do so.

Other points included in the reform are the strengthening of the basic subjects (especially Italian and mathematics), apprenticeship training and more work-based learning (up to 400 hours in the last three years), and the possibility of additional lectures by experts from the productive and professional world to broaden the existing educational offerings. Notwithstanding the competencies of the regions in the field of education and training, experimentation may include various measures, such as the following:

- Adaptation and expansion of the educational offerings, with particular attention to basic disciplines and new experimental paths, to respond to the specific needs of the regions;
- Promotion of transitions between different educational pathways;
- Reduction of upper secondary education to four years;
- Implementation of innovative teaching methods;
- Potential recruitment of teachers from the world of professional work.

Epistemological or pedagogical reasoning cannot be used to maintain the distinction between IP and IeFP, nor can it be applied to discern between professional roles in the world of work. The only reasons against the unification of IP and IeFP into a comprehensive Italian VET system today are to be found elsewhere, such as in historical factors, institutional and labour relations, and the actual governance of VET schools.

The VET system helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. While the prevailing view used to be that work was a solution for those without sufficient intellect for 'higher' education, the VET system actually offers a transition to a new paradigm in the national education system. This approach focuses on providing multiple pathways of equal value (Bertagna, 2006; Berner, 2017), thereby allowing young people to exercise their freedom of choice. In addition, the notion of education and training as a service aims to identify and nurture the talents of each individual without exception.

Schools should not discriminate against young people based on abstract notions of intelligence or social status. Rather, they have a responsibility to recognise and cultivate the intellectual abilities of each student in their care, thus enabling them to de-

velop into knowledgeable and skilled individuals (Bertagna, 2020, 2023). The VET system must also be integrated into a strategy of greater coordination between the regions and the central government. This coordination is essential to overcome the current regional fragmentation and to fully address the LEPs and thus the rights of all citizens. Legislative experimentation could serve as a prelude to broader regulatory reform, which would then pave the way toward the establishment of a unified national system of VET schools. This would, of course, require that the balance between national and regional regulations in this crucial sector of national education be reconsidered.

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