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The coherence of vocational education and training in Norway and Spain: national traditions and the reshaping of VET governance in hybrid VET systems.

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1. Introduction

The article explores the stated governmental ambition in Norway and Spain, particularly evident in the last two decades, to increase the coherence –understood as the internal connections of individual educational strands and the points of contact between strands- of their vocational education and training (VET) systems. The topic of coherence increasingly attracts attention in policy debates at European as well as at national level (Cedefop 2010; 2008; European Youth Forum 2010; Granville 2003). The need for coherence has in this context been associated with a range of exogenous factors including globalisation and an urgent need to integrate European labour markets.

In both Norway and Spain we find VET regulations influenced by State control, corporatism and free market models, with a lower degree of dominance of any of these stakeholders than in other countries which are more often analysed in comparative skills formation research, such as ‘corporatist Germany’, or the ‘free-market voluntaristic systems of the UK and the USA’ (Hall and Soskice 2001; Deissinger and Wellwig 2005; Walther 2006). The purpose of comparing Norway and Spain is to develop a better understanding of what we call ‘hybrid’ systems of VET regulation. The idea behind selecting these two countries for comparison is that they exhibit some commonalities in terms of VET governance structures, the role of the State and its interplay with social partners and other labour market actors. In spite of apparent differences between the two countries, rooted in their diverse national labour markets as well as historical backgrounds, this commonality can illustrate regulatory VET mechanisms that are shared by European countries that at first glance appear radically dissimilar.

The article provides a novel conceptualization of coherence, which differentiates between vertical coherence and horizontal coherence. The first is understood as the connections within different strands of VET, whereas the second refers to the mainstreaming of VET curricular elements and the systematization of VET practices across an education system. This conceptualisation captures the importance of both formal and organisational aspects in generating coherent systems and acknowledges the internal connections within the education and training sector. The article makes use of this conceptualization in the empirical analysis of two hybrid VET systems that, as has been advanced, have received relatively little attention in VET comparative research: Norway and Spain. It finds that the proposed differentiation of types of coherence is useful in explaining VET developments in the two countries over the last three decades. However, while both countries looked for coherence, the roots of their strive for it, how they operationalised the term and the emphasis of their actions differed substantially, which can be related to the way in which VET interests and stakeholders are organised in each country. These differences are particularly pronounced at a regional level, where stakeholders influence the public VET policy of the two countries in a divergent manner.

The article is organised as follows. Section two outlines the method. Section three presents the conceptual background to the study. Section four discusses the case studies of Norway and Spain. Section five concludes.

2. Method

The article is based on a comparison between Norway and Spain. The production of two case studies was preferred to the in-depth study of one case since this allowed us to reflect on how different social and economic structures and education and training systems affect the way in which VET coherence is conceptualised and pursued (cf. Watson 2001). Regarding case selection, Lijphart (1971) has argued that researchers should keep that in mind when selecting cases, trying to conform as much as possible to the ideal situation in which the countries for comparison are similar in all variables except those that interest them or dissimilar in all aspects except, again, those that interest them (cf. also Mills 1872). The fact that this ideal can never be fully achieved does, however, not invalidate the relevance of controlling for systemic variables as far as possible in the selection of cases.

Following this advice, the article explores the ways in which two countries with different economic and labour market structures and historical and cultural traditions have, both, attempted to strengthen the coherence of their VET systems, by unifying different strands of vocational education (initial, continuing and active labour market policies) –or by introducing VET schools and courses at all educational levels. While our case studies aim to enable some comparison between cases, they also aim to account for developments *within* cases through time. The longitudinal analysis of each case permitted us to focus our comparative analysis on “comparable cases” (Spain in the 1980s is compared to later “Spains”; and the same in the case of Norway)¹. The analysis of each of these two countries through time means, again following Lijphart (1971), that we cover cases that are “similar in a large number of important characteristics (variables)” that we can treat as constants: although both Spain and Norway changed during the period covered in the case studies, they were still more similar to themselves in the previous decades than to other countries regarding a broad range of cultural, economic or social aspects. This strategy contributed to alleviating the classical problem for comparative educational research of “too few cases and too many variables to control”.

3. Coherence and governance in VET systems

Conceptually, De Bruijn (1995) identifies two aspects of coherence in education. The first refers to the need for transparency of the system: that the relation between one qualification and another should be clear. Second, coherence refers to institutional versatility: change, movement and progression within the system should not be obstructed by the context or location of the training. Thus, some strategies for coherence may focus on the content of training, for example, concentrating on the development of modules around transferable skills. Other strategies focus on the collaboration between the ‘stakeholders’, such as social partners and schools/colleges, for the accreditation of modules offered by other institutions or sectors. Yet other strategies may be a mixture of the two. At European level, on the other hand, the issue of coherence is often related to the development of

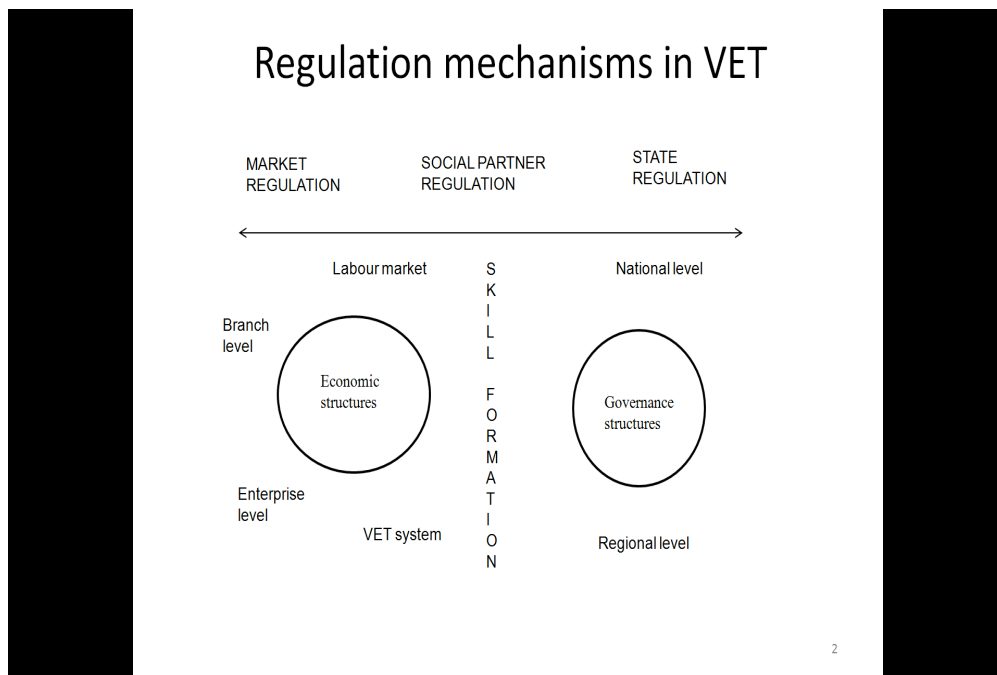
¹ A second option to improve comparability is using comparisons between different geographical units within one country, rather than over time -see, Linz et al. (1966). This strategy is not used in our analysis, given a relative lack of data at sub-national level in the variables of interest.

connections and points of transfer between different sectors of education, in particular general education, higher education and VET (cf. Cedefop 2008; Young and Gordon 2007).

While useful, these conceptualisations have two main shortcomings. First, they focus on formal aspects (e.g. equivalence and hierarchy of qualifications) at the expense of other important aspects, such as the organisation of the delivery of education and training (contextual aspects that the typologies mentioned ignore). Second, they tend to focus on the coherence of the system as a whole and do not sufficiently acknowledge the importance of the internal coherence of different education and training sectors. This is an important aspect for many countries, as the permeability between sectors is generally relatively small in practice. While recognising the importance of 'interconnections' for coherence, this article aims to offer a more nuanced approach to its analysis, by structuring our comparison around two dimensions: a vertical and a horizontal dimension of coherence. These are employed to analyse the VET system in each case study. The *vertical* dimension looks at the connections within the different strands of VET itself. The *horizontal* dimension focuses on the mainstreaming of VET curricular elements and the systematization of VET practices across education systems. This conceptualisation of coherence brings to the fore the contextual and organisational aspects of qualifications.

VET's vertical and horizontal coherence is discussed and shaped within a wider context. There is a long and fruitful tradition in the analysis of VET systems and their relationship with other parts of the education system as well as the labour market by reference to the regulatory mechanisms that can be found at the national level, and the relative importance of different stakeholders have in shaping VET structures. This tradition broadly distinguishes between market, state bureaucratic and corporatist VET models (cf. Greinert 1998, Crouch 1995 and Streeck 1989), which are characterised by different logics reflecting diverse political economies. Figure 1 illustrates how various regulation mechanisms as well as economic and governance structures found at distinct analytical levels, constitute the field of VET (cf. also Martin 2003).

Figure 1: Regulation mechanisms in VET



Source: Own elaboration.

This article reviews the degree of co-ordination between different agents, which are expected to follow their respective internal logics and interests, and the extent to which these different logics can result in coherence in VET systems. This is a particularly relevant question in the field of VET, as stakeholders are expected to have different degrees of influence in various parts of the system. For instance, companies tend to have greater interest in and influence on continuing training than in initial VET. An analysis of the degree of co-ordination thus enables us to look at the roots of the coherence of VET systems.

A range of countries (e.g. Germany, UK, USA) more and less fall in one of these types, as comparative research in skills formation systems has shown. Coherence could be expected to be higher in these countries, which partly explains why they are taken as the empirical basis to construct analytical models. Yet – paradoxically, given the lower degree of attention they receive in the literature - most countries, do not fit neatly in any of the models. They are, like Norway and Spain, ‘hybrid’ models. Thus, the Norwegian VET system has elements of all three models. This, as Michelsen et al. (2009:25) point out, signals “the danger of overestimating the stability of institutional arrangements and political logics in countries usually aligned with various models”. This diagnosis is similar to that of the Spanish VET system, which features “an unstable mixture of State control, corporatism and free market, which has been woven and unwoven during the last century” (cf. Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez 2002:369). Our ambition is that the comparison between Norway and Spain can improve the understanding of hybrid forms of VET regulation, found in these two, and other countries.

4. Case studies

This section provides a contextual introduction to the VET systems of Norway and Spain, with a particular focus on the links between VET and the labour market. In the last two decades, both countries have had a marked State agenda for VET modernisation. These agendas, however, are built on and affected by divergent national labour market structures.

As shown in Table 1, a relative high demand for low-skilled workers has been accompanied by very high overall unemployment levels in Spain, in contrast with the situation in Norway where unemployment rates have historically been much lower, in particular for highly educated people. Unemployment in Spain peaked above 20% in the 1980s and 1990s, and after a decrease in the 2000s it picked up again around 2008, in the context of the current financial crisis. These figures are several times the equivalent to those in Norway, which have tended to be below 5%. Unemployment affect young people much more severely than older workers in Spain, whereas differences are more moderate in Norway, suggesting a better match of the education system with the labour market and a more developed labour market in that country. Focusing more specifically on people who hold VET qualifications in Spain, upper secondary VET graduates have relatively good employment prospects four years after graduation, better than average for those in their age group (INE 2006). Students graduating from advanced VET courses also have relatively good employment prospects, although a large proportion of them decide to continue their studies rather than looking for employment upon graduation. This is because many of the jobs available for VET graduates use to be temporary and, often, low paid.

Table 1: Education and labour market indicators in Spain and Norway

	Unemployment	Unemployment (<25)	Unemployment Education	Educational attainment (25-34)	Education attainment (25-64)
Spain					
	18.0 (2009)	37.8 (2009)	11.5 (ISCED 0-2)	65 (at least ISCED3)	48 (ISCED 0-2)
	9.2 (2005)	19.7 (2005)	9.7 (ISCED 3-4)	39 (ISCED 5-6)	22 (ISCED 3-4)
	18.4 (1995)	39.7 (1995)	7.3 (ISCED 5-6)		High: 29 (ISCED 5-6)
Norway					
	3.1 (2009)	8.9 (2009)	5.0 (ISCED 0-2)	84 (at least ISCED 3)	19 (ISCED 0-2)
	4.5 (2005)	11.4 (2005)	3.0 (ISCED 3-4)	46 (ISCED 5-6)	45 (ISCED 3-4)
	4.9 (1995)	11.7 (1995)	2.9 (ISCED 5-6)		36 (ISCED 5-6)

Definitions and sources: *Unempl.* Average annual unemployment rate (Eurostat); *Unemploy (<25)* Average annual unemployment rate for people below the age of 25 (Eurostat); *Unempl. Education:* Unemployment by level of education (Eurostat); *Educational attainment (25-34):* Percentage of the population 25-34 who have attained at least to upper secondary education, and percentage of the population who have attained to HE (2008) (OECD 2010); *Education attainment:* Highest level of education attained by the adult population (2008) (OECD 2010).

The table also clearly illustrates that Spain has a strong polarisation in qualifications attainment. Over 40% of people of working age had only attained up to ISCED level 2, compared to less than 20% in Norway, and almost 30% had attained a tertiary level qualification in 2008. By contrast, less than a quarter of people had attained up to ISCED levels 3 and 4 qualifications. This is approximately half of the Norwegian and EU-27-

average. A certain increase in the take-up of secondary VET occurred in Spain over the last decade. However, VET take-up is still much lower in Spain than in the EU as a whole. It is nevertheless worth noting that while 5% of Norwegians in general study programmes drop out before completing upper secondary education, this figure amounts to 30% for vocational students (Markussen et al. 2007:117).

4.1 Basic facts about the development of the VET system in Norway and Spain

The development of VET in Norway, especially at post secondary level, came later than in other European countries. During the “nation building project” throughout the 20th century, the unitary school and general education were given priority, while VET remained a rather unstructured field. One consequence was a continuing deadlock in a series of plans to set up a training system for the crafts and modern industry. It is a historical paradox that this went on under the dominant concept of knowledge at the time, which perceived it as something useful for the nation and for a thriving industry and commerce (Sakslind 2002:9; 2006).

The social democratic ‘modernisation project’ from the 1930s onwards was marked by the advancement of VET, in coalition with representatives from industry, trade and commerce. This project particularly flourished in the early post-war years, but the development and appreciation of vocational education in Norway were still in their early stages. A major harbinger of change was the presentation in 1940 of the “Act on vocational training” (Sakslind 2002), which was planned together with representatives of thriving industries. It sketched a framework for a panoply of vocational evening courses and trainee arrangements, which were, in those days, decoupled from the public school system (Telhaug and Mediås 2003:122). The Act was followed a decade later by the “Act on Apprenticeship” (1950) that for the first time regulated apprenticeships.

However, vocational qualifications above the level of apprenticeship training – e.g. for technicians and foremen - were not regulated in the 1950 Act (cf. Sakslind 2002:14). In a comparative perspective, this exemplifies the late development of Norwegian VET. Even after the establishment of technical-theoretical trade schools (“teknisk fagskole”) in 1963 (Bjørndal 2005:111), such training remained an unshaped ‘no man’s land’ between secondary and tertiary level. A separate Act from 2000 regulated these trade schools considering them, de facto, as part of the system of upper secondary school. This vocational lacuna lasted until 2003 when an Act on tertiary vocational education was approved, that recognised an “intermediary level of technical competencies’ and associated training as an independent vocational path above the level of apprenticeship training (Ure 2007).

So far, Norwegian training and labour market structures have not been systematically analysed with a view to capture the nature of skill formation in the overall economy. However, some studies shed light on certain segments of occupations and trades (Hagen et al. 2008), and across a public/private divide (Hagen and Skule 2004). Studies of specific branches are also illustrative, for instance, of the continued success of the maritime industrial and petro-industrial clusters – and describe how former shipyards and mechanical workshops were gradually transformed into high skill service companies (Teige 2007), which are able to compete in international markets. These niche markets contribute to spurring the demand for high skilled labour.

Notwithstanding these developments, whether the Norwegian economy is on a high skill route is subject to debate. In 2010, the share of employed persons participating in education and training was close to the 2004 level, after reaching a peak during the economic upswing ending in the 2008 financial crisis (Eurostat New Cronos Database, 2011). This pattern corresponds with a longitudinal analysis of the number of apprenticeships certificates, demonstrating how the fluctuations mirror shifting economic cycles (cf. Høst 2008, Michelsen and Høst 2004).

Judging from the same Eurostat data as for Norway, the proportion of employees participating in education and training per year was more stable but also lower during the period 2005-2010 in Spain, oscillating between 10,4 and 10,7 per cent. Throughout these years, a significantly higher share of Norwegian employees (18,3 – 20,3 per cent) took part in various forms of education and training. This partly reflects the historically cumbersome relationship between VET and the labour market in Spain as well as the different productive strategies in both countries. From the late 1930s and up to the end of the 1970s Spain's productive system was sheltered from international competition under Francisco Franco's fascist dictatorship. Investment in education and training was very low (Martinez-Lucio and Stuart 2003). The Fordist and hierarchical system of production that emerged in Spain from the 1980s, after a democratic system replaced the previous fascist regime, did not require high skills levels (Barbiano 1993). As Perez-Diaz (2002) puts it: "The idea was to design a system of long-term institutionalised training², which was inspired by achievements within foreign models, such as the German, without realising that this model was linked to a productive structure orientated towards the production and exportation of high-quality industrial products; although neither the productive structure nor the export sector in Spain have the same characteristics as in Germany". Indeed, the productive system in Spain provided low-skills low-wage jobs, which reduced the incentives for both individuals and companies to invest in skills (cf. also Finegold and Soskice 1988). This was coupled with low levels of social esteem for vocational training, which reduced demand for VET even further.

The State has since the 1980s been the main stakeholder in the VET field, and has tried to influence the conduct of other stakeholders to address this situation. Perez Diaz (2002) argues that in Spain institutionalised training has traditionally been regulated and governed by the logic of state control ("estatismo"), and affected by numerous inconsistencies and rigidities. In the same line of argumentation, Heywood (1998) argues that Spain is a 'liberal market economy' with a high degree of power concentration in the State – including sub-national entities and in particular Autonomous Communities, CCAA-, which drives the policy process in the absence of strong levels of associational membership. Yet, it is more difficult for the State to provide direction in VET than in other parts of the education system, as it relies on concerted action with other stakeholders (most notably employers and trade unions) to make reforms work (Crouch 1999). Today, the Spanish qualifications profile suggests that there is significant scope for extending access to VET, in particular at the secondary level –as outlined in table 1. Continuing vocational training is also underdeveloped (Martinez Lucio and Stuart 2003). With regard to active labour market policies, the preferred strategy of left and right governments over the last three decades to address

² "Formación de ciclo largo"

unemployment in Spain has been flexibilisation of the labour market, rather than the enhancement of active policies and up-skilling (Llorente 2003; Rueda 2006).

4.2 Norway: Horizontal and vertical coherence

In this section and the next, the search for horizontal and vertical coherence in the VET systems of Norway and Spain are analysed from a longitudinal perspective. Pleas for coherence in VET are partly rooted in managerial ambitions; they occur when the Government or single ministries try to have a bird's view on a policy sector. Various forms of State governance are particularly related to horizontal coherence and are reflected in the communication between the national government and supranational bodies like the European Commission and OECD. Thus, while recent OECD reviews of Norwegian VET (cf. OECD 2008) have not addressed issues of coherence in the school dimensions of dual learning; this issue has been tabled earlier, for instance in the country report devoted to vocational guidance within Norwegian VET (OECD 2002). Moreover, when the Ministry of Education reported to the European Commission on national progress towards the EU 2010 objectives for education and training (EC 2009), its major concern was the attractiveness and coherence of upper secondary VET programmes, where students drop out more frequently than in general programmes. This picture of recent discussions on VET raises questions that revolve around how different forms of coherence have developed over time. We develop this aspect below.

A first aspect to note regarding horizontal coherence is that the various strands of VET in Norway (initial and continuing VET and labour market training), have traditionally not been strictly separate– by contrast to Spain (cf. next section). There is no clear-cut division between initial and continuing VET, mainly because initial VET providers are also providers of continuing VET. After a major reform in 1994, upper secondary general and vocational education became equivalent in the sense that they both give access either to studies at the level of higher education or to an apprenticeship certificate. Moreover, it is easy to shift between the two educational tracks of upper secondary education. The strongest differences occur between labour market training and initial and continuing training. This is partly due to the independence of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), which exercises a strong leadership on labour market training. Nevertheless, as a general rule, only the Ministry of Education is allowed to issue certificates recognised within the formal education system. The entire formal education system therefore rests on that ministry, without competition from the Ministry of Labour, to which the Labour and Welfare Administration reports.

Institutionalised practices for valuing non-formal and informal learning also count among the examples of horizontal coherence. Adults with a right to complete their education in Norway can have their prior learning assessed free of charge. Each year around 10,000 students at upper secondary level participate in the process of recognition of their non-formal and informal learning. Eight out of ten who enrol in such a process follow a vocational 'track' (OECD 2007: 79). This assessment can also allow students to shorten their studies through the award of exemptions from exams in subjects where the students earlier have acquired equivalent competencies. Each institution decides what qualifies as accepted prior learning, thus leading to a diversity of assessment practices (Ure 2009). This diversity attenuates the potential impact of appreciation of prior learning on the horizontal coherence in Norwegian VET.

Regarding our second dimension of coherence, vertical coherence, the integration of VET schools and courses at all educational levels has been a central ideal followed up in practice during the last two decades in Norway. Furthermore, apprenticeship arrangements have been developed in more economic sectors than in the past (handicraft, industry, trade and commerce, health and personal services etc). Coherence between curricula at different educational levels is also a key feature of the ongoing “Knowledge Promotion Reform” (2005), which targets the school system below the level of higher education (cf. the White Paper introducing this reform, “Culture for learning”). The level of vertical coherence can be further analysed according to education levels: namely in relation to the development of VET structures at upper secondary level and at tertiary level.

First, regarding the development of VET structures at upper secondary level, the variety of apprenticeship in trades increased from six in the early 1950s to 200 six decades later. Traditional trades in industry mushroomed in the 1950s and 1960s, then in the 1970s and 1980s new trades in industry (e.g. operators in the process industry) and in handicraft (e.g. waiter, cook, florist...) appeared; and finally the number of trades in the service sector boosted during the 1990s (particularly in health and care). This development has led to an increase in the annual number of signed apprenticeship contracts, from around 2,000 in 1970 to nearly 20,000 in 2008 (Høst 2008).

Second, and by contrast, the development of VET structures at tertiary level has been neglected until very recently. Vocational qualifications above the level of apprenticeship training were not addressed by the 1950 Act on apprenticeship, as already mentioned. A separate Act from year 2000 regulating these trade schools considered them de facto as part of the system of upper secondary school. In 2003, the Act on tertiary vocational education was approved and an “intermediary level of technical competencies” started to be recognised as an independent vocational path (Ure 2007). This has a duration between half a year and two years and is supposed to provide a level of competence that can be directly applied in the labour market.

Governance in Norwegian VET has been strongly influenced by State reforms scaling down the number of VET programmes in upper secondary education, particularly in an attempt to provide students with broader vocational skills. Presently there are nine vocational programmes, which are replicated in nine vocational councils, calling on representatives from branches and sectors. These councils report to the National Council for Vocational Education and Training, which gives advice to the ministry and directorate of education on VET policy and practices. Recommendations from the Council are often adopted as official VET policy. This national council, supplemented by the nine vocational councils, either carries out or co-ordinates similar responsibilities to those of the Spanish National Institute on Qualifications, for example observations and monitoring of developments in different trades.

There are also tripartite County Vocational Training Boards, which in 2008 were transformed from co-decision making to advisory bodies, now primarily assisting county authorities in regulating the courses offered to vocational students and advising on regional development. Compared to similar regional bodies in Spain, very much concerned with advancing an agenda reflecting the specific situations of each Autonomous Community, the Norwegian county boards now seem to be streamlined according to a national public VET agenda (cf. Olsen 2011: Høst 2008). From a system’s

perspective this may point out to an increased emphasis on coherence in public policy, which should be distinguished from the advancement of VET as a coherent educational pathway with distinct regulation mechanisms (cf. Greinert 1998).

The functioning of the aforementioned VET councils at a county, branch/sector or State level and their changing mission illustrates how State regulation is attenuated by other regulation mechanisms, such as corporate and social partners' influences (cf. Olsen, 2008; Deichman-Sørensen 2007). However, this mediation does not necessarily engender incoherent State regulation, as stakeholders have not tended to challenge the basic foundations of the State agenda, from which they benefit strongly, for instance through the availability of subsidies for apprenticeship placements in enterprises. In fact, recent VET reforms have probably implied a transmission of commitment and responsibility from labour market actors (notably social partners) to public authorities at county and State level. According to Olsen:

“...negative effects from integration processes at the system level might threaten the position of the social partners, the firms and working life in the institutional regulation of VET”(Olsen 2008:7).

This suggests that hybrid VET systems characterised by multiple regulation mechanisms and stakeholders may have strong players who are hardly interested in changing these mechanisms. Beyond their points of difference, stakeholders can find an equilibrium that is satisfactory to the parties involved, sustained by certain institutional structures. Thus, the reason why horizontal coherence is an issue of minor concern in discussions within the Norwegian VET system is partly related to the dominant role of the Norwegian Ministry of Education in terms of defining what counts as formal education. Apart from the co-ordination of labour market training, i.e. non-formal training schemes for unemployed under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour, lack of coherence between vocational strands is not identified as a problem by the main stakeholders.

This institutional setting has been complemented in recent times with specific legislation that has increased the connections between VET and other education and training sectors. The 1994 Reform as well as later reforms, like the so-called Knowledge Promotion Reform, allowed students to switch between learning trajectories such as vocational/general training (cf. St. meld 2003). The Knowledge Promotion Reform, launched in 2005, addressed primary as well as lower and upper secondary education, and followed up previous reforms by outlining procedures for pupils attending general 'education programmes' to switch to vocational education programmes. Provided that a vocational student is trained in a certain number of theoretical subjects (s)he is entitled to obtain general study competence certificates giving entrance to university studies without numerous *clausus*. In parallel to attempts to equalise the status of these programmes, the two tracks were made more distinct with a view to combat high dropout rates and to better guide hesitant students in their educational choices.

All in all, there is a low degree of compartmentalisation in the Norwegian education, and there is hardly any streaming of students. This allows public VET policy to concentrate on measures to spur the vertical coherence of the system.

4.3 Spain: Horizontal and vertical coherence

Given the weakness of the Industrial Revolution and the political instability lived in Spain during the XIXth century, there was no VET system per se (Homs 2008). Companies trained individuals 'in-house' with little intervention from the State. The first public VET schools did not appear until the late XIX and early XXth Century, but not until 1955 was VET regulated, through the so-called "Industrial Law". This Law aimed to integrate workers into the productive system, yet the need for training under Franco's dictatorship was marginal until the 1960s (Homs 2008; Prats 1985). High levels of unemployment during the 1980s diverted the interest away from VET and into general education, as the young aimed to progress to higher education in order to have better chances in the labour market (cf. Souto-Otero 2007). The underdevelopment of VET in Spain led to little interest in this policy area during the 1980s and 1990s.

From the 1980s, vertical coherence was not an issue on the policy agenda. Instead, given the low proportions of the age-cohort going into VET, how to make VET more 'general' and attractive for young people was the policy issue. The Spanish VET system was divided into three subsystems: formal VET, managed by the education ministry; continuous VET -CVT-, which has historically been managed by the social partners; and VET for the unemployed or as it is called in Spain 'occupational training' -OVET-, managed by the ministry of employment. Few connections existed between different VET subsystems. While vertical coherence did not acquire a high profile in national debates, greater emphasis has been put on horizontal coherence more recently. This process started at the end of the 1990s, when the Ley Orgánica de Cualificaciones y Formación Profesional -Qualifications and Vocational Training Act- (Law No5/2002) was passed (Marhuenda Fluixa and Bernad i Garcia 2008). The Law did not aim to unify, but aimed to connect, the three Spanish VET subsystems, in particular CVT and OVET. These were integrated in 2007 under the same legal Framework, to create a single VET system, and to facilitate lifelong learning at a point when the Spanish economy was growing at a strong pace.

A key instrument in the attempt to connect the three subsystems was the setting-up of a Spanish National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications (NCPQ) for some VET qualifications. The Catalogue had three main features: 1) it aimed to identify and define professional qualifications indicating the professional level and family; 2) each professional qualification was made up of competence units which were in turn defined in terms of activities and activity criteria; 3) each competence unit had its own associated training modules. The main difference with a National Qualifications Framework - currently under development in Spain as in many other EU countries, following the approval of the European Qualifications Framework- was that the catalogue included professional standards that acted as reference points for the production of awards, but did not organise the awards themselves.

The 2002 Qualifications and Vocational Training Act and the NCPQ were motivated by a range of policy objectives, of which the most important were to facilitate the adjustment of VET to the requirements of the labour market and to promote the integration of the VET offer; as the NCPQ was a reference point for the design of both initial and advanced VET programmes delivered by VET institutions and VET delivered in the context of the so-called 'Formacion Ocupacional', which is mainly targeted to the unemployed (cf. INCUAL 2009; IFES and MTAS 2008; IFES and MTAS 2006). The system therefore aimed

to contribute to the integration of and facilitate the transfer and transparency between the different types of VET through a common reference to the NCPQ (Cf. RD 34/2008).

In the early 2000s new 'Integrated Centres' for VET delivery were created to ensure a 'coherent reply', at all the VET levels, to the needs of the economy and also to achieve 'greater efficiency' –an idea that had been debated since the 1990s. These centres deliver provision related both to VET diplomas and certificates of occupational standards referring to the NCPQ. They provide initial VET, CVT and OVET, even in joint sessions when expected competence levels in courses from the different subsystems are equal. They also provide information, advice and guidance that, given the experience of integrated centres in the delivery of VET courses related to different subsystems, is also expected to be more coherent than in the past.

In spite of the effects of the Catalogue of Occupational Qualifications and the setting-up of Integrated Centres, the three subsystems remained dispersed. New unifying efforts were announced in the 2008 "Roadmap for a new vocational training", supported by the Spanish General Council for Vocational Training (CGFP), the highest consultative platform for VET matters in Spain, in which central government, the Spanish regions Comunidades Autónomas (CCAA) and the social partners are represented. The Roadmap has ramifications for all aspects of VET, including initial formal VET, CVT and OVET. Although Spain is today a strongly decentralised country in matters of education, the Roadmap applies to the whole Spanish territory, and is being implemented through joint work between the central administration and the CCAA. All economic sectors, which are currently grouped in 26 professional families, are included.

The Roadmap, was composed of 10 specific action lines. Three initiatives are particularly relevant in terms of coherence: the creation of national reference centres (NRC) and a system for the validation of non-formal and informal learning and the expansion of the network of integrated centres. Under the new Roadmap Integrated Centres as well as the National Centres for Occupational Training, which were under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour, can now become NRCs. These are specialised sectoral centres that monitor the qualification requirements of the labour market and are expected to undertake innovative and experimental actions in VET teaching methodologies, IAG (information, advice and guidance) evaluation and accreditation to benefit initial VET students, workers and unemployed people by enabling them to better match labour market needs. The centres are also expected to provide training to employers, trainers and teachers related to innovation in VET. In this respect, they are a new step towards greater horizontal coherence between the three subsystems. The Roadmap also envisaged the creation of a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning (Souto-Otero 2010). A single procedure for the evaluation and accreditation of professional competencies acquired through professional experience and non-formal training has since been established. The evaluation and accreditation will use as their reference points the competence units of the NCPQ, employed as references in the official diplomas on vocational training (títulos de formación profesional) and occupational aptitude certificates (certificados de profesionalidad). Professional competencies could be validated for modules of formal VET, or full qualifications (either diplomas or professional certificates). The link to horizontal coherence is straightforward, as validation is based on the linkages between learning in any setting, through the notion of learning outcome.

On the whole, Spanish reforms to achieve greater coherence in VET have been timid. They only gathered pace since the 1990s. Greater efforts have been put on horizontal, rather than vertical, coherence. Initial efforts focused on the integration of the provision previously delivered separately in each VET subsystem, within the same physical space (integrated centres). There was also a move towards a national catalogue of professional qualifications, which linked qualifications from different strands according to the competencies and performances associated with them. This approach has however been called into question recently by the Spanish central government and employers, so that more encompassing reforms have started to be implemented. These refer to the extension of the network of integrated centres and the move from the NCPQ to a national qualifications framework, which is also in line with EU requirements. A second set of initiatives in this area related to the setting up of National Reference Centres and a system for the validation of professional competencies.

The focus on horizontal coherence may be explained by the efficiency benefits of the integration of provision in VET, as well as the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Souto-Otero et al. 2008). Low social esteem for VET makes vertical coherence and mainstreaming into other types of education at different levels (in particular higher education) more problematic, and subject to accusations of ‘commodification’ of education, which subsequent governments have tried to avoid. Spanish young people have traditionally opposed the ‘vocationalisation’ of higher education and its close alignment to the needs of employers, which is often portrayed as being associated with decaying standards and the neglect of important critical functions of higher education (Elias 2010).

5. Conclusions

This article has defined two distinct dimensions of coherence: a *horizontal dimension*, referring to how different VET strands are brought into one single framework and treated more uniformly with respect to provision and delivery structures; and a *vertical dimension* whereby VET is mainstreamed across various courses of study at different education levels. These notions have been examined with reference to the cases of Norway and Spain. Our comparison between public VET policies puts at the centre State reforms in both countries. At the beginning of the recent “Roadmap for a new vocational training” reform the situation of VET in Spain partly resembled the situation of Norwegian VET in the early 1990s, prior to the structuring of a vocational track in upper secondary education, as a more systematic *alternance* between school and work practice. Regarding other aspects, developments related to ‘coherence’ have been different in the two countries. Spain has experienced a move from three largely unrelated VET strands into a more unified system; and Norway from a fragile VET system to the availability of more vocational schools and courses at all educational levels. While both countries looked for coherence, the way in which they operationalized the term has been substantially different.

Moreover, the results show that in spite of systematic attempts over the last two decades in the two countries, it is not possible to talk about a linear development of VET towards coherence. Both countries have experienced significant, and sometimes at least partly contradictory, reforms on the content and shape of their VET systems. As mentioned, in these reforms the State has been a key driver. While other stakeholders have provided inputs to the reforms, there is no apparent stride for hegemonic roles.

This suggests that hybrid VET systems characterised by multiple regulation mechanisms may have strong players who are not eager to change the morphology of these systems. VET governance in the two cases has thus been shaped by a constant set of stakeholders interacting in a way of mutual recognition. Overall, the observed institutional stability consists of the presence of the same players and not of the specific design of the VET system each of them may favour through time. The latter was repeatedly reshaped as various reforms unfolded.

State dominance is mediated by the interests and views of other social actors and by the relationship between VET and the economy. Moreover, this dominance features different mechanisms in the two systems, which has consequences for the State's capacity to direct the design and implementation of the reforms analysed in this paper. Spain has a more complex VET governance system than Norway, and is characterised by a high degree of power decentralisation to sub-national entities - in particular Autonomous Communities - which drive the policy process in the absence of strong levels of associational membership. This makes it difficult for the central government to provide direction in VET. In Norway, the relative institutional stability rests on combined efforts of social partners, regional interests and the State. Albeit embedded in an overall decentralised governance structure, regional VET administrations do not mediate sector interests in the same way as they do in Spain. Compared with the Spanish regions, which are heavily involved in advancing their agendas and their social and economic situation, the Norwegian tripartite County Vocational Training Boards are being streamlined according to a State VET agenda. This is underlined by their transformation from co-decision making to advisory bodies in the Norwegian VET system.

Finally, on a more general note, a two-country comparison between Norway and Spain illustrates different mechanisms for co-ordination and contestation at the intersection between national, regional and local VET structures. Analyses of national frameworks for consultation and stakeholder interaction can shed light on similar VET mechanisms in other European countries in the area of VET coherence, as well as other areas. Further research along these lines could, for instance, compare Germany's federal VET structures around the *Länder* with our findings from Spain. A juxtaposition of Denmark's nearly non-existing county level in matters of VET and our findings from regional VET policy in Norway, would appear equally fruitful. An enlarged comparison of country cases can nurture both VET research and research on decision-making structures in political science.

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