

Reframing the Social Role of VET: A Comparative Study of Institutional Responses to Societal Challenges in South America and Implications for European Research

Keywords: Social Role of Vocational Education, Comparative Education Research, Governance and Institutional Theory, South America, Europe

Research Overview

This study explores how VET institutions interpret and respond to societal challenges, using a comparative analysis of South American systems. Grounded in governance, network, and institutional theory, it identifies patterns of social role construction and reflects on their implications for European VET research and policy.

Abstract

This paper examines the expanding social role of vocational education and training (VET) institutions in light of increasing societal expectations related to social cohesion, democratic participation, and sustainable development. In recent years, European VET research has increasingly emphasized that VET institutions are not only sites of skill formation but also key actors in addressing broader political, ecological, and economic challenges (Moodie, Wheelahan & Kost, 2024; Kost, Mou & O'Shea, 2024). Despite these conceptual advancements, there remains a significant empirical gap regarding how VET institutions interpret, negotiate, and operationalize such external societal impulses. Furthermore, comparative perspectives beyond Europe are still underdeveloped, even though European systems are deeply embedded in global dynamics. Research from the Global South offers an important lens to critically reflect on dominant European assumptions and theoretical frameworks (Alphonsus & Schmees, 2025; Pozzer & dos Reis Neuhold, 2025).

Against this backdrop, the paper aims to advance a theoretically grounded and empirically informed understanding of the social role of VET institutions by combining European theoretical traditions with comparative insights from South America. The study builds on a conceptual framework developed in a prior project phase (presented at ECER 2025), which establishes a shared analytical language for examining the social role of VET across diverse contexts. This framework integrates three key theoretical perspectives widely used in European educational research. First, governance theory is applied to analyze actor constellations, decision-making processes, and coordination mechanisms that shape how institutions respond to societal demands (Maag Merki & Altrichter, 2015; Altrichter et al., 2007). Second, network theory provides tools for examining the embeddedness of VET institutions in local, national, and transnational networks, highlighting the importance of relational structures for institutional action (Granovetter, 1973; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). Third, new institutional theory focuses on normative expectations, legitimacy pressures, and institutional logics that influence how VET institutions define and justify their societal roles (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2014).

Building on this theoretical foundation, the study addresses three central research questions: (1) How do leadership actors in VET practice, policy, and administration perceive and interpret external societal impulses beyond the education system? (2) How are these impulses processed within different VET systems, and how do they shape institutional understandings of social

responsibility? (3) To what extent do cross-national patterns emerge that are analytically relevant for European VET debates? To answer these questions, the empirical analysis focuses on six South American countries—Colombia, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil. These cases were selected due to their relevance in addressing challenges that are also highly salient in European contexts, including ecological transformation, digitalization, social inequality, and evolving governance arrangements.

Methodologically, the study follows a theory-guided qualitative comparative research design (Pilz, 2022; Flick, 2018). The selection of cases and objects of comparison is driven by their analytical relevance for capturing institutional responses to societal challenges across different contexts. Data is collected through approximately 30 theme-centered, structured interviews with leadership-level actors from VET practice (with a focus on vocational schools), policy, and public administration (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Meuser & Nagel, 2009). This actor-centered approach reflects established traditions in governance and institutional research, emphasizing the role of key decision-makers in shaping institutional interpretations and responses.

The interview guide is derived from the conceptual framework and operationalizes central analytical dimensions from governance, network, and new institutional theory. It focuses on how external societal impulses—such as political reforms, ecological pressures, and global development agendas—are perceived, interpreted, and translated into institutional practices. Data analysis is conducted using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2022), combining deductive coding based on theoretical categories with inductive refinement to capture context-specific meanings. In a second step, cross-case comparisons are carried out to identify similarities and differences across countries and actor groups (Yin, 2018). This comparative approach enables the identification of recurring patterns of institutional sense-making and role attribution, as well as variations shaped by specific national contexts.

The expected contributions of the study are threefold. Empirically, it provides comparative insights into how VET systems outside Europe process societal challenges that are equally central to European policy and research debates. Analytically, it identifies cross-national patterns in how VET institutions and their leadership actors construct and enact social roles, offering a basis for reflecting on similarities and differences with European systems. Theoretically, it refines a conceptual framework grounded in European research traditions by testing and extending it through empirical material from non-European contexts.

Overall, the paper contributes to a more reflexive and globally informed understanding of the social role of VET institutions in times of societal transformation. By linking European theoretical debates with empirical insights from South America, it responds to calls for multidimensional comparative research that captures diverse responses to transformation processes (Clarke, Westerhuis & Winch, 2021). In doing so, it highlights how institutional arrangements can support or constrain sustainable development and social integration across different national contexts.

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