

# Re-vitalizing VET and Continuing Education through Best Practices: The Albanian Case

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*Abstract:* - Recent studies related to education, training, and employment in Albania argue about the skills gap about the main sectors of the Albanian economy as the former basis of the once-centralized economy, i.e., Vocational Education Training (VET) and Continuing Education (CE) lost their momentum and eventually collapsed due to the eventual failure of industrial production in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, thanks to concerted efforts over the past two decades on the part of international donors and governmental initiatives, VET and CE are projected to play an important role in the economic development of the country amidst various challenges ranging from funding, certification, market relevance to the legal framework, to name a few. This paper intends to first provide a short description of the current situation about VET and CE and, then, promote theoretical models such as the application of Post-Secondary VETs and the creation of a National VET Fund and a VET levy as well as the analysis of two successful cases studies: Murialdo Social Center-Fier and Skills for Jobs (S4J). It further concludes by highlighting the importance of such successful models in a knowledge-based economy, thus filling the current skills gap and securing sustainable economic growth.

*Key-Words:* - Vocational Education Training (VET), Continuing Education (CE), skills gap, training and employment, Post-Secondary Vets, National VET Fund, Murialdo Social Center-Fier, Skills for Jobs (S4J).

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## 1 Introduction

Many academic studies highlight the importance of VET as a mechanism to alleviate poverty and better integrate marginalized groups in the labor market, [1], [2]. Regarding Albania, there continues to exist a high demand for "middle-skilled" workers, on the one hand, and a high unemployment rate among young adults, i.e., not in education, employment, or training (NEETs), on the other hand, as revealed by several studies which focus on the importance of VET and CE in this regard, [3], [4], [5], [6].

Referring to high youth unemployment (NEETs): "The key challenges to the Albanian labor market remain high youth unemployment (26.5% in 2020), a high NEET (youth not in employment, education or training) rate (27.9% in 2020) (INSTAT, 2021), and a very high level of informal employment (57% in 2019 – ILO, 2021)", [7].

Therefore, over the two decades, the concerted efforts of both international donors and governmental initiatives have helped prepare the legal framework of VET and CE including but not limited to establishing the National Employment and Skills Agency (NAES), the National Agency for VET, and Qualifications (NAVETQ) and the State Inspectorate for Labor and Social Services (SILSS) as well as several strategies such as the new National Strategy for VET and Lifelong Learning 2013-2020, the inter-sectoral Employment Strategy 2013-2020 and various feasibility studies on Post-Secondary VET in collaboration with specialized international agencies such as the German GIZ, the Austrian Development Cooperation, and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

Even though in theory, it seems as if VET and CE enjoy full support domestically and internationally, the challenges faced are related,

among others, to the low level of student enrollment in VET schools and centers and lack of on-site and off-site job training in the country. Regarding poor attendance of vocational education, it could be related to the preference of Albanian students towards general secondary education as a more solid career path as well as to the poor quality of Vocational Schools and Regional Vocational Education Centers both in terms of human capital (instructors) and infrastructure and material equipment, [8].

Table 1 provides some worrying data related to youth unemployment, registered training occupations, and the percentage of school leavers who opt for vocational education as compared to some regional and European countries where VET has a long-established tradition. In fact, Albania ranks lower in comparison with both neighboring and other European countries in terms of youth unemployment, registered training occupations as well as VET attendance.

Table 1. Comparative Benchmarking of Albania's VET enrollment, youth unemployment and registered training occupations vs. selected countries

Country	Youth Unemployment rate	Registered training occupations	% of school leavers to VET
Albania	31,9 (2017)	100	21
Germany	6,8 (2017)	327	56
Switzerland	8,1 (2017)	230	66
Austria	9,8 (2017)	218	70
The Netherlands	8,9 (2017)	237	69
Serbia	29,7 (2018)	250	65

Source: [5]

However, according to data published by INSTAT, there has been a slight increase in the contribution of VET to general secondary education over the past decade. On average, students attending

VET make up about 20% of the total number of students attending secondary education in Albania (Upper Secondary Education), enjoying an increase of 5% compared to 20 years ago. Figure 1 explains how the percentage of general secondary education has decreased in terms of numbers over the past decade from close to 140 000 students in 2010 to 100 000 students in 2021; whereas VET enrollment has had slight fluctuations and has remained mainly under 20 000 students throughout this period, [9].

In addition, referring to data connecting VET with the labor market, a positive trend is noted. Thus, according to the data of AKPA - National Agency for Employment and Skills (2023), the

number of unemployed jobseekers with VET degrees has continuously decreased (from 36,000 in 2000 to 5,400 in 2022). Referring to the same data, even at the national level, unemployment is lower among individuals with low education and those with secondary professional education; while it is higher among individuals with general secondary education and higher education, [10].

The main concerns regarding VET providers, both VSS-s (Vocational Secondary Schools) and VTS-s (Vocational Training Centers, commonly regarded as Lifelong Learning Centers) range from poor performance and poor implementation to lack of admission criteria and insufficient teaching staff and infrastructure to lack of autonomy and occupational activity, to name a few. Figure 2, related to performance, highlights that out of 52 VET providers in the country, only 1 has performed satisfactorily; whereas 19 of them have performed moderately and the majority, consisting of 26 VET providers, have performed unsatisfactorily and 6 providers have performed poorly:

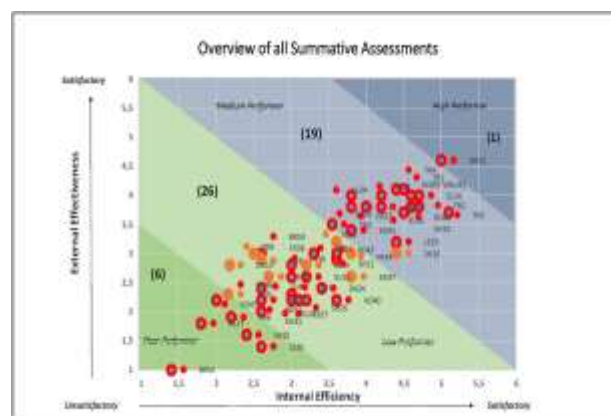


Fig. 1: VET Performance Matrix

Source: [5]

## 2 Revitalizing VET and CE through Best Theoretical Models

### 2.1 Introduction and Empowerment of Three Different Post-Secondary VETs

The review of Albania's Vocational Education and Training System (2020) argues about a strong relationship between VET and labor market relevance as well as standard-based assessment and certification. Furthermore, other studies by local researchers argue about the role that VET plays in social inclusion and overcoming barriers of all kinds, [11], [12]. Therefore, as Figure 2 explains, one way to improve VET is related to the introduction and implementation of three different

Post-Secondary VETs, which tend to meet the expectations of both trainees and businesses alike: firstly, Post-Secondary VET programs with a focus on academic and theoretical knowledge, i.e., the so-called Professional Colleges; secondly, the introduction of Post-Secondary VET programs combining theoretical knowledge with practical work-related skills, i.e., the so-called Post-Secondary VET providers; and thirdly, the introduction of Post-Secondary VET programs with a focus on vocational skills under the domain of Multifunctional VET centers.

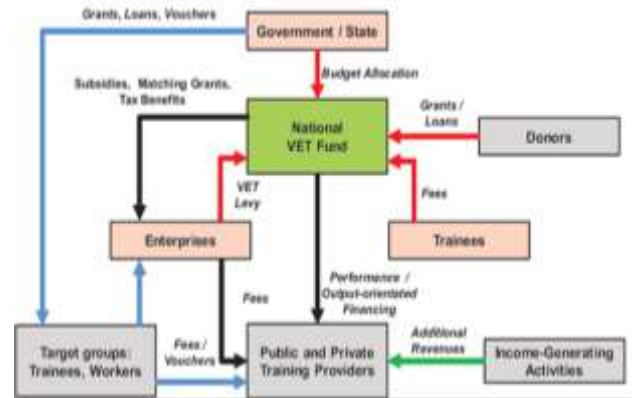


Fig. 3: Post-Secondary VET Funding Approach  
 Source: Own Modification

Figure 4 explains how such funds and the so-called VET levy is redistributed in a fair and transparent manner.

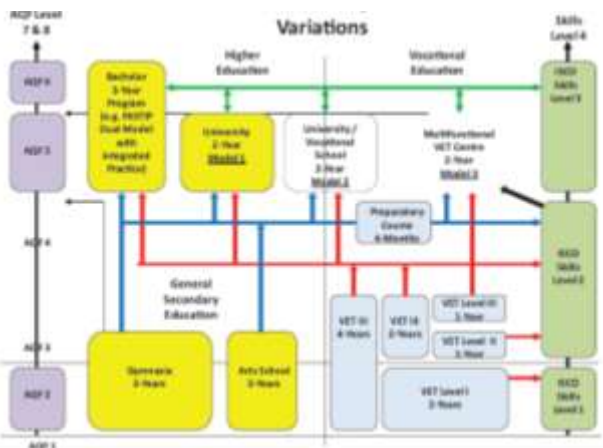


Fig. 2: Implementation of three Post-Secondary VET Model Variations  
 Source: [4] and Own adaptation

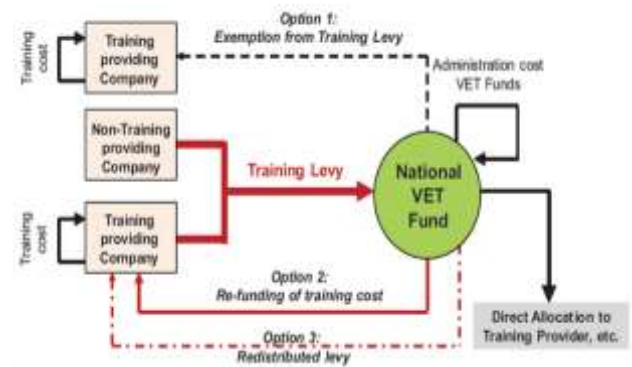


Fig. 4: VET Levy Three Pay-Back Mechanisms  
 Source: Own Modification

## 2.2 Revitalizing Post-Secondary VET through best Financing Options

Previous studies regarding VET and CE agree on one point, among others, that “the system is not only underfunded but also lacks efficiency in the management of funds. The latter is due to a partly unclear or incomplete legal framework and the consequent unclear roles of some actors”, [13].

Among the key challenges of Albanian VET system with regard to financing, it is worth mentioning the lack of VET providers’ financial autonomy, lack of business participation, lack of a coherent financing system as well as incomplete and unclear legal responsibilities on the part of local and central authorities.

Figure 3 highlights the importance of establishing a national VET fund, which acts as a mechanism to collect funds from the main contributors such as the state, donors, enterprises, and trainees.

## 3 Revitalizing VET and CE through Successful Case Studies

### 3.1 Murialdo Social Center-Fier

Considering the employment challenges and vocational training problems that young people are facing, it is worth mentioning some successful case studies and good practices where the employment of young people, especially those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, has been successful such as Murialdo Social Center in the County of Fier, [14].

Murialdo Social Center (MSC) was established in 1995 in Fier (Albania) thanks to the initiative of some Italian missionaries belonging to the Congregation of San Leonardo Murialdo. It is a not-for-profit organization focusing on education and social inclusion of Albanian young people (mainly in Fier and Durres) in partnership with regional and national Albanian public institutions, local civil

society organizations, international public and private partners, and international donors (European Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Italy, Ministry of Interior Affairs of Italy, Renovabis Foundation, CARITAS Italiana, Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, etc.), mainly from Italy. The main goal of MSC is the human and social promotion of young people and it principally operates in three main areas of activity.

First, it offers vocational and educational training (VET) for young people (aged between 14-26 years old) in several practical professions such as car repairing, IT, and foreign-related professions, to name a few. MSC also runs a school and has an official license recognized by the Ministry of Welfare of the Republic of Albania since 1997. It has trained more than 1 300 young people coming from Fier and its surrounding villages offering them more hands-on skills and job opportunities, thus, improving their social and economic situation.

Secondly, MSC provides social inclusion for marginalized groups like Roma people, children with disabilities, young offenders, and victims of human trafficking (especially girls). As a matter of fact, during its long-lasting experience, MSC has developed several projects in partnership with international partners focusing on marginalized groups in the regions of Fier and Durrës. The promotion of equal rights and opportunities has been promoted through the organization of education and recreational activities. Over the last 15 years, MSC has monitored and promoted the rights of Roma children by implementing socio-educational activities trying to create stable and positive relationships with public institutions, Roma organizations, and Roma communities. Recently, MSC carried out a project financed by the EU and coordinated by “Save the Children” aiming at the social inclusion of Roma children in the public schools of Fier. Moreover, MSC has been organizing after-school activities in the Roma community of Drize and recreational activities including them at the youth center. Since 2014, in partnership with the municipality of Fier and the Regional Department of Education, MSC has been organizing and developing educational, artistic, and recreational activities at the daycare center “Horizont” aiming at integration and personal development of children and young people with disabilities. Children and youngsters with disabilities have also been involved in some afternoon activities at MSC youth center to overcome social exclusion and prejudices.

Thirdly, MSC promotes an active lifestyle and good citizenship for youngsters. MSC runs a youth

center, that is open from Monday to Sunday and hosts around 150 children and young people every day. It offers 3 football pitches, 1 volleyball court, 3 basketball fields, and several closed spaces for artistic and recreational activities. Currently, it is the only space in the city of Fier where it is possible to practice sports and organize free time activities totally for free. Children and youngsters could freely play sports, take part in workshops (i.e. theatre, dancing, and recycling), play music, and creatively express their feelings and emotions. In this context, some international volunteers work and promote the values of voluntarism with the support of MSC.

### **3.2 Skills for Jobs (S4J)**

Skills for Jobs (S4J) is a project mandated by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and implemented by Swiss Contact Albania. It was part of the Economic Development Domain of the Swiss Cooperation Strategy for Albania (2018-2021), with a specific focus on the promotion of employment opportunities and skills development. The project is in its second phase and is expected to last until June 2023. The project was designed to address the main VET challenges. Ten VET providers in six selected regions have benefitted from this project: 9716 young people (102% of Phase I target) have accessed offers through Vocational School District (VSD) on (IT-based, innovative, attractive, demand-oriented, and gender-sensitive) Tourism & Hospitality, Smart Construction, Textile, and ICT-related areas in Shkodra, Lezha, Tirana, Berat and Vlora regions, 433 companies have signed Memorandums of Understanding with selected VSD providers offering apprenticeships for students, co-financing VSD financially or in-kind and participating in VET network and curricula development. Out of these, 422 companies have provided apprenticeships for 1422 students. Schools have been modernized with virtual learning and school management platforms and investment in IT equipment. Among the newly registered students in the 2018-2019 academic year, the share of females reached 16.6%. One year after graduation, 34% of students graduating from VET schools in 2016 got employed. For students graduating in 2017, the employment rate increased by 49%. A pre-tracer study with students graduating from VET schools in 2018 showed that 53% of them had received a job offer before finishing school, [15].

## 4 Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, VET providers in the country face several structural, programmatic, and funding challenges, to name a few, which, regardless of the ever-increasing number of enrollments, fail to fill the skills gap of the country's economy, which continues to suffer from lack of workforce due to rapid changes in demographics and acute youth immigration, [16].

Therefore, the introduction of the three models of Post-Secondary VET programs, based on the best practices, provides better solutions towards a more sustainable economic development and better-trained workforce to face the challenges and explore the opportunities of the 21st century. In addition, the implementation of a VET levy as well as the establishment of a national VET fund, as discussed in this paper, intends to decentralize and improve the financing aspect of VET and CE.

Murialdo Social Centre (MSC) as well as Skills for Jobs (S4J) could be regarded as successful examples of the proper application of VET and CE principles in filling the existing skills gap in the country and securing better social inclusion for people coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, even though at the regional and small-scale level.

Nevertheless, VET and CE continue to face other challenges, which have not been analyzed in this paper, mainly related to establishing a "coherent regulatory framework", identification of "clear roles and responsibilities", implementation of "equitable funding arrangements", application of "standard-based assessment and certification", establishment of "a quality mechanism for VET provision and delivery" as well as "systemic cooperation with the private sector", [16].

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