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Vocational Educational Training (VET) in Tunisia: Barriers and Challenges to its Internationalization and Possible Solutions to Boost Socio-Economic Development of the Country

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Abstract

Since the educational reform of the 1980s, Tunisian Vocational Educational Training (VET) system has been the oldest continuing education system in North Africa, with its origins dating back to the beginning of Tunisian independence from the French colonial power in 1956. This article explores internationalization trends in VET institutions in Tunisia through desk research on secondary sources and through informal interviews with local actors conducted in 2023 to complement gathered information. The study contributes to setting grounds for further research in this field by providing an overview of the (VET) sector in Tunisia, their internationalization trends, and policy recommendations to further develop the internationalization of VET institutions in the country.

Abstract in French

Depuis la réforme éducative des années 1980, le système tunisien de formation professionnelle (EFP) est le plus ancien système de formation continue en Afrique du Nord, ses origines remontant au début de l'indépendance tunisienne de la puissance coloniale française en 1956. Cet article explore l'internationalisation et

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ses tendances dans les établissements d'EFP en Tunisie à travers une recherche documentaire sur des sources secondaires et à travers des entretiens informels avec des acteurs locaux menés en 2023 pour compléter les informations recueillies. L'étude contribue à jeter les bases de recherches plus approfondies dans ce domaine en fournissant un aperçu du secteur de la formation professionnelle en Tunisie, de ses tendances en matière d'internationalisation et des recommandations politiques pour développer davantage l'internationalisation des institutions d'EFP dans le pays.

Keywords:

Economic development, internationalization, national priorities, strategy, Tunisia, VET

Introduction

Globalized and rapidly changing labor markets need a skilled and mobile workforce that can continuously develop their knowledge, skills, and competences to thrive and prosper in this increasingly competitive landscape (Oberheidt et al., 2015). Vocational and Educational Training (VET) is understood as comprising education, training, and skills development relating to a wide range of occupational fields, production, services, and livelihoods. It includes work-based learning, constant training, and professional development which may lead to qualifications. This system also includes a wide range of skills development opportunities relevant to national and local contexts (UNESCO, 2015). Higher education VET exists within International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level 4 and level 5 categorizations, and many institutions offer both levels (Raby & Valeau, 2022). Level 4 and level 5 correspond respectively to post-secondary non-tertiary education and tertiary Education and to short-cycle tertiary education.

Successful international cooperation in VET requires interested partners to have a very clear and common understanding of the mutual benefits of this cooperation that must then be translated into a coherent strategy. Priority fields in a strategic and coordinated internationalization approach include increasing exchanges on evidence-based policy making, engaging with international organizations, and fostering the international mobility of learners, teachers, and trainers.

To a certain extent, in some parts of the world, international cooperation in higher education has a longer tradition than that of VET. There is more data

and research in the higher education/university sector because the VET sector is often a neglected research area. The VET sector is perceived by families around the world as “second class” and “devalued” (Dempsey & Tao, 2017), “low status” (Reich & Ho, 2017), and “low take-up” (Nahm, 2017). Although international development and cooperation has existed in the VET sector for 60 years (Raby & Valeau, 2018), no common definition of international cooperation in VET exists. The World Federation of Colleges and Polytechnics (2023) is the international voice of colleges, institutes, and polytechnics that fosters an arena to promote collaborative projects, networking, and policy discussion. Yet, outside of this and other organizations, the topic is still relatively new on national and international agendas. Another complication is that the understanding of what is behind international cooperation may also differ from one country to another.

There is limited literature on VET within the international market. Some countries, e.g., Australia, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, have more documented engagement in VET international cooperation. Engagement tends to depend on a combination of factors and is often motivated by economic, commercial, or diplomatic interests (Oberheidt et al., 2015, Raby & Valeau, 2018). International cooperation is also considered as a means for exchange and mutual benefit because it provides a frame in which two or more countries share their expertise with the aim of increasing the quality and skill set of their labor force. One study demonstrates that globalization and its results have been the main drivers behind international cooperation in VET (Oberheidt et al., 2015). In the face of heightened competition to attract foreign investments and human capital, countries’ competitiveness depends also on the quality of their labor force and of the local workers in their companies abroad. However, key drivers for low-middle income countries are demographic pressure and the interplaying needs to train youth for employment, to find them jobs, to tackle the high levels of their unemployment—a source of social instability, and to cater for the high demand for specialized workers (CEDEFOP, European Centre for the development of Vocational Training, 2017).

All this emphasizes that education policies cannot be seen in isolation but need to be thought more in synergy with economic and labor market policies. In short, it is more crucial than ever that governments, education providers, and companies work together to create labor markets that are based on an understanding of what employers need and the skills required to meet those

needs in an efficient global labor market. Therefore, the idea that VET systems may have (due to their particular positioning between education and the world of work) an important role to play in this area is increasingly supported. Data on the topic is scarce overall. In particular, the topic has been far less touched upon by research as opposed to international cooperation in higher education.

Setting the Context: Objectives of the Study and Methodology

The focus of this study is the VET tertiary system in Tunisia, zooming in on internationalization as an alternative solution to the youth unemployment issue in the country and a means to contribute to the local, social, and economic development. The VET system in Tunisia is the oldest continuing education system in North Africa, with its origins dating back to the beginning of Tunisian independence in 1956. Despite that, little attention has been given to internationalization processes and practices at Tunisian institutions. Student mobility is one of the major internationalization trends and strategies adopted by higher education institutions (HEIs) in Tunisia (Ndaipa et al., 2022).

This article explores the internationalization of VET in Tunisia by adopting a qualitative approach. Desk research on secondary sources, mainly available in French and English languages, was conducted, and it was supplemented by four informal interviews conducted online and on telephone with Tunisian key stakeholders between March and August 2023. According to Creswell (1998, p. 15), “qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem”. Creswell (2009) claimed a qualitative study as a successful model that exists in a realistic context and allows the investigator to establish a degree of depth information from a group of participants in a specific profession (Creswell, 2009). In qualitative studies, the interview approach is very valuable and significant as interviews illustrate comprehensive and systematic analysis of the event or condition through nature (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003).

Therefore, interview questions were open-ended and their style was informal. Sociologist Michael Quinn Patton (2002) categorizes six types of questions that a researcher can ask. Among these, the questions chosen were mainly experiential and behavioral questions, which are about what a person

does or has done, and opinion and values questions, which are designed to understand what people think about some issue or experience.

The position, gender, and institution of the interviewees are presented in Table (1) below. Two of them are female and two male to keep the gender balance. Three of the four interviewees gave their permission to use their names in relation to their citations.

Name	Gender	Institution	Position
Khaouter Ghozzi	Female	Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Tunisia	Mission manager, Employability support office
Hmaid Ben Aziza	Male	UNIMED Network and University of Tunis	Secretary General of UNIMED and former President
Nesrine Baklouti	Female	Erasmus plus Office in Tunisia	Coordinator
Interviewee 4	Male	Tunisian University	President

TABLE (1): INTERVIEWEES

By contributing to setting grounds for further research in the field, it provides:

1. An overview of the VET system in Tunisia,
2. Analysis of internationalization VET trends, focusing on education abroad programs evaluation; and
3. Policy recommendations to further develop the internationalization of VET system in Tunisia.

Definitions of Terminology About the VET Sector and Internationalization

This section, through a comprehensive literature review, gives a definition of specific terms about the VET sector to clarify the context in which the study is framed and the objectives of vocational educational training in Tunisia which are in line with global trends and scopes of VET. The literature review provides with an insight about VET educational system in other regions of the worlds, including countries in African, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and Unites States of America and shows how VET contributes to local needs as well as serves the national communities worldwide.

Raby and Valeau (2009) identify a sector of institutions called Community Colleges and Global Counterparts which share four specific

characteristics. First, these institutions have a mission in which professional and academic programs are responsive to the educational needs of local communities and industries and whose curricular programs are likewise defined by local needs. In that these institutions are purposefully located in communities where students live, there is an ease of access that increases enrolment for non-traditional students. Secondly, this sector offers options for university overflow and a “second chance” for non-traditional students who have long been excluded from higher education. Thirdly, this sector offers short-term and sometimes longer multi-purpose curricula to meet regional medium-term labor requirements in high demand occupations in changing economies. Finally, these institutions support a mission that views educational access as necessary for providing economic and social capital that is needed to ensure social prosperity (Raby & Valeau, 2009). The term Global Counterparts is used because the various institutions around the world share mission, structural, and philosophical characteristics as they “educate non-traditional post-secondary students and demonstrate in a practical way the means by which new generations can receive skills and training that will ensure employment, prosperity and facilitation of social mobility” (Raby & Valeau 2009, p. 15). In an era of expanded educational reform for higher education, the role of the Community College or Global Counterpart is pivotal for serving a varied workforce that is ever demanding and changing. They have traditionally offered programs that specialise in apprentice training, paraprofessional training, and practical vocational or technical training. Today, most of them also offer a multifunctional, multipurpose mixture of programs for young and mature learners alike (Raby & Valeau 2022; Wong 2015).

In the current global-knowledge society, the concept of internationalization of higher education has itself become globalized, demanding further consideration of its impact on policy and practice as more countries and types of institutions around the world engage in the process. (Jones & de Wit, 2014, p. 28). Internationalization became defined by the generally accepted definition of Knight (2008): “The process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education” that clearly describes the process in a general and value neutral way” (de Wit & Deca, 2020, p.5). Internationalization is a powerful force that influences the orientation, operation, and development of all education sectors around the world (Dempsey & Tran, 2017).

Recent reforms in the VET sector that have internationalization practices mostly align with the neoliberal ideology that identifies globalization, changing global and national labor markets, and demands of the knowledge economy. Even though VET internationalization is manifested in various dimensions in both developed and developing countries, such as in the CEDEFOP 2020 Framework (Raby & Valeau, 2022), it is an often-neglected phenomenon in the existing VET and internationalization literature (Dempsey & Tran, 2017, Raby & Valeau, 2018). Contextually, the World Bank (2009) and more currently the 2030 Incheon Framework (UNESCO, 2018) and the Africa's Agenda 2063 (United Nations, 2020) all report that neglecting tertiary education could seriously jeopardize longer-term socio-economic growth and hinder progress of the Millennium Development Goals and the 2030 Goals which require tertiary-level training to implement such a training at higher education level. Examples from countries in Africa include adding programs that fashion a US model in Tunisia (Hagedorn & Mezghani 2013) and identify the importance of workplace and HEI connections in South Africa (Kruger & Wholhuter, 2018; Wholhuter, 2023).

Geographically speaking, Tunisia is a country in the North Africa and the Middle East region (MENA). This region comprises the area from the Western Mediterranean (Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt) to the Eastern Mediterranean including Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestinian Territories, Iraq. The countries of the MENA region display great diversity in terms of demography, culture, economic development, and levels of urbanization. Yet, there is also much similarity, especially in family aspirations and hopes for a better life, employment in decent and fulfilling work, and the positive future of their children and young people (Maclean & Fien, 2017). Accordingly, governments in MENA countries are investing strongly in education to the point where universal primary education has been achieved for girls and boys in most countries (Samans & Zahidi, 2017).

While the investment in education extends to universities in most Middle East countries, VET has not generally been as well served. VET is perceived as a "residual" category for those students who cannot make it to the general secondary path after completing basic education. As a result, there is a growing skills mismatch in the region, 'as young people fail to acquire the skills needed to succeed in today's jobs, let alone tomorrow's' (Samans & Zahidi, 2017, p. 9).

At the European level, through the Copenhagen process on enhanced European cooperation in Vocational Educational Training, that was launched in 2002, the European Commission has been working to improve the performance, quality, and attractiveness of VET. Although significant progress has been registered in the joint work to modernise European VET systems, both the EU and individual Member States have much to gain from opening up to the developments that are taking place in many developed and emerging economies. By exchanging experiences and best practices, and cooperating on evidence-based policy making, it could altogether contribute to improving the quality and labor market relevance of the skills provided by VET systems all over the world.

Various studies in the United States of America see the development of intercultural capabilities and global perspectives as critical for domestic students from American community colleges due to the nature of intercultural workplaces they may find themselves in after graduation (Braskamp, 2011; Raby et al., 2014). Engaging in mobility and harnessing international experience have been seen as a vehicle to enhance the employability of young people in Europe (Egetenmeyer & Rueffin, 2011). Increasing documentation (WFCP, 2023) shows how VET institutes, teachers, and students from across different continents are engaging in internationalization collaborations as a response to the demand of internationalization and transnational workforce mobility.

The policy and practice on VET in African countries prior to independence was largely either a traditional practice embedded in communities, or oriented by labor development strategies for primarily extractive colonial states. Since independence, they have gone through three main post-independence phases. These broadly reflect wider developmental orthodoxies of modernisation, basic needs, and neoliberalism (McGrath, 2018). Nonetheless, there is a strand in 'international' journals such as *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, and in African journals such as the *Journal of Vocational Adult and Continuing Education and Training* and the *Africa Journal of Technical and Vocational Education and Training* that show a wider tradition. This largely focuses on issues of teaching and learning (and increasingly of vocational teacher education) and institutional leadership and management. In the teaching and learning area, research has focused on curriculum, pedagogy and student support (Needham, 2018; Papier & McBride, 2018).

In line with the French system, in the majority of Latin American and Caribbean countries secondary education has, for a long time, been organized in two level system with two disciplines: one level that prepares students for university (although not all students reach this level) awarding a secondary education diploma, and the other level, which is made up of various forms of vocational education and training, particularly directed towards preparing students for employment (Moura Castro et al., 2000). During the 1990s, the introduction of education reforms in the majority of Latin American countries led to the expansion of the education systems and an increase in the average number of years spent at school by young people. However, these achievements brought in the Latin American countries an increase in fragmentation processes and in social inequality.

Countries in the Asian region have placed varying emphases on general and vocational education, depending upon several historical, social, economic and political considerations (Asian Development Bank, 1991). In several East Asian countries, the emphasis was not on formal vocational/technical secondary schools, but on training institutions and on-the-job training. In majority of the countries of the Asian continent, employers are also responsible for specific skill training, just as an example India has had to start afresh on vocationalization since its independence. It is more or less the same situation in other Asian countries, where particularly since their independence in 1950s, an increasing attention has been given to vocational education.

The interest of some of these countries towards VET is even older. Malaysia established its first technical college in 1906, initial efforts at vocationalization in Sri Lanka date back to the 1930s and in Philippines to 1920s. In particular a Vocational Education Act was passed in 1927 in Philippines stating that the “controlling purpose of vocational education is to fit pupils for useful employment” (UNESCO, 1984, p. 11). South Korea and Taiwan placed high priority on special vocational education at an early stage of industrialisation process in the respective countries. The very first educational development plan of Pakistan envisaged technical and commercial education as an integral part of general education, with diversification of the secondary education curriculum. All countries in the Asian region have, however, not accorded equal degree of attention to VET. According to the Asian Development Bank (1991, pp. 53-55):

- Korea stands as “a leading example” of how governments can promote an extensive school-based VET;
- Singapore had developed a “comprehensive vocational training infrastructure,” forging strong linkages between education institutions and training agencies;
- Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and Sri Lanka have “fairly developed” vocational and technical education systems – both in public and private schools;
- the agrarian economies of Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Myanmar have “patchy” systems of vocational and technical education; and
- India and China, the two big countries on the globe, suffer from “prejudice against manual work” and hence have “lopsided” education development structures including for VET.
- On the other extreme, Japan has the most developed and well-established infrastructure providing school based as well as enterprise-based VET.

In my view, these global specifications help to understand how some typical dynamics of the Tunisian case are not exclusive but have similarities at regional levels and globally. In Tunisia, there is an effort to frame the higher education VET sector relating to the MENA region and within a broader international context to transform the country that exists in isolation to bring it out of an oblivion in which it seems mired.

VET in Tunisia: National Priority for the Socio-Economic Development of the Country

This section aims to provide a historical overview about the birth of the higher education system in the country after the end independence from the French colonial power, through the first president Bourguiba until the early 1990s with Ben Ali taking power and thus the VET sector has been initiated. This latter was seen as a priority for the nation to boost the socio-economic development of the country.

The Edification of the Tunisian Higher Education System from the Independence to the Reform of VET in 1990s

Tunisia is one of the pioneering nations in promoting learning and education. The University of Ezzitouna was the first of its kind in the Arab world and is one of the most important universities in the world. Since its

independence in 1956, Tunisia has placed a special emphasis on the development of the education sector. Shortly in 1959, the government implemented an education plan in which education was approached as a national investment and key determinant of the nation's economic growth (Jules & Bouhlila, 2018).

From the 1960s, the Tunisian university was the space of a consensus between the regime put in place by President Habib Bourguiba (d. 2000) and the first generations of students who populated it (Siino, 2021). The Tunisian government has sought to satisfy the needs of the newly independent nation and improve its human assets. It was organized and made official by the promulgation of the law of education on November 4th, 1958. In the same year, schooling became compulsory and free of charge.

The edification of the Tunisian university structure in 1960 crowned a whole set of reforms organizing the different training cycles. In 1969, a Higher Education Law 1 was passed, incorporating all the existing government recognized institutions of higher education and scientific research into the "University of Tunis", an institute that was established in 1960. In the 1970s, the decision was made to extend Arabization to all subjects in post-primary education, except vocational, professional, and technical tracks. Aziza recalled that:

At the university level, French was maintained as the language of instruction in technical institutes and science faculties. In addition, teaching and training materials (handbook, texts, frameworks and guidelines) were all in French language for scientific and technical subjects and more importantly, faculty members and trainers were mainly trained in France (Aziza, interview, 2023).

In 1990-1991, a New Education Act stretched years in basic and secondary schools from 12 to 13 years. Education was also made compulsory for all pupils aged 6 to 16. In 2000, a competency-based approach was adopted.

Reform of the national vocational training system has been a government priority in Tunisia since the early 1990s. Vocational training in Tunisia is primarily under the responsibility of the Ministry of Vocational Training and Employment (MFPE) through the Tunisian Agency for Vocational Training (ATFP). The ATFP is a non-administrative public institution,

established in 1993 under 93-11 Law of 17 February 1993, and its administrative and financial structures, as well as its operating procedures, were established by the Decree 97-1937 on 29 September 1997 (OECD, 2014, p 27). Ghozzi explained that:

Higher education is organized in the framework of multidisciplinary universities (13 public universities including 203 public faculties, schools or higher institutes), a network of 24 Higher Institutes of Technological Studies (Instituts Supérieurs des Etudes Technologiques, or ISETs) and 76 private institutions (Ghozzi, interview, 2023).

The ISETs are classified under the General Directorate of Technological Studies and are under the supervision of the General Office of Technological Studies (also called the General Directorate of ISETs). The ISETs offer short-term professional programs from 6 months up to two years, that are generally more flexible and connected to the needs of the economy. According to Ghozzi, “While university enrolment rates are low, students have the opportunity to receive good quality technical and vocational training that qualify them for local and international jobs” (Ghozzi, interview, 2023).

From the Foundation of the VET Reform to the New VET Ministry Strategy 2016-2020: New Challenges and Difficulties

The first important step in this reform process was the launch of a national strategy for the reform of vocational training and employment in Tunisia, known as MANFORME (Mise à Niveau de la Formation et de l'Emploi, which means a Program for the Enhancement of Vocational Training and Employment). It was launched in the 1996 under the World Bank as first managing organisation, with the strategic goals of developing a demand driven, flexible and cost-effective vocational training system, which would provide trainees with the skills required by Tunisian businesses (ETF, 2006).

The start of MANFORME's current phase in 2002 saw the creation of a new Ministry of Education and Training responsible for ensuring that the positive reform elements are spread throughout the vocational training system. In line with its desire to develop a quality approach to vocational training, Tunisia is one of the few countries in the MENA region to introduce actions to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of government agency training programs. Until recently, vocational training in Tunisia did not offer

opportunities for lifelong learning. Under the responsibility of the Tunisian Agency for Vocational Training (ATFP), in Tunisia there are for 136 vocational training centers (secondary level), including (OECD, 2014):

- 47 Sectoral training centers (CSF)
- 61 Training and learning centers (CFA)
- 14 Training centers for young rural women (CFJFR)
- 11 Centres for Training and Promotion of Self-Employment (CFPTI)
- 1 Aeronautic training center

In all, 244 specialties are offered by the vocational training centres under ATFP according to the following diplomas (OECD, 2014). (1) Competence certificate (CC): Training for candidates aged 15 years and over, with the 7th year completed and who meet the specific skills or requirements or having passed the prerequisite assessment test; (2) Certificate of Professional Competence (CAP): Training cycle open to candidates who studied until the end of the ninth year of basic training; (3) Professional Technician Certificate (BTP): Training cycle open to candidates who have completed the second year of secondary training and have the certificate of professional competence in the same field; and (4) Qualified Technician Certificate (BTS): Training cycle open to holders of the Baccalaureate or those who passed the entrance test open to holders of the professional technician certificate in the same field.

Following the 2002 education reform, at the end of basic education, students can continue into either general secondary education (upon obtaining a basic education diploma) or vocational training. Those students entering vocational training can progress from a CAP or *certificat d'aptitude professionnelle* to a BTP or *brevet de technicien professionnel* and join general secondary students to study towards the Baccalaureate diploma to access higher education. Students from higher education can also enter BTS degrees. In this way the education system has built bridges between general and vocational education (Figure 1).

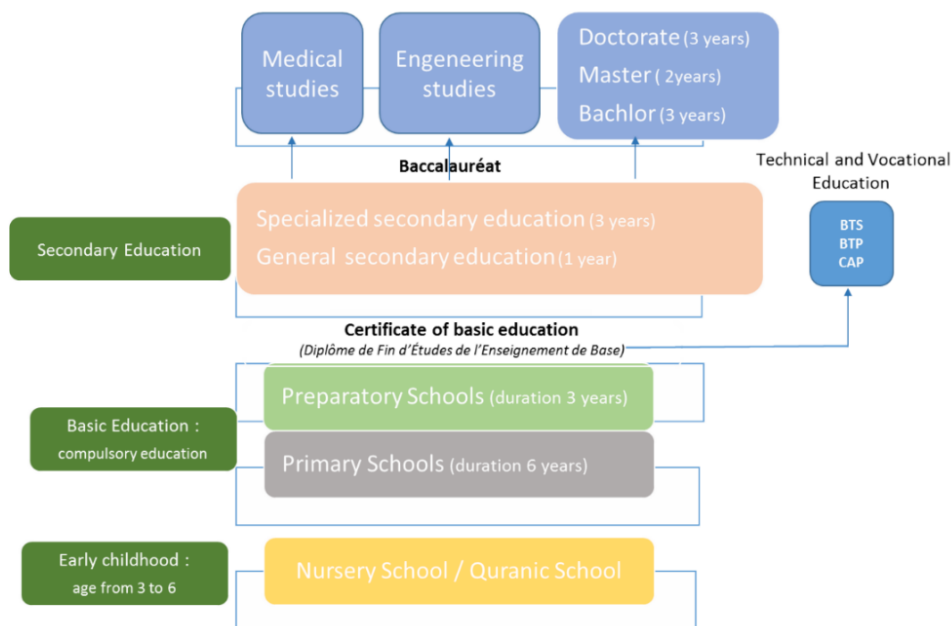


FIGURE (1): CAPACITY BUILDING IN TUNISIA HIGHER EDUCATION (MERIC-NET, 2019)

The 2008 Higher Education Act (Law n°2008-19) reformed university administration by offering institutions the option of moving from a centralized form of management system to a more flexible and decentralized one in key areas such as the academic, administrative, and financial aspects.

Tunisia has been trying to reform its education and training system through the Strategic Plan for the Reform of Higher Education and Scientific Research 2015–2025 aimed at revamping quality standards by improving teacher training, upgraded curricula, and enhancing private-sector partnerships (ETF, 2020). Tunisia also launched the Strategic Plan for the Education Sector 2016–2020 (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2016), the National VET Reform Strategy 2016–2020 (Ministère de la Formation Professionnelle et de l'Emploi – MFPE). Each plan has a structured approach to tackle the main problems and to receive a dedicated state budget to implement actions within the context of the National Development Plan 2016–2020 (MESRS, 2016). The VET Ministry strategy 2016-2020 is organised around a framework of 14 ambitious projects coordinated under the umbrella of a project management unit. According to this strategy, the main objectives for VET include:

- increase the attractiveness of VET through international mobility of students;

- support the professional development of trainers involving regional stakeholders;
- develop entrepreneurial mind-sets across the VET system (ETF, 2021).

Within the framework of the National Development Plan 2016–2020, special attention was given to an integrated governance approach at the top ministerial level of education, vocational training and higher education to better promote human capital development in a context of mutually reinforcing initiatives and lifelong learning. A new commission for human capital development, composed of representatives of all three ministries responsible for education and training, has been set up. In this regard, the area of initial education and training has by far the highest profile in terms of both strategic thinking and provision.

In the next section, these objectives of the VET strategy are better described, and some examples of concrete actions, initiatives, and projects are presented and described.

Tunisia VET and Internationalization: Context, Challenges, and Perspectives for the Future

When it comes to internationalization, both in higher education and in VET, this includes student mobility and recruitment onshore and offshore, staff mobility, internationalization of programs, transnational institutional partnerships and industry networks, and the involvement of aid and development activities in the developing regions. Among these dimensions, cross border student mobility is a key driving force that builds on interconnected features of international education, especially in VET sector. There are emerging philosophical constructs and ideological orientations governing institutional internationalization practices including the promotion of student mobility.

Over the past two decades, the VET sector in various developed countries have sought to internationalize practices and boost the delivery of programs to full-fee paying international students as part of a fundamental strategy for improving the sector in the globalized knowledge-based. Internationalization of vocational training could be practiced through mobility and the creation of international networks of vocational training institutions to promote knowledge and technology exchange, scale up quality, and facilitate matching with labor market needs.

International Mobility of Students in VET Sector: Cooperation with Neighboring Countries and Overseas

Tunisia is a forerunner in the introduction and full implementation of the European Higher Education System based on the Bologna process by introducing the three-cycle system (the so called LMD system which stands for Licence, Master et Doctorat). Interviewer 4, the president of a Tunisian University explained indeed that:

Tunisia also adopted the EU-inspired ECTS frameworks (European credit transfer and accumulation system) in 2008 that included a strong internationalization process and engagement in boosting quality assurance procedures (Interviewer 4, interview, 2023).

The 2014 Constitution reinstated the principle of the fundamental importance of compulsory national education up to 16 years old but also gave a great emphasis on the introduction of higher standards in the third cycle of education. The focus has been shifted to quality and competitiveness at the national and international levels. Moreover, interviewer 4, the president of a Tunisian University, recalled that the most recent national reform project considers students at the centre of the higher education system which has been prioritising accreditation and internationalization (interviewer 4, interview, 2023).

In this context, Baklouti explained that:

student mobility is one of the specific objectives of the national VET strategy. Different schemes provide international mobility opportunities for students and staff through the national fund of the Ministry of Higher Education or through international support offered by European and bilateral projects (Baklouti, interview, 2023).

The national internationalization strategy mainly focuses on three main pillars: ensuring a harmonisation with international standards criteria, increasing visibility and attractiveness of Tunisian curricula, and improving networking and partnership.

Regionally, Tunisia has a solid cooperation in higher education and scientific research with neighbouring countries from North Africa area (Yuqing,

2022). The interviewer 4 shared some good practices of Tunisian internationalization higher education by recalling that:

Tunisia has for example an intensive program for students exchange with Morocco for many years called Ibn Khaldun program which is indeed a Tunisian-Moroccan program of mobility between the Tunisian and the Moroccan HEIs. Tunisia is also a partner with Algeria in Erasmus+ programs (joint degrees, mobility for academic, research and administrative staff, credit transfers) (interviewer 4, interview, 2023).

Tunisia also participates in a number of bilateral programs with US, Canada and Japan, apart from European cooperation programs. The Tunisia Undergraduate Scholarship Program (Tunisia UGRAD) is part of the Department of State's Thomas Jefferson Scholarship Program which offers full scholarships to outstanding students from underrepresented sectors and parts of Tunisia for one academic year of non-degree undergraduate study in the United States at accredited four-year institutions. The program provides participants with a deeper understanding of American culture and new globally applicable skills and expertise to help them contribute to the economic growth and development of Tunisia. The last call for applications was in 2022. Once participants complete the training, they join an online group where they can access recruitment opportunities and receive online job search support. The initiative is made possible in part by a grant from the USA Embassy in Tunisia. A survey of the 2019-2020 cohort shows that nearly 100% of respondents reported positive change in behavioral competencies and professional skills as a result of their participation in the program (IREX, 2021).

Promotion of the 21st Century Skills and the Development of an Entrepreneurial Mind-set: Effective Tools to Boost VET Internationalization

Besides student mobility performed through exchange and study abroad programs, another new priority for the Ministry of Vocational Training and Employment has set in the framework of internationalization field: the promotion of the 21st century skills. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has adopted this explanation (Lai & Viering, 2012). It is common set of 21st century skills or competences, namely: collaboration; communication; Information and Communication Technology (ICT) literacy; and social and/or cultural competencies (including citizenship).

Most frameworks also mention creativity, critical thinking and problem solving. Across the various frameworks, ICT is acknowledged as a core of 21st century skills. Specifically, it is regarded as both (a) an argument for the need of 21st century skills, and (b) a tool that can support the acquisition and assessment of these skills. In addition, the rapid development of ICT requires a whole new set of competences related to ICT and technological literacy (Lai & Viering, 2012). In this regard, the European Training Foundation (ETF), piloted the integration of entrepreneurship spirit as a key competence, based on the EntreComp framework (the European framework for the Entrepreneurial Competences). Implementation of the 14 projects covered by the VET reform strategy is proceeding slowly, given the limited human and material resources available. Although the Tunisian authorities have taken real ownership of VET reform and the social partners have provided support, most of the projects have so far been funded by technical and financial partners, who have supported the capacity building of the social partners in the area of education and training. Finally, Aziza explained that “as a result of political volatility (new ministers have been appointed every year since the Arab revolts in 2011), there has been sudden reprioritisation or retraction of earlier decisions” (Aziza, interview, 2023).

Partnering with Regional and Local Stakeholders to Address Youth Employability

In line with the new constitution, adopted in 2014, the gradual decentralisation of VET functions is ongoing (ETF, 2021). This is an innovative approach to address youth employability by managing the quality and relevance of VET supply at local level. Building on previous experience gained by the ETF and other actors, it is worthwhile to mention the implementation of the EU-funded IRADA program (Initiative régionale d'appui au développement économique durable), which is a regional initiative to support sustainable economic development with EUR 32 million, started in 2018 (ETF, 2021). The aim of the program is to reinforce regional multi-stakeholders' platforms to steer human capital development according to local labor market needs in eight governorates. It is a pilot project with a bottom-up approach to improve VET provision, whereby the VET centres had the opportunity to shape their own curricula and training modalities in collaboration with businesses.

In 2018, the Ministry of Vocational Training and Employment made a significant effort to coordinate the implementation of VET reforms by introducing innovative mapping methods to track the efficient use of financial

and human resources and to strengthen the internationalization component from the international mobility to the internationalization of the training model. This approach should help identify the funding gaps, facilitate a division of labor among technical and financial partners, and provide a clear roadmap for support for systemic VET reform (ETF, 2021). The internationalization strategy still needs to be conceived and implemented at the inter-ministerial level. interviewer 4 said that:

this process of awareness raising and prioritizing internationalization in the country of Tunisia in particular but in general in the MENA region, requires coordinated efforts by ensembles of ministries in a comprehensive manner (interviewer 4, interview, 2023).

Moreover, he continued to elaborate:

one example is the announcement that Tunisia is preparing to open a support agency for foreign students by the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Moncef Boukthir, when he chaired the International Student Day organized by the University of Monastir on Sunday March 19, 2023 (interviewer 4, interview 2023).

The agency will be responsible for supporting the ambition of the Tunisian authorities to increase the number of international students in universities and potentially this could also positively affect the increasing of the number of VET students coming from other countries. Baklouti said that:

Since 2021, Tunisia is benefiting from the initiative under the Erasmus+ program funded by the European Union, to open-up new opportunities for international cooperation in VET sector allowing cooperation among organisations and institutions through capacity-building projects in the field of Vocational Education and Training. (Baklouti, interview, 2023).

In particular, priority is given to Capacity Building projects for VET that contribute to Economic and Investment Plan and/or the European Training Foundation (ETF) recommendations under the Torino process The Torino Process (TRP) is a participatory process leading to an evidence-based analysis of the vocational education and training (VET) policies in a country. Introduced in 2010 and carried out every two years, the Torino Process provides a snapshot of the state of development of VET systems in the European Training Foundation's

partner countries, an overview of progress made and priorities for the future. Among these priorities identified by the ETF for Tunisia, the following are the main priorities on which projects of this type could be financed, always in line with the EU agenda to foster green and digital transition:

- Foster the establishment of a multilevel and multistakeholder governance ecosystem at national, sectoral and local levels,
- Establish a lifelong learning culture and reinforce adult education to ensure economic growth, social inclusion and digital/green transition,
- Skills provision should ease labor market transition, support job creation and reinforce inclusion; and
- Data for better skills anticipation and matching, and monitoring labor market outcomes.

Baklouti explained that “in the call 2022 (ERASMUS-EDU-2022-CB-VET), among the 93 evaluated projects, 58 were Erasmus+ Capacity Building for Vocational Education and Training projects chosen for funding with a total amount of €21.3 million of EU funding”. (Baklouti, interview, 2023). Baklouti also recalled also that:

among these 58 funded projects, only one (COSMO project) sees the participation of two Tunisian universities which provides VET training: University of Monastir and University of Sousse. In this Capacity Building VET project, is a partnership with Jordan and Egypt and focuses on one of the European Commission's priorities in the Gender Equality Strategy (2020-2025), namely reducing the gender gap in the labor market and promoting the participation of women in the workforce in the MENA region, where women are largely unemployed (Baklouti, interview, 2023).

Baklouti shared with the author the below figure 2 showing that from the call 2022 to the more recent call of 2023 (ERASMUS-EDU-2023-CB-VET), Tunisia performed better since 9 project proposals were submitted and 4 projects of CB-VET (Capacity Building for VET) were accepted and funded. In the latter call, Tunisia performed very well and is ranked first in the Southern Mediterranean region.

Yet it is still very little compared to Jordan, Egypt and Palestine with respectively 9, 6 and 7 accepted projects. To note, within the 2023 call, a total of 162 applications were received and 62 projects have been selected for funding

with a total amount of €22.763.373,80 million of EU funding (Baklouti, interview, 2023).

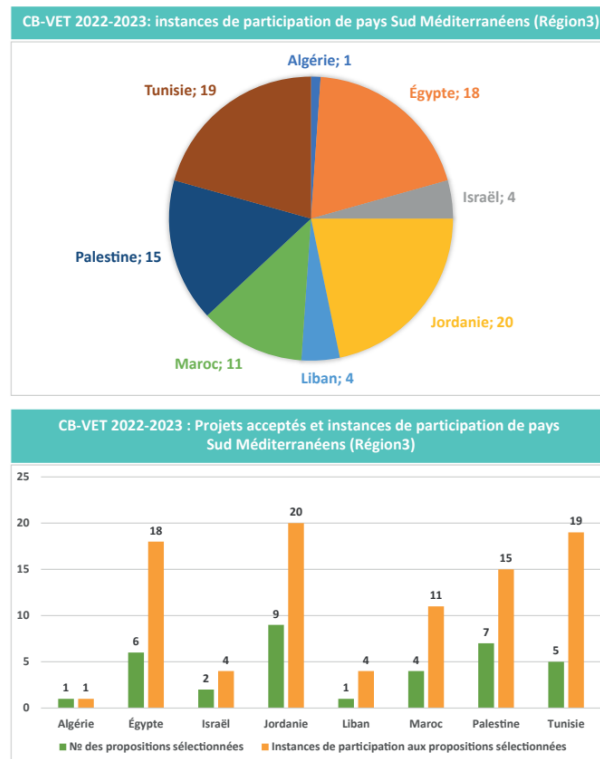


FIGURE (2): CB-VET 2022-2023

Barriers and Obstacles to Internationalization in VET in Tunisia

Despite the growth in Tunisian VET internationalization, it remains limited or not well exploited. The same is true for other countries of the Middle East and North Africa region. The capacities of VET providers and teaching staff to proactively look for peers for cooperation opportunities should be further developed as VET remains generally focused on national/local markets. The traditional nature of VET, being very much linked to the national /local sociocultural contexts, leads to VET systems being governed in very different ways e.g., led by employers, led by the central authorities and ministries, led by regional authorities, etc.

There is a wide range of factors creating barriers to internationalization in vocational education and training relating to issues of social class and mobility, culture, history and political orientation. Currently VET, across the globe, remains largely locked in the character of a national service serving economic, social, and cultural goals. The process of internationalizing the

vocational education sector is also associated with the current global context and global workforce mobility, which has required that students be trained to perform in an increasingly globalized, transnational, and intercultural environment (Dempsey & Tran, 2017).

From the reasons explained above, it is quite easily to understand that internationalization in Tunisian VET system still needs to be operationalised and there is still a need to raise awareness among leaders and policymakers in order to make operational the strategy and mission of the VET institutions. The literature review conducted for this chapter as well as the interviews with four key stakeholders that the author had between March and August 2023 with some key local actors, revealed that internationalization of VET in Tunisia is still not such widely known and structured in the curriculum neither in the mobility programs, except for some study abroad programs and exchanges projects. VET still remains linked to national needs suggested by the relevant Ministries and the government without the opportunity to include other elements.

The VET System: An Alternative to Boost the Tunisian Economic Development

The VET sector in Tunisia is strictly linked to the local and national economic needs and its internationalization is not well spread because the sector is still seen as an alternative to contribute to the local and economical country development. It is worthwhile to mention that the Tunisian economy has been plagued by high unemployment, particularly among higher education graduates. From 2007 to 2012, the unemployment rate for higher education graduates - a group that is more likely to be employed than unemployed in most other countries- increased from 18.7 percent to 33.2 percent (ILO, 2013). It has decreased slightly since then to 28.2 percent in the first quarter of 2019 (ILO, 2013). Over 2016–2017, the unemployment rate of female graduates was 40.6 percent in 2017, twice that of their male counterparts (ETF, 2021).

The World Bank's Systematic Country Diagnostic (SCD) for Tunisia (World Bank, 2015) identified the reduction of skills mismatch as an important element of a key driver for change toward improving equality of opportunities and increasing resilience. According to the definition of the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2020), by skills mismatch we refer to a discrepancy between the skills that are sought by employers and the skills that are possessed by an individual. The skills mismatch and low-quality education as two of the main

human capital weaknesses of Tunisia, particularly in its lagging regions. Only a small percentage of employed youths get jobs that exactly match their qualifications or diploma. In fact, in an economy that requires less skilled manual labor, there is no shortage of unskilled or semiskilled labor in Tunisia.

The analysis of the secondary sources has shown that the steady increase in unemployment in Tunisia, particularly among young people is not only the result of excess labor supply but is also related to an imbalance between supply and demand. In 2014 (World Bank, 2014), two out of five young Tunisians in the labor force were unemployed, and one in four was not in education, employment, or training (NEET). Youths, between the ages of 15 and 29, represent about 30 % of the labor force and about 75 % of the unemployed (77.2 % in 2012). The situation is worse for women, particularly for those in the midst and southern regions. Women face more difficulties in being integrated into the labor market. An estimated 69% of them are outside the labor market and only 18.8% find a job. While the public sector is the main provider of (good) jobs, the high levels of public expenditure and public debt make increases in public employment unsustainable (World Bank, 2015). More recent data show that the unemployment rate for those aged 15–24 was 34.4% in 2019, indicating difficulties for both men and women equally (ETF, 2020).

The proportion of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) is increasing every year, reaching 33% in 2019 (ETF, 2020). From an economic perspective, Tunisia must find a way to rebuild a balanced and competitive economy through education in strong and diverse areas, including mining, agriculture, petroleum products, manufacturing, and tourism because “a sustainable economy enhances a nation’s standard of living by creating wealth and jobs, encouraging the development of new knowledge and technology, and helping to ensure a stable political climate” (Shediac et al., 2008, p. 1).

Although the real impact of VET is difficult to assess due to insufficient data and evaluations, it is generally accepted that VET has a positive impact on the school-to-work transition times, particularly in countries with dual apprenticeship. The VET contributes to facilitating youth employment and a country’s economic development. An adequately educated workforce is one of the success variables of business performance outcomes. There is a strong correlation between the proportion of VET students and per capita income. VET

can be one of several pathways for regional convergence and may contribute to and help local economies together with regional economic development plans.

However, the assessment of past programs shows, for example, that employment services have not significantly contributed to reducing the unemployment rate. Tunisia has developed a 'dual system' (work-study program) combining classroom theory with training in enterprises. The dual system is managed by the Tunisian Agency for Vocational Training (Agence Tunisienne de la Formation Professionnelle - ATFP), the main agency responsible for the public provision of VET. The dual system consists of the student spending one day a week in a training center and the remaining days at the workplace. The institution and work-based training (programs d'alternance), represents around 88 % of all students in the system (ETF, 2020).

However, small firms do not have enough human resources to organize and monitor the work-based training and often treat trainees more as free labor than as potential employees. The system is facing a high demand for internships or apprenticeships from initial vocational training to higher education; the private sector cannot provide for this without better planning and coordination across the ministries involved. Students can find their internships by themselves or ask the VET centers to do it for them. Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Tunisia remains a challenge. Despite availability of funding through a training levy and the existence of work-based learning legislation, the quality, relevance and attractiveness of VET provision in Tunisia is suboptimal.

The main challenges include how to increase VET attractiveness, supporting trainers' professional development, involving regional stakeholders, improving data collection and analysis, enhancing monitoring and evaluation, and developing an entrepreneurial mindset across the VET system. Vocational training still conveys a negative image despite the efforts of institutional efforts. The causes of the persistence of this negative image are well known: the lack of a culture of work and learning, the refusal of students to pursue studies in less rewarding fields (construction, sheet metal work, etc.), despite the existence of requests high hiring rates from companies, the inefficiency of the guidance system which does not allow the most deserving students from vocational training to integrate teaching superior. Ghozzi elaborated on this idea:

Without mentioning the lack of an awareness campaign for students and their parents and even public opinion in general, on

the characteristics of the professions offered by vocational training institutions as well as the opportunities offered by the VET system. The vocational training system has shown its limits as it was unable to anticipate the evolution of the professions and the needs of the labor market in some specific fields (Ghozzi, interview, 2023).

Recommendations to Improve Internationalization in the Tunisian

Within this framework, according to the key results of the meeting held by the European Training Foundation on 16-17 May 2022, and in particular from the parallel workshop 2 “Cooperation and internationalization strategies in VET in Tunisia, (paper available for direct consultation), and based on the information collected, I suggest that VET providers and teaching staff need to build up their international capacities and competences. This means enabling providers and teaching staff to make connections, partnering up and network with other peers. It implies also empowering them to foster online collaboration, exchanges with other schools/centers around the world, to develop joint courses with other peer institutes. The capacity to create partnerships, working together, networking should be encouraged starting from the national and local levels to boost this international cooperation.

Opportunities for internationalization, although growing, remain limited or not well known in Tunisia. VET providers, teaching staff and students have increasingly been interested in exchanging and learning from international peers. This interest has become stronger especially during the Covid pandemic period and the steps already made, particularly in recognition of qualifications but also in mobilizing existing networks and collaborative platforms, are providing important input and support to refugees and displaced people.

This can be achieved by creating the conditions for open and frank exchanges with international peers about the strengths and weaknesses of national VET systems. International communities of practice can be further fostered and promoted bringing at forefront peers and practitioners playing an active and participatory role. Facilitating the discussions is key, particularly in a so much diverse domain as it is VET, to move a step forward from a passive role of community members to a more active and dynamic one.

To make internationalization strategies in VET a reality, networking, partnership, and cooperation need to be available, there are several initiatives that can boost this trend if considered, including:

1. To boost the participation of Tunisia VET institutions in the EU funded programs+ which has been have always provided funding for capacity building in VET.

Currently, in Erasmus +, opportunities of cooperating and exchanging go beyond the EU, with the opening up of the external dimension of the program. For example, from the new program Erasmus+ for the period 2021-2027, Tunisia can take part in Capacity building projects in the field of VET as international cooperation projects based on multilateral partnerships between organizations active in the field of VET in Program and third countries not associated to the Program. They aim to support the relevance, accessibility, and responsiveness of VET institutions and systems in third countries not associated to the Program as a driver of sustainable socio-economic development. Through joint initiatives that foster cooperation across different regions of the world, this action intends to increase the capacity of VET providers - especially in the fields of management, governance, inclusion, quality assurance, and innovation – so that they are better equipped to engage with private sector/enterprises/business associations to explore employment opportunities and jointly develop responsive VET interventions.

2. To maximize the potential of existing international networks of VET providers, to offer opportunities of cooperation and partnership.
3. To enlarge the opportunities for financing VET internationalization, diversifying the financing sources, through specific programs, mechanisms put in place by International Financial Institutions (IFI) and other bilateral donors.
4. To align the national strategy with economic development priorities, which means working more closely with industries and firms employing VET graduates that will ensure that VET activities accelerate economic development. This can be achieved through value chain working groups established with a cross-ministry platform on the government side, in collaboration with a variety of large and small enterprises, relevant NGOs and educational institutions.

Conclusion

Shaw (2016) states that VET institutions generally speaking are unable to co-operate fully on international research; nor can its practitioners, lecturers, researchers and instructors easily liaise with comparable teachers in other countries to conduct occupational benchmarking, learn new skills, and raise the overall standards of the sector. This is partly because of intensive practical workloads, but also because partnership is more difficult in such a diverse sector. They do not know who the comparable practitioners in other countries are, or how their work might compare to their own. There are currently very few mechanisms in place to connect them, nor are there clear systems of comparability of national courses and qualifications. The VET system is nationally focused like no other form of education, but without this national focus, it would not be delivering the unique things it does so well: to be a nationally responsive education system, at the service of the national economy, delivering to national employment needs.

The Tunisian economy is on the threshold of significant change, with the prospect of exposure to higher levels of international competition. The Tunisian government has, since the mid-1990s, made important efforts to reform its vocational training system. Despite these efforts, too much vocational training in Tunisia remains low quality and irrelevant to labor market needs. Vocational training is presently part of the problem of social and economic inequality. It needs to become part of the solution if Tunisia is to become a dynamic, knowledge-based economy. Through improving vocational training quality and relevance, important steps could be taken in competency-based curriculum development. The Tunisian government has also sought to develop a vocational training quality policy, which would ultimately lead to the establishment of one, commonly accepted national qualifications system.

Finally, in order for the vocational educational and training in Tunisia to embrace internationalization, local and national needs should be certainly met but more has to be done yet. As long as VET's learners are unable to transfer their qualifications across borders and its staff unable to access opportunities to collaborate internationally, then the sector is under-serving itself and its graduates. Tunisia as the world needs highly skilled VET-qualified workers as never before. Those workers need to be able to go where their skills are most wanted. Those who teach them need to be able to co-operate and share their

skills and knowledge with others in the same sector in other parts of the globe in order to provide their trainees with a truly international perspective. Only with new ways of addressing the current barriers will it be possible to achieve these outcomes.

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