COMMENTARY

Recent Miracle in the Turkish Vocational Education and Training System

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ABSTRACT *This commentary examines the transformation of vocational education in Türkiye, addressing its challenges, innovations, and impacts. Türkiye's system, including the Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School (MTAL) and the Vocational Training Center (MESEM), has historically faced difficulties due to policies like the "coefficient application," which restricted access to higher education for vocational graduates. Recent reforms, such as a revamped management model, industry collaboration, enhanced production processes, and integration of research and development (R&D) and intellectual property (IP) culture, have increased enrollment rates, improved education quality, and enabled rapid production of essential goods during crises. These changes have also advanced vocational training in the defense industry, attracting top-performing students. Consequently, these reforms have addressed vocational education challenges and contributed to societal improvements, including reduced youth unemployment and increased women's employment, positioning Türkiye as a model for vocational education globally.*

Keywords: Vocational Education, Artificial Intelligence, Automation, Labor Market Dynamics, Skills Development

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Introduction

Vocational education deserves a separate evaluation within the educational system. Countries worldwide are implementing a wide range of steps to strengthen their vocational education. The structure of vocational education in each country is designed to meet the specific needs of that country.[1] As a result, the economic situation of countries and the characteristics of the labor market are determining factors. Therefore, vocational education at the secondary education level in some countries is provided at the higher education level in others. In some countries, the connections between vocational education and the labor market are loose, and therefore, the emphasis on professions in vocational education is more flexible. However, in countries like Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, an employment-focused vocational education policy is implemented, giving much more specific emphasis on professions.[2] Furthermore, in these countries, vocational education is organized not only in schools but also in businesses, referred to as dual vocational education, as it takes place in two locations.[3] In this regard, especially in Germany, the transition from school to work is rapid, leading to significantly low rates of youth unemployment after graduation.[4]

On the other hand, thanks to the increased access to higher education worldwide has led young people to show a greater inclination toward academic programs rather than vocational education. Therefore, even countries with the strongest vocational education systems struggle to direct academically successful students toward the branch. This situation adversely affects the quality of vocational education. Especially in recent years, the widespread adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) and automation technologies has led to significant transformations in the skills demanded by this type of education.[5] When academically skilled students do not choose vocational education, it becomes challenging to impart new skills, particularly to less skilled students, creating a new dilemma. Countries are attempting to address this new challenge by developing different solutions.

As an example, Türkiye has launched a significant transformation in its vocational education in recent years despite facing challenging issues from both the education systems and labor markets. This commentary evaluates the main characteristics of the transformation, and additional recommendations are provided for the sustainability of the process, considering both educational systems and labor markets.

General Structure of Vocational Education in Türkiye

In Türkiye, two different models are used in vocational education: the Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School (*Mesleki ve Teknik Anadolu Lisesi*, MTAL) model and the Vocational Training Center (*Mesleki Eğitim Merkezi*, MESEM) model.[6]

In the MTAL model, a four-year vocational education is provided, and depending on the applied program, skill training sessions are organized in businesses, especially in the final year of education on specific days of the week. The MESEM model, on the other hand, adopts the dual vocational education approach used in Germany. Throughout the four years of education, students receive training at school for one to two days each week while continuing their training in businesses on the remaining days.

In Türkiye, two different models are used in vocational education: the Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School (*Mesleki ve Teknik Anadolu Lisesi*, MTAL) model and the Vocational Training Center (*Mesleki Eğitim Merkezi*, MESEM) model

The training provided in MESEM is regulated by the Vocational Education Law No. 3308. According to the regulation, three years of the four-year education are organized as apprentice training. At the end of three years of training, apprentices become journeymen, and after the training received in the final year as journeymen, they graduate from MESEM as masters. Furthermore, students receive a wage during their education, not less than 50 percent of the minimum wage, and are insured against workplace accidents and occupational diseases.

Vocational education in Türkiye, within the general framework provided, is indeed grappling with common challenges faced by other countries, such as the lack of preference for successful students, high school dropout rates, and absenteeism. However, misguided educational policies in Türkiye have exacerbated these issues and made them seemingly insurmountable.[7] One of the primary contributors to these problems is the "coefficient application" policy. Enacted in 1999, this policy restricted vocational high school graduates' access to higher education, significantly impeding their entry into higher education. In other words, an unwanted issue that naturally occurs in other countries has been systematically implemented in Türkiye through this policy. Consequently, students with high academic skills, and thus the potential to transition to higher education, have distanced themselves from vocational high schools. In a short period, vocational high schools transformed into a type of high school where academically less successful students cluster homogeneously.[8] The expectations of success from teachers have steadily decreased, and educational environments in vocational high schools have become increasingly disadvantaged.

The continuous implementation of this policy from 1999 to 2012 has generated significant costs, both in the education system and the labor market. One major cost is the high

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economic burden placed on the economy due to businesses being unable to find the employees they need or individuals who possess the required competencies. This situation, particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises, has led to difficulties in accessing the human resources needed, negatively affecting production capacity and quality.

The second cost is related to the educational system. Existing differences in success among schools have further increased with this policy, deepening the existing problems. PISA studies demonstrate the extent of this disparity.[9] The third cost is the rise in school dropout rates, absenteeism, disciplinary cases, peer bullying, and dependencies in these schools after the implementation of this policy. To address these issues, the Ministry of Education has been compelled to develop numerous projects, utilizing significant budget allocations.

In conclusion, a misguided education policy has not only rendered vocational education dysfunctional but has also inflicted deep wounds, creating additional challenges that need to be addressed.

Paradigm Shift in Vocational and Technical Anatolian High Schools

Though the coefficient application was abolished in 2012, more steps were required to counter the negative effects of the previous policies. To revive vocational education, significant efforts and projects have been carried out every year. Each project has contributed significantly to its recovery. The most crucial step taken to strengthen vocational education was the innovation in the management model in 2019.[10]

The newly developed model encompasses comprehensive updates in vocational education, including joint curriculum development with sector representatives, collaborative planning of skill training for students, expanding scholarship support for students, conducting on-the-job and professional development training for vocational field teachers together, and prioritizing employment for graduates.[11]

All collaborations with sector representatives have been reorganized to encompass all these dimensions. Collaboration with sector representatives in this regard has not only elevated the expectations of stakeholders but has also rapidly increased the inclination of academically successful students toward vocational education. As a result of these comprehensive steps, students from the top 1 percent academic achievement bracket have

started enrolling in vocational high schools. In other words, academically successful students who had previously moved away from vocational education due to the coefficient application are returning.

The second innovation implemented to strengthen vocational education was the transformation of production processes within high schools under a revolving fund. The most significant advantage of the production carried out in this context is the potential to popularize the "learning by doing/producing" model. This way, the acquired skills become permanent, and as the production capacity and quality increase, graduates can easily find jobs in the labor market, making a significant contribution.[12]

On the other hand, the partners in this process, namely students and teachers, can receive a share of the income in proportion to their contribution to production. The regulations allow students to receive at least the minimum wage and teachers to receive up to twice the minimum wage. Before this transformation, the income generated from production in 2018 was around 200 million Turkish Liras, and after the transformation, this amount has increased every year, reaching 2 billion Turkish Liras in 2022. In 2022, the share distributed to vocational high school students from this income reached 100 million, while the share distributed to teachers reached 200 million Turkish Liras.

The ability for students to earn income during their education has positively transformed the perspectives and expectations of students and their families toward vocational education. As a result, many families have started directing their children toward the option. This has led to an increase in the inclination of students from all levels toward vocational education, and its share in secondary education has continuously risen.

On the other hand, the productions carried out in this context have rapidly increased the Ministry of Education's ability to meet its needs. For example, the production of educational materials and laboratory kits needed to enrich educational environments is now being met through the production of vocational high schools. The production capacity has also facilitated the implementation of new education policies. For instance, as part of the "Let No School Be without a Library Campaign" launched in 2021, 16,361 new libraries were established in three months, existing libraries were renewed, and their content was enriched.[13] As a result, a library has been established in every school. The furnishings for all the new libraries established under this project were produced by vocational high schools. Without the production capacity of vocational high schools, it would not have been possible to complete this project in such a short period.

Similarly, in 2023, a new policy was created to provide free meals to all students in preschool education starting from the second term. The increased production capacity of vocational education, especially in the food and

Students of Kanuni Sultan Süleyman Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School in Gaziantep designed a system to track the sun from sunrise to sunset to increase the efficiency of solar power plants within the scope of the Renewable Energy Technologies Course.

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beverage-related departments, played a significant role in the formulation of this policy. As a result, throughout the second term, all students in preschool education were able to receive one free meal per day in line with this policy.

Thus, the increased production capacity not only facilitated the development and implementation of new policies but also continuously elevated the income level of vocational education through the implementation of these policies. In other words, there has been a positive feedback loop between the enhanced school climate and quality through the increased production capacity in vocational high schools and the development of new policies.[14]

Since 2019, the increased production capacity in vocational high schools has progressively motivated vocational field teachers to produce new technology devices used in the labor market. As a result of these efforts, significant equipment ranging from five-axis CNC machines to medical devices, which were previously purchased for education, are now being produced in vocational high schools. The benefits of this dynamism were soon evident during the days of the COVID-19 pandemic. All the products needed during those days, such as masks, disinfectants, face shields, disposable gowns and coveralls, respiratory devices, and mask machines, were rapidly produced in vocational high schools and swiftly delivered to points of need. Vocational high schools played a crucial role in overcoming the extraordinary conditions of the pandemic in Türkiye.[15]

Similar contributions were made in swiftly managing processes follow-

ing the earthquake on February 6, 2023. Vocational high schools rapidly activated their food and bread production capacities, providing crucial support in meeting the food needs of earthquake survivors.[16] With the involvement of the ministry's teacher houses and practice hotels, the daily food production capacity was increased to 2 million meals, and the bread production capacity was raised to 1.4 million loaves a day. Additionally, they were able to rapidly produce other logistical support equipment needed for the accommodation of earthquake survivors.

Intellectual property studies, especially the commercialization of these products, contribute significantly to the development and competitiveness of countries. The educational system plays a critical role in establishing and disseminating the culture in this context. Therefore, the third innovation in strengthening vocational education has been to connect this increased production capacity with research and development (R&D) and the culture of intellectual property (IP).[17] Within this framework, R&D centers have been established in 55 Vocational and Technical Anatolian High Schools with sufficient infrastructure and human resources, initiating research activities. The emphasis in these R&D centers has been on patenting, utility model registration, trademarking, and design registration, aiming to popularize this culture in the education system. The efforts have not been limited to R&D centers and have gradually been spread to all schools.

Türkiye lacked vocational education programs to support the strong steps taken in the defense industry in recent years. To fill this gap, the first step was taken with ASELSAN, and the ASELSAN Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School

These intensive focused efforts have quickly yielded results. While only three products were registered annually in all schools before, a historic transformation was achieved in 2022 with the registration of 8,300 products. Support has been provided for the commercialization processes of registered products, resulting in the commercialization of 184 products. On the other hand, with these steps, vocational high schools have begun to export the products they produce abroad, and they have even started producing the machines that manufacture the exported products.

One of the innovations in vocational education is the introduction of vocational training in the defense industry. Türkiye lacked vocational education programs to support the strong steps taken in the defense industry in recent years. To fill this gap, the first step was taken with ASELSAN, and the ASELSAN Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School, the first high school in the defense industry,

was established in Ankara and admitted students from the top 1 percent success bracket.[18]

Following the same approach, the Konya ASELSAN Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School was later established and continues to provide successful services. In 2023, two more significant steps were taken. First, the Özdemir Bayraktar Aviation and Space Technologies Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School was established in Ankara, and shortly after that, the Bayraktar National Technology Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School was established within the Bayraktar company, initiating a new era in aviation and the defense industry. This high school started admitting students for the first time in the 2023-2024 academic year, and all students admitted to this school will receive a scholarship equivalent to the minimum wage. In the 2023 high school entrance exam (*Liselere Geçiş Sınavı*, LGS) results, both high schools admitted students with a perfect score of 500 for the first time. In other words, with the transformation in vocational education, vocational high schools, which initially attracted successful students from the top 1 percent bracket, experienced another positive breakthrough in 2023 by attracting the most successful students with perfect scores.

In summary, all these steps represent the results of a comprehensive approach to vocational education, combining the achievements from various sectors of the country into a vocational education framework that rapidly responds to the needs of the labor market. The developments achieved are now beneficial to the business world and sector representatives, leading to new collaborations and initiatives.

Paradigm Shift in Vocational Training Centers

All the steps mentioned above are initiatives aimed at improving vocational high schools. Innovations to strengthen vocational education have also encompassed MESEM.[19] The first innovation in MESEMs is the establishment of a flexible structure for students attending MESEMs to earn a high school diploma. Previously, MESEM students had to apply for an open high school program while continuing their education to obtain a high school diploma, which meant they had to complete both programs. In other words, despite providing four years of education after middle school, MESEM education did not lead to a high school diploma. With the new regulation, additional courses have been integrated into the MESEM program, eliminating the need to apply for an open high school program to obtain a high school diploma. This innovation has increased the value of MESEMs, leading to an increase in young people's interest in them. With these steps, the number of apprentices and journeymen receiving education in MESEMs had reached around 160,000 by the end of 2021.

One of the most significant innovations for the improvement of MESEMs

is the amendments made to the Vocational Education Law with Law No. 3308, published on December 25, 2021.[20] One of these amendments is the state covering the entire amount of the monthly wages paid to apprentices and journeymen during the four-year training, which must be more than 30 percent of the minimum wage. As a result, business owners became much more willing to open their doors to train apprentices and journeymen, relieved of the burden of providing the wage. The Second Amendment raised the wage of journeymen to 50 percent of the minimum wage from the previous 30 percent.

This enhancement has made MESEM education more attractive for young people. These improvements have quickly reflected in the field, and the number of apprentices and journeymen, which was 160,000, has increased to 1,410,000 as of May 2023 in a short period of about 1.5 years.[21] This has opened a significant gateway for small and medium-sized enterprises, which have long complained about the difficulty of finding apprentices, journeymen, and masters to meet their needs. The problems related to not being able to find apprentices and journeymen, even in the remotest corners of Türkiye, have been fundamentally solved.

Another innovation developed in MESEMs is the implementation of short-term remedial programs for high school and higher education graduates, enabling them to transition to new fields. In this regard, a new program has been developed to open up opportunities for high school and higher education graduates, granting the right to young individuals to become masters in their specialty and open businesses through six to eight months of short-term, entirely workplace-based training.[22] The fact that approximately 800,000 young people who have previously graduated from high school and higher education programs have applied for this program demonstrates the significant gap in this field.

Thanks to the transformation rapidly spreading in both MTAL and MESEM, the share of vocational education in secondary education has increased from 28 percent to 52 percent

On the other hand, remedial programs have provided a new opportunity for vocational high school graduates to transfer skills to different fields, enhancing their employability. Expanding these programs at different levels will be a crucial contribution to reducing youth unemployment.

This radical transformation in MESEMs provides a significant opportunity to address one of our country's most challenging issues, which is youth unemployment. The employment rate for MESEM graduates is at the level of around 88 percent, which is quite high. Approximately 75 per-

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cent of the 1,410,000 apprentices and journeymen are young people aged 18 and over. These young people, who were previously unemployed, have gained a significant opportunity regarding their employability through vocational training. Moreover, the number of women in MESEM programs, which was previously only around 27,000, has increased to around 443,000, opening a new window for women's employment. The transformation in MESEMs will facilitate the country's access to the human resources it needs and contribute significantly to reducing the rate of young people classified as "Not in Education, Employment, or Training" (NEET) due to the employment opportunities it provides.[23]

Conclusion

The problems related to vocational education in Türkiye generally overlap with those in other countries. However, misguided educational policies such as the coefficient application had eliminated the vocational education system's ability to cope with these overlapping issues. At this point, thanks to the transformation rapidly spreading in both MTAL and MESEM, the share of vocational education in secondary education has increased from 28 percent to 52 percent.

As of May 2023, the proportion of MESEM in vocational education has increased from 13 percent at the end of 2021 to 53 percent. In the labor market, particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises, the demand is often for apprentices, journeymen, and master craftsmen rather than graduates of vocational high schools.

On the other hand, to maintain a balance between supply and demand, the capacity of MTAL programs should be reassessed. In times when the capacity of MESEM is low, the labor market demand is often attempted to be met by increasing the capacity of MTAL programs, resulting in an excess supply capacity in many programs compared to demand. This situation has negatively affected the quality of education in the short-term and, in the long-run, has also adversely affected employability. When more supply is produced in vocational high schools than demanded, it directs graduates toward seeking employment outside their field of education, ultimately diminishing the value of vocational high schools. Additionally, considering the cost of education in vocational high schools, an excessive supply above demand reduces the efficiency of education investment costs. Therefore, achieving this balance in

MTALs will contribute to improving the quality of education in vocational high schools. This transition, especially with the widespread adoption of artificial intelligence and automation technologies, will increase the potential to meet the demand for more academic and generic skills in professions. Thus, providing a much higher level of education in all vocational high schools will become more feasible.

In conclusion, Türkiye has undergone a significant transformation in vocational education in recent years, addressing fundamental problem areas in the education systems of many countries. Vocational education in Türkiye has evolved to not only solve its own problems but also contribute to improvements in other areas. For instance, it has played a crucial role in rapidly addressing societal issues in extraordinary conditions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the earthquakes on February 6, 2023. On the other hand, it has started to emerge as a significant contributor, especially in reducing the NEET rate and promoting women's employment. The transformation achieved in vocational education in Türkiye has the potential to serve as an example for other countries. ■

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