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Researching policy transfer of vocational education and training across the European Union: a systematic literature review

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ABSTRACT

Various academic fields have focused on the transfer of Vocational Education and Training (VET) policies and practices, and the research base on VET policy transfer is broadly scattered. Recognising this deficit, researchers have sought to organise the current research. However, VET policy transfer studies carried out in European Union (EU) member states have made no such synthesising attempts. I conducted this systematic literature review to analyse the research methodology in this context. I searched for publications on the Scopus, Academic Search Ultimate (EBSCO), and ERIC databases, identifying a total of 577 publications, finding a total of 35 publications that met the inclusion criteria and that I subsequently analysed in detail. This review argues that research on VET policy transfer in the EU has particular gaps. It outlines four key areas that require attention: the lack of methodological diversity; the data collection from specific policy transfer actors and the exclusion of others; the geographical spaces that remain unexamined; and the focus on particular VET practices at the centre of policy transfer. The results identify lacunas in the current methodological practice of research on VET policy transfer in the EU and provide recommendations for future research.

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Introduction

In recent decades the mechanisms of educational policy transfer have allowed the proliferation of Vocational Education and Training (VET) policy and practice across the globe. The European Union (EU) has shown a vested interest in VET, as it aligns with its broader socioeconomic goals such as the European Green Deal and digital transformation (European Commission 2022). Indeed, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, clearly outlined this interest when she named 2023 the European Year of Skills.¹ This year sought to ‘... promot[e] a mindset of reskilling and upskilling, to help people to get the

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right skills for quality jobs' (European Parliament 2024a, para 19). During this period the VET sector saw a total of 400 policy developments across EU member states, as Cedefop's (2024) biennial policy brief series reports. Overall, the European Year of Skills has partly succeeded in achieving its aim (e.g. reporting an increased awareness of VET and the implementation of many initiatives), yet several skill shortages remain (European Commission 2022). It therefore seems the EU's interest in VET is here to stay.

In light of the relevance of VET in the EU and the expected continuing growth of the substantial body of research (Pellegrini and Vivonet 2021), I review methodological practices used in studies of VET policy transfer. In this article I understand policy transfer in its broadest definition, as '...the utilisation of knowledge based on experiences of others ...' leading to the policy transfer of VET '...strategies, guidelines, rules and regulations, action plans, and goals and objectives' (Barabasch 2010, 226). Previous reviews have sought to capture the current findings of policy transfer in VET (Šćepanović and Martín Artilés 2020; Scheuch et al. 2021; Toepper, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, and Kühling-Thees 2021). However, the lack of methodological reporting in publications and the prevailing use of case studies which provide localised knowledge have complicated the task (Li and Pilz 2021; Toepper, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, and Kühling-Thees 2022). In this review I examine how research has analysed VET policy transfer and diffusion among EU member states, top-down transfer from the EU to its constituents, and bottom-up transfer from EU member states to the EU. I thus adopt an integrated approach as my analytical lens (Börzel and Panke 2013), and I examine how research has conceptualised and examined different forms of diffusion and transfer. I build on the reviews by Gessler and Siemer (2020) and Scheuch et al. (2021), which have also sought to investigate research methods. However, in this review I focus on studies involving EU member states. I also examine the prevailing terminology used to refer to policy transfer and the aspects of VET on which research has focused. This systematic literature review sheds light on particular gaps and provides recommendations for future research on VET policy transfer in the EU.

This paper consists of four sections. The introductory section elaborates the main concepts and presents the aims and research question. The paper then outlines the research protocol and methodology used to conduct the systematic review. It then presents the results. The fourth section examines these results further and underlines the implications for this research niche. The paper concludes with an exploration of some of the study's limitations and a summary of the key findings.

Policy transfer

Policy transfer is a theoretical concept which seeks to understand how one organisational system seeks to learn from another. Dolowitz's (2000, 3)

explanation of policy transfer is one of the most cited definitions in the literature, whereby policy transfer is understood as ‘...knowledge about policies, institutions and ideas developed in one time or place used in the development of policies, institutions etc. in another time or place’. Over the years various theoretical approaches and analytical tools have emerged that are closely related to the concept of policy transfer and concern the movement of policies and ideas across contexts (Graham, Shipan, and Volden 2013). The most cited are the cyclical model of policy borrowing Phillips and Ochs (2003) outline, and the framework Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) delineate, providing tools to examine policy transfer’s underlying factors.

The policy transfer literature has tended to focus on the agency and roles that actors hold. Alternatively, the concept of policy diffusion examines structures and how they adopt policies more closely by observing each other’s practices (Graham, Shipan, and Volden 2013). Policy transfer and policy diffusion ‘... share an overlapping conceptual core and a complementary interest in a related class of empirical phenomena’ (Marsh and Sharman 2009, 271) and taken together, provide an understanding of both agency and structure in the movement of policies. Ultimately, the vast nomenclature² in use points to the numerous perspectives from which one can understand the process of policy transfer.

Many studies examine VET policy transfer which spans various academic fields (Graf and Lohse 2021). For example, political science, human resource management, economic geography, sociology, and comparative educational science have all conducted investigations of VET policy transfer (Li and Pilz 2021). In this review I analyse research that has examined an interrelated set of mechanisms such as policy transfer, policy diffusion, and policy borrowing (see Table 2 for a comprehensive list of the analysed terminology), all of which involve some form of movement of VET policy across the EU. This review therefore does not aim to identify the main trends of particular policy transfer mechanisms but rather aims to examine the dominant terminology and methodology used in the examination of this phenomenon in the EU.

VET in the EU

In general terms we can describe VET as a form of education which prepares one for the world of employment (Karmel 2011). At the broadest level the EU divides VET practice into two main categories: the first encompasses all VET which occurs before one enters the world of work; the second includes VET in which one participates on completing compulsory schooling or during employment. Initial vocational education and training (I-VET) is provided before individuals are employed, within or alongside upper secondary and postsecondary education. Continuing VET (C-VET) is accessible after postsecondary schooling is completed and during employment (European Commission n.d.). Another prominent type of VET practice is the Dual VET³

model, which typically involves a combination of practical workplace training and theoretical education, and which formal schooling institutions collaborating with employers often implement (European Commission, *n.d.*; Manuel Galvin Arribas 2016). The dual VET system is popular among German-speaking countries, and German multinational companies (MNCs) appear to be at the forefront of transferring dual VET practices to their subsidiaries overseas (Stockmann 2014). The economic and industrial benefits of dual VET have steered research on VET policy transfer towards an examination of the export of the German dual VET system (Gessler 2017; Pilz and Wiemann 2021). One key question concerns its ability to be transferred to other contexts, which scholars have thus far documented as a complex and difficult task (Laczik et al. 2023; Unwin 2019).

In the realm of education the subsidiarity principle grants EU member states legislative power (European Parliament 2024a, 2024b). However, the Lisbon Agenda and the Copenhagen Process (the latter having a more decisive effect on VET than the former) have paved the way for the central idea that education is profitable and can meet economic aims (Alexiadou and Rambla 2023; Huisman and Van der Wende 2004). United in seeking economic prosperity, EU member states' education policies have converged towards a common European model of education while retaining a national character. This is well documented in the sectors of higher education (see Cino Pagliarello 2022; Huisman and Van der Wende 2004) and VET (see Loogma 2016; Šćepanović and Martín Artiles 2020). This systematic literature review analyses research on VET policy transfer involving the 27 EU member states and the United Kingdom (UK). The UK is included because it was still an EU member until 2020 (although negotiations for Brexit had started in 2017), and UK studies are therefore also relevant to the scope of the review.

In the EU context Cedefop is the main agency working on the 'promotion, development and implementation of the Union policy in the field of VET' (Cedefop 2015, para. 1). With the European Commission and the European Council, Cedefop has facilitated VET coordination among EU members through various coregulation mechanisms. The main mechanism for this is the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), which is a form of soft governance enacted through the delineation of standards and goals EU member states must achieve (Cino Pagliarello 2022; Eeva 2024). The OMC allowed the establishment of common frameworks of educational standards and skills.⁴ These markers of professionalism (or vocationalism) have led to what Elken terms a 'distinct form of governance' (2017, 128), whereby member states adopt particular VET models that fit into these common frameworks. Additionally, the European Commission and Cedefop carry out regular monitoring of VET quality and provide funding for member states to reach targets.⁵ This consistent evaluation further incentivises member states to follow a European model of VET (Elken 2017; Huisman and Van der Wende 2004). Finally, the European Alliance for

Apprenticeships (EaFA), which brings together various stakeholders interested in promoting apprenticeships (Graf and Marques 2022), clearly reflects collaboration among member states.

The aforementioned role of the EU in the 'promotion, development and implementation' (Cedefop 2015, para. 1) of VET among its members is an example of top-down Europeanisation. In this case the EU's influence results in changes in its members' national policy. However, it is noteworthy that the opposite can also occur, with member states influencing the EU's ideology and practice in a bottom-up manner (Börzel and Panke 2013). Germany exemplifies bottom-up Europeanisation, as similar practices in the EU have modelled its dual VET system (Martínez-Izquierdo and Torres Sánchez 2022b). However, it is more accurate to say that bottom-up and top-down processes occur simultaneously. Such is the case with the EU's push for modularisation, which Germany heavily contested and adopted in a hybrid manner (Li and Pilz 2017; Rohde-Liebenau and Graf 2024). Points of agreement and/or conflict between nation states and the forces of Europeanisation have led to mutual influence across horizontal and vertical hierarchies (Powell and Solga 2010). These mechanisms are difficult to separate, and some researchers seek to adopt an integrated approach to examine transfer at all levels (Börzel and Panke 2013). This review will include an analysis of studies examining policy transfer occurring at horizontal and/or vertical levels (i.e. from country to country, and from member state to broader EU agencies or vice versa).

Aims and research questions

Previous literature reviews have examined VET policy transfer research at the international level (e.g. Caves, Baumann, and Renold 2021; Gessler and Siemer 2020; Klassen 2024; Li and Pilz 2021; Toepper, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, and Kühling-Thees 2021, 2022), while some have focused on the European region (Šćepanović and Martín Ariles 2020; Scheuch et al. 2021). The majority of these reviews have examined the current state and knowledge of research in VET policy transfer (Šćepanović and Martín Ariles 2020; Scheuch et al. 2021; Toepper, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, and Kühling-Thees 2021); others have focused on specific aspects such as VET reform implementation (Caves, Baumann, and Renold 2021), the role of international organisations in VET transfer (Klassen 2024), and methodological practices in VET policy transfer research (Gessler and Siemer 2020; Toepper, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, and Kühling-Thees 2022). A ubiquitous claim is that VET policy transfer is complex, involves various local and global factors, and requires careful deliberation to be successful (Caves, Baumann, and Renold 2021; Li and Pilz 2021; Toepper, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, and Kühling-Thees 2021).

Regarding methodology, research has tended to adopt qualitative approaches, often using the case study method to examine specific cases of

transfer. This is the preferred method for research funders, who tend to be practical and political stakeholders seeking recommendations for the successful transfer of VET (Klassen 2024; Li and Pilz 2021). Notwithstanding the valuable practical knowledge this has produced thus far, this research niche has several limitations. For example, past reviews have underlined the lack of transparency in reporting methodology (Gessler and Siemer 2020; Toepper, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, and Kühling-Thees 2022), which complexifies the comparison across studies and makes it difficult to formulate generalisable knowledge (Quintão, Andrade, and Almeida 2021). There are calls for more comparative studies across different cases (Toepper, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, and Kühling-Thees 2022), detailed reporting of the methods used, and further reviews that systematise current knowledge (Scheuch et al. 2021) and examine methodology (Gessler and Siemer 2020).

Following the above calls, this review therefore aims to examine the methodology of VET policy transfer research more closely, while narrowing in on the EU context. I aim to answer the following research questions (RQ):

- (1) How has research sought to investigate VET policy transfer in the European Union?
- (2) What aspects of VET have been at the centre of research in the European Union?

Review method and materials

This study follows the Systematic Literature Review method Petticrew and Roberts (2006, 284) outline, as well as Gessler and Siemer's (2020, 104) recommendations for reviews of VET research. For the scope of the review I identify studies for analysis according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria Table 1 outlines.

Table 1. Summary of inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Published between 2000 and 2023.	Published before 2000 and after 2024.
Published in English.	In a language other than English.
Journal articles, books and book chapters, reports and working papers.	As the focus of the review is on the methodology of research, grey literature which does not involve an empirical aspect is excluded. e.g.: policy documents, book reviews, conference papers or reviews, media articles, or guidelines.
Cross-national studies and comparative studies of two or more countries.	Thematic or conceptual papers that do not involve the investigation of transfer across countries.
Studies of I-VET, C-VET, and dual VET; irrespective of age of students/apprentices or curriculum content.	Studies of adult learning, as adult learning includes formal learning apart from VET.
Studies about VET policy transfer, the history of VET transfer, and VET implementation from one country to another.	Studies assessing the effectiveness of VET programmes and/or implementation to meet economic and/or social aims.
Studies involving at least one EU member state (members as of 2023), and the UK.	Studies involving only non-EU countries.

Table 2. Characteristics of the studies reviewed – descriptive statistics.

Category	Subcategory	Total	Publication Nos. (see Appendix B)
Year of publication	2001–2005	1	30
	2006–2010	4	3, 4, 5, 29
	2011–2015	5	1, 10, 12, 14, 28
	2016–2020	11	2, 7, 8, 9, 17, 18, 25, 27, 33, 34, 35
	2021–2023	14	6, 11, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 31, 32
Data collection method/s used in the paper	Focus groups	1	13
	Pilot study	1	16
	Survey	2	22, 24
	Data from prior research	6	3, 4, 7, 13, 14, 28
	Observations	6	7, 8, 16, 33, 34, 35
	Scientific literature	13	1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 24, 26, 27
	Documents	22	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 26, 27, 29, 30, 32, 35
Interviews	22	2, 5, 6, 7, 11, 13, 15, 16, 18, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35	
Terminology used to refer to the policy transfer mechanism/s within the paper	Adaptation	1	27
	Institutional transfer	1	27
	Lesson drawing	1	23
	Policy copying	1	4
	Policy influence	1	3
	Policy reception	1	19
	Policy taking	1	4
	Policy travel	1	3
	Transformation	2	6, 8
	Policy imitation	3	4, 9, 27
	Translation	3	2, 6, 27
	Cross-national attraction	5	3, 9, 19, 20, 21
	Educational transfer	5	2, 8, 9, 10, 22
	Policy diffusion	5	12, 19, 21, 23, 29
	Policy lending	5	2, 3, 18, 19, 22
	International transfer	9	7, 11, 28, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35
	Policy learning	10	3, 4, 5, 13, 17, 18, 22, 26, 27, 29
	Policy borrowing	12	2, 3, 6, 8, 10, 13, 18, 19, 20, 22, 25, 30
	Policy transfer	22	1, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 28, 29, 30, 35
	Type of VET/VET aspect at the focus of the study	VET Curriculum	1
VET Governance		1	20
VET Learning outcomes		1	17
Qualifications Systems		2	11, 23
VET Teacher Training		2	1, 4
CBET		2	2, 9
National VET Systems		5	10, 11, 16, 27, 29
I-VET		6	5, 10, 12, 17, 22, 26
C-VET		9	3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 21, 22, 30
Dual VET		19	1, 2, 8, 10, 14, 15, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35

I compiled a list of keywords to identify studies from the research questions outlined above. Appendix A provides the search string, including the terms related to policy transfer which I use in additional searches. Li and Pilz (2021) identify these terms as used across research fields to refer to the same processes of VET policy transfer. Finally, Figure 1 depicts the process of data searching, which led to a total of 35 papers for detailed analysis (see Appendix B for a list of all the analysed papers).

I extracted data using data extraction sheets and Atlas.ti to code the articles and analyse the 35 publications. I used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to analyse the papers, and I focused the codes on the following categories: key methodological aspects (i.e. data gathering tools, type of data being collected, participants involved, and instruments used for data analysis); the geographical focus of the publication; and the type of VET under study. Using codes facilitated the analysis and presentation of results.

Key findings

Between 2000 and 2008 only one paper was published regarding VET policy transfer, whereas 77% of the studies ($n = 26$) have been published in the last ten years (2014–2024). Table 2 presents the year of the studies' publication. This parallels the steadily increasing interest in investigating VET policy at the international and supranational levels (Li and Pilz 2021; Scheuch et al. 2021). Within the EU this aligns with the emphasis on VET meeting economic demands and facilitating the green and digital transitions (European Commission 2022). This section presents the results according to whether they answer the how (RQ1) or the what (RQ2) question about VET policy transfer research. The following table presents the main characteristics of the analysed papers, which I use to answer the research questions.

Research methods

To answer RQ1, *How has research sought to investigate VET policy transfer in the European Union?*, this section presents and discusses the research methods used, the type of data collected, and the use of terminology. It is important to note at the outset that 19 papers presented a section dedicated to the methodology and/or methods used ($n = 54.29\%$), whereas 11 papers ($n = 45.71\%$) either provided methodological information in the introduction or the information could be inferred from the case/s discussed (from the data collected see Gonon 2012; Langthaler 2015; Loogma 2016). We need consistent and detailed methodological reporting to understand research in its entirety and for biases to emerge and the drawing of inferences.

An overwhelming majority of the analysed papers are of a qualitative nature ($n = 30$, 85.71%), while a smaller number use quantitative methods

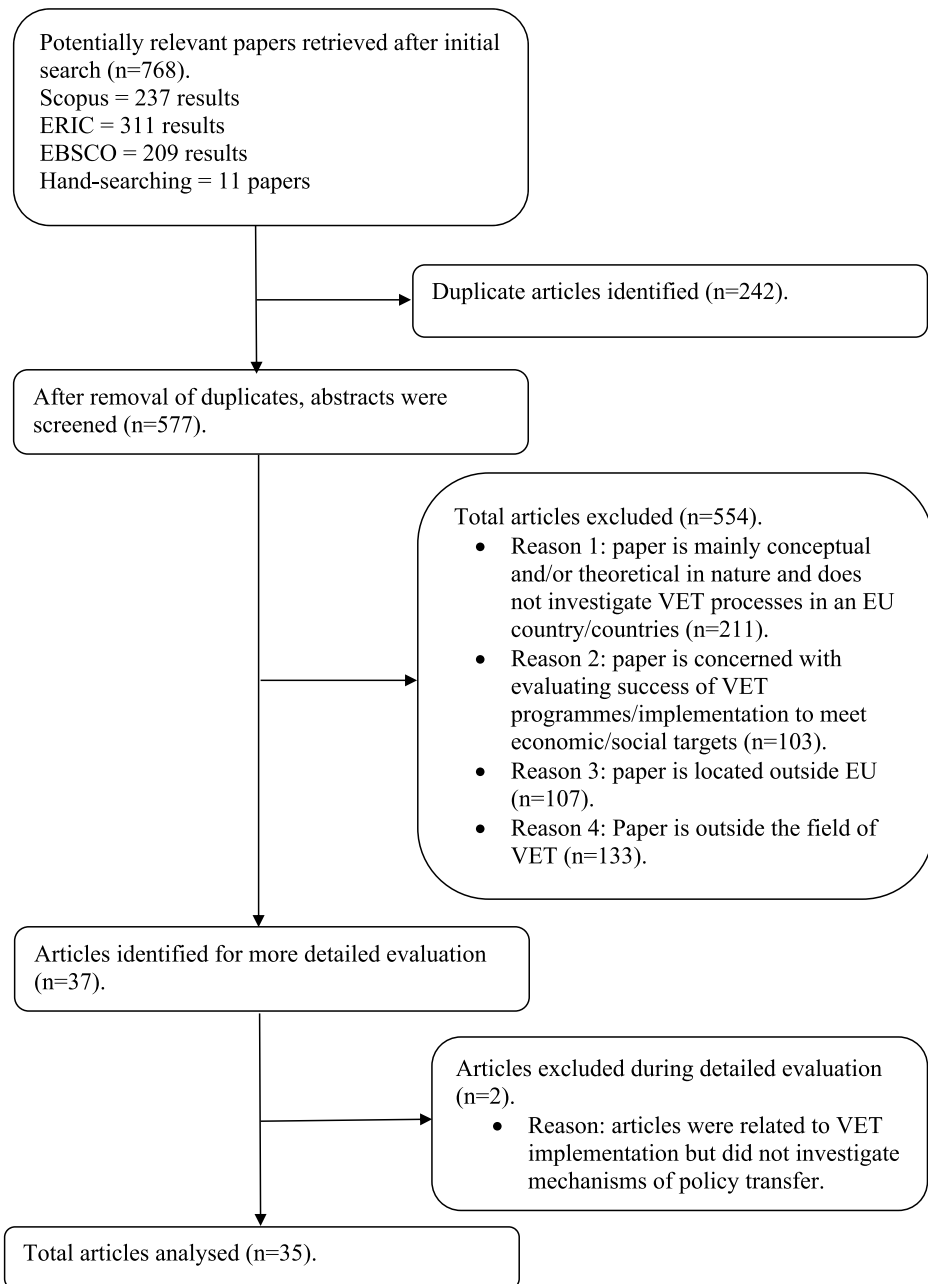


Figure 1. QUOROM flowchart.

($n = 2$, 5.71%), and some have used a mixed methodology ($n = 3$, 8.57%). Specifically, the majority of the papers collected were of an empirical nature and involved single-country ($n = 16$) and multi-country case studies ($n = 11$). We can explain the prevailing use of case study methodology within the analysed publications by the use of the search terms 'country'

OR 'cross-countr*' OR 'compar*'. Nonetheless, the use of qualitative methods and case studies ties in with the needs of VET stakeholders to identify 'best practices' for evidence-based policies, and case studies can provide tangible examples of 'successful' transfer (Pellegrini and Vivonet 2021). For example, from the data collected Li and Pilz (2021) carried out a case study in China to examine how a European model of VET peer review could be transferred. Similarly, Oeben and Klumpp (2021) conducted a case study of the transfer of VET from Germany to Tunisia. The results of both studies are beneficial to practical stakeholders seeking to carry out VET policy transfer.

Regarding the data collection method, there was a preference for collecting documents ($n = 22$, 30.14%) and conducting interviews with experts ($n = 22$, 30.14%). The type of documents collected included policy documents ($n = 9$), media reports or information found online ($n = 4$), newspaper articles ($n = 3$), and state or international organisation reports ($n = 3$). All the papers refer to the conceptual and theoretical literature, but 13 use data presented in scientific articles as part of the analysed dataset. Finally, observations and onsite visits ($n = 6$, 8.22%) were a common way of collecting data for those papers analysing the transfer of dual VET training practices in companies.

The abundance of terminology and concepts describing and alluding to policy transfer (Graham, Shipan, and Volden 2013) also became evident throughout the reviews analysed. During the analysis I coded each word or phrase used to refer to the movement of ideas, practices, and policies. Just over a third of the papers only used one term to refer to the process of policy transfer ($n = 13$, 37.14%). However, the majority of the publications ($n = 22$, 62.86%) used between two and four terms to describe the process of policy transfer. The vast array of terminology used parallels the heterogeneous theoretical and conceptual understanding of VET policy transfer (Perry and Tor 2009).

Countries at the focus of research

To answer RQ2, *What aspects of VET have been at the centre of research in the European Union?*, the following three sections present and discuss the EU member states, policy actors, and types of VET practice that are the focus of research. The papers featured cases from 27 different countries, 13 (48.15%) EU member states, and 16 (51.85%) non-EU member states. The non-EU countries were all cases of transfer of VET policy and/or practices from EU countries. There were also publications involving region-based case studies, which mentioned regions such as the Arab region ($n = 1$), Latin America ($n = 2$), Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) ($n = 2$), and Southeastern Europe (SEE) ($n = 2$). Table 3 below depicts the countries that featured in the data collected and their roles as transfer agents and/or transfer recipients.

In the data collected a little under half the 27 EU member states ($n = 13$, 48.15%) have analysed policy transfer activities. Two common patterns of transferring activities emerged from the collected data. Germany ($n = 21$, 43.75%) and Austria ($n = 5$, 10.42%) have played significant roles in acting as a model of dual VET and apprenticeship systems, as well as establishing training and C-VET practices in MNCs in subsidiaries outside Europe. For example, from the data collected Gessler (2017), Pilz (2016), and Wiemann and Pilz (2020) have examined the transfer of VET from German MNCs. In these cases the research intends to identify good VET transfer practices to provide tangible recommendations for other employer-led VET projects. Alternatively, Gonon (2012), Langthaler (2015), and Langthaler and Top (2023) have investigated how German VET has affected other countries' national policies. These publications explore how the German VET model acts as a reference point for other countries to emulate (Waldow 2017). Yet the UK ($n = 4$, 8.33%) has provided a blueprint for a vocational qualification system (from the data collected see López-Guereñu 2018; Müller 2021) and influenced the implementation of Competency-Based Education and Training⁶ (CBET) (from the data collected see Gessler and Siemer 2020; Turbin 2001).

A wide range of countries adopted or implemented VET policies. Of these 20 countries, six (30%) were members of the EU, and 14 (70%) were non-EU

Table 3. Countries as policy transfer agents and/or policy transfer recipients of VET.

Country	Nos. of publications examining policy transfer agents.	Nos. of publications policy transfer recipients.
Germany	21	-
Austria	5	-
UK	7	1
France	2	-
Denmark	2	1
Switzerland	2	2
Belgium	1	-
England	1	-
Finland	1	-
Ireland	1	-
Netherlands	1	-
China	-	9
Mexico	-	5
America	-	3
Estonia	-	3
North Macedonia	-	3
Hungary	-	2
Serbia	-	2
Spain	-	2
Sweden	-	2
Tunisia	-	2
Turkey	-	2
Greece	-	1
Iran	-	1
Japan	-	1
Namibia	-	1
South Korea	-	1
Bangladesh	-	1

members. There is a marked difference in the type of VET adopted between EU and non-EU countries. On the one hand, non-EU countries have implemented dual VET practices, apprenticeships, and C-VET programmes within industrial companies (from the data collected see Meyne and Peters 2022; Wiemann 2017; Wiemann and Pilz 2020). On the other, EU member states have more commonly adopted I-VET policies and practices and/or participated in EU-funded projects (from the data collected see Fazekas 2010; Loogma 2016; Toots 2009).

Policy actors at the focus of research

Overall, there is a clear preference for conducting interviews with actors from the business or academic spheres and collecting policy documents that the state issues. The studies using interviews explained that participants were training coordinators employed within a company ($n = 5$), academics ($n = 5$), human resource managers ($n = 4$), policymakers ($n = 4$), government officials ($n = 4$), and education staff/providers ($n = 3$). Although the majority conducted interviews with only one type of expert ($n = 18$), some conducted interviews with experts from different fields ($n = 5$). Barabasch (2010) also reported this trend in a synthesis of VET governance studies, stating that experts' selection was frequently a result of their availability and/or public reputation.

The business industry plays a significant role especially among German cases of transfer (from the data collected see Langthaler 2015; Pilz 2016; Saniter and Eberhardt 2022; K. Wiemann and Pilz 2020; Wiemann and Fuchs 2018; J. Wiemann 2017). However, in this review studies collected data from human resource managers and training coordinators within companies, and their input concerned the dual implementation of VET programmes. For example, Pilz (2016) examined the transfer of VET among German companies in four countries. They conducted interviews with training officers and human resource managers. The interviews concerned '... cooperation between vocational schools and companies, training content, participants, trainer, cost allocation, certificate, relation between initial VET and continuing training' (Pilz 2016, 70). This research may provide a partial understanding of VET policy transfer, as no study has included C-level executives, who often play primary roles in initiating transfer, as participants.

Finally, interviewees frequently mentioned supranational actors as being key transfer agents. From the gathered data the supranational actors mentioned included the EU ($n = 18$, 40.91%), businesses and private organisations ($n = 16$, 36.36%), the OECD ($n = 4$, 9.09%), UNESCO ($n = 4$, 9.09%), and the World Bank ($n = 2$, 4.54%). In the reviewed publications the EU's influence became evident in the guidelines and targets it set for its members, as well as in the criteria it mandated for those countries undergoing the accession process. For example, from the data collected Martínez-Izquierdo and Torres Sánchez note (2022a, 10) that 'recommendations on the specific characteristics that should shape the

structure and functioning of the proposed apprenticeships model permeate the European texts'. Additionally, within the EU, the ETF and CEDEFOP have financed VET projects and produced annual reports regarding various VET practices (from the data collected see Chakroun and Sicilia 2010; Turbin 2001).

In the gathered data international organisations such as the OECD, UNESCO, and the World Bank issue reports and policy recommendations which have facilitated policy dialogue in the VET area (from the publications collected see Fazekas 2010; Jakobi 2012). For example, Fazekas's (2010) analysis of transfer in Hungarian VET policy illustrates how an OECD review of Hungary's policies highlighted policy learning as a form of good practice, thus incentivising further VET policy learning. Overall, they indirectly referred to the influence of international organisations (i.e. through references to the academic literature in the publications and/or interview participants mentioning them), and they did not collect primary data from these organisations (from the data collected see Kersh and Laczik 2021; Langthaler 2015). In a literature review Klassen (2024) also noted the use of indirect academic references, as opposed to direct data collection from international organisations.

Types of VET practices

The type of VET at the focus of research varied, although there was a clear preference for examining dual VET and C-VET practices. Almost a third of the publications ($n = 17$, 32.69%) examined the transfer of dual VET systems and apprenticeships. For example, from the data collected Gessler (2017) examined the export of German dual VET across MNCs, and Martínez-Izquierdo and Torres Sánchez (2022a, 2022b) investigated the EU's role in promoting dual VET. This is consistent with the finding that most publications have examined transfer activities from Germany, a country known for its role in promoting dual VET (Rohde-Liebenau and Graf 2024; Stockmann 2014). The lack of studies examining the transfer of VET qualifications stands in stark contrast with the importance, reported in the academic literature, of VET qualifications for VET policy transfer (Clarke and Winch 2015; Elken 2017; Loogma 2016). Additionally, it hints at corporate actors' power in incentivising research on particular types of VET – that is, dual VET implemented in businesses and companies. This section has made evident that we need more research regarding I-VET practices and VET qualification systems to produce a holistic understanding of VET policy transfer in the EU.

Discussion

This review has shown that research on VET policy transfer across EU member states tends to carry out single-country case studies, examines a select few actors, particular EU member states, and specific types of VET practices. Thus,

the body of knowledge on the policy transfer of VET in the EU remains incomplete and fragmented. This concluding section discusses four key points which will aid researchers in bridging research gaps, namely: research methods; the policy actors recruited to provide data for research; the examination of EU member states for transfer; and the type of VET practice that is the research focus.

One key point has emerged in answering the question: *How has research sought to investigate VET policy transfer in the European Union?* (RQ1). This point contends with the prevailing use of qualitative research designs featuring country case studies. This finding supports what previous reviews have found, and I join in the previous calls made for the diversification of methods (Scheuch et al. 2021; Toepper, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, and Kühling-Thees 2022). Qualitative studies, especially country case studies, risk narrowing the analytical lens to a defined space (Perry and Tor 2009; Quintão, Andrade, and Almeida 2021). To overcome this limitation, the field could use more quantitative research or mixed-methods research. Such studies would allow the collection of data from a broader landscape and thus the drawing of generalisable conclusions. For example, from the publications analysed Jakobi (2012) transformed qualitative data into a binary-coded variable (i.e. quantitative data). This allowed her to investigate the policy diffusion of lifelong learning across 99 countries. Such research expands the analytical space and can identify broader trends and patterns of policy transfer, producing generalisable knowledge.

Multiple countries' comparative analyses are another type of research design that can provide knowledge of how transfer practices occur over different spaces (Toepper, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, and Kühling-Thees 2022). For example, from the data collected by Fuchs (2020) and Wiemann and Pilz (2020), using a comparative case-study methodology, have analysed the transfer activities of German MNCs in subsidiaries abroad. These studies have highlighted particular patterns which single-country case studies would not have identified (Quintão, Andrade, and Almeida 2021). Finally, the field can benefit from longitudinal studies, which can provide knowledge of how policy transfer processes change or remain consistent over time and across space (Ness 2010). Such research is regarded as less feasible, as it requires more time and resources to produce practical recommendations (Fontdevila and Verger 2019; Manuel Galvin Arribas 2016). Nonetheless, in the context of increased collaboration among EU member states, longitudinal studies and comparative research would provide valuable knowledge of the relationships of policy influence among countries, and how the roles of actors involved in policy transfer ebb and flow over time. I therefore propose that we make more effort to diversify research methods.

An additional three points become evident in response to the question: *What aspects of VET have been at the centre of research in the European Union?* (RQ2). First, I draw attention to the unexamined EU spaces where VET policy transfer may happen. Indeed, the publications examined less than half the EU member

states. Germany and German-speaking countries feature as the primary transfer agents, reflecting the findings of previous research (Li and Pilz 2021; Stockmann 2014; Toepfer, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, and Kühling-Thees 2022). Such transfer activities included transfer from German MNCs to subsidiaries abroad (from the data collected see Gessler 2017; Pilz 2016; Wiemann and Pilz 2020) and transfer of aspects of the German VET model to the national policies of other countries (from the data collected see Gonon 2012; Langthaler 2015; Langthaler and Top 2023). This spotlight on German VET stands in stark contrast with other research which contests the transferability and adaptability of the German VET model to foreign contexts (Laczik et al. 2023; Unwin 2019). An examination of the power and agency German actors have in shaping VET and VET research would therefore be an interesting point for future research.

Overall, transferring countries exert their influence in various ways. For example, transfer can occur during collaboration with other countries when experts from one country assist key actors in another in establishing VET programmes. From the data collected López-Guereñu (2018, 510) documents how VET stakeholders '... sought to improve the Basque VET system by contacting experts from Switzerland and Austria to better understand the corporatist model of VET'. Another mechanism of transfer is through participation in EU-funded projects.⁵ Turbin (2001), another publication gathered for this review, examined the transfer that followed the FORCE project. Finally, countries have acted as a reference society emulating the best VET practices (Waldow 2017). For example, Germany has provided a model of best practice for dual VET (from the data collected see Schrank 2020; Saniter and Eberhardt 2022), while England has provided a model for the C-BET and VET qualifications system (from the data collected see Gessler and Siemer 2020; Müller 2021).

This review has revealed that there is a marked difference between the types of VET EU and non-EU member states implement, a hitherto unreported finding. For example, the integration of VET practices into national education policies is more prevalent among EU countries. From the gathered data Fazekas (2010) examines how VET policy learning has shaped education policy in Hungary; Loogma (2016) takes the case of Estonia to examine the influence of Europeanisation on VET national practices; and Toots (2009) examines Estonia and investigates policy learning from Finland, which has also shaped VET national policy. In contrast, business partnerships in non-EU countries have led the implementation of dual VET practices in occupational settings.

The pattern of transfer between EU and non-EU countries points to a network of VET policy transfer among EU member states that German-speaking countries and EU initiatives mostly lead. Non-EU countries have implemented EU-inspired VET policies outside this network, but the data collected imply that EU member states appear not to be importing VET policies from non-EU member states. Overall, our understanding of VET policy transfer in the EU is still incomplete because half the EU member states remain unexamined. This trend, taken with

the partial examination of some countries and the exclusion of others, highlights that some countries are more easily visible as policy transfer actors or have more access to the power that enables them to become policy transfer agents. Across different EU member states it therefore seems that power, interest, and agency in affecting VET policy transfer vary. While Scheuch et al. (2021) have examined the country of residence for the first author publishing on VET policy transfer, the specific EU countries at the focus of research remain largely unexamined. Additionally, transfer research remains preoccupied with the recipient country's perspective (e.g. from the data collected Gonon 2012 focused on the perspective of Scotland); whereas studies examining transfer from the perspective of the transferring countries are scarce (e.g. from the data collected Langthaler 2015 analysed transfer from the Austrian perspective) (Toepper, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, and Kühling-Thees 2021). Future research investigating these factors could shed light on the power and agency of EU member states in enacting top-down and bottom-up transfer (Alexiadou and Rambla 2023; Börzel and Panke 2013).

The second point answering RQ2 concerns who is recognised as a policy transfer actor and therefore provides data for collection. Most interviews are with corporate agents of transfer, usually in German companies. VET trainers and human resource managers have been recruited; C-level executives and senior management have not featured as participants for data collection. For example, from the data collected Fuchs (2020), Pilz (2016), and Vogelsang and Pilz (2021) have all conducted interviews with VET trainers and/or human resource managers within German MNCs located abroad. Senior management is often involved in the executive decisions seeking transfer, so an analysis of VET transfer would benefit from an examination of these actors' roles. Alternatively, document data were largely collected from government sources, meaning the state features prominently in seeking to change VET national policy through engagement in policy transfer. From the collected data Barabasch and Petrick (2012) examine how Turkey engages in policy learning and borrowing to implement VET, while López-Guereñu (2018) examines the Basque case. Finally, despite the knowledge that '[a]ctors involved in educational transfer include not only official policy makers, bureaucrats and politicians, but also individuals, organizations and networks...' (Perry and Tor 2009, 516), the majority of publications reviewed collected data from policy actors in only one sphere. For example, from the publications analysed Pilz (2016), Wiemann (2017), and Wiemann and Fuchs (2018) have carried out interviews only with participants within the business industry. These studies take the perspective of these participants as the primary source for understanding the dynamics of VET policy transfer.

The role of international organisations, thus far largely examined indirectly through literature references, requires more attention. For example, from the data gathered Jakobi (2012), Fazekas (2010), and Müller (2021) have collected

documents directly from international organisations, while other studies have mentioned supranational actors in passing or not at all. This is because the most accessible participants are usually those within the business sector, and expanding the data collection pool requires more resources (Barabasch 2010). Additionally, the primary stakeholders investing in VET research have been political and corporate actors seeking empirical knowledge that provides practical solutions for successful VET implementation (Fontdevila and Verger 2019; Manuel Galvin Arribas 2016). Answers to practical and policy issues are therefore usually sought within the business sector. Nonetheless, given that international organisations significantly influence VET policy transfer, we should also collect data directly from actors within these spheres (Klassen 2024; Stone 2004).

To summarise this point, certain actors like the business industry and the state have featured more visibly as agents of policy transfer. This stands in stark contrast with the knowledge that several actors maintain VET policy transfer at the same time (Stone 2004). International organisations (like the EU and OECD), the state, and the business industry simultaneously affect transfer through different forms of power and agency (Fontdevila and Verger 2019; Porto De Oliveira 2020). Studies that interview actors from only one sphere are therefore unlikely to provide an accurate and complete analysis of all the agents involved in VET policy transfer (Elken 2017). We need further research that collects different forms of data from different types of participants. Within the EU such research would elucidate how the inter-relationship of actors facilitates transfer, especially the much less studied bottom-up transfer (Börzel and Panke 2013; Li and Pilz 2021).

The fourth point underlines the dominant focus on specific types of VET practices at the centre of policy transfer research – namely, dual VET and C-VET. Growing economic needs have spurred EU member states to adopt dual VET (Šćepanović and Martín Artiles 2020), and from the data collected Martínez-Izquierdo and Torres Sánchez (2022a; 2022b) show how the EU has played a role in promoting a dual VET. For example, with the establishment of the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) and the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships the EU is promoting the use of a specific form of dual VET (Elken 2017; Graf and Marques 2022; Huisman and Van der Wende 2004). Additionally, the involvement of corporate actors – who greatly benefit from dual VET programmes that enable the upskilling of their employees – has accentuated the attention provided to dual VET and C-VET (Fontdevila and Verger 2019). Indeed, from the gathered data many investigate the transfer of dual VET within MNCs (e.g. Vogelsang et al. 2022; J. Wiemann 2017; J. Wiemann and Fuchs 2018; K. Wiemann and Pilz 2020). This has led to the policy transfer of other types of VET practices such as school-based VET and the standardisation of VET qualification systems remaining unexamined. In the context of the EU we therefore require more research to understand how EU-incentives¹ and the forces surrounding the green and digital transitions are shaping the transfer

of particular forms of VET, while examining the power of certain EU member states in enacting bottom-up transfer of particular VET (Börzel and Panke 2013).

In taking these four points together, the limitations of the current body of research in providing a broader image of the trends of VET policy transfer practices that may exist in the EU become clear. In this review I am unable to provide a generalised understanding of the patterns and/or broader networks of policy due to the unexamined spaces in the current body of knowledge. However, I have identified the common methodological practices that prevail in the field. Current studies have provided important micro-level analyses which already point to some common practices (e.g. in the implementation of dual VET). These findings could act as a starting point for propelling further research which analyses VET policy transfer at the macro level. When developing research, we must remember that '[p]olicy transfer specialists focus on an object that does not have a well-defined territoriality, has transnational connections, moves across distinct jurisdictions, and can also be modified during the process by distinct involved actors according to their perspectives and interests' (Porto De Oliveira 2020, 135).

Conclusion

All EU member states have implemented VET (European Commission, n.d.), and with 400 policy developments across the EU constituents, it is clear that policy is changing in various ways (Cedefop 2024). Policy changes are likely to be a mixture of top-down and bottom-up policy influence, policy transfer, and policy diffusion (Börzel and Panke 2013; Marsh and Sharman 2009). Given the ties of VET to the economy and the increasing push towards more VET practices in the EU (European Parliament 2024a), these policy changes are likely to affect the future of the job market – highlighting the societal and economic importance of further research to examine this phenomenon.

The findings largely corroborate previous reviews in terms of the identified methodological gaps and patterns, and I align with previous calls made for the further systematisation of research on the topic (Gessler and Siemer 2020; Scheuch et al. 2021; Toepper, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, and Kühling-Thees 2022). However, this review provides a new perspective by examining the EU context and shedding light on the countries and types of VET that are the focus of research. Four key points emerge that require further consideration to address the existing gaps in the research: the research methods used; the policy actors involved in data collection; the geographical space analysed; and the type of VET practice investigated. The generalisability of this review has certain limitations. For example, language limitations meant I could not analyse the large body of academic literature published in German. Additionally, studies that have used terms other than those used in the search string may have been

overlooked. Finally, certain gaps and limitations are not easily identified because of the partly excluded information about methods in some publications.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the results have exposed particular gaps in research into VET policy transfer in the EU. Diversifying the range of methodological techniques will allow the examination of VET policy transfer in the EU from multiple perspectives. Questions regarding power and agency in the EU could guide future research: why do certain countries and types of VET have such influence in the EU? If all EU members have implemented VET, how are the less visible countries adopting it? How is the current drive towards the green and digital transition influencing further VET policy transfer? Primarily, research on the topic could benefit from increased methodological diversity and the broadening of the boundaries of the analytical space.

Notes

1. The European Year of Skills 2023 sought to increase the competitiveness of the European job market by establishing particular initiatives and providing funding for member states to meet VET-related goals. At the time of writing examples of EU initiatives in VET include the European Skills Agenda and the European Digital Skills and Jobs Platform. Examples of funding include the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the Recovery and Resilience Facility which can be used to support member states' employment and skills sectors, and the Digital Europe Programme (European Commission, [n.d.](#)).
2. Graham, Shipan, and Volden (2013) have identified a total of 104 terms used to refer to policy diffusion.
3. The terms 'dual VET' and 'apprenticeships' are often used interchangeably (Karmel 2011).
4. Through the OMC the EU has established mechanisms for collaboration and regulation – for example, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the European Credit Transfer System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), and the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (Clarke and Winch 2015; Elken 2017).
5. Examples of EU-funded projects include the FORCE programme and the MEDA-ETE regional project.
6. CBET is a type of training programme based on a set of competencies and/or skills being translated into qualifications that are comparable across several qualification systems (Burke 1989).

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