Finding one’s place in society: Exploring the relation between vocational education and social cohesion in Greece and England

Ioanna Katsikopoulou
University of York, York, UK

This paper is based on my current PhD study. The background to the study is the European Union and the envisaged role of vocational education and training (VET) in the creation of more and better jobs and the fostering of social cohesion in Europe (2000 Lisbon Strategy; 2002 Copenhagen Process). This vision includes school-based vocational education, the pathway considered to provide its students with more practically-focussed learning. The aim of the study is to explore the envisaged relation between vocational education and social cohesion. It is framed by theories of human and social capital, and sets forth to examine how vocational students are to acquire qualifications suitable for employment (Cedefop, Preston, & Green, 2008), and a sense of belonging to a community or society (OECD, 2001). In this light, the purpose of the study is to explore how vocational education is envisaged to support its students in finding their own place in society and hence contribute to keeping society cohesive. Greece and England have been selected as cases. Both countries support European initiatives on VET, including vocational education. They have developed models of vocational education with differences in structure and objectives. There are perceived differences in the focus and status of the economic structure of each country. Such differences are expected to illuminate aspects of the relation of vocational education to social cohesion. To produce data sufficient to address the purpose of the study two datasets have been created: one with interviews with teachers delivering vocational courses in Greece and England, and one with state education policy documents produced in each country. Thematic analysis of pilot interviews conducted with eight vocational teachers in total, equally distributed between Greece and England, has offered some indications about the relation under study. In terms of development, it could be argued that vocational students could develop interests and choices not quite fitting into academic education (Greece) provided that they have opportunity and motivation to do so (England). Through team work and specific vocational tasks they could develop a sense of togetherness and a vocational identity associated with their studies. This identity could enable them to find employment and hence contribute to the development of the society that surrounds them. This study could bring the academic and wider community closer together by raising awareness of the purpose of vocational education in current society.