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The adoption of dual VET in Spain: analysis of decentralised decision-making in education policy transfer.

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Abstract: This paper examines the adoption of dual VET in Spain as a process of education policy transfer. Using Phillips and Ochs' (2003, 2004) policy transfer spectrum and decision-making classification and Perry and Tor's (2008) model of transfer forms, the study relies on semi-structured interviews with key decision-makers in the Spanish central government and the Autonomous Communities of the Basque Country and Andalusia. Findings indicate that EU diffusion activities facilitated adoption, involving first-order learning. Initially, adoption at the central level was uninformed, driven by quick-fix decisions, but later shifted to informed transfer through second- and third-order learning, enhancing realism. In Andalusia and the Basque Country, decision-making consistently adapted to the real context, progressing from second- to third-order learning. Ultimately, this analysis concludes that dual VET adoption at the central, Andalusian, and Basque levels falls between 'negotiated under constraint' and 'borrowed purposefully', though not at the same point.

Keywords: education policy-making, education policy transfer, policy adoption, policy borrowing and lending, vocational education and training, dual VET, apprenticeship.

1. Introduction

The Great Recession served as a significant stress test for the productive systems of southern Europe, particularly highlighting the vulnerabilities within their vocational education and training (VET) systems, which are traditionally school-based. This economic downturn exacerbated the already high youth unemployment rates characteristic of these regions. Even during a favorable economic cycle in February 2008, the Eurozone's average youth unemployment rate stood at 14.4%, while in Spain, it was notably higher at 19.8% (Eurostat, 2008b). This occurred despite Spain experiencing a year-on-year GDP growth of 3.8% and several years of sustained economic development (Eurostat, 2008a).

By January 2011, in the aftermath of the Great Recession, Spain's youth unemployment rate had surged to 43.1%, compared to the Eurozone average of 19.9% (Eurostat, 2011). In contrast, the productive systems of Central European countries with dual VET systems demonstrated remarkable resilience and a swift recovery in youth employment during this period. These countries continued to maintain strong performance in youth employment. For instance, in January 2011, Austria's youth unemployment rate was 8%, Germany's was 8.3%, and Denmark's was 13.5% (Eurostat, 2011). These figures were comparable to those in the first quarter of 2008, which were 7.7%, 9.8%, and 8.4%, respectively (Eurostat, 2008b).

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According to European Union (EU) analyses, this highlighted the ineffectiveness of school-based VET systems in contrast to the 'world-class' systems of countries with dual VET models.

Some European countries already have world-class VET systems (Germany, Austria, Denmark, and the Netherlands) with built-in mechanisms to adapt to current and future skill needs, so training is more demand-driven. They report fewer problems with skills mismatches and show better employment rates for young people. In these countries, VET education is characterised by dual systems with a high proportion of work-based learning. May others, typically in Southern Europe, lag in participation, quality, outcomes and attractiveness. (European Commission, 2012: 5–6)

Following the Great Recession, the EU intensified and refined its recommendations for the reform of VET systems, building on the initiatives set forth at the beginning of the Copenhagen Process in 2002. These recommendations aligned with the training and governance principles of the dual VET models prevalent in certain central and northern European Member States, such as Austria, Germany, and Denmark (Martínez-Izquierdo and Torres-Sánchez, 2022).

In November 2012, the Spanish government enacted Law 3/2012 of 6 July on urgent measures to reform the labor market, which 'modified the regulation of the training and dual apprenticeship contract to boost youth employment by removing certain limitations on its application in companies' (Ministerio de Empleo y Seguridad Social and Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2012: 1). Subsequently, under this law, both Ministries jointly approved Royal Decree 1529/2012 of November 8, developing the contract for training and apprenticeship and establishing the foundations for dual VET (Ministerio de Empleo y Seguridad Social and Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2012). This legal framework provided the necessary legal backing for some Autonomous Communities to voluntarily initiate a reform process towards dual VET, while in others, it either supported or promoted the reform. This reform process aimed to implement the dual modality in VET, taking as a reference the dual VET systems of Central European countries, such as Germany (Echeverría, 2016; Martín-Artiles et al., 2019). Finally, the adoption of dual VET in Spain was concluded with the approval of Organic Law 3/2022 of 31 March, which organized and integrated Vocational Training, making dual VET the norm within the system (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2022).

This reform process exemplifies what is known in Comparative Education as 'policy borrowing and lending' (Steiner-Khamsi and Waldow, 2012) or, as it will be used in this research due to its semantic connotations, education 'policy transfer' (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000: 5). Both the prior activities of EU institutions and the approval of Royal Decree 1529/2012 are early milestones in an education policy transfer process that has materialized at multiple levels and involved numerous actors, both public and private, from central and regional levels. This article aims to analyze the process of education policy transfer, focusing on the decision-making stage (Phillips and Ochs, 2003), conceptualized as the period from 2012 (2007/2008 in the Basque case) to the drafting of Organic Law 3/2022, which led to the implementation of dual VET in Spain. The analysis addresses the following research questions: What was the degree of voluntariness in the origins of the process of transferring dual VET to Spain? What form of education policy transfer has occurred in Spain? What kinds of political decisions have been made throughout the transfer process?

2. Decision-making in Spanish VET policy

The Spanish Constitution of 1978 establishes a decentralized model, distributing educational competencies across the regions. Specifically, regarding the structural configuration of the education system, the Spanish Central Government, along with the Parliament, is responsible for establishing the system's framework. This task is accomplished through the approval of Organic Laws, which are further elaborated at the regulatory level through Royal Decrees and Orders. The Autonomous Communities, in turn, develop and complement this primary central legislation through Autonomous Decrees and Orders, thus shaping the final form of their respective education systems. Additionally, the Autonomous Communities hold the executive and administrative powers necessary to manage their education systems.

When legislating on VET, the central government relies on consultative bodies that issue reports on various reforms. The General Council for VET, whose presidency alternates between the Ministries of Education and Labour, is particularly significant in advising on VET decision-making. This body comprises representatives from various Ministries, the Autonomous Communities, and the most representative employers' organizations (e.g., CEOE) and trade unions (e.g., UGT, CCOO).

The Autonomous Communities also have consultative bodies in the field of VET that assess reform proposals and issue recommendations. This research focuses on the Basque Country and Andalusia, both of which have autonomous VET councils: the Basque VET Council and the Andalusian VET Council. These councils include representatives from the regional ministries, leading employers' organizations (e.g., CEA in Andalusia, ConfeBask in the Basque Country), and regional trade unions (CCOO, UGT). The Basque VET Council additionally includes representatives from public, state-subsidized, and private VET centres (Ikaslan, Hetel).

Beyond these official bodies, decision-making in dual VET in Spain is influenced by foundations specifically created to promote dual VET and lobby for its regulation. Examples include the Bertelsmann Foundation and the Dualiza Bankia Foundation. Both have strong ties to the employers. The Alliance for Dual VET, established by the Bertelsmann Foundation, includes business sector representatives on its board, while Dualiza Bankia (now CaixaBank Dualiza) is affiliated with one of Spain's largest banking institutions, Bankia (now CaixaBank).

3. Theoretical framework

In the field of Comparative Education, Phillips and Ochs (2003, 2004) developed one of the most recognized theories in the Anglo-Saxon world for analyzing education policy transfer processes. To address the analysis of the previously raised questions, this research employs two of their main contributions: the Model of Composite Processes (Phillips and Ochs, 2003) and the Spectrum of Education Policy Transfer (Phillips and Ochs, 2004)

The Model of Composite Processes, is a sequence of four stages that illustrate the configuration of an education policy transfer process. The four stages outlined by this model are, in progressive order, Cross-National Attraction, Decision, Implementation, and Internalization (Phillips and Ochs, 2003). This paper specifically focuses on the analysis of the Decision stage. According to Phillips and Ochs (2003), the Decision stage comprises the measures through which the government or other agencies initiate the change process. The authors identify four types of decisions:

- **Theoretical:** these are overarching policy decisions, such as 'educational equity,' which may not be reflected uniformly across all areas but serve as the guiding principle for the education system from a theoretical standpoint.
- **Realistic/Practical:** these decisions are made after evaluating the feasibility of immediately implementing measures that have proven successful elsewhere, while considering the contextual differences with the countries or environments where such policies have been effective.
- **Quick fix:** this approach involves proceeding with the implementation of measures that have been successful in other contexts without evaluating their appropriateness for the new setting.

- Phoney: these decisions depend on the enthusiasm of certain actors for elements of education in other countries to achieve immediate political or electoral gains, even if such decisions are unsustainable in the long term.

This theoretical proposal makes a significant contribution to the conceptualization of decision-making in education policy transfer processes but leaves some underlying details unaddressed. Specifically, Phillips and Ochs (2003) do not elaborate on aspects such as potential learning to prepare for decision-making or the specific role of external actors, such as international organizations. To address this gap, this article also incorporates the approaches of Perry and Tor (2008).

Perry and Tor (2008) propose conceptualizing education policy transfer as a learning process, which justifies differences in form and outcome. The authors emphasize that such learning varies according to the nature of the process and the intentionality of the receiving actors, ranging from more rational and intentional forms of learning, such as lesson drawing, to more constrained forms, such as imposition, or unintentional forms, as in the case of diffusion (Perry and Tor, 2008). Based on these premises, the authors detail these three different forms of transfer, emphasizing that the typology of a transfer process can evolve over time and is not static.

- Imposition: it is 'externally induced educational transfer by military occupiers, colonisers, transnational organisations, and/or donor agencies'" (Perry and Tor, 2008: 519). Whether they desire the transfer or not, the receiving individuals or authorities feel compelled to accept it to obtain other benefits. The use of power in this scenario is explicit and deliberate. However, this coercive nature is often disguised by the use of apolitical, technical, and neutral terms such as diffusion, knowledge sharing, and best practices (Perry and Tor, 2008).
- Diffusion: it is 'a form of educational transfer that is unintentional and spontaneous, especially on the receiving end' (Perry and Tor, 2008: 519). Diffusion involves the gradual introduction of discourses, ideas, norms, and educational culture from another context. In this scenario, education policy transfer is implicit, unconscious, and unintentional, leading to first-order learning. This osmotic learning process is characterized by routine matching, satisfying, and adjusting existing policies to evolving internal and external conditions. International organizations play a crucial role by exerting their influence through forms of soft power, involving a less overt exercise of power. According to Perry and Tor (2008), 'diffusion normally precedes deliberate lesson-drawing and typically leads to incremental forms of educational transfer' (519).
- Lesson-drawing: 'lesson-drawing is a deliberate effort by a borrower to initiate educational transfer' (Perry and Tor, 2008: 519). Prior to this, the diffusion of external ideas, norms, and culture paves the way for the initiation of such processes. Their range starts "from uninformed transfer to various levels of informed transfer" (Perry and Tor, 2008: 519). Globalization and transnational organizations have favored this type of transfer as a middle ground. When official actors decide to glean insights from other sources for political purposes, such as legitimizing a policy decision or quickly satisfying the demands of another actor, the education policy transfer often becomes symbolic or blindly emulated, resulting in minimal actual learning. This outcome is termed "uninformed transfer." In contrast, lesson-drawing can lead to "informed

transfer," which manifests in varying degrees of learning leading to different outcomes. Typically, the initial result of informed transfer is second-order policy-related learning. This process may involve incremental change, adaptation, and selective experimentation. As second-order learning and incremental decision-making unfold, the likelihood of overt or institutionalized educational transfer increases. Third-order learning, the highest level of education policy transfer, entails fundamental decision-making marked by a radical paradigm shift in the goals and content of education policy. This highest level of learning results from collaborative learning efforts within local policy communities and broader social networks, including think tanks and other governmental and non-governmental organizations (Perry and Tor, 2008)

The second theoretical tool proposed by Phillips and Ochs (2004) used in the theoretical conceptualization of this research is the Spectrum of Education Policy Transfer (Figure 1). Through this framework, the authors position education policy transfer within a continuum that involves varying degrees of voluntariness. This research enhances the theoretical framework of decision-making in foreign policy-making by integrating the theoretical variable of voluntariness, also described by Perry and Tor (2008) under the concept of ‘intentionality’. The spectrum ranges from the extreme of imposition to the transfer of ideas and policies resulting from the general influence of internationalization and globalization. Between these two endpoints, the authors identify other scenarios situated at different points along the continuum: policy transfer required under constraints (e.g., occupied countries), negotiated under pressure (e.g., loan requirements, multilateral agreements), and the intentional copying of policy observed elsewhere (Phillips and Ochs, 2004).

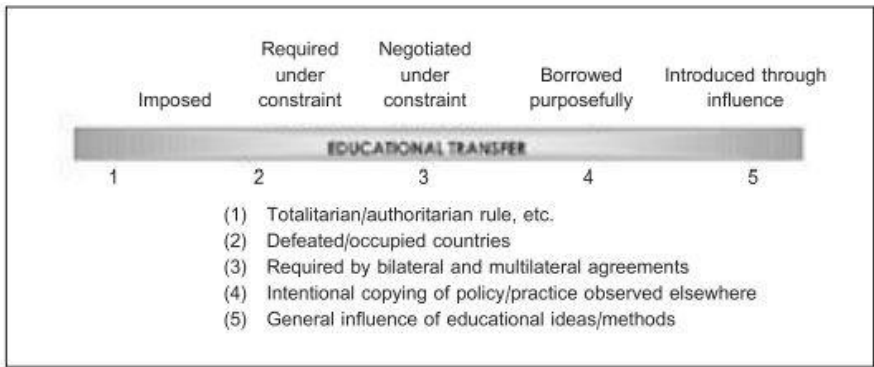


Figure 1. Spectrum of Education Policy Transfer. (Phillips and Ochs, 2004: 9)

4. The international transfer of dual VET policy in the scientific literature with emphasis on Spain

The study of the international transfer of dual VET policy has emerged as a multidisciplinary field. Research has focused on three main themes: the exportation of dual VET models (e.g., Fontdevila et al., 2022), the dissemination efforts of international organizations (e.g., Vanderhoven, 2023), and the importation of dual VET policy (e.g., Vogelsang et al., 2022). However, when it comes to policy importation, particularly the analysis of the Decision phase (Phillips and Ochs, 2003), the available studies are limited. In this study on decision-making, it is essential to analyze the pressure exerted by external actors (e.g., transnational organizations), the role of social dialogue, and the processes involved in the formulation of specific policies.

Transnational organizations, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Training Foundation (ETF), and the World Bank, act as ‘travelling salesmen’ (Barabasch et al., 2021: 347) for specific national VET models, promoting them as blueprints for all countries. In the European context (the context of this research), the EU has promoted the adoption of dual VET in Member States through recommendations (Psifidou and Ranieri, 2020) and subsidies (Scepanovic and Martín-Artiles, 2020). Additionally, public agencies from certain Central European countries have become influential in shaping VET policy adoption within the EU. For example, German public agencies played a crucial role in Greece (Baumann and Vossiek, 2022) and both German and Austrian agencies had a significant influence in candidate countries like Serbia (Langthaler and Top, 2023).

When it comes to social dialogue in the adoption of dual VET, the evidence from Europe shows that it has generally been limited. For instance, in Greece (Baumann and Vossiek, 2022) and Portugal (Sanz de Miguel et al., 2022), EU pressures driven by economic uncertainty and the need to repay post-2008 crisis aid accelerated dual VET reforms, leading to a prioritization of EU agreements over dialogue with national VET stakeholders. However, scientific evidence highlights the presence of extensive social dialogue in the adoption processes of dual VET in EU countries such as Sweden, as reported by Andersson et al. (2015).

Regarding the processes of creating specific dual VET policies, there is a clear scarcity of empirical research. In EU, one of the few pieces of evidence are the pilot projects developed in Sweden, Greece and Italy aimed at advancing dual VET (Andersson et al., 2015; Baumann and Vossiek, 2022; Rustico et al., 2020). Outside Europe, Mexico implemented dual VET projects on a smaller scale before broader adoption (Valiente et al., 2020), driven by local business demands (Vogelsang et al., 2022). Within this area of policy creation, scientific literature has also highlighted the use of international models as key references, with Germany being a prominent example in the formulation of dual VET policies (e.g., Valiente et al., 2020).

In Spain, the scientific literature on the adoption of dual VET primarily stems from theoretical frameworks unrelated to policy transfer and Comparative Education. This body of work is fragmented, with decentralization and the diverse contexts of the Autonomous Communities complicating the extraction of coherent conclusions. Regarding the decision-making phase (Phillips and Ochs, 2003), few studies have focused explicitly on this aspect (see Martín-Artiles et al., 2020; Sanz de Miguel, 2017; Sanz de Miguel et al., 2022).

Martín-Artiles et al. (2020) examine the influence of international organizations, analysing Europeanization rhetoric and its significant role in integrating EU recommendations into Spanish legislation and regional frameworks. They highlight European instruments such as funding from the European Social Fund, social security reductions for Youth Guarantee Program contracts or the Erasmus+ program. These influences are evident mainly in the discourse of union representatives.

Sanz de Miguel (2017) and Sanz de Miguel et al. (2022) argue that the initial development of the dual VET model in Spain occurred without social dialogue, diverging from the consensual legislative approach in VET policy since the 1980s. Tripartite VET Councils primarily served consultative roles, with informal communication channels dominating due to regulations allowing independent governmental decision-making. This lack of structured engagement hampers the councils' ability to influence the political agenda, exacerbated by unclear mandates

for research and policy development. Additionally, Sanz de Miguel (2017) notes the absence of a clear agenda and specific objectives, hindering the evaluation of actions through indicators.

In the research on knowledge acquisition for policy formulation, only two studies have specifically addressed these aspects. Barrientos (2021) reports that VET centres engaged in training on the German model through study trips and the review of technical documents. Similarly, Cebrián (2018) details pilot projects in Aragon, which were part of a regional strategy to expand dual VET.

Given the limited scientific research on this topic and the decentralized nature of VET policy decision-making in Spain, studies with a more geographically focused scope are necessary. A deeper analysis of each Autonomous Community is essential to gain a nuanced understanding of the decision-making phase in the transfer process of dual VET to Spain. This article aims to provide insights into the real influence of the EU on key actors in Andalusia and the Basque Country, the specifics of social dialogue and decision-making processes, external pressures favouring dual VET, and the learning processes inherent in creating new regulations. Lastly, this study aims to complement the existing scientific evidence on decision-making and policy creation in the international transfer of dual VET, an area with limited scientific production.

5. Methodology

Data collection

This research focuses on representatives from both the central level and the Autonomous Communities of Andalusia and the Basque Country who were involved in the adoption of dual VET in Spain. To this end, the study includes 14 semi-structured interviews with primary decision-makers in VET at the Spanish central level, Andalusia, and the Basque Country, as well as a representative from one of the most active national foundations promoting dual VET (see Table 1 for an anonymized list of participants).

The selection of Andalusia and the Basque Country is justified by their significance for this research. Andalusia began its process of adopting dual VET in 2013, representing an example of Autonomous Communities that initiated the implementation of this modality following the publication of Royal Decree 1529/2012. In contrast, the Basque Country serves as an example of a pioneering Autonomous Community, having started the implementation of minority dual projects in the 2007-2008 academic year (*Ikasi eta lan* program) and in 2012 (*Hezibi* program).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted between early December 2022 and late April 2023. The period covered by the content of these interviews spans from 2012, when the first central decree regulating the basis for the implementation of dual VET was passed, to 2020, marking the beginning of the parliamentary process that led to a paradigm shift with the passing of Organic Law 3/2022 on the organization and integration of VET, which established duality as the standard for the Spanish VET system. In the Basque case, this period begins in the 2007/2008 academic year. The direct quotes from these interviews, originally in Spanish, have been translated by the authors.

Tabla 1. Anonymised list of participants

<u>Category</u>	<u>Scope</u>		<u>Specific position</u>	<u>Acronym</u>
Ministry of Education (ME)	Central level (CL)		<i>Minister for Education</i>	ME1
			<i>Head of Service at the Ministry of Education</i>	ME2
Department of Education (RME)	Autonomous Community (AC)	Andalusia	<i>Coordinator of Dual VET of the Andalusian Government</i>	RME-A
		Basque Country	<i>Vice-Minister for VET of the Basque Government</i>	RME-BQ
Trade unions (TU)	CL		<i>Confederal Secretary for Strategic Transitions and Territorial Development</i>	TU-C
	AC	Basque Country	<i>Head of Employment and Vocational Qualifications</i>	TU-BQ
Employers' Confederation (EC)	CL		<i>Head of Education and Training</i>	EC-C
	AC	Andalusia	<i>Head of the Programmes and Projects Area</i>	EC-A
		Basque Country	<i>Head of Training, Talent and Employment Department</i>	EC-BQ
Education Centres (VC)	CL		<i>President of an State Association of VET Centres</i>	VC-C
	AC	Andalusia	<i>Heads of VET Centres in Andalusia</i>	VC-A
		Basque Country	<i>President of an Association of VET centres in the Basque Country</i>	VC-BQ
Foundation (F)	CL/ AC		<i>Co-responsible for a foundation</i>	F1

Reflective Thematic Analysis

The semi-structured interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Given the peculiarities and uniqueness of this policy transfer process, the flexibility of reflexive TA allowed for an approach to the data that ranged between inductive and deductive methodologies. As Braun and Clarke (2021) assert, the range between inductive and deductive orientations "is more a spectrum than a dichotomy, and coding of a dataset can encompass both types" (p. 55). Consequently, the analysis was conducted using the themes already identified by the theoretical framework of education policy transfer (e.g., degrees of voluntariness, lesson-drawing), while also allowing for the emergence of new, case-specific

themes through inductive methods. Similarly, on the continuum between semantic and latent codes (Braun and Clarke, 2021), this analysis primarily aligned closer to the semantic end.

Following the principles and processes proposed by reflexive TA (Braun and Clarke, 2021) the first phase involved immersion in the documents and transcripts to observe their organization and the emergence of themes. In the second phase, the content was systematized using primarily semantic codes. During the third phase, different codes that shared a pattern of meaning were grouped together to construct themes capable of addressing our research questions. The fourth phase involved reflecting on the themes created in phase three, pooling the themes from each semi-structured interview. In the fifth phase, the themes constructed in previous phases were refined by assigning them more precise names and clarifying their definitions.

6. Results

6.1 External determinants that placed the adoption of VET as a priority on the central, Basque and Andalusian government's agenda

The European Union, its policies and its dissemination agenda as the main reason for the start of the adoption of dual VET at central and Andalusian level.

Central and Andalusian actors identify the EU as the fundamental catalyst for initiating the adoption of dual VET, emphasizing its role in fostering cross-national attraction. This perspective, however, is not reflected in the Basque Country context, highlighting a divergence in recognizing the EU's influence. Therefore, only central and Andalusian actors acknowledge the EU as the primary promoter of dual VET adoption, while the Basque Country positions itself on an equal footing with the EU in terms of VET credibility and authority.

It comes from EU; they are EU recommendations, etc. In other words, EU is the whole reason for what we will have. One hundred per cent, there is not a 95%, there is not a 1% Spanish decision; it is all the recommendations, indications and destination of funds from Europe: 'change the VET model because I am giving you to finance this model'. (ME2)

What I think is that it is the other way around. The Basque VET model is being considered very much in Europe. It is considered one of the models of excellence at the European level and is used as a reference for developing initiatives throughout Europe. (TU-BQ)

In this context, Central and Andalusian actors identify the EU as the main precursor of the discourse advocating for the adoption of dual VET based on central European models and the rejection of school-based systems.

And then, well, with this unemployment data, the Commission makes the analyses and says: 'Hey, you are doing badly with the issue of young people and yet those countries that have these dual VET models are doing much better'. Hence, the European bodies promoted these reforms: 'Hey, you have to start reforming your things because they are not working, so look over central Europe'. (TU-C)

Specifically, the role attributed to the EU in the origin of the process revolves around the influence exerted on Spanish actors by the EU's advocacy for dual VET. In this regard, it is noteworthy that actors highlight in their discourses the influence exerted by five specific

categories of dissemination activities: EU recommendations resulting from the Copenhagen Process; the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEA) (Council of the European Union, 2018); Peer Learning Activities among policymakers of Member States; the creation of the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA); and especially, grants and subsidies.

EU recommendations and declarations under the Copenhagen Process have promoted the introduction of work-based learning, preferably through apprenticeships, and a cooperative governance model for VET in each Member State (see Martínez-Izquierdo and Torres Sánchez (2022) and Psifidou and Ranieri, (2020)).

I believe the influence of the EU is very significant because there are several declarations, particularly the Riga Declaration, in which the European Commission effectively pushes the entire system to ensure that companies are more involved in VET. (VC-C)

The most frequently cited recommendation by Spanish actors is the EFQEA (Council of the European Union, 2018). This framework for apprenticeship training includes twenty-two quality criteria for dual VET, grouped into seven categories.

EU conducted its analysis and stated: "These are the 21 criteria that any country must have for the apprenticeship system, that is, for dual VET". Based on these 21 criteria, we have been analyzing and observing. (F1)

Peer learning is cited by the Ministry of Education representative, who states that 'all EU agencies have promoted dual VET through Peer Learning Activities (PLAs), which we refer to, attended by different Ministry representatives' (ME2). These learning and exchange processes primarily occur within ECAVET, Euro Guidance, Pale, and CEDEFOP. During various mutual learning sessions, each state reviews other models based on EU priorities and recommendations, eventually issuing individual recommendations encouraging a degree of homogeneity. According to the Ministry representative, Germany holds significant influence within these European institutions, causing the action lines to lean towards their VET model.

Regarding the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA), launched in 2013 by European social partners, the European Commission, and the Council of the European Union (European Commission et al., 2013), it is the private actors—such as business confederations and foundations—who most notably highlight the crucial role this European alliance played during the adoption process in Spain and their interactions with it.

Finally, interviewees highlight EU funding initiatives has been very decisive and the most important driving factor for the adoption of dual VET, including financing for disseminating dual VET, incorporating companies into VET systems, implementing dual projects, and conducting research.

And once everything has been said and our basis established, what was decisive? The decisive factor was what applied to all of Europe: the EU funds VET. If I finance, I decide the model. (RME-A)

These European funding initiatives for VET are highlighted by the European Commission in the European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience (European Commission, 2020) which emphasizes the use of Next Generation funds for national

reskilling and upskilling plans. The Commission lists funding sources like the European Social Fund, Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Youth Guarantee Programme and InvestEU, noting increased budgets through a €800 billion recovery instrument. Recommendations for receiving these funds include expanding dual VET, incentivizing SME participation through direct grants, investing in company training networks, and promoting cooperative governance of the VET system.

Not from an isolated point, but from many, the EU has been saying to the Member States: 'We are going to work on this, and now I am going to take out projects to finance certain activities'. The eligibility of these projects is conditional, and they have been funding activities and projects for a long time to create that breeding ground for dual VET adoption. (ME2)

From a theoretical perspective, when evaluating the voluntariness of this dual VET adoption process in terms of the influence of international organizations, specifically the EU, conditioning the funding of national and regional VET projects on their duality is a clear example of a policy negotiated under constraint (Phillips and Ochs, 2004). In Spain, with structural problems and a deficit triggered by the 2008 crisis, public funds to finance the VET system were scarce. Therefore, this EU funding, although complementary to the ordinary financing of the Spanish state, served as an effective pressure measure.

Apart from the funding, the EU's influence on the decision-making extended further through 'long-term persuasion exercises' (Stone, 2012: 491), as evidenced by the number and variety of activities reported by the actors. This 'diffusion' (Perry and Tor, 2008) of dual VET paved the way for subsequent deliberate lesson-drawing, leading to incremental forms of education policy transfer. In this context, the EU promoted dual VET to central and regional VET decision-makers through its activities, both before and alongside any formal intention to adopt it, thereby facilitating a process of first-order learning (Perry and Tor, 2008). This type of learning influenced the decision-making processes at the central, Andalusian, and Basque levels. It is worth noting that despite contrary assertions from Basque actors on EU influence, members from their sphere refer to having been in contact with EU texts and the EAfA, making them participants in this 'first-order learning', which is often 'unintentional and spontaneous, especially on the receiving end' (Perry and Tor, 2008: 519)

However, the policy transfer process in both the central level and Andalusia cannot be situated entirely at the point of 'negotiated under constraint' (Phillips and Ochs, 2004) due to the absence of a hierarchical relationship in education between the EU and Spain. The funding and the Open Method of Coordination by which the Member States try to harmonize their VET systems (Cort, 2009) are elements of influence, but they lack any natural hierarchy for decision-making in Spanish VET and do not entail any direct dependence for the survival of the system itself. Therefore, in the case of Andalusia and the central level, this transfer process must be placed within the spectrum of voluntariness (Phillips and Ochs, 2004), close to 'negotiated under constraint' but also near 'borrowed purposefully.' This indicates that, despite significant EU influence, the transfer was ultimately optional and voluntary. This spectrum of voluntariness has nuances in the Basque case, as will be elaborated upon in the following section.

Lastly, it is important to highlight that the EU is the only transnational organization whose influence in this process is explicitly recognized in the actors' discourses. Other foreign entities,

such as German public agencies or organizations are mentioned only in a negative anecdote that took place during the decision-making phase of the Andalusian process. In this instance, the representative from the Andalusian Regional Ministry of Education described a confrontation with the German Embassy, which attempted to offer training in the German dual VET system for Andalusian youth already graduated without recognizing the vocational training these students had already received within the Andalusian educational system.

I believe Germany took advantage of the high unemployment due to the economic crisis to offer dual training placements in their VET system. In Andalusia, I met with the person responsible from the German Embassy. I said, 'Okay, but you need to recognize the vocational training they've already received here,' and they responded, 'No, I will not recognize any of the training given here.' So, I said we wouldn't sign an agreement because the students had already acquired this training theoretically. (RME-A)

The differentiated nature of the Basque adoption process: from business interest to shared initiative.

As indicated in the previous section, Basque actors deny that the EU had a direct influence on their decision to adopt dual VET. In this case, the discourses identify the Basque business sector as the primary initial driver of dual VET adoption through pilot programs (*Ikasi eta lan*) in the 2007-2008 academic year.

The dual system in 2008 came about at the initiative of companies. It was not something that the law or the government introduced but the other way around. Companies knocked on the Government's door and said, 'Hey, please, let us start with things like *Ikasi eta lan*'. (EC-BQ)

On its part, the broader adoption that began in 2012 with the program '*Hezibi*' was driven by the shared conviction of the Basque Regional Ministry of Education and the business community.

I must say that 2012 was a terrible year for us. Companies needed students to arrive with 80% of the knowledge perfectly acquired and then 20% for the company to impart its culture and way of working. So, we started Dual VET as a proper modality. (RME-BQ)

However, attending to the discourses of the Basque interviewees, it cannot be concluded that the transfer of the dual VET policy to the Basque Country, even as a pioneering region, responded exclusively to 'borrowed purposefully' (Phillips and Ochs, 2004). The diffusion of dual VET by the EU and its funding tend to be processes that are 'unintentional and spontaneous, especially on the receiving end' (Perry and Tor, 2008: 519). This, combined with the initiation of pilot programs due to pressure from the business sector, places the transfer of dual VET in the Basque Country in the area of the spectrum between 'negotiated under constraint' and 'borrowed purposefully' (Phillips and Ochs, 2004). Still, the second phase of the adoption should be located at a point closer to 'borrowed purposefully' than the Basque first phase or the central level and Andalusian adoption, given that *Hezibi* aligns with the Basque government's long-term development strategy. This demonstrates that the typology and intentionality of the transfer evolve and are not static throughout the entire education policy transfer process.

Royal Decree 1529/2012 and the pioneering Autonomous Communities as an incentive for Andalusia

In the discourses of Andalusian actors, whose Autonomous Community began adopting dual VET following the approval of Royal Decree 1529/2012, central state regulations are considered a determining factor. These regulations are articulated as key incentives through direct and indirect mentions. The representative of the EC-A is categorical, stating that dual VET was implemented following the 2012 Labor Reform and changes in temporary contracts (Law 3/2012). Similarly, the representative of the Andalusian Regional Ministry of Education sees Royal Decree 1529/2012 as providing the legal guarantee for implementing dual VET, ensuring no administrative legalities were breached.

It was decisive because that Royal Decree allowed us to do so. It was decisive simply because it allowed us to do so: it gave us the protection or the legal cover provided by the regulation. It was not a spur, it was not a fuse, it was not something that generated, but it was something that protected. (RME-A)

Indirect mentions highlight that the development of dual VET in other Autonomous Communities also relied on Royal Decree 1529/2012. The Andalusian Regional Ministry of Education noted that seeing other communities, like the Basque Country with its *Hezib* program from 2012 and Madrid's 16 dual VET cycles in 2013, motivated Andalusia to initiate its own dual VET projects as a preliminary step to creating a model comparable to bilingual or semi-presential modalities.

There was already a bilingual modality, a distance modality, a semi-presential modality, an ordinary modality, and my boss said: 'Hey, in other Autonomous Communities, they are starting to do projects in alternance, but not even as a modality. Let us try this modality and see how it goes'. (RME-A)

These assertions corroborate the placement of the adoption of dual VET in Andalusia at a point between 'negotiated under constraint' and 'borrowed purposefully' (Phillips and Ochs, 2004). Despite EU influence and economic pressure, and given the non-compulsory nature of the dual system established by Royal Decree 1529/2012, no hierarchical or legislative obligation forced the autonomous government to implement duality. Therefore, adoption was ultimately a local decision. However, external pressures from the EU, the central government, and the desire not to lag behind other Autonomous Communities position the nature of decision-making in Andalusia within a spectrum of voluntariness that is also close to 'negotiated under constraint' (Phillips and Ochs, 2004).

6.2 Dual VET initial policy making at the Autonomous Communities: the concrete adoption of dual VET in Spain

Inadequate legal basis at central level which hindered decision-making at the Autonomous Communities: Royal Decree 1529/2012 as a 'quick fix'

At the central level, Royal Decree 1529/2012 was approved when the government had not even been in office for a year and was imposed without deliberation by the absolute parliamentary majority of the governing party, breaking the previous consensus and lacking the necessary reflection and social dialogue. This Royal Decree did not require the adoption of dual VET across the different Autonomous Communities; instead, it established a general framework for

dual training. The key aspects regulated by this decree include the mandate that at least 33% of the program's training hours be carried out in collaboration with companies, and the provision of a legal framework allowing for the hiring of apprentices through training contracts.

This general framework has led to a situation in Spain where, throughout the period analyzed, we could not speak of a single type of dual VET system. Instead, each Autonomous Community developed its own specific regulations concerning aspects such as the mandatory nature of contracts, the alternation between different training sites, access methods, and even remuneration (see Consejo Económico y Social (2023)).

In this context, all actors argue that Royal Decree 1529/2012 was inadequate and even incomprehensible. Central level, Andalusian, and Basque actors converge in their criticism of several aspects as its lack of adaptation to reality, the absence of reflection and consensus in approving this change or the insufficient regulation of certain aspects, which led to a situation where anything could be labeled as dual.

We were surprised by this way of establishing a new model that substantially modified the previous one. Moreover, by using a Royal Decree, a modality was created that left the field open for each Autonomous Community to create, shall we say, their own model. (VC-C)

This approach taken by the central government during the initial phase of the process aligns with what Perry and Tor (2008) classify as "uninformed transfer," characterized by minimal or no actual learning and a blind emulation of dual VET. According to Phillips and Ochs (2003), this type of policy decision corresponds to a 'quick fix' due to the lack of proper prior reflection on its appropriateness and the absence of any serious social dialogue before its approval.

Constructing realistic decision-making: Basque and Andalusian stakeholders investigated the reality of Dual VET to facilitate its sustainable adoption in their regions.

Although all the actors interviewed agree on the impossibility of directly replicating foreign models, they argue that it was necessary to explore these models to gather ideas for developing local versions.

Logically you look at models already established in other countries, look and discard, look and discard again and so on, and then you build your own model, at least your own approach according to your particularities. (VC-BQ)

The discourses emphasize a widespread lack of detailed knowledge about dual VET among most actors during the early stages of its adoption. This gap in understanding applied not only to the German system, which dominated perceptions, but also to dual VET models in other countries (Martín-Artiles et al., 2019), beyond a basic awareness of their existence.

The first thing I had to do... Because, of course, I had no idea what dual VET meant, and nobody in Andalusia knew about it... So, to create a model, you had to start from something. The first thing I had to do was an exploratory phase (of the dual models). (RME-A)

At this initial stage of the adoption process, actors were trained on successful dual VET models in a lesson-drawing process close to third-level learning (Perry and Tor, 2008). In this regard, the countries explicitly mentioned in the interventions related to this type of training include

Germany, Australia, Austria, Denmark, Canada, France, New Zealand, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. Thus, it becomes evident that the list of analyzed and studied models not only comprises traditional, predominant, and well-established dual VET models (e.g., Germany, Switzerland, Austria) but also includes dual models that are still minority and of recent adoption (e.g., Portugal, France). Among all, training on the dual VET system in Germany is the most prevalent, explicitly featured in the discourses of all actors examined in this study. On a secondary level, learning about the dual models of Austria, Switzerland, and France is explicitly referenced, though to a lesser extent than the German model. Notably, the representatives of the Andalusian Regional Ministry of Education and the Basque Vice-Ministry of VET, who are the key authorities responsible for implementing dual VET in their respective Autonomous Communities, have studied the broadest range of dual VET models.

The set of actors primarily mentions learning activities such as learning journeys, systematic reading and analysis of the role distribution and structure of these dual VET systems, and face-to-face or online exchanges with peers from those countries.

As happens in any issue, we need to pay attention, learn, and exchange ideas... and that is what we did: read a bit, and learn from our colleagues... Well, find out what was being done in some places and others. (F1)

I do know a bit more about the dual model because I had the opportunity to participate in a study visit in 2013. We were a group of social partners and trainers with the German Embassy, and they invited certain people who were working in... We were not working in dual VET because they set this up precisely to get to know it. (EC-A)

As this section demonstrates, in contrast to the central level during the initial adoption period, decision-makers in Andalusia and the Basque Country did not engage in "quick-fix decisions" (Phillips and Ochs, 2003) or "uninformed transfer" (Perry and Tor, 2008) at any stage of the adoption process. Spain's decentralisation of education is again crucial for the analysis, as the Autonomous Communities must address the regional and specific realities and demands of their education systems on a daily basis. In this regard, Andalusia and the Basque Country followed a similar progression in their learning approach. Both regions established dual VET through two methods: by experimenting with pilot programs (see following section) and by initially engaging in self-training activities on successful models. These processes are manifestations of second-order learning in an informed transfer (Perry and Tor, 2008) and realistic decision-making (Phillips and Ochs, 2003).

Dual VET pilot projects as first steps in the Basque Country and Andalusia

The Andalusian Regional Ministry of Education and the Basque Country's Regional Vice-Ministry of VET developed pilot projects for dual VET in specific centres and companies with the objective of gaining a deeper understanding of the details of this training modality before legislating its establishment as a formal modality.

It was like a test; it was trial and error... It was not a quality model; it was not something very systematic: 'We are going to choose several centres [...] in which we are going to try a model out'. Furthermore, the projects were experimental projects, without the centre having to do anything more than follow the instructions of the Regional Ministry. (RME-A)

In the case of the Basque Country, this pilot program was implemented under the name *Ikasi eta Lan* (learn and work) and was a pioneer at the national level. Its main objective was to meet the needs of certain Basque companies that were struggling to find qualified personnel. It is worth noting that, in a later stage during the implementation of the subsequent regulation on dual VET programs in the Basque Country, the *Hezibi* program in 2012, the first academic year of this program was also conceptualized as an experimental and learning year. Both programs, whose foundations were established before Royal Decree 1529/2012, provided flexibility in the minimum number of hours of in-company training and aimed to establish quality and symbiotic relationships, emphasizing quality over quantity.

In Andalusia, the Regional Ministry of Education took the initiative to select centres that had favorable interactions with the business community. The objective of this selection process was to launch pilot projects for dual VET during the 2013-14 academic year. This selection was carried out through the Order of June 21, 2013, which called for experimental projects in public education centres offering VET programs in collaboration with companies and entities during the 2013-2014 academic year (Consejería de Educación, 2013). According to the representative of the Andalusian Regional Ministry of Education, these pilot projects were conceived as a 'trial, a test-and-learn process' (RME-A) in a wide variety of fields to determine if their effectiveness varied from one to another.

We are going to select several centres, 12 centres in which it was going to be tested. We are going to test the dual VET model (then still called 'in alternance') as an additional modality" (RME-A).

As indicated in the previous section, these pilot programs are part of a learning process that manifests as second-order learning within an informed education policy transfer (Perry and Tor, 2008) and is characterized by realistic decision-making (Phillips and Ochs, 2003). However, in the Andalusian case, this realistic and rational decision-making is somewhat influenced by the minimum requirement, set by Royal Decree 1529/2012, that 33% of training hours must take place within a company.

Social dialogue as a common yet differentiated tool for adoption in Andalusia and the Basque Country

However, the actors from Andalusia and the Basque Country emphasize the importance of social dialogue in shaping their respective regulations for the dual VET modality. Yet, differences between the two Autonomous Communities reappear, particularly in how they conceptualize social dialogue as a tool for adapting to local needs.

Basque actors stress the climate of dialogue and collaboration fostered throughout the regulation process, attributing this to the concessions and efforts made by all parties to overcome discrepancies and misgivings. The social dialogue on dual VET involved various stakeholders, including government representatives, particularly from the Vice-Ministry of VET of the Basque Country, business representatives, primarily through the Basque Business Confederation (Confebask), non-nationalist union representatives such as CCOO Euskadi and UGT Euskadi, and associations of VET centres, mainly Ikaslan and Hetel.

So it was trust, mainly, which led us to a commitment from all parties (companies, labour unions and VET centres) to approve this model to see if it was really along the lines that we all wanted. (RME-BQ)

There is much previous work before legislation is passed in the Basque Country [...] In this area, the opinion of the companies is usually considered, as are we as their representatives. (EC-BQ)

Mainly, these contacts and negotiations occurred within the Basque VET Council, where all social dialogue actors are represented. Basque actors acknowledge that, despite the consultative nature of the council, it played a quasibinding role, with numerous formal exchanges and debates conducted to advance the adoption of dual VET.

Within the Basque VET Council we had many debates and discussions there, important discussions, but all very proactive and positive. The goal was to reach an agreement, and when everyone is trying to reach an agreement, you inevitably reach one. Of course, compromises are necessary, but we reached a consensus. (RME-BQ)

Despite the effective functioning of the VET Council, Basque actors highlight that social dialogue in the Basque Country extended beyond this body. It encompassed working groups, direct interactions among network participants such as employers and trade unions, and bilateral meetings with representatives from the Regional Vice-Ministry of VET to address and resolve disagreements. The Basque union representative concludes that the key to the entire process was that different stakeholders were able to sit down and talk 'in more informal settings at certain times' (TU-BQ).

Then, a lot of bilateral meetings. I had to talk to the heads of companies and trade unions, addressing specific issues that can be better resolved bilaterally than in a group. (RME-BQ)

Lastly, the representative of the Basque business confederation indicates that throughout the process, there was a working group on dual VET consisting of a representative from the Vice-Ministry of VET, representatives from Basque employers' confederation, and VET centres. According to this spokesperson, for example, the group conducted in-depth analyses of various dual VET regulations.

It is worth noting that this intense social dialogue led to the creation of the final law in the first phase of dual VET adoption in the Basque Country: Decree 83/2015 of June 2, which established Dual VET in an Alternance System in the Basque Autonomous Community (Viceconsejería de Formación Profesional del Gobierno vasco, 2015). Among its regulations, it specifies that for a program to qualify as dual, the in-company training must account for at least 40% of the total duration of the training cycle in the standard regimen, and the apprentice's status must be formalized through a scholarship or contract.

In Andalusia, mentions of social dialogue in the creation of the dual VET model are almost non-existent, and the few that do exist indicate an unsystematic and discontinuous dialogue, deemed insufficient even by the Andalusian confederation of employers. Andalusian actors consistently note that both the Order regulating the initial experimental pilot projects for training cycles in collaboration with companies and entities (Consejería de Educación, 2013) and the subsequent Orders for Alternance Training Projects (from 2015, dual VET) (e.g., Consejería de Educación, Cultura y Deporte (2016)) were unilaterally developed by the Andalusian Regional Ministry of Education.

According to the representative of the Andalusian employers' confederation, social dialogue at the executive level in Andalusia has been almost nonexistent and, at best, intermittent, primarily limited to consultations with the Andalusian VET Council. As previously noted, this regional advisory council includes representatives from the autonomous government, primarily from the Andalusian Regional Ministry of Education, business representatives mainly from the Confederation of Andalusian Entrepreneurs (CEA), and regional union representatives such as CCOO Andalucía and UGT Andalucía. However, the representative of the Andalusian Employers Confederation also emphasizes that this body has often been overlooked and even sidelined. These assertions align with those of the Andalusian Regional Ministry of Education representative, who notes that the Andalusian Regional Ministry entrusted him personally with the responsibility of constructing the model he deemed most suitable for Andalusia.

Nonetheless, the Andalusian Regional Ministry of Education recognized the importance of social dialogue and collaborative policy development. According to its representative, a model emphasizing both flexibility and rigor was designed through individual projects. These projects were governed by adaptable regulations, which allowed specific details to be shaped through local social dialogue between VET centres and the surrounding businesses. This approach made social dialogue more prominent at the local level. The Andalusian Regional Ministry of Education believes that by promoting flexible projects, local social dialogue between specific VET centres, nearby businesses, and, in certain cases, local municipalities was encouraged, leading to programs tailored to their specific local contexts. This prevented the creation of a rigid, one-size-fits-all model that would not suit the diverse territorial and sectoral realities of Andalusia. Within this framework of great flexibility, one of the fundamental aspects emphasized by these regulatory orders for dual VET in Andalusia was that they must include a minimum of 33% of the training hours of the program with the participation of a company or entity, and that a contract was not necessary, with remuneration being prohibited.

The Andalusian Employers' Confederation emphasizes the flexibility of this model, which is grounded in dialogue and cooperation between centres and businesses in developing local projects, as a key positive aspect. According to its representative, 'Andalusia can be somewhat proud of how it implemented the model' (EC-A). The representative praised the model's lack of restrictive specifications and the autonomy granted to VET centres and local businesses, highlighting the Regional Ministry of Education's flexible approach that effectively involved businesses and acknowledged Andalusia's reality of predominantly small SMEs.

It is worth noting that the Andalusian Regional Ministry of Education always considered these orders as temporary measures, pending the more precise definition of VET regulations at the national level (Consejería de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2016: 1).

From a theoretical perspective, the statements of the Andalusian and Basque actors indicate that both dual VET models were created with social dialogue as the primary tool for addressing difficulties and challenges in transfer detected by regional VET networks. Therefore, decision-making in both Autonomous Communities aligns with Phillips and Ochs's (2003) category of 'realistic decisions' and 'informed transfer'. While the path toward realistic decision-making differed between the two Autonomous Communities, both approaches ultimately represented different routes to the same goal: adapting to the real needs of local stakeholders. Therefore, according to Perry and Tor (2008), both processes can be categorized as examples of 'third-order learning,' as they involve collaborative learning efforts within local sociopolitical

networks to extend previously pilot projects that exemplified ‘lesson-drawing’ by ‘second-order learning’.

7. Discussion and conclusion

Regarding the first research question (What was the degree of voluntariness in the origins of the process of transferring dual VET to Spain?), this analysis concludes that the adoption of dual VET at the central, Andalusian, and Basque levels aligns, within the spectrum of voluntariness of policy transfer (Phillips and Ochs, 2004), with a position between ‘negotiated under constraint’ and ‘borrowed purposefully’. However, they not all occupy the same exactly point on this section of the spectrum. In this case, central-level actors identify the EU as the sole external pressure that led to the adoption of dual VET. This claim is consistent with evidence from adoption processes initiated by other south EU countries such as Greece, Italy, and Portugal, which, like Spain, faced economic difficulties and received EU aid following the Great Recession that began in 2008. However, studies conclude that Greece, and Portugal began their VET reforms compelled by the signing of the financial agreement memorandum (Baumann and Vossiek, 2022; Sanz de Miguel et al., 2022), whereas Spanish actors do not acknowledge such an agreement. Instead, Andalusian and central actors mention the influence of the EU only through soft diffusion tools leading to first-order learning (Perry and Tor, 2008) such as recommendations, subsidies, the creation of alliances, and joint working groups among VET ministries of various member countries. It is noteworthy that in Spain’s case, the EU bailout was limited to the banking sector, and the memorandum primarily addressed financial sector issues (see Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación, (2012)). The adoption process at the central level in Spain has more parallels with that of Italy where no memorandum was signed and whose smooth submission to the EU was disguised under the term of ‘internationalization’ (Baumann and Vossiek, 2022).

Moreover, Andalusia faces additional pressures beyond those from the EU, including the enactment of Royal Decree 1529/2012 and the concern of falling behind other Autonomous Communities that had already initiated the adoption process. However, it is challenging to engage in a meaningful discussion of these pressures, as there is a lack of empirical evidence or theoretical frameworks addressing this reality in decentralized states concerning educational competencies. Conversely, Basque stakeholders acknowledge only regional business pressures, downplaying the influence of the broader EU agenda and central regulations as key factors in initiating or advancing the adoption process. Notably, examples of international adoption initiatives by the business sector include programs by German companies abroad, like in the USA (Gessler, 2017), or reforms co-led by local businesses, governments, and German actors, as in Mexico (Vogelsang et al., 2022).

Additionally, it is important to note that the interviewed actors deny any influence from public agencies of Central European countries in the process. This claim contrasts with the situation in other European countries, such as Greece (Baumann and Vossiek, 2022), an EU member, and Serbia (Langthaler and Top, 2023), a candidate for EU membership. Particularly noteworthy is the confrontation with the German embassy highlighted by the representative of the Andalusian Regional Ministry of Education. This disparity with Greece can be justified by Germany’s constant presence and advisory role in the reform processes outlined in the economic bailout memorandum. The situation in Serbia can be explained as part of the development cooperation policy of Central European countries and the Serbian interest in pleasing the EU and meeting its accession requirements (Fontdevila et al., 2022).

Addressing the other two research questions (What form of education policy transfer has occurred in Spain? What kinds of political decisions have been made throughout the transfer process?), the conclusions must be divided into two levels: central and regional. Regarding policy transfer at the Spanish central level, the adoption begun as 'uninformed' (Perry and Tor, 2008) and as the result of 'quick-fix decisions' (Phillips and Ochs, 2003). Significantly, the informants of this study conclude that in Spain, Royal Decree 1529/2012 was adopted without reflection or consensus among key stakeholders, an idea reinforced by other research (Echeverría, 2016; Moldes-Farelo and Molina-García, 2020). However, this study has gathered evidence of systematic analyses conducted at later stages of established dual VET models, as well as an increase in social dialogue by the Ministry of Education (central level) to develop feasible ideas for the Spanish context, following the approval of Royal Decree 1529/2012 and during the transition toward a new VET law. This demonstrates that actors involved in policy transfer processes can evolve toward "informed transfer" once formal adoption has taken place. Thus, what initially began as "uninformed transfer" can progress into "informed transfer" through second- or third-order learning activities (Perry and Tor, 2008).

This absence of social dialogue at the central level during the approval of these national regulations mirrors the experiences observed in the initial phase of dual VET adoption in Portugal, Greece, and Italy (Baumann and Vossiek, 2022; Sanz de Miguel et al., 2022). Research in these Member States suggests that the lack of social dialogue arose from the urgency imposed by the EU, with regulatory aspects primarily negotiated with this external interlocutor, effectively marginalizing national social actors involved in VET (Baumann and Vossiek, 2022; Sanz de Miguel et al., 2022). However, both countries, similar to Spain at the central level, have recently made efforts to overcome this situation and move towards cooperative governance of the dual VET system at all levels (Sanz de Miguel et al., 2022: 32–35). While these findings help explain the criticized approval of Royal Decree 1529/2012 at the central level, they become less relevant when analyzing regional processes due to the decentralized nature of the Spanish state in VET.

Unlike at the central level, this study concludes that decision-making in Andalusia and the Basque Country has been pragmatic and grounded in realistic considerations (Phillips and Ochs, 2003) from the outset, evolving through second- to third-order learning (Perry and Tor, 2008). Spain's educational decentralization emerges as one of the key factors behind this approach, as each Autonomous Community must consistently address the specific demands and circumstances of its educational system. Moreover, both Andalusia and the Basque Country have followed a similar learning trajectory in policy elaboration. Initially, they studied foreign models – Germany, Australia, Austria, Denmark, Canada, France, New Zealand, Portugal, and the UK- in search of inspiration and a deeper understanding of dual VET. It is notable that the models explicitly referenced in these training interventions include not only the well-established dual VET systems of Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, but also those from France or Portugal. This indicates a broad scope of analyzed models, although the German dual VET system is the most frequently cited as in the rest of the world (Valiente et al., 2020; Vogelsang et al., 2022). Furthermore, both Autonomous Communities implemented dual VET through pilot programs, aligning with the approaches taken by Sweden, Greece, Italy, and, outside the EU, Mexico, in their progress toward greater duality (Andersson et al., 2015; Baumann and Vossiek, 2022; Rustico et al., 2020; Valiente et al., 2020). These efforts exemplify second-order learning within an informed transfer framework (Perry and Tor, 2008) and demonstrate realistic decision-making (Phillips and Ochs, 2003). However, in Andalusia,

the decision-making process, while pragmatic, was somewhat influenced by the requirement established in Royal Decree 1529/2012, which mandated that at least 33% of training hours take place in the workplace before the regional pilot programs were fully developed.

This study also concludes that in the later stages of adoption, actors from both Andalusia and the Basque Country report third-order learning (Perry and Tor, 2008). Statements from these actors reveal that the dual VET models in both regions were developed using social dialogue as the primary tool to address challenges and obstacles identified by regional VET networks. Although similar outcomes were achieved, the pathways to realistic decision-making diverged between the two Autonomous Communities. In the Basque Country, the regulatory process was characterized by active and ongoing social dialogue at all levels, from executive to local. In contrast, while Andalusian regulations were largely driven unilaterally by the Regional Ministry of Education at the executive level, they allowed local VET institutions and businesses to collaboratively develop context-specific projects, indicating another form of social dialogue.

From a broader perspective, this research not only sheds light on the international transfer of dual VET but also delves into critical aspects of decision-making, policy formulation, and the voluntariness of education policy transfer processes (Phillips and Ochs, 2003, 2004). It further explores the role of international organizations in these processes, contributing to ongoing debates in the field of comparative education (see Eta (2015) and Jakobi (2012)). Additionally, the conclusions of this study offer valuable evidence for developing a theoretical and analytical framework specifically designed for education policy transfer in decentralized states.

For the Spanish case, and in order to continue reporting international evidence on the decision-making phase (Phillips and Ochs, 2003) future research should delve deeper into how decision-making was developed by the main VET actors in the other Autonomous Communities. Future research should also focus on other stages of education policy transfer, such as internalization (Phillips and Ochs, 2003).

Declarations and ethics statements

This research has been positively evaluated and authorised by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of X under the favourable report X.

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