

Article

Enhancing Refugee Youth Integration Through Vocational Education and Training: Policy Recommendations for Education and Labour

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Abstract

Vocational education and training are essential for the integration of refugee youth into Greek society. Therefore, it seems that there is an urgent need for the Greek Ministry of Education and Religion and for the Ministry of Labour (herewith, Greek Ministries of Education and Labour) to redesign and adapt their strategies and practices to address the specific learning needs of refugee youth. The aim of this study is to explore the types of policies that the Ministries of Education and Labour should design, reform, and implement to increase the number of students attending vocational education and training in Greece. The researchers adopted a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Ten participants took part in the study: seven Refugee Education Coordinators based in camps across Greece, two experts from the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), and one academic specializing in adult education and serving as an EPAL Ambassador. The findings indicate that both Ministries of Education and Labour need to collaborate more closely in redesigning and implementing targeted policies for refugee students. These should include expanding reception classes in EPAS (vocational school) and EPAL (vocational high school) schools, reducing bureaucratic procedures, ensuring adequate staffing with trained teachers, and adopting simpler administrative processes.

Keywords: vocational education and training; refugee youth integration; inter-ministerial cooperation; educational policy reform; Greece



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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the European Union has become a refuge for millions of displaced people. More than 65 million individuals are currently seeking asylum or have been internally displaced, while the average duration of exile for a refugee is approximately 20 years ([UNESCO 2017](https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci15030152)). Between 2015 and 2018 alone, more than 3.9 million refugees registered as asylum seekers in European countries ([Jørgensen et al. 2021](https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci15030152)). In Greece, since the 1990s, due to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, migratory and refugee flows have increased significantly, reaching their peak in 2019, when 74,613 refugees arrived in the country, mainly from Afghanistan, Somalia, Palestine, Iraq, and Syria ([Karanikola et al. 2022](https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci15030152)).

However, according to [Heidenreich \(2016\)](#), refugees face an increased risk of long-term unemployment or engagement in informal, low-wage work. In light of this, and considering the increasingly multilingual and multicultural context of contemporary societies, official European discourse emphasizes the necessity of appropriate teaching resources and skills to address learners' goals and needs ([Karanikola and Panagiotopoulos 2023](#)). After all, education can enhance individuals' ability to understand and exercise their rights, ultimately facilitating their successful participation in community life ([UNESCO 2022](#)). In the same spirit, the European Commission supports educational initiatives and the exchange of good practices among member states. Its efforts focus on language assessment, the educational integration of refugees and unaccompanied minors, the evaluation of prior schooling and knowledge, the recognition of refugees' qualifications, and strategies for fostering linguistic and cultural diversity and social inclusion ([Karanikola and Palaiologou 2021](#); [Palaiologou and Prekate 2023b](#)).

The psychosocial well-being of refugee students constitutes a foundational element for their successful educational integration. Research conducted at refugee hospitality centres in Greece has demonstrated that supportive educational environments, combined with multicultural approaches and peer relationships, significantly enhance refugees' resilience and capacity to overcome trauma ([Nantsou et al. 2025](#); [Palaiologou and Prekate 2023b](#)). Moreover, friendship patterns among refugee children reveal the importance of social cohesion and belonging as prerequisites for educational engagement and long-term integration ([Palaiologou and Prekate 2023a](#)). These dimensions are particularly relevant when designing vocational pathways, as they underscore the need for holistic support structures that address not only academic and professional competencies but also emotional and social development.

In recent years, there has been considerable interest in promoting refugee post-compulsory education and vocational education and training in Greece. A review of the relevant literature indicates that the effective education of young refugees and migrants requires both host-country Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems and policy-makers ([Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs 2018](#)) and practitioners to recognize and support diverse approaches to language learning, to provide timely information about VET opportunities—also making use of technology (for example, the VET Voices application can make information seeking more engaging and personalized)—to strengthen coordination with civil society and host communities, and to amplify the voices of migrants and refugees themselves. In this way, significant barriers and challenges faced by young refugees during their participation in VET programs can be mitigated. In most cases, language constitutes the first and most prominent barrier to overcome, as most VET programs require at least a minimum level of language proficiency. Furthermore, learning gaps, deficiencies, cultural differences, and a sense of “otherness,” which may sometimes lead to prejudice and discrimination, represent major challenges even before training begins. Additional obstacles include financial and legal difficulties, as well as the need to build self-confidence and motivation ([Edwards 2023](#); [Hormova et al. 2023](#)).

Understanding refugee youths' career aspirations is equally critical for designing responsive VET policies. Research shows that refugee children hold diverse professional ambitions shaped by both their pre-migration experiences and their current context of displacement ([Palaiologou et al. 2024](#)). Vocational education systems must therefore be flexible enough to recognize prior learning, validate informal skills, and offer pathways aligned with refugees' own goals and capacities ([Koehler et al. 2022](#)). Furthermore, experiences from refugee hospitality centres highlight both promising practices and persistent challenges in creating inclusive educational spaces ([Palaiologou et al. 2022](#)), reinforcing the need for coordinated policy action at national and local levels.

This change is also reflected in the Greek VET system. Between 2018 and 2023, there has been a considerable increase in the number of foreign students enrolled in Vocational Apprenticeship Schools (EPA.S.), which are established under and belong to the Ministry of Labour. The rise in enrolments in EPA.S. can be attributed to social changes within Greek society and to the evolving structure of the labour market, which affects the entire workforce (Hormova et al. 2023). More specifically, these changes involve a shift from general education to VET for several reasons, such as language barriers, cultural mismatches, limited familiarity with institutional and school norms, and the desire for a smoother transition into employment (Hormova et al. 2023). At the same time, the continuous professional development of teachers in formal VET schools (EPAL) focuses on enhancing their knowledge and skills in collaborating with enterprises and apprentices. Equally important are peer-learning initiatives and the exchange of experiences among teachers who have already implemented work-based learning activities in previous years (Cedefop 2019).

In the following sections, this paper provides an in-depth discussion of the actions that the two main actors—the Greek Ministries of Education and Labour—should undertake to respond effectively to the new labour market conditions and to the evolving dynamics of Greek society.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Focus and Interview Design

The present study focuses on identifying effective strategies and policy actions that could be implemented by the Greek Ministries of Labour and Education to enhance refugee participation in the Greek VET system. The research aims to explore stakeholders' perspectives on the measures, reforms, and collaborative initiatives necessary to make VET more accessible, inclusive, and responsive to the educational and professional needs of young refugees. Within this framework, the study seeks to document and analyze suggestions from educational coordinators, policy experts, and institutional representatives on how the Greek educational system can strengthen refugees' engagement in vocational pathways and facilitate their smoother integration into the labour market.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question: "What actions could the Greek Ministries of Labour and Education take to increase the number of refugees participating in vocational education?" The interview questions were carefully designed in alignment with the research objectives and are as follows:

1. Do you think the cooperation between the Ministries of Labour and Education regarding refugee participation in VET and social integration is effective? Please provide specific examples to support your opinion.
2. Do you believe that the Greek VET system requires reform? Could you provide examples? What changes would you make if you had the authority to do so?
3. What characteristics should a newly established EU-wide relocation VET system have? On which principles should it be based?
4. In what ways could the exchange of knowledge and experiences among countries benefit member states in their efforts to achieve better and more meaningful vocational education and training?

2.2. Research Approach, Data Collection, and Instruments

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore participants' in-depth experiences, professional insights, and policy perspectives on strengthening refugee participation in VET. According to Creswell (2014) and Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative inquiry enables researchers to interpret complex social phenomena by uncovering the mean-

ings individuals assign to their experiences. Given the exploratory and human-centered nature of the research question, this approach was deemed most appropriate for capturing the contextual and institutional dimensions of refugee education in Greece.

Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were employed as the primary research instrument because they offer both structure and flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate freely while ensuring comparability across responses (Knott et al. 2022; Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). This format encouraged reflection, detailed examples, and critical viewpoints regarding inter-ministerial cooperation and policy reform.

The interview questions were chosen based on the existing literature. After studying a plethora of academic articles relative to the subject in research, the writers decided that there is more to be researched and written on refugee vocational education in Greece for children finishing compulsory education. Furthermore, two pilot interviews were conducted aiming to examine if the interview questions were clear, understandable and relative to the existing literature.

The duration of the interviews was approximately 30 to 40 min. The seven interviews concerning the Refugee Education Coordinators were conducted by phone and were all in Greek. Thus the researchers interpreted all sayings from Greek to English. The remaining three interviews taken from CEDEFOP (The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) members and the EPALE (Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe) Ambassador were questionnaires that were sent via email. Two questionnaires were in Greek, so again, the researchers interpreted the writings. One of the CEDEFOP interviewees is of Latvian origin, so the interview questionnaire was in English.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using Turboscribe. Each transcript was reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy and to capture contextual cues such as tone, pauses, and emphasis, which enrich the interpretive depth of qualitative data (Bryman 2016). Due to time constraints, three additional participants—two experts from CEDEFOP and one EPALE (electronic platform for adult learning in Europe) Ambassador—completed semi-structured questionnaires containing the same items as the interviews. This parallel method maintained methodological consistency while broadening participation. Collectively, these 10 sources provided rich empirical material combining both practice-based and policy-level perspectives on how the Greek Ministries of Labour and Education could enhance refugee inclusion in vocational pathways.

The qualitative data analysis was conducted by members of the research team with established expertise in qualitative methodology and thematic analysis. Specifically, the verbatim transcripts of the interviews and the open-ended questionnaire responses were initially analyzed by the two of the authors, who carried out independent first-cycle coding of the data. This stage followed the core principles of reflexive thematic analysis, with codes and preliminary themes developed inductively from the data rather than predefined a priori (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2012; Tsiolis 2018).

Afterwards, the initial coding frameworks were systematically compared and discussed by the two of the authors. All the authors contributed to the critical review and consolidation of themes. Discrepancies in interpretation were addressed through iterative discussion, continuous reference to the original data, and collective reflexive deliberation until analytic consensus was reached regarding theme boundaries, content, and coherence. This collaborative analytic process is consistent with established qualitative research practices that emphasize transparency, reflexivity, and shared interpretive responsibility (Bryman 2016; Creswell 2014; Nowell et al. 2017).

Formal statistical measures of inter-rater reliability were not applied, as such indices are not considered methodologically appropriate within the interpretive and reflexive approaches to the thematic analysis framework. Instead, rigor and trustworthiness were

ensured through independent analysis by multiple researchers, analytic triangulation, and reflexive team discussions, and sustained engagement with the empirical material (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Isari and Pourkos 2015; Tsiolis 2018). The involvement of multiple analysts and the structured consensus-building process enhanced the credibility, dependability, and transparency of the findings, in line with contemporary standards for qualitative research reporting (Bryman 2016; Creswell 2014).

2.3. *Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations*

The credibility and reliability of the study were ensured through methodological transparency and careful alignment between the research aims, data-collection tools, and analytical procedures. In qualitative research, reliability is achieved when data collection and interpretation remain coherent and replicable within similar contexts (Bryman 2016; Nowell et al. 2017). Two pilot interviews were conducted to assess the clarity and thematic relevance of the questions. Feedback from these sessions informed minor refinements to wording and sequencing, thereby strengthening the dependability of the final instrument.

The study demonstrates strong validity as it addresses an empirically documented educational gap—namely, the underrepresentation of refugees in VET. Previous research by Hunt (2024) confirmed the minimal levels of refugee participation in post-compulsory education in Greece, while Hormova et al. (2023), highlighted systemic barriers that hinder access and completion. Similarly, Simopoulos and Alexandridis (2019) emphasized that limited interaction between refugee and Greek students exacerbates both linguistic and motivational challenges. Moreover, studies examining refugee children’s psychosocial well-being and social integration in Greek educational settings (Palaiologou and Prekate 2023b) have underscored the importance of supportive institutional frameworks and trauma-informed pedagogy. By engaging key stakeholders directly, the present study contributes contextually grounded and empirically valid evidence on potential institutional and policy improvements.

All ethical standards governing research with human participants were strictly observed (Resnik 2020). Participation was voluntary, and each respondent received full information regarding the study’s purpose, scope, and confidentiality provisions before providing informed consent. Personal data were anonymized and securely stored. Ethical clearance procedures conformed to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association 2013). Upon completion, the researcher remained committed to disseminating the results transparently and responsibly within the academic and educational policy community.

2.4. *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, an approach well suited to identifying recurrent themes and constructing meaning from textual data (Stemler 2000; Vaismoradi et al. 2016). After transcription, each interview and questionnaire response was read several times to ensure familiarity with the material. Through iterative coding, inductive categories were developed directly from participants’ words and ideas, reflecting their perceptions of inter-ministerial cooperation, institutional barriers, and strategies for reform.

A thematic framework was subsequently developed by grouping related codes into broader analytical categories. Continuous comparison among codes, excerpts, and emerging themes ensured analytical coherence and minimized researcher bias (Nowell et al. 2017). The final themes were closely aligned with the overarching research question: “What actions can the Greek Ministries of Labour and Education take to increase the number of refugees participating in vocational education?” This alignment ensured that the interpretation remained grounded in empirical evidence and directly relevant to policy and practice.

2.5. Sampling and Participants

A heterogeneous purposive sampling strategy was employed to capture a diverse range of perspectives from multiple stakeholder groups. Such an approach, as [Robinson \(2014\)](#) argues, enriches qualitative inquiry by integrating voices from different institutional and professional contexts. The sample comprised 10 participants occupying key roles in the Greek and European VET landscape.

Seven participants were Refugee Education Coordinators (RECs), officially appointed by the Ministry of Education under Law 4547/2018 ([Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs 2018](#)). Their daily involvement in refugee schooling provided grounded insight into the operational realities and challenges of inclusive education. The remaining three participants were two CEDEFOP experts based in Thessaloniki and one EPAL Ambassador and university academic specializing in adult education and vocational policy. Their inclusion added a European dimension and policy-oriented perspective, fostering a holistic understanding of the issue across governance levels.

This balanced composition, combining field practitioners with international experts, enhanced both the credibility and transferability ([Lincoln and Guba 1985](#)) of the findings, ensuring a comprehensive view of how vocational education can become a more inclusive and effective pathway for refugee youth in Greece.

3. Results and Discussion

This section, arguably the most important and demanding part of the study, seeks to present and discuss the outcomes of the qualitative research. The analysis of the interview data followed the six-phase thematic analysis process proposed by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). After all interviews were completed, the data were categorized, and the results were systematically compiled. The following codes, which are presented in detail in the subsequent sections, emerged from this process.

3.1. Inter-Ministerial Cooperation: Perceptions and Realities

In this section of the study, participants were invited to share their views on whether the Ministries of Education and Labour cooperate effectively to promote refugee participation in Vocational Education and Training (VET). As shown in [Table 1](#), the majority of participants agreed that such cooperation is virtually non-existent. More specifically, they observed that the Ministry of Labour makes no substantial contribution to refugee vocational education. Several participants noted that, if meaningful collaboration did exist, the Ministry could play an active role in promoting EPAS schools as a suitable and attainable option for refugee learners. EPAS, being a less demanding and more practice-oriented form of vocational training, was considered an appropriate pathway for students with limited proficiency in the Greek language.

In contrast, Participants 3 and 4 acknowledged that the Ministry of Education has made noticeable efforts to support refugee students' participation in vocational education. Drawing on both the researcher's practicum experience and participants' observations, examples were provided of initiatives such as covering transportation costs for students living in refugee camps. Participant 4, for instance, mentioned that the Regional Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education ensures that buses and taxis are available to transport children to and from school. Given that many refugee camps are located far from educational facilities, this policy substantially reduces the financial burden on families and helps maintain regular school attendance. These transportation arrangements align with findings from refugee hospitality centres, where logistical support has been identified as a key enabler of consistent school participation ([Palaologou et al. 2022](#)).

Table 1. Cooperation between Ministries of Labour and Education.

Coding	Participants' Responses
Non-existent cooperation between the two ministries	P1: "I do not think there is any cooperation" P2: "We did not have any cooperation with ministry of Labor" P3: "I do not know if the two ministries cooperate" P5: "I believe, if there is any cooperation, it is not successful" P7: "In my opinion there is no cooperation" P8: "Both ministries diachronically state that they wish cooperation, but reality is far from harmonious cooperation"
Ministry of Education's contribution	P3: "The MoE does everything it can for these children. It offers everything" P4: "I believe the MoE does every possible effort"
Absence of political strategy and will Need for decentralization	P8: "Reality is far from ideal cooperation" P8: "The autonomy of local authorities could make the difference"

Finally, the importance of decentralization emerged as a recurring theme in this discussion. Participant 8 emphasized that "it would make the difference," underscoring the need for more flexible, locally tailored solutions. This suggestion aligns with the findings of [Semeia et al. \(2023\)](#), who argue that decentralization enhances problem-solving efficiency and enables faster, context-specific responses within educational systems.

3.2. Structural Reform of the Greek VET System

In this section of the findings, the researchers explore participants' views regarding whether the Greek Vocational Education and Training (VET) system requires reform and what specific areas should be improved (Table 2). The responses reflected a variety of perspectives and priorities. Participant 1, for instance, highlighted the need for better-trained teachers and more emphasis on intercultural communication. The same participant also suggested establishing reception classes in both EPAL and EPAS schools to support refugee students' linguistic and academic integration. Several participants proposed broader policy reforms, such as linking financial allowances to school attendance, providing economic incentives to encourage consistent participation, and appointing career advisors to guide refugee students toward realistic employment pathways. Such career guidance is essential, as research on refugee children's career aspirations indicates that young refugees hold diverse and ambitious professional goals that require structured support to be realized ([Palaiologou et al. 2024](#)).

Table 2. VET Reform Priorities.

Coding	Participants' Responses
Trained teachers	P1: "More trained teachers for refugees and more translators"
Expand reception classes	P1: "Reception classes in EPAL.S. and EPAS"
Better Ministry programming and organization	P4: "Effective programming and better organization from ministry of Education" P6: "Most of the ministry administrative staff does not want anything to change! Everything operates with a sense of irrationality in which there are no answers! In this irrationality we all try to create cracks in order to be able to exist. . . and those of us that wish to give answers and wish to exist"
Authority supervision and changes	P5: "Strictest supervision of underage work by the authorities"
Law change	P7: "Link allowances to presence at school"
Career advisors	P8: "Legislative interventions accompanied by financial incentives" P9: "Offer professional guidance"

Participants 4 and 6 further emphasized the necessity of transforming the bureaucratic mindset within the Ministry of Education. They argued that administrative procedures should become less complicated, more transparent, and more responsive to the actual needs of learners. It is widely recognized that Greek public services often function within a framework of excessive complexity, rigidity, and inefficiency, an approach that, according to the participants, undermines educational effectiveness. As one participant metaphorically described, the so-called “monster of bureaucracy” must be replaced by fast-track procedures that can deliver timely and practical solutions, ensuring a smoother educational experience for all students, including refugees.

These perspectives align with the observations of Hunt (2024), who underscores the urgency of reforming the Greek VET system to enhance refugee participation. In particular, Hunt points out that simplifying administrative processes and adopting targeted, flexible policies are crucial steps toward creating a more inclusive and efficient vocational education framework in Greece. Additionally, research from refugee hospitality centres has documented both effective practices and structural shortcomings in educational service delivery, reinforcing the need for systemic reform at both policy and operational levels (Palaologou et al. 2022).

3.3. Principles for a European VET Relocation System

According to Participant 5, language forms the very foundation of all types of integration. As he/she emphasizes, without adequate language support, any attempt at specialization or professional training becomes ineffective. Participant 2, on the other hand, highlighted the importance of connecting theory with practice, noting that such an approach facilitates faster and more meaningful professional learning. He/she also underlined the need to align vocational training programmes with the demands of local labour markets and to ensure that refugees’ prior qualifications are formally recognized at the European level (Table 3).

Table 3. Vocational Training and Relocation System Characteristics.

Coding	Participants’ Responses
Support linguistic skills	P5: “First language then internship—otherwise there is no integration”
Skills’ recognition in European level	P2: “To be recognized in the EU, so they could continue elsewhere”
Combination of theory and practice on vocational training	P2: “To be able to practice the profession and acquire useful skills”
Common EU curriculum and language	P2: “Common European curriculum and common language”
Designed based on students’ skills and needs	P5: “Take into consideration children’s skills and interests”
	P10: “Study the characteristics of the population it serves”
VET linked to businesses needs	P5: “VET follows a programme of economic development for example link VET to primary sector”
	P5: “Assess local needs in workforce”
Micro-credentials	P8: “Introduce micro-credentials”
Flexibility and customization	P8: “To adapt to the needs of the country and the refugees”

Building on this discussion, Participant 8 made an insightful contribution concerning the future design of a reformed European VET framework. He/she stressed the importance of introducing micro-credentials (MCs) as a means of increasing flexibility and accessibility. Micro-credentials are short, targeted learning programmes that certify the acquisition of specific skills or knowledge in a defined area. They can therefore serve as powerful tools for enabling refugee learners to gain practical, job-relevant competencies within

a limited timeframe, fostering both flexibility and motivation to continue their studies (Pouliou 2024).

In this regard, Participant 8 suggested that the Ministry of Education should seriously consider establishing a system of micro-credentials within Greek vocational education, thereby making it more adaptive to learners' diverse needs and more accessible to young refugees. This perspective resonates with the views of several researchers, most notably Hunt (2024) and Pouliou (2024), who emphasize that the flexibility inherent in micro-credentials represents a promising avenue for innovation and inclusivity in vocational education and training. Moreover, such flexible credentialing systems align with multi-cultural educational approaches that prioritize resilience-building and trauma-informed support for displaced learners (Nantsou et al. 2025).

3.4. Learning from European Best Practices

The fourth interview question focused on identifying ways in which European Union knowledge, experience, and best practices could benefit Greece in increasing refugee participation and completion rates in vocational education and training (Table 4). Participants 2, 5, 7, and 9 offered a range of valuable suggestions. They emphasized the need to adopt successful European models, including fast-track and transparent procedures for work permits, targeted increases in funding, and greater empowerment of local authorities to collaborate with housing agencies in securing appropriate accommodation for refugee families. According to these participants, providing stable housing would foster a sense of belonging, an essential prerequisite for a successful educational and vocational journey. This perspective resonates with Costa et al. (2021), who underline the importance of sharing knowledge and expertise across European contexts to strengthen integration outcomes.

Table 4. EU Practices and Applications in Greek VET.

Coding	Participants' Responses
Adoption of EU policies and practices	P2: "Adopt useful and effective practices which support refugees in completing VET, both theory and practice" P2: "Adopt policies of how EU countries support young refugees financially and educationally"
Make procedures fast	P9: "To apply the European targets that we co-sign" P2: "Fast track procedures on work permits" P7: "We should build a VET system which makes it easier for them (refugees) to stay here in Greece"
Increase level of social services	P2: "Increase the level of social services as in EU"
Language as a prerequisite	P9: "Through various work groups, counselling and support groups or forums" P5: "For example Germany invests a lot in the learning of the language and then VET follows, we should do the same"
Funding VET	P8: "Implementation of common VET programmes, exchanging good practices, utilization of European tools, benefit from European funding"
Connection of apprenticeship, internship and employment	P10: "In Germany someone who completes vocational training finds a job straight away"
Recognition of qualifications	P1: "Legislation of a practical examination in order to certify skills"
Holistic approach to integration	P9: "Like the Hlios programme which connects housing, allowance, apprenticeship and employment"
Change in mentality	P5: "In Greece we do not have respect for technical education"
Domestic barriers	P5: "We have to solve our own basic problems first"

Participants also pointed to the significant administrative difficulties associated with managing and organizing what the Greek Ministry of Education itself described in 2017 as a "fluid" and "heterogeneous" refugee population (Hunt 2024). They noted that the Euro-

pean Commission (EC), and particularly the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid office (ECHO), is the primary funding source for both formal and non-formal educational initiatives targeting refugees. However, participants expressed concerns that such funding is often unreliable, poorly coordinated, and ineffectively distributed, with limited oversight and accountability. They also noted that Greece is still recovering from a prolonged economic crisis and that the country's educational system has faced chronic underfunding for more than 15 years, conditions that inevitably limit the scope and consistency of refugee education initiatives.

Moreover, Participants 3 and 10 stressed the importance of linking apprenticeship programmes and internships directly to integration strategies, arguing that such measures effectively connect refugees with the labour market. Once again, the issue of qualification recognition emerged as a central concern, alongside calls for a holistic approach that integrates housing, financial support, apprenticeships, and employment opportunities. This position aligns with [Dragonas \(2021\)](#), who advocates for the adoption of comprehensive models of refugee integration encompassing educational, economic, and social dimensions. Similar holistic frameworks have been observed in refugee hospitality centres, where coordinated services addressing educational, psychosocial, and material needs have proven more effective in supporting long-term integration outcomes ([Denzin and Lincoln 2018](#); [Palaiologou et al. 2022](#)).

Another recurring theme among participants was the need for Greece to first address its domestic structural deficiencies before attempting to apply external European policies. They argued that basic administrative and educational challenges, such as bureaucratic rigidity, under-resourced schools, and lack of coordination, should be resolved at the national level to ensure that EU-inspired reforms can be implemented effectively. Additionally, the persistent social bias against vocational education in Greece remains a barrier. Participant 5 in particular emphasized the need to shift public attitudes toward vocational training and to recognize its value as a viable educational and professional pathway.

Finally, it is worth noting that the 10 participants represented two distinct professional groups, which influenced the nature of their responses. The first seven participants were Refugee Education Coordinators (RECs) with diverse field experience across Greece, and their contributions focused primarily on the practical dimension of the problem. Their recommendations centered on urgent, operational issues such as increasing the number of reception classes, ensuring trained teachers with intercultural competence from the beginning of the school year, providing interpreters in both camps and classrooms, securing stable funding, and involving local authorities in the processes of housing and employment support. These practical insights complement the broader policy-oriented perspectives offered by participants from institutional and European contexts, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the challenge of refugee inclusion in Greek vocational education and training.

4. Conclusions

This study set out to explore how the Greek Ministries of Education and Labour could enhance young refugees' participation in VET. The findings revealed a complex and interdependent set of barriers—linguistic, structural, cultural, and institutional—that collectively hinder refugee inclusion in vocational pathways. Yet they also pointed toward a series of pragmatic and policy-oriented solutions that, if coordinated effectively, could transform VET into a genuine bridge between education, employment, and social integration.

A key conclusion concerns the absence of systematic collaboration between the two ministries, which participants consistently described as fragmented and ineffective. The Ministry of Labour has remained largely detached from refugee-related educational initia-

tives, while the Ministry of Education bears most of the operational responsibility without sufficient interministerial support. Strengthening this partnership through shared planning, targeted funding, and policy alignment emerges as a necessary first step toward more coherent governance. Similar calls for cross-sectoral coordination have been echoed in broader European research on refugee education and employability (Cerna 2023; OECD 2022).

Equally important is the need for structural reform within the Greek VET system. Participants highlighted the rigidity of bureaucratic procedures, the lack of reception classes in EPAL and EPAS schools, and the shortage of adequately trained teachers. Simplifying administrative processes, providing intercultural training for educators, and ensuring the early appointment of staff at the beginning of the academic year would contribute to a more stable and supportive learning environment. This argument is reinforced by Hunt (2024), Halachev (2015) and Hormova et al. (2023), who underline that flexibility and teacher preparedness are central to refugee inclusion. Moreover, evidence from Greek refugee hospitality centres confirms that well-coordinated institutional support—including trained educators, interpreters, and consistent programming—significantly enhances educational participation and psychosocial well-being among refugee youth (Palaiologou and Prekate 2023b; Palaiologou et al. 2022).

The linguistic barrier remains a defining obstacle. Without sustained Greek language support, vocational specialization and employability cannot be achieved. Tailored language instruction integrated into VET programmes, following successful European models such as those in Germany and Denmark (Jørgensen et al. 2021), would allow refugee learners to progress from language acquisition to professional training in a structured and motivating way. Language competence is not only a prerequisite for learning but also for belonging; as Cummins (2015) argues, linguistic empowerment is the foundation for social and cognitive growth. Furthermore, multicultural educational approaches that build resilience and address psychological trauma through language-sensitive pedagogy have proven effective in supporting refugee students' integration (Nantsou et al. 2025).

Participants also emphasized the importance of local-level solutions and decentralization. Empowering municipalities and regional directorates to respond directly to the needs of refugee students—for example, through subsidized transportation, housing coordination, and school-community partnerships—was viewed as essential for sustainable inclusion. This aligns with Semeia et al. (2023), who demonstrate that decentralized governance fosters more adaptive and context-sensitive responses to immigrant populations.

Another major insight relates to the potential of micro-credentials as an innovative tool within vocational training. Short, skills-based qualifications could offer refugees tangible achievements within a shorter timeframe, thereby strengthening their motivation and employability. As Pouliou (2024) and Hunt (2024) contend, micro-credentials introduce flexibility and recognition mechanisms particularly suitable for learners with disrupted educational backgrounds. Implementing such frameworks within Greek VET would not only modernize the system but also align it with European lifelong learning policies (European Commission 2023) and measures in European countries (Semeia et al. 2023).

The study also reveals that socioeconomic precarity continues to drive school dropout among refugee youth. Linking financial allowances to school attendance, providing career counselling, and facilitating apprenticeships aligned with local labour needs could help mitigate these pressures. Understanding and supporting refugee youths' diverse career aspirations is crucial in this regard, as many young refugees hold ambitious professional goals that require tailored guidance and pathways (Palaiologou et al. 2024). Apprenticeship and work-based learning models have been shown to significantly improve transition outcomes for refugees in countries such as Austria and Germany (Böhn and Deutscher 2022; Busse et al. 2025). Similarly, recognizing prior skills and informal qualifications would

enable many young refugees to re-enter education and the labour market more efficiently (Desiderio 2016).

From a broader perspective, public perception of vocational education in Greece remains a persistent cultural barrier. Participants noted that VET is often regarded as a second-choice or remedial pathway. A shift in societal attitudes—through awareness campaigns, the promotion of success stories, and improved career outcomes—could re-frame vocational education as a respected and aspirational option for both refugees and Greek youth. As Özer et al. (2021) suggest, VET can serve as a vital mechanism not only for economic integration but also for restoring dignity and a sense of agency among displaced learners.

Taken together, these findings point to a multilevel reform strategy that includes (a) policy collaboration between the Ministries of Education and Labour, supported by EU guidance and shared funding mechanisms; (b) structural flexibility within VET through reception classes, trained teachers, and simplified bureaucracy; (c) linguistic and inter-cultural support integrated into vocational curricula; (d) decentralized governance enabling local authorities to address housing, transport, and school-community coordination; (e) micro-credential and recognition frameworks that validate short-term learning and prior experience; and (f) a cultural revaluation of VET, positioning it as a pathway of choice rather than necessity.

Ultimately, VET holds the potential to act as both an educational and social equalizer, enabling refugee youth to move from marginalization to participation. Realizing this vision, however, requires not only political will but also long-term investment and shared accountability among ministries, educators, and local stakeholders. As Dragonas (2021) and Costa et al. (2021) argue, integration must be understood as a holistic process that links education, employment, and community belonging. The experiences documented in Greek refugee hospitality centres further demonstrate that when educational interventions are combined with psychosocial support and peer relationship building, refugee children develop stronger resilience and social connections that facilitate both academic success and long-term integration (Palaiologou and Prekate 2023a, 2023b).

While this research provides valuable insights, it also acknowledges its limitations. The qualitative nature of the study limits the generalizability of findings; therefore, future research should include larger and comparative samples across different educational sectors. Further investigation into the implementation of micro-credentials—possibly through mixed-method or triangulated designs involving teachers, employers, and refugee learners—could offer practical pathways for innovation. Additionally, longitudinal studies examining the long-term educational trajectories and career outcomes of refugee youth in VET would strengthen our understanding of effective integration strategies.

In conclusion, this study reaffirms that refugee inclusion in vocational education is not merely an educational challenge but a societal imperative. Building a flexible, humane, and collaborative VET system would not only empower young refugees but also advance Greece's broader goals of social cohesion, workforce development, and sustainable integration within the European framework. As demonstrated by research on refugee children's psychosocial well-being, friendship patterns, and career aspirations (Palaiologou et al. 2024; Palaiologou and Prekate 2023a, 2023b), successful integration requires attending to multiple dimensions simultaneously—academic, linguistic, psychological, social, and professional. The policy recommendations emerging from this study offer a roadmap for creating such multidimensional support systems, ultimately enabling refugee youth to realize their full potential as active members of Greek society.

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