

# Social Capital in the Digital Age: Vocational Education and Training (VET) System in Georgia

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## Abstract

The present article describes the process of producing structural social capital in the e-Government context and aims at contributing to the profound understanding of the enabling role of *non-traditional co-production* (Sorrentino, M., Sicilia M. & Howlett, 2018; Spotswood EL, Wohn DY, 2020).

Understanding of structural social capital in a non-traditional – based vocational education and training system (VET) can be developed in line with the following guideline questions: what is structural social capital (separating it from what it does?)? Is structural social capital an action, or is it related to the action (Claridge, 2018)? With these questions in mind, the article analyzes the output of integrating *non-traditional co-production* within the Georgian VET sector and describes the findings in line with Bourdieu's analytical approach along with the network-based concept.

The reason for choosing vocational education and training system is the argument that elaborates on the importance of the decisive role of trust, along with the cooperation between private and public stakeholders. These elements build not only a comprehensive VET design but also influence the status quo of the labor market. The country perspective-based analysis of these tendencies enables us to observe the transition of Georgian VET design, the shift from supply-driven VET framework to the demand-oriented model.

**Keywords:** social capital, e-Government, information and communication technologies (ICT), Vocational education and training (VET), non – traditional co-production, online structural social capital, demand- driven, supply–oriented

## Introduction

The thematic issue is the fruit of the regular webinar sessions held by Social Capital Research Group. The central focus of the webinar *Social Capital in the digital age: Vocational Education and Training in Georgia* (21.01.2022) has been set on defining Social Capital as an end goal of non-traditional co-production within the vocational education and training (VET) system.

To organize the discussion, the present article explores the interaction between *non-traditional co-production* (Sicilia, Howlett & Sorrentino, 2018) and the structural social capital, which relates to the properties of the social system and network relations (Claridge, 2018).

In the e-Government context, which promotes networking and wider concepts of governance (Politt & Bouckaert, 2011), *non-traditional co-production* appears as the promising modern framework for structural social capital provision. *Non-traditional co-production*,

introduced by Sorrentino, Sicilia & Howlett (2018), challenges traditional forms of collaboration in public administration and mediates the relation between service professionals and service users by ICT – based platforms (Sicilia, Sorrentino & Howlett, 2018).

A series of recent studies have indicated that the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) into our everyday lives has increased the research examining online social capital (Spotswood & Wohn, 2020). Thereby examining the use of new platforms as a framework for obtaining online social capital turned into the focal point of the new research dimension. Additionally, the interest in finding methods for taking advantage of online social capital resources made the process of reproducing social capital more relevant (Spotswood & Wohn, 2020). Intensive integration of online platforms created new enabling conditions for reshaping communication between stakeholders, empowering network closure (Zhao, 2020; Thole, 2017; Spotswood, 2020).

In the case of vocational education and training (VET), *non-traditional co-production* opens not only new avenues for accumulating structural social capital but also opens new facets of the VET sector itself. More precisely, the VET system becomes more relevant in terms of

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tackling major social, as well as economic challenges (ET, 2020), and the integrity between business models, organization of work, along with the acquisition of vocational competencies turns into the central pillar for the comprehensive VET service delivery (Dr. Klös, Neuburger, Sattelberger & Werner, 2021).

The impact of *non-traditional co-production* on vocational education and training (VET) is analyzed in line with the correlation between two variables, the modes of interaction – ICT platforms and expected outcome. The findings are explained in terms of the framework, covering two pillars. First, Pierre Bourdieu's argument that advocates the reproduction of education-related social capital with other dimensions in public policy and second, on the tradition of the network approach, which identifies the factors which affect the development of creative clusters and emphasizes the role of the institutional setting. Mackiewicz and Namyślak elaborate on the significant role of clusters in terms of accelerating the innovation process and networking (Mackiewicz and Namyślak, 2021). The focus on clusters enables us to reveal the contingent factor that influences the interaction between stakeholders and thereby understand how the e-Government models are used (Marino, Pariso and Picariello, 2022).

### **Accumulating online social capital within Georgian VET Policy**

The backbone of the present article is to explore how far *non-traditional co-production* will modernize the VET system in Georgia and create enabling conditions for producing structural social capital and in which form will it reproduce?

In the case of the VET system in Georgia, the core expectation from *non-traditional co-production* is the shift from supply-driven VET design to the demand-oriented model that should enable the sustainable development of the VET sector (Gasskov, 2018). The demand-driven VET system, first, requires the reconciliation of the labor market demand for skilled workers and the individual learners' demand for training, as well as for employment (Gasskov, 2018).

The present article narrows down the scope of analyzing the following shift and sets the central focus on the transformation of VET institutional configurations, creating solid co-ownership of the VET service, as well as empowering trust-building, along with the possible reproduction in terms of the employment policy. Both a high level of trust and co-ownership are essential for VET policy for the following reasons: first, law trust in the policy sector can cause low demand; second, the low demand will result in inadequate students' selection; third, gaps in the selection will negatively influence rigorous assessment and lower employment rate and finally, will once again weaken the trust level of the society (UNDP, 2019). As for the co-ownership of the VET service, the collaborative institutional architecture is crucial for regulating the matching skills to the labor market, along with creating modern employment

opportunities (ACT & UNDP, 2020).

Institutional configurations of Georgian VET design miss an empowered systematic private-public partnership in the VET sector (ACT & UNDP, 2020). Additionally, the system has been confronted by the conflict of interest between public institutions in the VET sector. Practical experience shows that the VET policy has been affected by the overlapping responsibility-sharing (For instance, National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) has been responsible for approving qualification standards, as well as for their authorization (TRReport 2019)). Georgian VET design must overcome the dominating hybridization elements and provide enabling conditions for the full-fledged inclusion of the private sector on micro, mezzo, as well as micro levels of decision-making, along with practical implementation.

In terms of developing the multi-dimensional governing architecture for VET policy, a positive step has been taken by launching the *Vocational Skills Agency* (June 2021), which has been defined as the new model of management in the VET field, a new platform that would be based on the active involvement of the private sector, introduce the VET reform at a high level and respond to the demand of the private sector, an anchor of the newly amended Law on Vocational Education and Training System in Georgia (2018)(Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2021). *Vocational Skills Agency* has promising content, but the architecture of the institution is not complete, especially in terms of co-ownership. Based on official documents actual status – quo of the *Vocational Education Skills Agency* can be defined as rather consulting-oriented.

The tangible example is the responsible framework of the institution (For instance, *Vocational Skills Agency* is responsible for supporting and approving creation/ updating of professional standards, as well as for advising stakeholders in the VET sector and/or cooperating with international and donor organizations). Along with the contextual understanding of the VET central elements (in the present case, the institutional configurations), online provision of structural social capital depends on national e-Government architecture. In the case of Georgia, the e-Government context is confronted with certain gaps. First of all, the e-Government system misses an e-Government strategy, as well as the in-depth analysis of the existing policy papers (The e-Government strategy (2014 - 2018)) (IDFI,2020). There is a need for empowered acknowledgment of e-Government within public administration. It is crucial to develop a strategic vision that will be based on the several – years plan (IDFI, 2020) that will introduce the measures for integrating *non-traditional co-production* and thereby create the enabling conditions for the effective usage of ICT – platforms (For instance, developing concrete government policy in line with the uniform standard for mandatory disclosure of public open data) (IDFI, 2020). The employment policy is the sector where the VET-related structural social capital can reproduce.

ICT – based platform-driven *non-traditional co-production* promises to open new perspectives, like freelancing, that can regulate skills mismatch in the labor market in Georgia (the oversupply of graduates and gaps in the provision of high skilled jobs (ETF, 2019). Additionally, online platforms can enable lower-skilled workers to integrate (ETF, 2021). The engagement of the private sector in the VET sector enables VET graduates to access diverse job opportunities on an international level (ETF, 2021).

## Conclusion:

The present article has addressed the online production of structural social capital through *non-traditional co-production* in the VET policy sector has been analyzed in line with the evaluation of the correlation between modes of interaction – the ICT platforms and the expected outcome – the decentralized institutional configuration with the possibility of reproduction. Even though the future of the VET system is context-dependent, the present article shares the argument, which advocates that the adaptation of VET in terms of content, organization, and process *must not be exclusively path-dependent* (Dr. Klös & Werner, 2021). The introductory article to the thematic issue has addressed the importance of non-traditional co-production in terms of transforming supply-oriented VET design to the demand-oriented one in terms of institutional configurations. The preliminary analysis shows that within *non-traditional co-production-based* VET system produced structural social capital has a broader perspective of reproduction. Due to the enabling role of ICT platforms VET related structural social capital gets the capacity of regulating problems in other dimensions of the public policy sector.

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