

# The Intersection of Vocational Education and Foreign Trade in Turkey: Systemic Barriers and Proposed Solutions on the Path to a Skilled Workforce

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## Abstract

In the globalizing world economy, the competitiveness of countries is directly related not only to their production capacity but also to the availability of a skilled workforce. Vocational education and foreign trade education in Turkey are of strategic importance in this context. This study is structured based on the document analysis approach, one of the qualitative research methods. In order to comprehensively assess the current state of vocational education and foreign trade education in Turkey, official legislation, MEB regulations, statistical data, relevant academic publications, and current policy documents were examined. The data obtained from these documents were analyzed using content analysis techniques, and the structural problems of the education system and its compatibility with sectoral needs were classified thematically. Thanks to this methodological approach, the role of foreign trade education in the country's development and the systemic obstacles it faces have been evaluated in a multidimensional manner. In particular, the content of foreign trade education provided within the framework of Vocational and Technical Anatolian High Schools, its regional distribution, teacher qualifications, and perception issues in society are comprehensively addressed. In addition, the relationship between foreign trade education and the country's development vision, its impact on employment, and structural deficiencies in the context of education policies have been evaluated. At the end of the study, concrete recommendations are made for the restructuring of the vocational education system and the strengthening of foreign trade education in terms of quantity and quality in order for Turkey to achieve its economic goals for 2023 and beyond.

**Keywords:** Foreign trade; Vocational education; Logistics; Technical education; Employment; Skilled labor force

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**Citation:** Hilal DEMİR, Zühal YÜKSEL, Gökhan YAĞAR, Serkan ACAR, Murat YİĞİT (2025) The Intersection of Vocational Education and Foreign Trade in Turkey: Systemic Barriers and Proposed Solutions on the Path to a Skilled Workforce. Global Media Journal, 23:75.

**Received:** 02-June-2025; Manuscript No. gmj-25-167150; **Editor assigned:** 04-June-2025; Pre QC No. gmj-25-167150; **Reviewed:** 18-June-2025; QC No. gmj-25-167150; **Revised:** 23-June-2025; Manuscript No. gmj-25-167150 (R); **Published:** 30-June-2025, DOI: 10.36648/1550-7521.23.75.502

## Introduction

Vocational education is a process that enables individuals to acquire knowledge, skills, and work habits related to a specific profession while supporting their cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development in a holistic manner [1]. The aim of vocational and technical education is to equip individuals with the competencies required by professions in line with the goals of society and the expectations of the business environment; in this way, the dynamism of the young population in particular

can be transformed into sustainable development potential [1,2]. Investment in human resources directly affects the pace of development, employment rates, and the country's competitiveness; therefore, vocational education should be given strategic importance in line with the requirements of the technological age [3].

The vocational and technical education system must offer a qualified, applicable, and competitive education model in line with the demands of the private sector. In line with the expectations of the industrial sector, it is essential to train individuals who are

productive, disciplined, and capable of performing their duties in accordance with national and international standards [4]. In Turkey, the vocational and technical education system has been restructured over time to reduce bureaucratic burdens and ensure integrity in decision-making processes. In this context, the General Directorates of Male Technical Education, Female Technical Education, and Trade and Tourism Education were merged under the umbrella of the General Directorate of Vocational and Technical Education through Decree Law No. 652 (Ministry of National Education [5]. This structural transformation aimed to eliminate differences in budgets, investments, and training fees between school types and to simplify decision-making mechanisms [6]. Subsequently, Circular No. 2014/8 reduced school diversity and renamed all schools as "Vocational and Technical Anatolian High Schools." However, care was taken to preserve traditional school names [7]. With this transformation, standardization in vocational education was sought, and the integrity of the system was strengthened.

On the other hand, in order to make the vocational education system more compatible with the labor market, the Ministry of National Education launched the Vocational Education and Training System Strengthening Project [8]. The project, which was launched in pilot schools in the 2005–2006 academic year, was expanded to all vocational high schools starting in the 2006–2007 academic year [4]. Within this scope, vocational education programs were restructured and transitioned to a modular system in line with sector needs, technological developments, and the European Union harmonization process. Anadolu Vocational and Anadolu Technical programs were organized according to 52 fields and 204 branches, with the aim of increasing specialization and field proficiency [6]. The MEGEP project aimed to bridge the gap between vocational education and the real sector, thereby improving the quality of applied education.

The effectiveness of foreign trade education in Turkey has not been limited to MEGEP modules but has been reshaped in line with the current needs of the sector and global trade dynamics [9]. In this context, survey studies conducted in light of data from the business world have revealed that the most important problem faced by foreign trade companies is "the inability to find qualified personnel" [10]. Furthermore, it is observed that vocational education in Turkey has reduced skill mismatches in the labor market, but the problem of horizontal skill mismatch (graduates working outside their field) is still widespread [9]. Another issue that emerged in expert interviews is that the foreign trade system faces bureaucratic obstacles, regulatory complexity, and structural problems related to customs processes [10]. These findings indicate that the curriculum of foreign trade education in secondary education needs to be restructured to include more practical and advisory internships alongside theoretical knowledge [10]. In conclusion, in order to ensure a sustainable supply of qualified labor, foreign trade education must be supported by both institutional reforms and new models and protocols that interact directly with the market [11].

## Method

This study was conducted using the document analysis

method, one of the qualitative research designs, with the aim of analyzing the structural problems related to vocational and technical education and foreign trade education in Turkey from a multidimensional perspective. Qualitative research focuses on understanding social phenomena within their natural contexts and enables in-depth content analysis [12,13]. In this context, the study was structured through a systematic review of official legislation, policy documents, curriculum documents, strategy reports, academic theses, statistical data, and scientific publications related to vocational education published by relevant institutions in Turkey.

The theoretical framework of the research is based on human capital theory [14] and the education-employment compatibility theory [15]. Human capital theory emphasizes the impact of knowledge and skills acquired through education on economic productivity and national development, while the education-employment compatibility theory enables the analysis of the direct relationship between vocational education and the labor market. In this context, the document analysis technique not only enabled content analysis but also allowed for questioning the extent to which education policies are aligned with employment policies.

The documents were examined using descriptive content analysis methods in line with pre-determined thematic categories (e.g., regulatory structure, curriculum adequacy, teacher training, regional inequalities, sector collaboration, and social perception), and the findings were interpreted in a comparative manner with current studies in the literature [16]. This methodological choice provides an analytical framework that enables policymakers, education administrators, and researchers involved in vocational and foreign trade education to make more in-depth and comprehensive assessments.

## Related Literature

### Foreign Trade Education in Turkey

Foreign trade education in Turkey has developed in parallel with the needs of the globalizing economy and has undergone a significant transformation, especially in the last two decades [17]. In this context, foreign trade education programs have gained intensity in both higher education institutions and vocational training centers [18]. In the literature, the primary objective of foreign trade education is defined as providing students with knowledge and skills in areas such as international trade processes, customs regulations, logistics management, and international marketing [19].

Academic studies include important discussions on the curriculum structure and content of foreign trade education in Turkey. In particular, it is stated that foreign trade programs offered at universities do not fully meet current economic needs, that the curriculum is theory-heavy, and that opportunities for practical application are limited [20]. On the other hand, positive developments have been observed in vocational and technical education with regard to foreign trade, as regulations have been implemented to enhance students' sectoral knowledge and practical skills [21].

With the support of the Turkish Exporters Assembly (TİM) and various public institutions, digitization and the use of educational materials that meet international standards are becoming more widespread in foreign trade education [22]. In addition, sectoral cooperation projects and internship programs facilitate students' adaptation to real work environments and increase the employability of graduates [23].

However, the literature emphasizes the need to improve education quality, strengthen academic and sectoral cooperation, and improve technological infrastructure for the sustainable development of foreign trade education [24]. Furthermore, in today's rapidly changing global trade dynamics, it is important to support education programs with flexible and innovative structures [25].

### Foreign Trade and Logistics Education in Vocational High Schools

It is the process of effectively and efficiently planning, implementing, transporting, storing, and controlling the movement of all kinds of products, services, and information flow from the starting point to the final destination in order to meet customer needs [26]. Foreign trade and logistics education in vocational high schools stands out as an important field of education in line with Turkey's economic growth targets and the needs of the labor market [27]. These educational programs aim to equip students with knowledge and skills in areas such as logistics management, supply chain, storage, and distribution, while also ensuring they gain mastery over international trade processes [28].

The literature focuses on the curriculum structure of foreign trade and logistics programs in vocational high schools and emphasizes the need to update existing programs in line with developments in the sector [29]. In addition to theoretical education, the adoption of an application-oriented education model is considered critical for improving students' professional skills [30].

In order to improve the quality of education in the field of foreign trade and logistics in vocational education, it is important to develop the field competencies of teachers and use technology-supported educational materials [31]. It is also stated that internship and application programs conducted in collaboration with the business world provide students with the opportunity to gain professional experience [32].

In recent years, the increase in digitalization and automation in the logistics sector has highlighted the need to improve the technological infrastructure and integrate new technologies into logistics education in vocational high schools. In this context, introducing students to applications such as digital logistics software, warehouse management systems, and automatic tracking technologies has become important [33].

In summary, equipping vocational high schools with foreign trade and logistics education that is tailored to the needs of the sector, equipped with up-to-date knowledge and skills, application-oriented, and technology-supported ensures that graduates are more competitive in the labor market [34].

Foreign Trade Education in Vocational High Schools and Post-

### Graduation Employment Opportunities

The foreign trade program is designed to meet the labor demands of the sector, and the course content covers the technical and practical aspects of economics, business, and foreign trade [35]. The main courses offered in the program include: Economics, Law, Business Administration, Foreign Trade, Principles of Marketing, Accounting, Customs Legislation and Applications, Export and Import Applications, Transportation Operations, Supply Chain Management, Entrepreneurship, Financing of Foreign Trade, and Logistics [22,23].

These courses are taught by faculty members using interactive methods; students are encouraged to actively participate in the topics, and examples from the real business world are discussed to ensure that theory is translated into practice. In addition, the learning process is reinforced with assignments and projects. As an important part of the program, each student completes a mandatory internship at institutions and organizations related to foreign trade, gaining the opportunity to apply the knowledge they have learned in a real work environment [24].

After graduating from foreign trade programs, students have the opportunity to work in various positions in the fields of business and application. Graduates can work as import and export personnel in foreign trade companies, warehouse, stock control, shipping, or operations personnel in logistics companies, technicians in the foreign exchange departments of banks, and experts in customs consultancy firms [36]. In addition, there are employment opportunities in various civil service positions where college graduates are employed in the public sector, as well as in marketing, sales, or specialist positions in international trade companies [17].

Students who graduate from vocational and technical Anatolian high schools in fields such as accounting and finance, marketing, and retail have the opportunity to enroll in foreign trade programs with additional points [37]. Graduates who complete a two-year associate degree program can transfer to four-year bachelor's degree programs at public and foundation universities' regular or open education faculties if they obtain sufficient scores on the Vertical Transfer Exam (DGS) [38].

After successfully completing the DGS, students can continue their bachelor's degree studies in the following fields:

- Banking and Insurance
- Labor Economics and Industrial Relations
- Economics
- Political Economy
- Business Administration
- Logistics Management
- Capital Markets
- Capital Markets Supervision and Rating
- Technology and Information Management
- International Finance

- International Finance and Banking
- International Business
- International Logistics
- International Trade and Finance
- International Trade and Logistics
- International Trade and Marketing

These wide-ranging programs increase graduates' competitiveness in the job market and contribute significantly to their career development [39].

### International Trade and Logistics Education: University-Level Orientations and Employment Opportunities

Many universities in Turkey have established undergraduate programs under the names of "International Trade," "International Trade and Logistics," and "International Finance" within their Faculties of Economics and Administrative Sciences. The primary objective of these programs is to cultivate experts with proficiency in foreign trade and finance who can assume roles in public and private sector institutions in line with the country's economic development goals [22]. In this context, the education provided aims to equip students with comprehensive knowledge in areas such as global logistics, international finance, foreign trade law, and foreign languages, in addition to the basic concepts of foreign trade [4].

The impact of globalization on economic structures has fundamentally transformed the nature of international trade. In this new era, where not only geographical but also digital, cultural, and economic boundaries have been eliminated, the competitive power of companies has become largely dependent on international financial competence and digital logistics management [40]. Indeed, in this environment of intensified international competition and increased economic integration, Turkish companies seeking to be active in foreign markets have an increasing need for professionals specializing in export, import, finance, and logistics [41].

Graduates from these departments can be employed in the public sector as assistant experts, assistant inspectors, or assistant auditors in (A) group positions based on the results of the Public Personnel Selection Examination (KPSS) [42]. However, it is quite common for them to be employed in private sector companies involved in foreign trade, particularly in export and import units, marketing and sales departments, or logistics operations units [43]. Graduates can also apply to graduate programs to pursue an academic career and continue their education in this field at the master's and doctoral levels [44].

Turkey can achieve a stronger position in international markets not only by increasing its foreign trade volume but also by training a workforce that is proficient in at least two foreign languages, equipped with technological capabilities, and knowledgeable about foreign trade financing [41]. Therefore, these educational programs offered at the university level both develop a strategic human resource that supports national competitiveness and

offer a development perspective in line with the global economy.

### Graduate Level Education in Foreign Trade

Undergraduate students who have graduated from departments such as international trade, foreign trade and logistics, economics, business administration, public administration, and similar fields are pursuing graduate-level education in foreign trade to gain expertise. In this context, candidates wishing to pursue graduate education in foreign trade must apply to programs offered by the Institute of Social Sciences at universities [36].

The application process is conducted according to the conditions specified in the application guidelines published by the relevant university each semester. Generally, applicants are expected to meet conditions such as a bachelor's degree, academic grade point average (GPA), ALES score (for thesis-based programs), and foreign language proficiency (Kaya, 2020: 104). Applicants who meet all the conditions and are eligible for placement based on their success ranking can begin their master's education after completing their final registration [45].

For students who do not have an economics-based education, a scientific preparation program is implemented at the beginning of their graduate education. Within this scope, students take courses such as basic economics, accounting, and foreign trade transactions to ensure their adaptation to the field [46].

Graduate programs are offered in two formats: thesis-based and non-thesis-based. Thesis-based master's programs aim to enable students to gain advanced academic proficiency and scientific research competence. In this program, after completing compulsory and elective courses, students prepare a scientific thesis on a topic they have chosen, with the guidance of an advisor. Upon successfully defending their thesis and having it accepted by the jury, they are eligible to receive a master's degree [47].

Thesis-free master's programs, on the other hand, aim to enhance professional development and practical knowledge. In these programs, students carry out a project study for one semester; however, there is no requirement to write an academic thesis [48].

Today, the multidimensional structure of global trade has increased the need for professionals who have received postgraduate education in foreign trade and possess analytical thinking and strategic foresight regarding international markets. Therefore, graduate foreign trade programs at universities offer an important opportunity for both individuals seeking academic advancement and professionals aiming for a career in the sector [49].

### Problems in Foreign Trade Education in Turkey

Foreign trade education in Turkey is provided at vocational and technical Anatolian high schools, two-year vocational colleges, and four-year faculties. This situation gives rise to different problems at each level of education. When public institutions, the private sector, and other stakeholders are also taken into consideration, the problems can be classified under the following headings:



## Social Perception

Following the extension of compulsory education from five to eight years in 1997, vocational high school students were prevented from pursuing undergraduate education outside their fields of study due to a coefficient barrier. This situation led to a decline in demand for vocational high schools and had a negative impact on student profiles. The placement of students with the lowest scores in vocational high schools as a result of exams such as SBS and TEOG has harmed both the field competence of graduates and their access to four-year undergraduate programs.

Although Law No. 3308 on Vocational Education and Law No. 6764 provide students with internship and GSS opportunities, state support for the employment of apprentices and interns (Law No. 3308, 1986; Law No. 6764, 2016) has been insufficient to change social perceptions. Parents do not prefer vocational education due to reasons such as the lack of new and widespread fields such as foreign trade and logistics, as well as teacher shortages.

## Issues at the Secondary Education Level

While vocational education should essentially begin in middle school, in Turkey this education is first provided at the high school level. This situation prevents students from developing skills and professional identity at an early age.

Although 52 fields of study are offered in vocational and technical Anatolian high schools under the MEGEP program, foreign trade is not offered as an independent field. Foreign Trade Office Services is only offered as a branch under the Accounting and Finance field ([megep.meb.gov.tr](http://megep.meb.gov.tr)). The fact that foreign trade is not offered even in large cities such as Erzurum shows that the field is not widespread. According to data from the General Directorate of Vocational and Technical Education, only 117 schools offer education in the field of logistics, and only 161 schools offer education in the field of foreign trade. These numbers indicate that foreign trade education is not widespread ([mtegm.gov.tr](http://mtegm.gov.tr)).

## Teacher Training Issues

With the decision issued in 2009, the faculties of Technical Education, Trade and Tourism Education, and Vocational Education were closed, and the faculties of Technology, Tourism, and Art and Design were established in their place. This situation created a serious shortage of teachers in these fields, and graduates of the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences and the Open Education Faculty were appointed as teachers instead.

The Ministry of National Education's decision No. 80, which allows teachers to teach more than one subject, has led to teachers teaching subjects in which they are not experts. This has led to a decline in the quality of education in fields such as foreign trade and logistics, which require expertise.

## Problems at the Higher Education Level

Vocational colleges offer education in foreign trade. However, students who enter these departments without taking an

entrance exam tend to have low academic achievement levels. In addition, the professional knowledge and sectoral experience of the teaching staff in these departments are not adequately monitored.

Universities' units such as the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Economics, and Business Administration admit students to departments related to foreign trade. However, the quality of education has become controversial due to reasons such as excess quotas and unconditional admission.

In postgraduate education, students are admitted through protocols established with the private and public sectors. However, in some cases, academic criteria are not required beyond being an open education graduate and working at the relevant institution.

## Public Institutions

Public institutions such as the Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Trade, and General Directorate of Customs are authorized to issue legal permits related to foreign trade. However, the requirement for approval from multiple institutions leads to prolonged processing times and loss of time and money [26].

## Discussion and Conclusion

Foreign trade education in Turkey has a structure that is provided at different levels but is not integrated. The education programs offered at Vocational and Technical Anatolian High Schools, Vocational Colleges, and undergraduate higher education institutions are fragmented and insufficiently synchronized in terms of both content and structure. This situation hinders the training of qualified labor and prevents the sustainable formation of the intermediate and expert profiles required by the foreign trade sector.

In today's world of intensifying global economic competition, one of the key factors determining a country's foreign trade performance is the quality of its human resources in this field. Turkey's 2023 vision document's target of \$500 billion in exports ([tsv2023.org](http://tsv2023.org)) is directly related not only to macroeconomic policy tools but also to the quality of foreign trade education. However, current education policies and practices pose serious structural obstacles to achieving this target. In particular, the fact that foreign trade is still not recognized as an independent field within the MEGEP framework weakens the institutional foundation of vocational and technical education and creates a disconnect between education and employment [8].

The inability to provide foreign trade education from the secondary education level onwards leads to delays in shaping students' vocational orientations and results in a low achievement level among students pursuing these fields. The unplanned transformation of teacher training policies (Official Gazette, 2009) is lowering the pedagogical quality of foreign trade education and resulting in the employment of teachers who lack expertise in the field.

The oversupply of foreign trade and logistics education at universities, the admission of students with low minimum scores, and the lack of a prerequisite system based on professional

qualifications also overshadow the qualitative depth of undergraduate education. However, at the postgraduate level, non-standard admissions in education through protocols with the public and private sectors undermine the principle of academic merit and fail to ensure qualitative homogeneity in the graduate profile [26].

At the societal level, negative perceptions of vocational education stem not only from individual preferences but also from past misapplications of education policies. In particular, practices such as the coefficient barrier have undermined confidence in vocational education, positioning these institutions as second-class options in the eyes of parents and students. In this context, foreign trade education is struggling to develop under the shadow of structural perception barriers in society.

As a result, the institutional and structural nature of foreign trade education in Turkey is insufficient to create a labor market that can compete with the modern world. The inability to achieve vertical integration between educational levels, the failure of the teacher training system to synchronize with the demands of the labor market, and the lack of recognition of foreign trade as an independent discipline are the main reasons for this inadequacy. Turkey's ability to achieve its foreign trade goals will depend not only on economic policies but also on a contemporary and comprehensive foreign trade education reform that strengthens interdisciplinary coordination and is based on sectoral needs analysis. In this context, bringing vocational education to an earlier age, restructuring curricula in collaboration with the sector, designing teacher training mechanisms based on field expertise, and breaking the negative perception of vocational education in society should be among the priority responsibilities of policymakers.

## Recommendations

A multi-level and comprehensive reform approach is needed to overcome the qualitative and structural problems of foreign trade education in Turkey. In this context, the recommendations are not limited to pedagogical improvements, but cover a broad perspective ranging from curriculum structure to social perception, teacher quality to administrative coordination.

First and foremost, foreign trade education lacks inter-level coherence. This fragmented structure, which extends from Vocational and Technical Anatolian High Schools to Vocational Colleges, undergraduate, and graduate levels, weakens learning outcomes and employment transitions. Therefore, vertical integration from secondary education to higher education must be strengthened. The first step toward achieving this coherence should be to redefine foreign trade as an independent field

within the scope of MEGEP and support it with an independent curriculum and competency framework. Similarly, the Vertical Transfer Exam (DGS) system should be restructured specifically for foreign trade to ensure a continuous academic progression process in this field.

The breakdown in teacher training mechanisms is preventing the implementation of foreign trade education by qualified human resources. In particular, the failure of the faculties established to replace the Faculty of Trade and Tourism Education, which was closed in 2009, to take on the role of training teachers with pedagogical training has caused serious damage to the field. In this context, it is of great importance to restructure the faculties that train teachers for vocational education, to open special programs in the field of foreign trade and logistics, and to equip teacher candidates with both field knowledge and pedagogical training. In addition, making field-based in-service training mandatory for teachers currently in service will serve as a quality assurance mechanism in terms of teacher quality.

The restructuring of the curriculum structure in line with sector needs is also an inevitable necessity. In an era where foreign trade is becoming digitalized and blockchain, artificial intelligence, and e-logistics applications are transforming business processes, educational content that is limited to traditional patterns does not meet the expectations of either students or employers. In this regard, foreign trade education curricula should be revised with the participation of national and international sector representatives; topics such as digital skills, sustainable trade, green logistics, and international financial technologies should be integrated into lesson plans. Practical education laboratories, trade simulations, and field-based learning environments developed within the framework of public-private sector collaborations will also form a complementary part of this transformation.

The negative perception of vocational education in society has led to insufficient interest in promising fields such as foreign trade. Past practices such as coefficient barriers for vocational high schools and misguided approaches associating them with low academic standards have damaged the reputation of vocational education. At this point, it is important to introduce graduates who have been successful in fields such as foreign trade and logistics to the public and to make positive role models visible through the media and digital platforms. With national campaigns and social media strategies structured in a way that attracts the interest of young people, the message that vocational education is not just a second choice, but rather a strategic path that will meet the labor force needs of the future, should be conveyed strongly.

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