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[...]

*Accompanying the Commission Proposal for a*

**Council Recommendation**

**on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social  
fairness and resilience**

{COM(2020) 275 final}

## Contents

1. Introduction.....	2
2. Political context .....	7
2.1. VET policy in Europe .....	9
3. State of play of VET.....	13
3.1. Prevalence, benefits and outcomes of VET.....	13
3.2. Member States progress towards common (Riga) priorities.....	21
3.2.1. Priority 1 - Promote work-based learning in all its forms, with special attention to apprenticeships.....	22
3.2.2. Priority 2 - develop quality assurance mechanisms in VET and continuous information and feedback loops .....	24
3.2.3. Priority 3 - access to VET and qualifications for all .....	26
3.2.4. Priority 4 – strengthen key competences .....	28
3.2.5. Priority 5 - initial and continuous professional development of VET teachers, trainers and mentors.....	29
3.3. Overview of EU support.....	30
3.3.1. Legal acts.....	31
3.3.2. Fostering exchanges and mutual learning .....	39
3.3.3. Policy initiatives.....	40
3.3.4. EU funding and support programmes .....	42
4. Potential scenarios (policy options) for developing further Union policy on VET.....	47
4.1. Presentation of the potential scenarios.....	47
4.2. Assessment and conclusions of potential scenarios (policy options) .....	51
5. Key elements of the Proposal.....	52
5.1. Preparatory work for the proposal – consultations and evidence .....	52
5.2. Vision and actions for modernization of VET at national level .....	57
5.3. Integration of ECVET and EQAVET – future of the tools.....	61
5.4. EU support initiatives.....	63
5.4.1. Platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence .....	63
5.4.2. Support services for VET .....	69
5.4.3. EQAVET Peer Reviews .....	70
5.4.4. European Vocational Core Profiles .....	71
5.4.5. Capacity building of providers of vocational education and training .....	71
5.4.6. SELFIE tool for VET schools and work-based learning .....	72
5.5. Monitoring and indicators for the VET policy framework.....	74
6. Conclusions.....	81

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Skills are critical to ensure competitiveness, innovation capacity and social cohesion in Europe. Vocational education and training (VET) is the sector of education and training closest to labour market and is at the forefront of providing skills and qualifications, to successfully drive forward the digital and green transitions. It supports young people to make the transition to work, and adults to remain employable throughout their working lives and adaptable to changing tasks, work environments and career evolution. Given the overall economic and societal trends and the EU ambition to become the first climate neutral continent by 2050, the importance of continuing training for the workforce and the need for up-skilling and reskilling is growing.

In 2018, 48.4 % of young Europeans were enrolled in upper-secondary education and training (at upper secondary level). Following a vocational education and training pathway opens up good employability perspectives on the labour market: 80% of VET graduates find their first long-term job within six month of finishing their studies. Meanwhile, all people of working age living in the EU need to engage into further vocational training to keep up with changes on the labour market, but less than half of them do so.

Traditionally, VET programmes were seen to prepare individuals for jobs in medium-skilled occupations. Even if declining, such occupations continue to represent the largest share of jobs currently available in the labour market. However, the need for higher skills also paved the way for expansion of VET qualifications to higher levels. Based on Cedefop employment projections, job openings requiring medium-level qualification will continue to represent the largest share of all job-openings (46% of all job openings over the period of 2016-2030), closely followed in number by job-openings requiring high-level of qualification (43% of all job-openings).<sup>1</sup>

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has seriously disrupted standard learning activities in education and training systems including for VET across Europe. Despite the fact that Member States have quickly moved towards digital learning solutions, the outbreak has put the resilience of the system to a test. The situation in VET was further aggravated by the fact that practical learning – in form of work-based learning and apprenticeships – has been suspended in most sectors.<sup>2</sup>

The transition to a digital and climate-neutral economy will have a massive impact on sectors that traditionally rely on VET graduates, whether in the energy production sector, transport, construction, or manufacturing, to name just a few. At the same

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<sup>1</sup> Cedefop (2018) Skills forecast. Trends and challenges up to 2030. These forecasts assume no changes in skills requirements within occupations (high skills for ISCO1-3, medium skills for ISCO4-8, low skills for ISCO9). The forecasts were produced before the COVID-19-outbreak.

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/cedefop\\_community\\_apprenticeship\\_experts\\_synthesis\\_how\\_are\\_european\\_countries\\_managing\\_apprenticeships\\_to\\_respond\\_to\\_the\\_coronavirus\\_crisis.pdf](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/cedefop_community_apprenticeship_experts_synthesis_how_are_european_countries_managing_apprenticeships_to_respond_to_the_coronavirus_crisis.pdf)

time, forecasts also show positive projections for job creation linked to decarbonisation process both in industry and services that employ traditionally VET graduates, including construction, waste management.

However, current systems do not seem fit to address the skills challenge raised by the deep changes triggered by digitalisation and move to a climate-neutral economy. The numbers of young people choosing VET are decreasing and the take up and offer of upskilling and reskilling of the workforce is very low. Demographic trends show that employers can not rely solely on new generations to take up new job opportunities, but they need to increasingly tap into the talent of all people of working age by supporting their continuing vocational education and training. Investments in continuing vocational education and training are not aligned with the scale of the challenge to support the green and digital transitions through upskilling and reskilling. Access to quality vocational education and training is uneven and exposure to work based learning seen as a pre-requisite to enhance the labour market relevance of VET programmes is far from being the norm across the EU. The European Semester put a strong focus year after year on the need to support structural reforms in vocational education and training, and recently more attention is put to boost continuing vocational education and training.

The economic recovery from the COVID-19 outbreak is an opportunity to accelerate reforms in VET and strengthen its resilience, notably by digitalising learning tools and agile adaptation to changing labour market needs. This includes paying attention to the need to ensure access to digital tools and technologies for every learner, teacher and trainer, as well as appropriate guidance measures. Digital tools such as simulators, virtual and augmented reality have the potential to increase the accessibility and efficiency of training, notably to small and medium-sized companies providing apprenticeship places. Inter-company training centres and Centres of Vocational Excellence can also play an important role here.

The pandemic is expected to lead to the deepest recession in the EU's history and young people entering the workforce at this time will find it harder to secure their first job<sup>3</sup>. Earlier crises have shown that young people are indeed likely to be hit hardest. Further strengthening VET systems is therefore crucial for the recovery from the Covid-19 crisis, as VET has proven an essential part of the efforts to support youth employment in the previous economic and financial crisis<sup>4</sup>. Notably apprenticeships, work-based learning, but also short-term VET programmes targeting unemployed, proved to be a pathway to increased employability and easier access or return to the labour market. The present proposal contributes to a high quality of the offers, in particular, for apprenticeships and other vocational programmes, made under the Youth Guarantee by ensuring labour market relevance, digitalisation and environmental sustainability of VET. It will also call for reinforced support for apprenticeships reforms and European Alliance for Apprenticeships to renew and boost commitments for quality and affective apprenticeships opportunities.

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<sup>3</sup> European Economic Forecast, Spring 2020. Institutional paper 125, May 2020. European Commission.

<sup>4</sup> Employment rates of graduates from vocational education and training was gradually increasing from 73% in 2013 to 79,5% in 2018

Modernisation of VET systems is also warranted as the world of work and skills is changing. On-going developments such as automation and digitalisation of production and services continue to reshape the labour markets. In addition, the broader twin transitions towards a more digital and greener economy will require VET to adapt to ensure that VET learners acquire the skills needed for the green and digital transitions while also reconfirming and strengthening the central role of VET in the lifelong learning continuum.

The Common Union vocational training policy as defined in the Treaty of Rome, has been taken forward by the launch of the Copenhagen process in 2002 bringing together Member States, social partners, Commission and supported also by associations of providers of vocational education and training. The enhanced cooperation on vocational education and training has been driven by series of Ministerial meetings which have defined priorities in a form of Declarations and Communiqués, notably the 2010 Bruges Communiqué and the 2015 Riga Conclusions. The aims and priorities pursued under this process contributed to the objectives set out in the Strategic framework for education and training (ET2020), and the 2016 Skills Agenda gave a further strong boost to the Union VET policy.

In addition, as part of the VET policy framework, two specific VET instruments have been developed and implemented since 2009 to support Member States in improving the quality of their VET systems (the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework in Vocational Education and Training - EQAVET) and in making VET more flexible (the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training - ECVET). Recent evaluation of these two instruments show areas where they have had a positive impact and areas where their impact has been more limited. They also indicate the need to enhance the articulation between these two instruments and the overarching VET policy agenda as well as the broader skills and qualifications instruments such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Europass.

With the policy framework for European cooperation in education and training and specific priorities for VET ending in 2020, there is an opportunity to define a new and more ambitious Union policy on VET that responds to the challenges described above. The overall objective should be to modernise the EU's VET policy to meet the large upskilling and reskilling needs driven by the common ambition to be fit for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in particular to become a climate neutral Europe and to support the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The proposal for a Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience was announced in the Communication "A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions" of 14 January 2020<sup>5</sup>. It is an important part of the ongoing implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights strengthening principle 1 "education, training and lifelong learning".

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<sup>5</sup> Communication from the Commission A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions, COM(2020) 14 final.

The new VET policy agenda places VET at the core of the lifelong learning continuum, strongly interlinked to all other education and training sectors, while also being a driver for innovation, competitiveness, employment and social cohesion policies. Therefore, the proposal is firmly embedded in other upcoming Commission's policy initiatives, notably the Commission Communication on the European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience<sup>6</sup>, on the Communication on Youth Employment Support - A Bridge to Jobs for the next generation<sup>7</sup>, the Digital Education Action Plan, the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020), and the European Education Area, which cover all levels and types of education and training.

At the same time it is an opportunity to consolidate the existing VET policy framework at European level by integrating policy agenda, EU VET instruments, governance structures and working methods in one single legal act. This will increase the visibility of VET policy at European level and serve as a single point of reference and a blueprint for VET modernisation.

The proposal also responds to a call addressed to the European Commission from Member States and social partners in the Opinion of the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training to prepare a proposal to streamline and consolidate the EU VET policy framework, governance and existing EU instruments in a form of an overarching Council Recommendation on VET.

### Scope of the proposal

The Commission Proposal for a Council Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience aims at renewing the EU's VET policy by:

- a) **modernising the Union policy on VET** supporting the transitions to a green and digital economy in times of demographic change as well as upward convergence of national VET systems. Given the crucial role VET and, in particular, apprenticeships play in improving employability, the proposed modernisation will equally **support the fight against youth unemployment**. It will also include the increased use of digital tools and continued digitalisation of VET systems, which will contribute to increasing their resilience.
- b) **confirming the central role of VET in the lifelong learning continuum** and its strong links to all education and training sectors, which calls for permeability and transparency,
- c) **streamlining the European cooperation process** in the field of VET by integrating and adapting the instruments for VET quality assurance (EQAVET) and flexibility and tailored provision (ECVET),
- d) **simplifying VET governance at Union level** (related to integrated ECVET and EQAVET Recommendations) and defining the working methods, types of support activities at Union level and a monitoring framework to assess progress towards the implementation of this Recommendation, in full coherence with the broader governance framework for education and training,

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<sup>6</sup> COM(2020)274 final

<sup>7</sup> COM(2020)276 final

Concretely, for actions to be taken **at national level**, the new elements are the following:

- **Underlining the crucial role VET systems play for the young people** entering the labour market and adding that VET systems should play an equally important role for the adults in need of continuous up- and reskilling;
- **Granting VET providers a level of autonomy** to allow them to react quickly to skills challenges, offer fast reskilling programmes and work in close partnerships with employers;
- **Modularising VET programmes** and expanding them to higher levels of qualifications and microcredentials;
- **Linking VET to forward-looking economic strategies and innovation systems**;
- **Promoting Centres of Vocational Excellence** (through Erasmus+) linked to smart specialisation strategies and offering innovative services that include business incubators, support to start ups and technology diffusion in particular for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), to make VET resilient and fit for increased digitalisation, digital readiness and to foster transition from sectors that are in decline to new growing sectors;
- **Embedding environmental and social sustainability** into VET curricula and organisational management;
- **Ensuring better permeability** between the systems of education and training;
- Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, **increasing the digital readiness of VET institutions**, by promoting new learning environments, tools and pedagogies in particular linked to digitalisation, catering for both VET specific and transversal curricula and content, and by including the digitalisation aspect in the EQAVET framework;
- **Increasing attractiveness of VET** for learners and companies, including micro, small and medium-sized, including through internationalisation and increased opportunities for mobility of learners and staff through the Erasmus+ programme and other funding opportunities;
- Addressing **gender** bias and gender stereotypical choices and supporting diversity and inclusiveness;
- **Defining a set of indicators and objectives** to enable both quantitative and qualitative monitoring of performance of vocational education and training systems.

In addition to reconfirming the role of the tripartite Advisory Committee on Vocational Training (ACVT), the proposal also puts forward the following **new elements at EU**:

- **Providing support service** that caters for the various dimensions of VET systems (e.g. apprenticeships, Centres of Vocational Excellence, continuing vocational education and training, quality assurance), bringing together the management of several separate support structures (EQAVET and ECVET secretariats, apprenticeship support services, expert working groups;

- **Supporting the digital readiness of VET institutions** through the reinforced deployment of the SELFIE tool and its gradual extension to cater for work based learning <sup>8</sup>;
- **Promoting European VET as a global reference point in skills development** and boosting mobility and recognition of vocational education and training qualifications/diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, including through development of the concept of the European Vocational Core Profiles as part of Europass platform and complemented, where possible, by vocational digital content;
- **Introducing a peer review process on quality assurance in VET** to support upward convergence in quality, transparency and mutual trust.

## 2. POLITICAL CONTEXT

Climate change, environmental degradation and technological development will have a major impact on our societies and our way of life, which will lead to radical transformations. These transformations present both opportunities and challenges for the EU's economy, industry and citizens: jobs will disappear and new ones will be created, and the existing ones will undergo change requiring new skills and a high degree of adaptability from the individuals. At the same time, the European population is aging and is becoming more and more diverse. Employment increasingly concentrated in urban centres and rural depopulation create difficulties in optimal provision of services including education and training and infrastructures (e.g. broadband) in remote areas. Opportunities for continuing learning, beyond the initial education and training, are critical to cope with the changing nature of and fluctuating demand for work.

Vocational education and training (VET) is the sector of education and training closest to labour market and is the most important sector in providing labour market relevant skills and qualifications to both young people to make the transition to work and to adults throughout their working life to remain employable and adaptable to changing tasks, work environments and career demands. With the overall economic and societal trends and challenges, the importance of continuing training for the workforce and the need for up-skilling and reskilling is growing.

The scale of the challenge is significant. The numbers of young people choosing VET is decreasing, while the EU is far from attaining its current very modest participation

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<sup>8</sup> SELFIE (Self-reflection on Effective Learning by Fostering the use of Innovative Educational Technologies) is a free, easy-to-use, customisable tool to help schools assess where they stand with learning in the digital age. It has been designed by JRC with the aim to help schools embed digital technologies into teaching, learning and student assessment. It can highlight what's working well, where improvement is needed and what the priorities should be. The tool is currently available in the 24 official languages of the European Union with more languages to be added over time. SELFIE gathers – anonymously – the views of students, teachers and school leaders on how technology is used in their school. This is done using short statements and questions and a simple 1-5 agreement scale. The statements cover areas such as leadership, infrastructure, teacher training and students' digital competence. The results of the self-assessment can be used strategically at system or institutional level to deploy follow-up capacity building and infrastructure investments, in line with the gaps identified.



target of 15% of 25-64 year olds engaging in learning in the past four weeks. There is therefore a need to define a new and more ambitious policy agenda for the next decade to help the EU remain competitive and socially cohesive, to meet the goals of its industrial, green, innovation and digital strategies, and to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, the Commission has proposed a bold and comprehensive **plan to repair and prepare for the next generation**. The plan presents a roadmap on how to kick-start the European economy, protect and create jobs, boost the green and digital transitions, and make it fairer, more resilient and more sustainable for future generations. It underlines that improving and adapting skills, knowledge and competences has become all the more important.

The Next Generation EU<sup>9</sup> will raise new financing on the financial markets for 2021-2024 for the newly proposed **Recovery and Resilience Facility**<sup>10</sup> and **REACT-EU**<sup>11</sup>. Both programme will include investments in **skills, education and training** to lay the basis for a green, digital and resilient recovery. The Commission has also adjusted its proposals for the future European Social Fund Plus to give even stronger support to for **youth employment measures and education and skills**.

As part of the Recovery Strategy, the Commission has also proposed to provide substantial additional funding of EUR 30 billion for the **Just Transition Fund**, bringing the total to EUR 40 billion. This funding will be used to alleviate the socio-economic impacts of the transition towards climate neutrality in the regions most affected, for example, by supporting the re-skilling of workers.<sup>12</sup>

This links in with the **European Green Deal**, which is the EU's new growth strategy that aims to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050 and where economic growth is decoupled from resource use. Investing in a **more circular economy** has the potential to create at least 700,000 new jobs by 2030 and help the EU to reduce its dependency on external suppliers and increase its resilience to global supply issues. The upcoming **Renovation Wave** will focus on creating jobs in construction, renovation and other labour-intensive industries.<sup>13</sup> The transitions in these areas lead to an increased need in re- and upskilling. VET programmes can play a key role in delivering on these skills.

The Commission also adopted a **New Industrial Strategy for Europe**<sup>14</sup> to address the twin challenge of the green and the digital transitions. It calls for decisive action to make lifelong learning a reality for all and ensure that education and training keep pace with the twin transitions. It also calls on higher education and VET to provide more scientists, engineers and technicians for the labour market. Equally, the **SME Strategy for a sustainable and digital Europe** highlights how an increasing number of SMEs is confronted with the challenge of finding the necessary skills and the fact

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<sup>9</sup> COM(2020) 456 final

<sup>10</sup> COM(2020) 408 final

<sup>11</sup> COM (2020) 451 final

<sup>12</sup> COM (2020) 442 final

<sup>13</sup> COM(2020) 456 final

<sup>14</sup> COM(2020) 102 final

that availability of skilled staff or experienced managers remains the most important problem for a quarter of SMEs in the European Union<sup>15</sup>. VET is particularly relevant for SMEs to make sure that their workforce has the skills needed on the labour market.

The opportunities and challenges of the ongoing digital transformation and Europe's policy response have been outlined in the strategy **Shaping Europe's Digital Future**, which highlights the need to invest in education and training and digital skills of all Europeans.

The **Commission Communication on 'A Strong Social Europe for Just Transition'**<sup>16</sup> sets out the road towards an Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights. It presents EU level initiatives that support the implementation of the Pillar and launches a broad discussion with all EU countries, and regions, and with all our partners. To place skills, employability and human capital centre stage, the Commission is coming with the reinforced Skills Agenda. The Communication also sets out that The Commission will also further develop the objectives of the European Education Area - to make it easier for learners to move across borders in Europe and will improve access to quality and inclusive education and training for all- and establish a new education and training cooperation framework with the Member States covering all education and training sectors.

## 2.1. VET policy in Europe

According to the Charter of Fundamental rights of the European Union<sup>17</sup>, Article 14, everyone has the right to education and to have access to vocational and continuing training. The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)<sup>18</sup>, Article 156, specify that the Commission shall encourage cooperation between Member States and facilitate the coordination of their action in all social policy fields including employment and basic and advanced vocational training, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content and organisation of vocational training. Article 165 states clearly the responsibility of Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems, but also that the EU shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action. Article 166 of the TFEU calls on the Union to implement a vocational training policy which should support and supplement the action of the Member States, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content and organisation of vocational training. The Union actions should facilitate adaptation to industrial changes and improve initial and continuing vocational training in order to facilitate vocational integration and reintegration into the labour market. Strong vocational policies are also essential in order to achieve the goal of promoting a skilled, trained and adaptable workforce and labour markets responsive to economic change, set in Article 145 TFEU.

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<sup>15</sup> COM(2020) 103 final

<sup>16</sup> COM(2020) 14 final

<sup>17</sup> OJ C 326, 26.10.2012

<sup>18</sup> OJ C 326, 26.10.2012,

The Copenhagen Declaration, adopted as a Council Resolution<sup>19</sup> in 2002 launched the European strategy for enhanced cooperation in vocational education and training (VET) to improve cooperation, promote mobility and increase the transparency and recognition of competences and qualifications ('Copenhagen process') as voluntary process of an open method of coordination. The process has been steered by the tripartite Advisory Committee on Vocational Training (ACVT) established in 1963 and Director-Generals for VET.

Furthermore, VET policy framework at EU level is supported by different expert and stakeholders bodies such as the Expert group of EU providers association of vocational education and training, European Alliance for Apprenticeships, groups related to the implementation of the ECVET and EQAVET Recommendations, the ET 2020 Working Group on VET and adult learning.

The Europass Decision<sup>20</sup> was adopted in 2004, seeking to support the transparency of skills and qualifications by providing instruments to individuals, namely a portfolio of 5 standardised Europass document templates which facilitated the communication and understanding of skills and qualifications in a consistent way. The European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF)<sup>21</sup> was established in 2008 through a European Parliament and Council Recommendation with the aim to improve the transparency, comparability and portability of people's qualifications in Europe. The Recommendation created a common reference framework of eight European generic levels of learning where each level was defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence.

With intensive cooperation with Member States and social partners, two specific VET instruments were developed and established in 2009 through Recommendations of the Council and the European Parliament. The European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET<sup>22</sup>) set a reference framework to support Member States in improving the quality of their VET systems and to contribute to increased transparency of VET policy developments between Member States, thereby promoting mutual trust, mobility of workers and learners, and lifelong learning. The purpose of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET<sup>23</sup>) was to make VET learning pathways more flexible, allowing learners to obtain qualifications by accumulating credit (assessed units of learning outcomes) earned in different locations, settings and timeframes.

After the financial crisis and against the backdrop of high youth unemployment rates, the conclusions of the November 2010 Council underlined the important contribution VET systems can potentially make to the Europe 2020 strategy<sup>24</sup>. The Bruges Communiqué<sup>25</sup> in 2010 recognised the urgency to invest in high quality vocational training and promoted a set of actions to increase the quality of VET in the following decade. The Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of

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<sup>19</sup> OJ C 13, 18.1.2003

<sup>20</sup> OJ L 112, 2.5.2018

<sup>21</sup> OJ C 111, 6.5.2008, p.1.

<sup>22</sup> OJ C 155, 8.7.2009

<sup>23</sup> OJ C 155, 8.7.2009

<sup>24</sup> OJ C 119, 28.5.2009

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/content/bruges-communique>

non-formal and informal learning<sup>26</sup> invited Member States to put in place arrangements for validating non-formal and informal learning linked to national qualifications frameworks and enable individuals to obtain full or partial qualifications on the basis of validated learning outcomes acquired outside formal education and training systems. The Riga Conclusions<sup>27</sup> in 2015 identified five medium-term priority areas in which vocational training could be further improved until 2020. The focus was placed on promoting work-based learning, quality assurance, enhanced access to VET, the strengthening of key competences and the professional development of VET trainers.

The 2016 New Skills Agenda for Europe<sup>28</sup> reconfirmed the Riga priorities and identified 10 areas for action. As part of its priorities for action 'Making VET a first choice', the Skills Agenda proposed the possible revision of the EQAVET and the ECVET in order to increase the attractiveness of VET through quality provision and flexible organisation. Furthermore, it highlighted the need to support opportunities for learners to undertake a work-based learning experience as part of their studies, and a Recommendation on the European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships<sup>29</sup> (EFQEA) which was adopted by the Council in 2018.

The proposal of the Skills Agenda to gain better information on the labour market outcomes or learning progression of higher education and VET graduates lead to the Council Recommendation on tracking graduates<sup>30</sup> adopted in 2017. The Recommendation calls upon Member States to improve the availability and quality of data about VET and higher education graduate outcomes by 2020.

The Skills Agenda also proposed the revision of the Europass framework. The new Decision of the European Parliament and the Council on Europass<sup>31</sup>, adopted in 2018, establishes a platform that will offer an e-Portfolio tool for users (e.g. job-seekers, learners) to store information on their skills and qualifications, create CVs and applications. It serves as a web portal with information on qualifications and qualification systems, guidance, validation, recognition and other topics related to skills and qualifications to help Europass users. The new Europass service supports use of authentication services (e.g. digital signatures/certificates) to reflect the increasing use of digital technology to exchange information. The framework for digitally signed credentials supports authentication of a diverse range of credentials over time e.g. qualifications, course credentials, records of experience, certification of skills, recognition statements. It is important to note that the Europass service for digitally signed credentials does not replace quality assurance, accreditation or other national public or private systems but offers technical solutions that issuers, holders and recipients of digital credentials can use. The technical framework is built on open standards and is made available for use on a voluntary basis, free-of-charge to users.

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<sup>26</sup> OJ C 398, 22.12.2012, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> [https://www.izm.gov.lv/images/RigaConclusions\\_2015.pdf](https://www.izm.gov.lv/images/RigaConclusions_2015.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> COM(2016) 381 final

<sup>29</sup> Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships, OJ C 153, 2.5.2018 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32018H0502%2801%29>

<sup>30</sup> OJ C 423, 9.12.2017

<sup>31</sup> OJ L112, 2.5.2018

The Skills Agenda also initiated the revision of EQF. The revised European Qualifications Framework Recommendation<sup>32</sup>, adopted in 2018, consolidates the purpose of the EQF, namely to improve the transparency, comparability and portability of people's qualifications. In addition, it outlines in its Annex IV the quality assurance principles for qualifications that are part of national qualifications frameworks or systems referenced to the EQF. Annex V of the Recommendation outlines principles for credit systems that are related to NQFs referenced to the EQF.

The priorities of the 2016 New Skills Agenda are highly relevant for the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>33</sup> proclaimed in 2017 and they are also supporting the objectives of the European Education Area by 2025 launched in 2017, notably on 'improving the inclusive, lifelong-learning based and innovation-driven nature of the education and training systems'.

The Blueprint for sectoral cooperation on skills is a new strategic approach to mobilise stakeholders to develop demand-led sectoral skills strategies in Europe. It provides a strong basis to launch larger efforts. To date it has been piloted in additive manufacturing; automotive; batteries; bio-economy; construction; defence technologies; energy value chain digitalisation and energy-intensive industries; space; maritime technologies; maritime shipping; microelectronics; steel; textile-clothing-footwear-leather; and tourism.

The Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad<sup>34</sup> invite Member States to put in place the steps necessary to achieve, by 2025, automatic recognition of higher education and upper secondary qualifications, as well as recognition of the outcomes of learning periods, without making learners go through a separate recognition procedure. The Recommendation stresses the need to further develop quality assurance instruments in vocational education and training in line with the European Framework for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training and its further developments with a view to foster transparency and build trust in each other's secondary education and training systems. What concerns facilitation of mobility and recognition of the outcomes of learning periods abroad, the Recommendation calls on extending the use of the EU tools developed in VET: such as those made available through the Europass online platform and the Memorandum of Understanding and Learning Agreement that are part of the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training.

Another relevant European policy development in the field of education and training was the launch of the first full version of **ESCO**<sup>35</sup>, the multilingual classification of European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations in July 2017. In July 2018, the Commission adopted the Implementing Acts required by Article 19 of the EURES Regulation to guide and support Member States to map their national classifications to ESCO, or adopt ESCO directly into their systems. This adoption

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<sup>32</sup> OJ C 189, 15.6.2017

<sup>33</sup> *"Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market."*

<sup>34</sup> OJ C 444, 10.12.2018

<sup>35</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/esco/portal/home>

marked the start of the 3-year period for Member States to comply with the requirements of the Regulation. Mapping the national skills classification to ESCO will have the potential to use a standard terminology to describe the details of a job, the professional profile of a job seeker or the content of a learning outcome thus to achieve greater transparency of skills and qualifications.

Funding for Member States is ensured by the European Social Fund which from 2014 to 2020 has been investing € 6.4 billion in youth employment and € 27 billion in education and training measures. Under the Erasmus+ Programme (2014-2020) almost € 3 billion is assigned to VET for mobility, cooperation and reforms in the education sector.

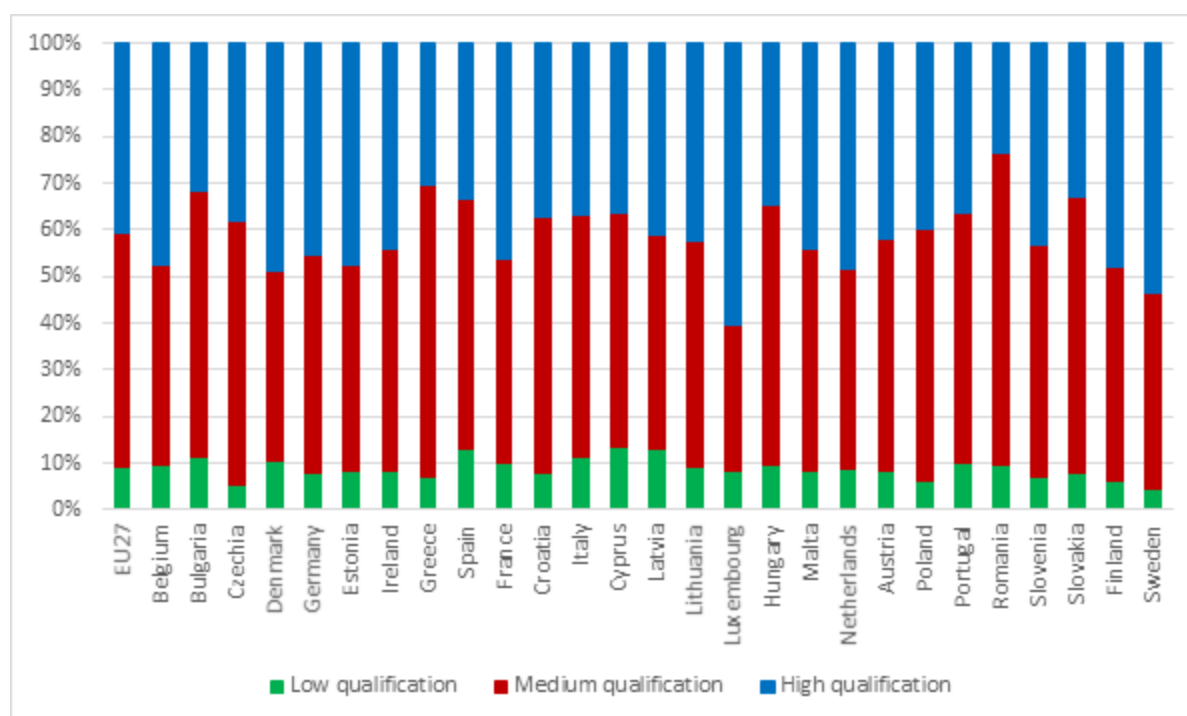
### 3. STATE OF PLAY OF VET

#### 3.1. Prevalence, benefits and outcomes of VET

Vocational education and training (VET) is a comprehensive term commonly used to refer to education, training and skills development in a wide range of occupational fields, production, services and livelihoods. Vocational education and training activities can take many forms – ranging, for example, from guided training received on-the-job, to non-formal training opportunities, to formal or preparatory programmes spanning education levels from lower-secondary education to tertiary education.

Traditionally, VET programmes were seen to prepare individuals for jobs in medium-skilled occupations, which, even if declining, continue to represent the largest share of jobs currently available in the labour market. In 2018, in EU28 41% of all jobs were in occupations requiring a high-level qualification; 50% of all jobs were in occupations requiring a medium-level qualification and further 9% of jobs were in occupations requiring only a low-level qualification.

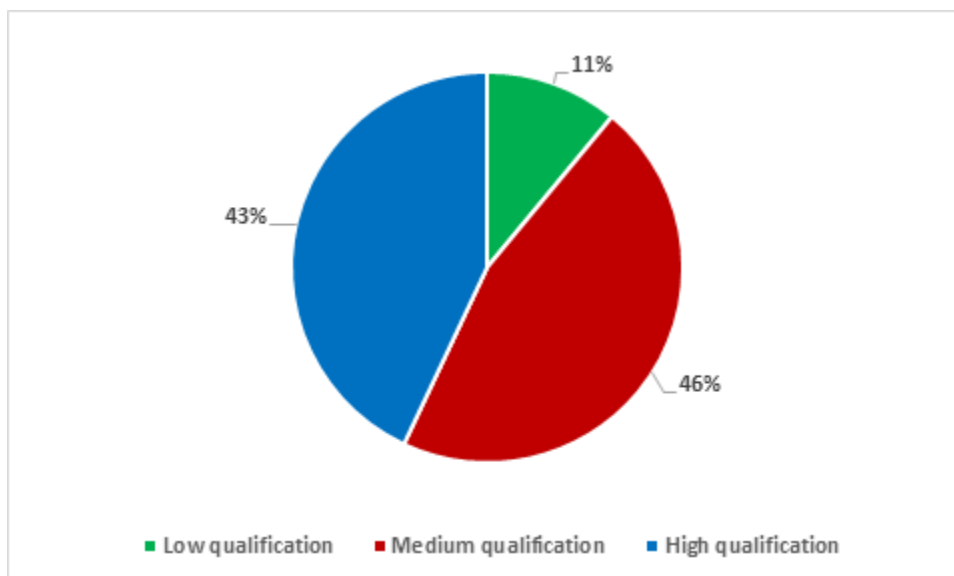
**Figure 1: The share of jobs by level of qualification needed, 2018**



Source: Eurostat, EU LFS, 2018, online data code [[lfsa\\_egais](#)]. Reading note: share of jobs calculated based on the number of employed persons aged 15-74. According to ISCO 08 classification of occupations, jobs requiring high level (i.e. tertiary) of qualification are classified within the occupational groups of Managers (ISCO 1), Professionals (ISCO 2) and Technicians and associate professionals (ISCO 3). Jobs requiring medium level (i.e. upper-secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary) qualification are classified within the occupational groups of Clerical support workers (ISCO 4), Service and sales workers (ISCO 5), Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers (ISCO 6), Craft and related trade workers (ISCO 7) and Plant and machine operators and assemblers (ISCO 8). Jobs requiring only a low level of skills include the occupational group of elementary occupations (ISCO 9).

In terms of actual job opportunities, based on Cedefop employment projections<sup>36</sup>, job openings requiring medium-level qualification will also continue to represent the largest share of all job-openings (46% of all job openings over the period of 2016-2030), closely followed in number by job-openings requiring high-level of qualification (43% of all job-openings).

**Figure 2: The share of total job openings by level of qualification needed, 2016-2030, EU28**



Source: CEDEFOP Skills Forecasts 2016-2030. Extracted from Skills Panorama online article: [https://skillspanorama.cedefop.europa.eu/en/analytical\\_highlights/skills-forecast-key-eu-trends-2030](https://skillspanorama.cedefop.europa.eu/en/analytical_highlights/skills-forecast-key-eu-trends-2030)

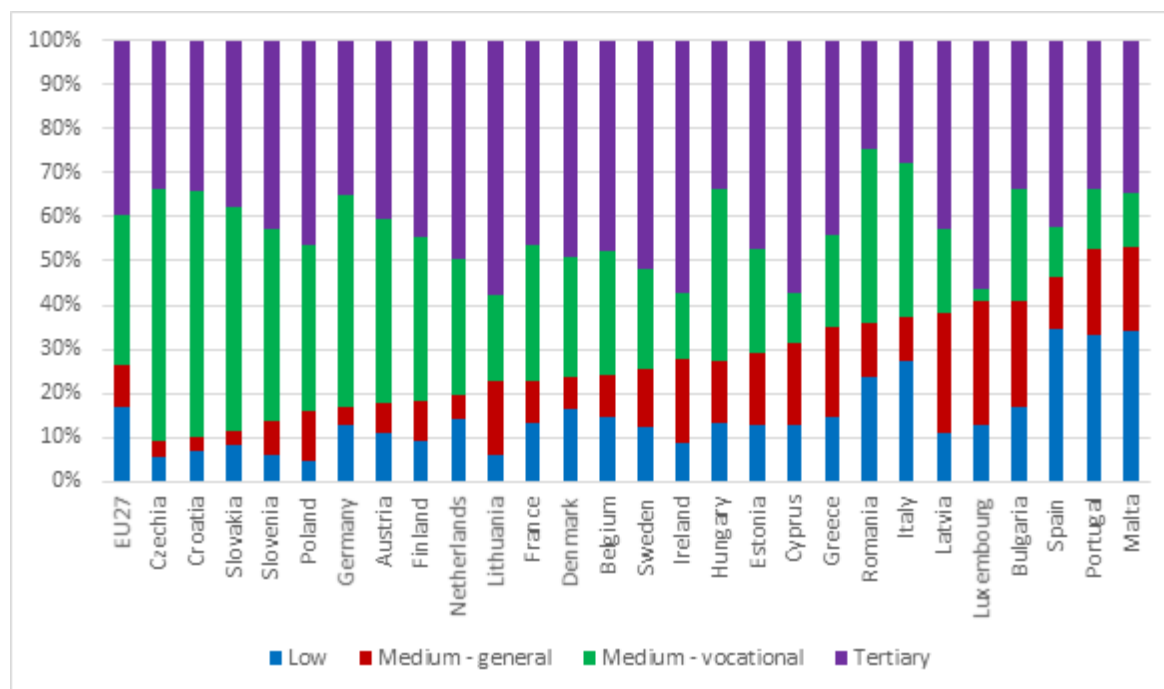
Over the last decades, given the expansion of jobs in occupations requiring high-level of qualification, in many countries VET programmes that target to deliver higher-level skills, a number of which lead to tertiary qualifications, have also been

<sup>36</sup> Cedefop (2018) Skills forecast. Trends and challenges up to 2030.



introduced (European Commission, 2016). For example, around two-thirds of EU Member States, report having vocational/professional programmes at ISCED<sup>37</sup> 5 – short cycle tertiary education level (Eurostat, 2017). Furthermore, a third of OECD countries also report programmes with professional orientation at bachelor’s and master’s levels, even if definitions on programme orientation at these levels are not yet agreed internationally (OECD, forthcoming).

**Figure 3: The level and orientation of educational attainment of young adults aged 30-34, 2018**



Source: Eurostat EU LFS, 2018, online data source [\[edat lfs 9914\]](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/lfs). Tertiary level includes vocational, professional and academic qualifications. The data is sorted by the proportion of individuals without a qualification leading to a direct entry to the labour market, i.e. those with either a low or medium-general qualification.

Nevertheless, despite educational upgrading, still a large proportion of young adults do not attain a qualification which leads to a labour market entry (i.e. a vocational or a higher education qualification). In the EU27, out of all adults in the age group 30-34 (when the majority of young people have completed their initial education and training), 9.8% have achieved at most a medium-level qualification of a general orientation, and 16.7% a qualification below an upper-secondary level diploma (i.e. being low qualified). These figures suggest that more than a quarter of young adults in the EU do not attain a qualification with a direct labour market relevance. There are, nonetheless, significant differences among countries – for example, in Czechia or Croatia this share is up to 10%, whereas in Malta and Portugal, it is above 50%.

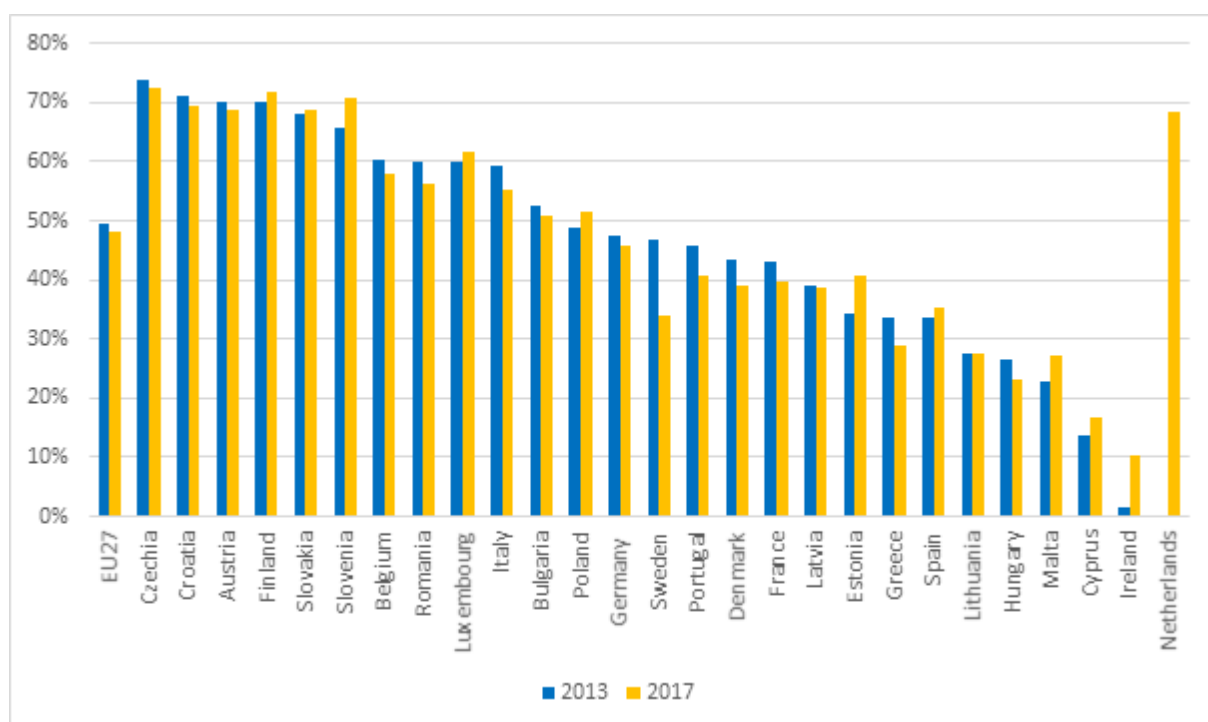
Overall, the largest share of VET learners are concentrated in educational programmes at upper-secondary level. They make-up nearly half of all learners

<sup>37</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/International\\_Standard\\_Classification\\_of\\_Education\\_\(ISCED\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/International_Standard_Classification_of_Education_(ISCED))



enrolled at that level. Over the last 5 years, given the demographic developments, the absolute number of VET learners enrolled at upper-secondary level declined by a little more than 5%, however in relative terms the share of VET learners has declined only by 0.5 p.ps.

**Figure 4: The share of learners enrolled in upper-secondary VET programmes**



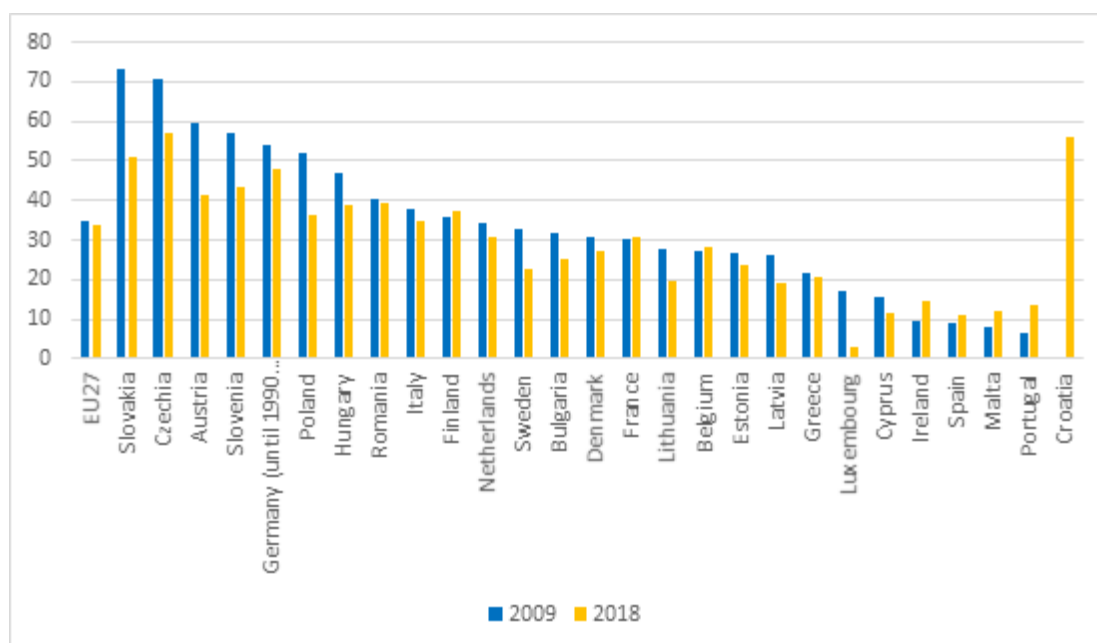
Source: Eurostat, UOE data, reference years 2013 and 2017, online data code [\[educ\\_uoe\\_enrs04\]](#). Reading note: the data is sorted by the enrolment share in 2013 in descending order, Data on enrolment share in 2013 in the Netherlands is not available.

Overall, the largest share of VET learners are likely concentrated in educational programmes at upper-secondary level, they make-up nearly half of all learners enrolled at that level. Over the last 5 years, given the demographic developments, the absolute number of VET learners enrolled at upper-secondary level in EU27 declined by a little more than 5%, however in relative terms the share of VET learners has declined only by 1.3 p.ps. over the same period (Eurostat, 2017). When looking over a longer period since 2005, for countries where data is available the enrolment in VET seems to have been rather stable, with only a few exceptions - in several countries enrolments have declined significantly (notably in Sweden) while in several others it has substantially increased (notably in Ireland, Portugal and Estonia).

In terms of study field, the largest group of upper-secondary education graduates from VET programmes are specialised in technical fields (i.e. engineering,

manufacturing and construction), but business, administration and law, as well as services, are also popular fields for VET graduates. Gender differences are substantial, with women being less likely to have a VET degree in most countries, and those who have a VET degree specialising in different fields than men. For example, in 2017 in the EU28 women represent only 13% of learners in the field of engineering, manufacturing and construction, or 16% in the field of information and communication technologies. On the other hand, 82% of learners are women in the field of health and welfare (Eurostat, 2017). Gender imbalances in particular fields or types of programme, for example, can raise equity issues – in an apprenticeship system dominated by the construction sector, the benefits yielded by apprenticeships fall disproportionately on men. Policies typically aim to address this in two ways: widening the coverage of programmes (e.g. expanding apprenticeships into traditionally female occupations) and encouraging entry into non-traditional occupations (e.g. encouraging women to train as electricians).

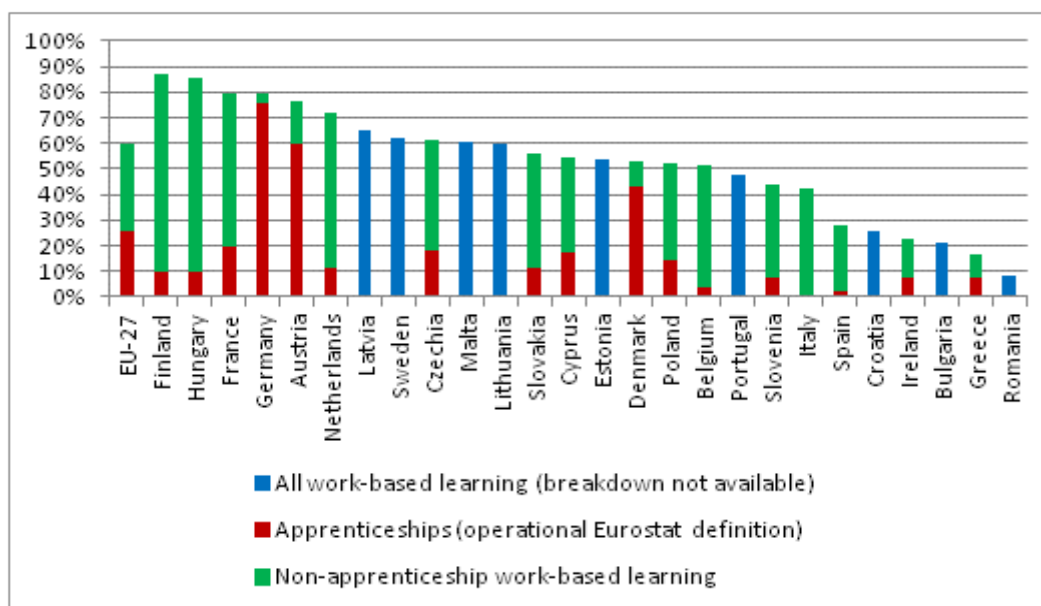
**Figure 5: The share of young adults aged 30-34 with a medium-level VET qualification out of total cohort of 30-34 year olds, 2009 and 2018**



Source: Eurostat EU LFS, 2018 and 2009, for 2018 data, the online data code is [\[edat\\_lfs\\_9914\]](#), 2009 data was provided to DG EMPL by Eurostat as a special data extraction from EU LFS 2009 ad-hoc module on young people in the labour market. Reading note: data for 2009 is based on a LFS ad-hoc module on young people in the labour market. The definitions of VET in 2009 and 2018 might not be fully comparable, but both sources cover only VET at medium level (i.e. upper-secondary – ISCED 3, or post-secondary non-tertiary – ISCED 4 programmes). Data for 2009 were provided for DG EMPL by Eurostat as a special data extraction. Data on the share of VET graduates in 2009 in Malta is unreliable and for Croatia is not available.

Similarly to the proportion of young adults who pursue a VET pathway at upper secondary level, which seems to have declined only slightly on average in the EU27, similarly the share of young adults whose highest level of educational attainment is a medium-level VET qualification has slightly declining from 34.8% in 2009 to 33.8% in 2018 (Eurostat, 2018).

**Figure 6: Exposure of recent graduates (aged 15-34) with a medium-level vocational education and training qualifications to work-based learning, 2016**



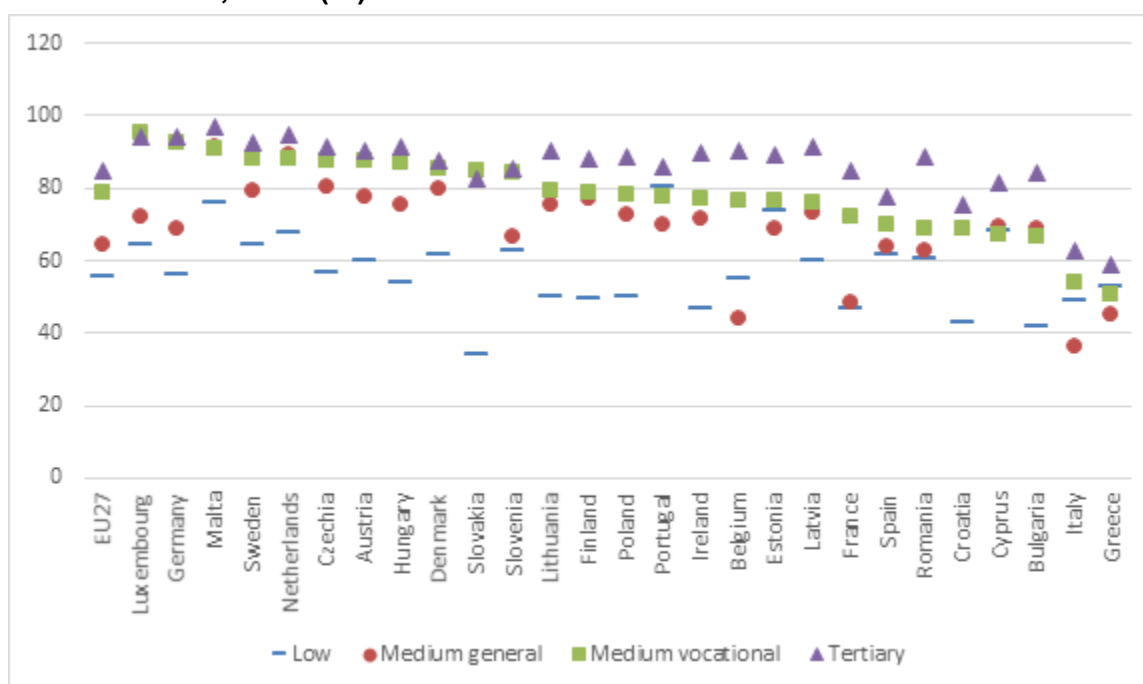
Source: Eurostat, LFS ad-hoc module on young people in the labour market, 2016, special data extraction for DG EMPL . Reading note: Recent graduates are defined as individuals who have graduated 1-3 years before the survey. VET at medium level includes qualifications from upper-secondary (ISCED 3) or post-secondary non-tertiary (ISCED 4) education and training programmes. The data also include those still enrolled in education or training. Operational Eurostat definition of apprenticeship includes remunerated, curriculum-related work-experience during studies, of at least 6 months in duration. Data on share of recent graduates exposed to all work-based learning is not reliable for Malta and Croatia; data on share of recent graduates exposed to apprenticeships is not reliable for Belgium, Cyprus, Italy, Slovenia and Spain; data on share of recent graduates exposed to other types of work-based learning apart from apprenticeships is not reliable for Cyprus.

An important feature of many high-quality VET programmes is a systematic integration of work-based learning components (e.g. traineeships, apprenticeships, dual-system education programmes), bringing about a variety of benefits for learners and future employers (OECD, 2019; JRC, 2020). Notably, apprenticeships and other forms of work-based learning considerably facilitate the transition of young adults into the labour market. In 2016, in the EU only 63.2% of young adults who were not exposed to work-based learning were employed, compared to 69.1% for those with mandatory traineeship experience and 83.7% for those with an apprenticeship experience. However, on average only 59.3% of recent graduates (aged 15-34) from vocational education and training in EU27 reported to have been exposed to work-based learning in 2016, with 25.7 % being part of an apprenticeship-type programme and 33.6% having profited from other types of work-based learning.

The outcomes of VET graduates, given restrictions in data, can most reliably be assessed for individuals graduating from VET programs at upper-secondary level and not continuing at higher levels of education, comparing with the labor outcomes of individuals graduating from general programs at the same level who also do not continue study at higher levels. These can be considered the two most similar groups of individuals for comparison, even if some important differences remain between the two, on the one hand due to tracking of individuals at earlier stages of education and on the other due to different propensity, depending on educational pathway, to continue studies at higher levels. In this regard, a major review done by the OECD

recently analyzed in detail the outcomes of VET from this perspective (OECD, forthcoming).

**Figure 7: Employment rates of recent graduates aged 20-34 by educational attainment level, 2018 (%)**



Source: Eurostat (EU-LFS, 2018, online data code [\[edat\\_lfse\\_24\]](#)). Reading note: data on the employment rate of low qualified includes all young adults aged 20-34 not enrolled in education or training no matter how long ago they completed their education. Medium-level educational attainment covers educational qualifications at upper-secondary (ISCED 3) or post-secondary non-tertiary (ISCED 4) levels. Data for medium and highly qualified include only individuals who have graduated 1-3 years before the survey. The data exclude those still enrolled in education or training. The data is sorted by the employment rates of recent graduates from medium vocational programmes in a descending order. For Croatia, data is not available for the employment rate of graduates from medium-level programmes of general orientation.

When comparing the outcomes of VET at upper-secondary level, it is found that in general graduates from VET at upper-secondary level have higher employment rates and lower unemployment rates than graduates from general programmes at the same education level. Work intensity among VET graduates is also slightly higher than among general education graduates. VET graduates have broadly the same outcomes in terms of job quality as general education graduates, although there are some dimensions in which the former group performs slightly worse than other graduates, even when they have similar characteristics and work in similar jobs (OECD, forthcoming).

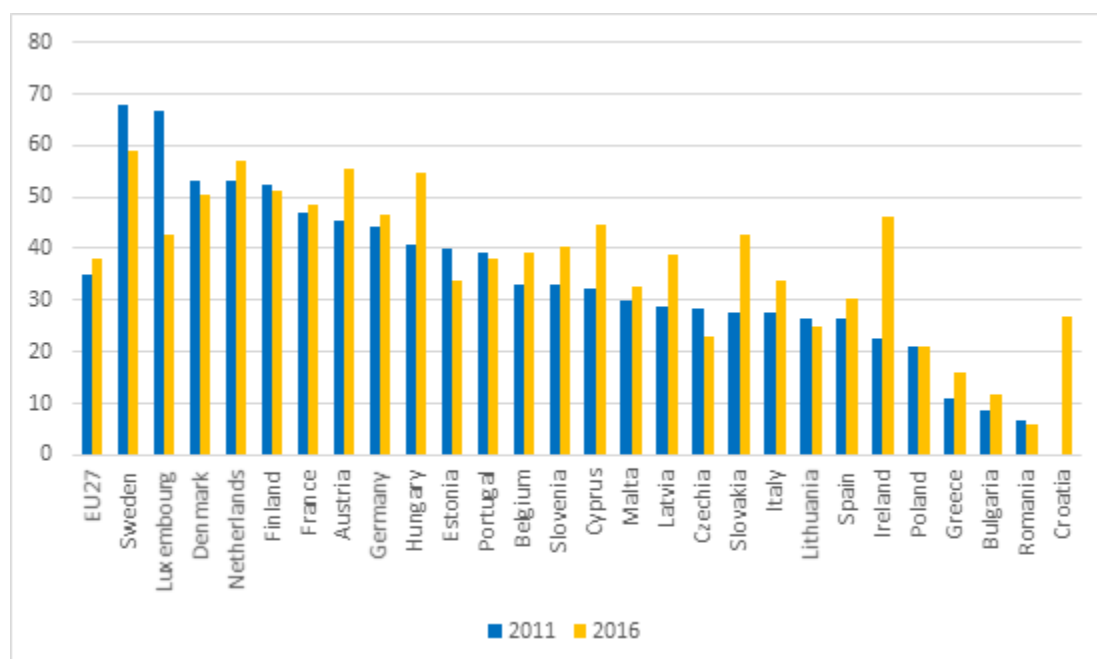
VET graduates have moderately higher wage levels than general education graduates although this level is substantially lower than for tertiary education graduates, even when they work in similar jobs. VET graduates are also less likely than general education graduates to report being ill prepared for their job and are more likely to work in occupations that match their education level. Nevertheless, a significant share of VET graduates work in occupations that do not match their field of study. Furthermore, fewer VET graduates are employed in high-skill occupations, compared to general education graduates (OECD, forthcoming).

For VET graduates to be resilient in a changing labour market, it is imperative that they have strong foundational skills. However, the Survey of Adult Skills shows that, in many countries, VET graduates have lower numeracy, literacy and problem-solving skills than general education graduates. At the same time, only a relatively limited share of VET graduates participate in job-related training, although they have seen stronger growth in training participation in the past ten years than other graduates. In spite of the importance for VET graduates to up-skill and re-skill, they show low interest in training (OECD, forthcoming).

Apart from formal (initial) education and training, covered above, also non-formal (continuing) education and training is seen as an increasingly important part of VET systems. This is also evident at the European level, where the Council since 2003 have set a benchmark to highlight the ambition to increase adult participation in learning (of which the majority is job-related). Despite this ambition, progress towards achieving the benchmark has been slow, both due to difficulties in changing the behaviour of (mostly) private actors but also in part due to weaknesses in the definition of the indicator, which considers participation only during a reference period of 4 weeks, as it is measured in the EU Labour Force Survey. Such a short reference period is not ideal for monitoring adult learning, where majority of learnings undertake only just one or two learning activities over a period of one year.

Notably, lack of progress with regard to the original indicator could in part be explained as a statistical artefact caused by low sensitivity of the existing indicator measuring adult learning in the EU Labour Force Survey (JRC, 2020). Conversely other, specialised surveys - such as the EU Adult Education Survey or the EU Continuing Vocational Training Survey, which have indicators on adult learning that are more comprehensive, both show a steady increase in the prevalence of learning among adults (Eurostat, 2018).

**Figure 8: Share of adults (aged 25-64) participating in education and training (12 months reference period), 2011 and 2016**



Source: Eurostat, AES, 2011 and 2016, special data extraction for DG EMPL provided by Eurostat. Reading note: the indicator represents the share of adults aged 25-64 who report to have participated in at least one formal or non-formal education or training activity, excluding guided on the job training or informal learning. The data is sorted according to the share of adult learning in 2011 in descending order. Data not available for Croatia in 2011. There is break in time series between 2011 and 2016 in Ireland, Luxembourg and Sweden.

Therefore, it is proposed for the analysis of adult participation in learning to rather use a more comprehensive measure, i.e. participation over a 12 months period. Based on the data from Adult Education Survey, in the EU27 adult learning participation rate has increased from 35% in 2011 to 37.9% in 2016.

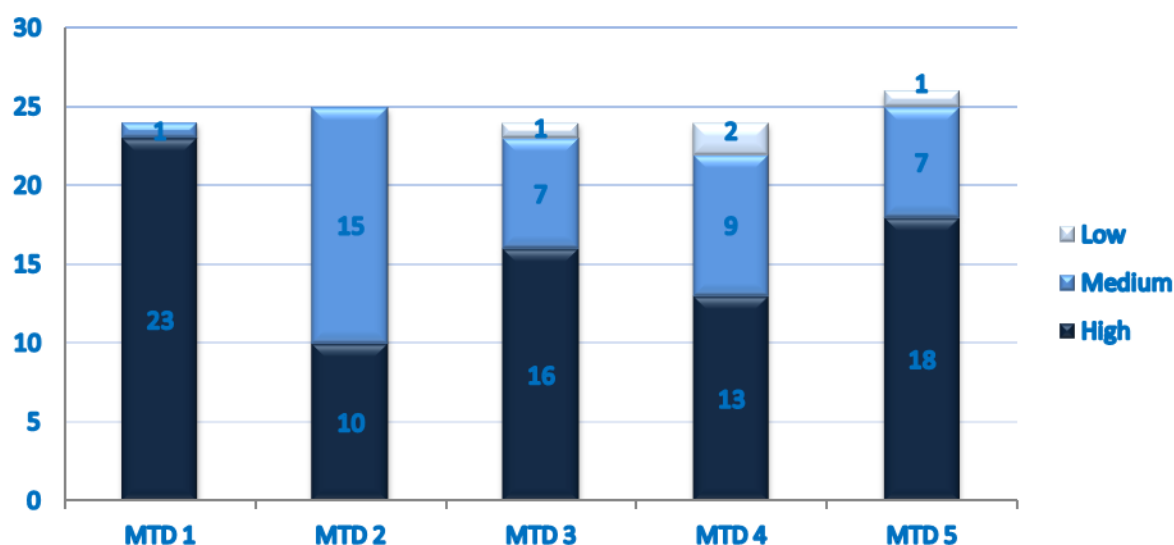
### 3.2. Member States progress towards common (Riga) priorities

In 2002, the Copenhagen process has laid the foundations for a systemic approach in VET reforms at European level. For nearly two decades, Member States, European Economic Area, candidate countries and European social partners have been working closely on joint priorities for vocational education and training (VET). Based on a long-term vision agreed in 2010 together with a set of shorter-term priority areas (Bruges communiqué), in 2015, they renewed their efforts in fewer and broader priority areas to raise quality and status of VET (Riga Conclusions). The Riga conclusions set five medium-term deliverables (MTDs), which have been addressed by the countries to a different extent depending on their starting point and respective contexts.

In a 2016 Cedefop survey, the Directors General for VET assigned relevant priority to the MTDs as follows (see Figure 1): strengthening work-based learning, with specific attention to apprenticeships (MTD 1), followed by access to VET and qualifications for all (MTD 3) and teacher and trainer professional development (MTD 5); quality

assurance and feedback loops (MTD 2) and key competences (MTD 4) were ranked lower by the countries (Cedefop, 2016)<sup>38</sup>.

**Figure 9 - Riga Priorities for 2016-20 in the EU-28+**



NB: 26 respondents.

*Source:* Cedefop based on the survey among the Director Generals for VET in the Member States in 2016 (Cedefop, 2016).

In its mandate, Cedefop has closely monitored and analysed the progress of EU28+ countries toward the agreed objectives, collecting evidence on common trends, achievements and challenges and identifying examples of practice that can inspire others.

### 3.2.1. Priority 1 - Promote work-based learning in all its forms, with special attention to apprenticeships

Promoting **apprenticeships** continued to be high on the European policy agenda and in 2015-19, apprenticeship and other forms of work-based learning (WBL) expanded and became central to several EU-level and many national actions and initiatives in VET. Most countries introduced system level reforms such as setting up or updating their legal frameworks, updating and clarifying rules and regulations or expanding apprenticeship to new programmes at higher levels. Some countries worked to clarify roles and responsibilities of different actors especially employer organisations and chambers. This area will be on countries' agenda for the years to come.

#### **Example 1: Alliance for dual training in Spain; Baltic alliance for apprenticeships and work-based learning**

In Spain, the Alliance for dual training was created in 2015. It is a network of companies, VET institutions and research centres to support the development of dual VET through creating a quality dual training model, assisting SMEs

<sup>38</sup> Cedefop (2016). DGVT survey on priorities among the Riga deliverables [unpublished].



participating in dual VET, and contributing in improving legislation. To be admitted to the alliance, companies must have remuneration systems for their apprentices, ensure that trainers and tutors are properly trained, and involve higher level managers in dual VET<sup>39</sup>.

Latvia together with Estonia and Lithuania, launched the Baltic alliance for apprenticeship and work-based learning in 2015, which aimed to involve social partners and VET providers in promoting work-based learning/apprenticeships and make VET more attractive<sup>40</sup>.

*Source: Cedefop*

Many countries focused on making apprenticeships more attractive for employers and learners. Incentives are increasingly used to encourage enterprises to offer training places; most of these are financial subsidies or tax exemptions. Some countries have started designing non-financial incentives such as developing 'labels' and certificates to companies to recognise the quality apprenticeship they provide.

**School-business cooperation** was reinforced through increased participation of labour market stakeholders, sharing responsibilities and strengthening partnerships in shaping VET, in programme design and teaching. Despite the efforts this area requires more attention and further exchange through peer learning as well as increased matchmaking between schools and businesses.. The findings of Cedefop's thematic country reviews on apprenticeship conducted in 2014-2018<sup>41</sup> point out that countries find it particularly difficult to distribute and coordinate learning that happens at school with that at the workplace.

### **Example 2: Labour market and education cooperation programme in Estonia; Office Francophone de la Formation en Alternance in Belgium-Fr**

In Estonia, within the framework of the Labour market and education cooperation programme, education-business coordinators were introduced into schools, tasked with finding enterprise partners and coordinating cooperation in apprenticeships training. VET schools received support to strengthen cooperation between employers and education institutions for developing work-based learning<sup>42</sup>.

In the French Community of Belgium, the Office Francophone de la Formation en Alternance (OFFA) was established in September 2015, and mandated for

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<sup>39</sup> Cedefop (2020, forthcoming). Developments in vocational education and training policy in 2015-19: Spain. Cedefop monitoring and analysis of VET policies. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/vet-policy-developments>

<sup>40</sup> Cedefop (2020, forthcoming). Developments in vocational education and training policy in 2015-19: Latvia. Cedefop monitoring and analysis of VET policies. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/vet-policy-developments>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/apprenticeships-work-based-learning#1>

<sup>42</sup> Cedefop (2020, forthcoming). Developments in vocational education and training policy in 2015-19: Estonia. Cedefop monitoring and analysis of VET policies. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/vet-policy-developments>



steering, promoting, developing and coordinating apprenticeships. OFFA's purposes include harmonising practices in the framework of the apprenticeship contract; centralising accreditation of companies; and centralising and processing applications from companies for incentives<sup>43</sup>.

Source: Cedefop

Evidence reveals that countries worked to boost the involvement of SMEs in providing WBL and apprenticeship and SMEs will remain one of the key target group of policy actions in the future.

### **Example 3: Support to SMEs – various countries**

SMEs were provided with methodological guidelines and toolkits for quality placements and took part in training workshops (e.g. Croatia, Cyprus, Germany, Latvia and Poland). Apprenticeship advisors were trained to provide companies with administrative assistance and apprenticeship support services (e.g. Croatia). For employers that can only provide partial placements, shared apprenticeship was put in place, where apprentices move between different employers (e.g. Wales). And finally, databases of SMEs interested in apprenticeships were created to support schools' and learners' search for placements (e.g. Croatia)<sup>44</sup>.

Source: Cedefop

Some countries strengthened the work-based component of their school-based programmes by requiring more VET programmes to include practical training, increasing the duration of practical training and set up coordination functions to support school-business cooperation (e.g. Estonia, Lithuania, Romania, and Slovenia).

### **3.2.2. Priority 2 - develop quality assurance mechanisms in VET and continuous information and feedback loops**

By 2019, all countries had developed a national approach to quality assurance (QA). Many countries worked on revising their regulatory frameworks (e.g. Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Portugal, Scotland), either as part of a greater VET reform or in some cases focusing on consolidating their fragmented approaches (e.g. Croatia) and establishing comprehensive practices across the country and different sectors of education and training (e.g. Austria, Bulgaria, Italy, Slovenia).

Many developments focused on quality of VET providers: promoting self-assessment in VET schools (mostly in IVET) to introduce a culture of continuous improvement; further developing external evaluation practices, introducing quality observatories

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<sup>43</sup> Cedefop (2020, forthcoming). Developments in vocational education and training policy in 2015-19: French-speaking Belgium. Cedefop monitoring and analysis of VET policies. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/vet-policy-developments>

<sup>44</sup> Cedefop (2020, forthcoming). Developments in vocational education and training policy in 2015-19: [country]. Cedefop monitoring and analysis of VET policies. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/vet-policy-developments>

(e.g. Luxembourg), inspection bodies (e.g. Bulgaria, French-speaking Belgium, Norway) and making quality agreements with VET providers systematic (e.g. the Netherlands). The analysis of the countries' approaches to quality assurance of VET providers shows a significant variation in terms of flexibility on the mandatory or optional nature of self-assessment, on the bodies and the types of external monitoring, and the types and number of indicators used. The variation can be explained by the differences in the way VET is organised and the degree of autonomy of VET providers.

In most cases, self-assessment and external evaluation work hand in hand and support putting in practice the use of the quality cycle, an important element of the EQAVET Recommendation. The Quality Assurance National Reference Points supported quality assurance related developments, using the expertise provided by the EQAVET community of practice. They shared examples of good practice with other network members, participated in peer review activities and used Erasmus+ funding to support the developments and implementation of their national approaches.

The analysis of national developments also calls for closer links between quality assurance efforts and other policy areas. Few countries linked quality assurance to developing methodologies for qualification design and review (e.g. Portugal), certification and examination processes (e.g. Greece, the Netherlands, Poland); and expanded quality assurance to work-based learning and apprenticeships (e.g. France, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Portugal).

**Anticipating training needs** is a crucial element of feedback loop to improve the quality and relevance of VET. Most countries have some mechanism to inform national, regional and local authorities responsible for VET, training providers, public employment service and employers in planning of VET; some combine available statistical data with qualitative information to identify technological trends and societal changes to project future skills demand in the labour market. About one third of the countries started developing comprehensive forecasting mechanisms. Cedefop <sup>45</sup> supported Bulgaria, Estonia, Greece, Iceland, Malta and Slovakia in their endeavour to improve anticipation methods, build their capacity on skills and labour market intelligence and put in place effective policies and actions to tackle skills mismatch.

Setting up mechanisms to assess, anticipate and respond to skill needs is not enough. To be able to translate labour market intelligence into effective policies requires collaboration of different stakeholders. Evidence shows that countries set up advisory bodies to inform policy making, such as government agencies, sector skills councils (e.g. Hungary, Latvia), national and/or regional education councils (e.g. Greece, Latvia, Poland), and forums for national and/or regional public debate on education and training (e.g. England, Ireland, Luxembourg). A closer look at the composition of these advisory bodies points to the need of more involving teachers, learners and employee representatives. There is also an increased need for local and regional autonomy in programme development and closer cooperation between providers and employers in keeping VET relevant to regional and local needs.

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<sup>45</sup> <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/assisting-eu-countries-skills-matching>

#### Example 4: OSKA surveys in Estonia

In Estonia, the Ministries of Education, Economic Affairs and Social Affairs, in cooperation with employers and representatives from other ministries, launched a system for regular forecasting, monitoring, and feedback on labour market needs (OSKA). OSKA's surveys on sectoral needs for labour and skills use a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods and analyse professional qualifications across all education levels. Results of this analysis and projections form the basis for several activities: establishing qualifications; career guidance services; curriculum design by education institutions; aiding authorities that finance learning activities. Active and content-driven participation by employers in the lifelong learning system is a prerequisite to making this approach a success. The first OSKA reports in 2016-17 focused on ICT, accounting, forestry and the timber industry, metal products, machinery, social work, healthcare, production of chemicals, rubber, plastic and construction materials, energy and mining. An overview of global and domestic trends influencing labour supply and demand in the country was also published. The first labour market overview, conclusions and proposals based on the surveys were presented to the Estonian Government in spring 2017. The government will receive a summary of OSKA results every year.

*Source:* Cedefop (2020, forthcoming). Enhancing European cooperation in VET: Outcomes of the Riga round. Progress in common priorities for 2015-20.

Transition and employability of VET graduates has come to focus as the information on outcomes is not collected systematically. Many countries work to develop monitoring systems of **graduate tracking** (Croatia, Cyprus, Poland, Sweden), mainly through statistical tools as well as the setting up of specialised bodies (e.g. French-speaking Belgium). To set up graduate tracking countries report the obstacles posed by data protection regulations, the cost of collecting such data and the capacity needed at system level to interpret and use these data to inform VET.

#### Example 5: Graduate tracking in Ireland, Belgium-NI and Poland

In Ireland, the Department of Social Protection and the Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS) agreed on a data sharing protocol to develop and implement a data infrastructure to support VET provision and policy<sup>46</sup>.

In Dutch-speaking Belgium, the Flemish Public Employment Service (VDAB) and the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training agreed that schools will receive data on both progression of their graduates towards higher education (as was the case so far) and the transition of their IVET graduates to the labour market<sup>47</sup>.

In Poland, the Educational Research Institute launched an ESF co-financed project to develop a system to track the educational and professional trajectories of VET

<sup>46</sup> Cedefop (2020, forthcoming). Developments in vocational education and training policy in 2015-19: Ireland. Cedefop monitoring and analysis of VET policies. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/vet-policy-developments>

<sup>47</sup> Cedefop (2020, forthcoming). Developments in vocational education and training policy in 2015-19: Dutch-speaking Belgium. Cedefop monitoring and analysis of VET policies. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/vet-policy-developments>

graduates at the national, regional, local and school levels. The project has been using administrative data from the social security administration (for professional trajectories) and educational resources (for educational trajectories). First results and recommendations are expected for 2019<sup>48</sup>.

*Source:* Cedefop (2020, forthcoming). Enhancing European cooperation in VET: Outcomes of the Riga round. Progress in common priorities for 2015-20.

### 3.2.3. Priority 3 - access to VET and qualifications for all

To address the multidimensional scope of the MTD, countries worked on the following areas: training, reskilling and upskilling vulnerable groups; increasing permeability and flexibility; improving guidance services; recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning; transparency of qualifications and promoting equal opportunities for all.

Almost all countries acted to **train, reskill and upskill at-risk groups**, such as early school leavers and young people not in employment, education and training (NEETs), low-skilled, unemployed, employed people at risk of becoming jobless, parents on (or after) a parental leave, youth from disadvantaged urban areas, young people with learning difficulties, people with disabilities, senior workers, refugees and other migrants. Among the approaches, countries developed training courses for the different target groups (most typical approach); apprenticeship and internship schemes (e.g. Bulgaria, Czechia, French-speaking and German-speaking Belgium, Sweden); established training guarantee programmes (e.g. Austria, Germany), scholarships or financial support for training (e.g. Bulgaria, England, Estonia, Germany, Lithuania, Spain, Sweden). In few countries, the approaches to upskilling low skilled adults aligned with the three-stage pattern<sup>49</sup> of the Upskilling pathways Recommendation and most often in relation to refugees and migrants (e.g. Austria, Finland, Germany, Poland, Sweden).

#### Example 6: Alliance for initial and further training in Germany

In Germany, the 2015-18 Alliance for initial and further training between the Federal Government, the Länder, business and industry, unions and the federal employment agency aimed to reduce the number of young people without school certificate and give each person in need a path that can lead to a VET qualification. Within the alliance, sectors have committed to providing 20 000 places annually for introductory training. 17 500 young people took up this type of training in 2015 while in 2018 they were 21 000<sup>50</sup>.

<sup>48</sup> Cedefop (2020, forthcoming). Developments in vocational education and training policy in 2015-19: Poland. Cedefop monitoring and analysis of VET policies. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/vet-policy-developments>

<sup>49</sup> Skills assessment; provision of a tailored, flexible and quality learning offer meeting the needs identified in the skills assessment; followed by validation and recognition of the skills acquired.

<sup>50</sup> Cedefop (2020, forthcoming). Developments in vocational education and training policy in 2015-19: Germany. Cedefop monitoring and analysis of VET policies. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/vet-policy-developments>

Source: Cedefop.

To allow learners a smooth progression in education and training systems, countries worked to increase their **permeability and flexibility** through setting up new pathways and bridging routes (e.g. Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, Norway, Slovakia); making admission, progression and examination rules more flexible (e.g. Estonia, Norway, Spain, Sweden); opening up VET to general education and higher education students (e.g. Germany, Norway); and introducing modularisation and partial qualifications in IVET and CVET (e.g. Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden).

According to Cedefop monitoring of the EQF/NQF implementation<sup>51</sup>, all countries have developed or have revised their qualification frameworks; the coverage of NQFs has been increasing and their comprehensive character is becoming stronger. The impact of the NQFs is growing in particular in the review and renewal of qualification standards and in promoting stakeholder involvement, as comprehensive frameworks act as platforms for cooperation across educational sub-systems and education and labour market. There is a growing trend among countries to open up their frameworks to include qualifications awarded outside the formal system by labour market stakeholders and international organisations. It is important that work continues in this direction in order to further increase the international dimension of VET. A challenge that needs to be addressed in the future is to continue communicating the benefits and added value of EQF/NQFs to end-users. A concrete example is to systematically include EQF and NQF levels on qualification documents and in registers of qualifications.

Since 2015, efforts in most countries have been made towards integrated and quality **guidance** services. Countries concentrated on revising procedures, training teachers who have guidance tasks, extending services to broader age and social groups; e-tools with integrated matching and self-help tools have become prominent in the last years. Despite the number of initiatives implemented by countries, the challenge remains to seize perceiving guidance as an ad-hoc service and embed it into the lifelong learning process. It is important that countries follow a holistic approach to guidance and counselling involving stakeholders and linking it to skills assessment, validation and certification at any transition points from education to work and within both.

### Example 7: Guidance for all learners in Sweden

In Sweden, the Government proposed in January 2019 an amendment to the Education Act aiming to introduce individual career guidance for all learners. Compulsory education would include an activity called 'Future choices' of a total 80 hours in grades 7 to 9 to teach learners about working life, career paths and vocational areas before they proceed to upper secondary education<sup>52</sup>.

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/national-qualifications-framework-nqf>

<sup>52</sup> Cedefop (2020, forthcoming). Developments in vocational education and training policy in 2015-19: Sweden. Cedefop monitoring and analysis of VET policies. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/vet-policy-developments>



Source: Cedefop.

Most countries have reinforced their work on **validating non-formal and informal learning**, moving towards the creation of overarching strategies and tackling the existing fragmentation of validation systems<sup>53</sup>. The youth guarantee, the Council recommendation on upskilling pathways, measures for long-term unemployed and large inflow of migrants in recent years have contributed to using validation more widely. Major challenges on validation in VET seem to be the professionalisation of validation practitioners who are not required to have any training and the offer of this training is limited. Monitoring and evaluation of the efficiency and effectiveness of existing validation initiatives remains limited, although more countries are establishing quality assurance systems specifically for validation. There is limited information on the number of people that goes through validation. In addition, there is still room for better coordination between validation and wider career guidance management practices.

#### 3.2.4. Priority 4 – strengthen key competences

Key competences are high on the skills demand that employers look for and they received due attention in the countries' education and training policies through setting up strategies and action plans; revising programmes and curricula; improving methods for assessment of key competences; and training of teachers and trainers on learning key competences. EU initiatives, e.g. the EU frameworks for key competences, languages (CEFR), entrepreneurial (EntreComp) and digital competences (DigComp), affect these policies<sup>54</sup>.

Digital competences, competences in science, technology and maths, country and foreign languages, entrepreneurship and financial literacy were among most frequently addressed while learning to learn, social and civic competences and cultural awareness and expression competences received less attention. Sometimes, national policies address key competences as a package, aiming mainly to raise awareness and set a vision, rather than embedding them into the system. A trend to develop tools in support to key competences (competence mapping tools, tools to support the acquisition of digital skills, learning-to-learn, entrepreneurship competence and other emerging key competences) is on the rise.

**Digital competences** attracted most attention among the countries. There is an increase in inter-ministerial/ inter-departmental cooperation towards addressing digital competences in VET; also establishing of dedicated authorities for digital affairs. Comprehensive digital strategies addressing learners and teachers as well as the provision of appropriate infrastructure and learning tools have been designed (e.g. Austria, Croatia, Estonia, French-speaking Belgium, Luxembourg, Norway). Courses on digital skills, the internet and programming have been offered in schools and to the wide public including disadvantaged groups (e.g. Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, French-speaking Belgium, Luxembourg).

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<sup>53</sup> The 2018 EU inventory (European Commission, Cedefop, ICF), forthcoming on Cedefop's website at: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>

<sup>54</sup> Cedefop (2020, forthcoming). Key competences in initial VET: digital, literacy and multilingual.

### Example 8: Digital skills programmes in Germany, Italy, Cyprus, Ireland

In Germany and Italy, funding and tax incentives were provided to support investment that contributes to the acquisition of digital competence.

Cyprus introduced the European Computer Driving License (ECDL) Certification Programme, for participation on a voluntary and free-of-charge basis.

In Ireland, the Explore programme started, in June 2018, to provide older workers in the manufacturing sector with training on basic digital skills.

*Source: Cedefop (2020, forthcoming). Enhancing European cooperation in VET: Outcomes of the Riga round. Progress in common priorities for 2015-20.*

The need for digital competences and entrepreneurship is rising since they are key to flexible learning approaches, to promoting creativity and innovation and to supporting other key competences, such as literacy, science, technology, engineering and mathematics. In addition, the need for further work on personal, social, learning to learn, citizenship and cultural awareness and expression competences is strong.

VET has good potential to equip learners with key competences. As the Cedefop's 2016 opinion survey on VET<sup>55</sup> revealed, respondents from VET were more likely to say that they developed entrepreneurship, creativity, communication, digital and team-working skills while respondents from general education were more satisfied on the development of their social and civic competences, foreign languages, science and technology skills and critical thinking skills<sup>56</sup>.

#### 3.2.5. Priority 5 - initial and continuous professional development of VET teachers, trainers and mentors

Competent and motivated teachers and trainers are essential for high quality and inclusive VET. Different EU-level working groups have focused on competences and professional development of VET teaching and training staff. Some countries looked for ways to address teacher shortages and make teaching more attractive by increasing salaries (e.g. Latvia), developing career opportunities and attracting professionals from industry (e.g. Hungary, Norway, Slovakia, Northern Ireland). Despite the work done in this respect further attention is required on this area in the future.

Redefining **VET teachers' entry requirements** and updating pre-service and initial in-service training is mostly targeted at addressing insufficient preparedness of teachers with respect to the challenges they are faced with.

To support **teachers and trainers continuous professional development**, most countries introduced programmes and courses, extended career development opportunities and promoted work placements in companies (e.g. French-speaking

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<sup>55</sup> Cedefop (2017). Cedefop opinion survey on vocational education and training in Europe. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper; No 62. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/5562>

<sup>56</sup> These results should be interpreted with caution, as they reflect personal beliefs and, in some cases, the meaning of terms may not have been fully clear to the respondents.

Belgium, Croatia, Czechia, France, Hungary, Luxembourg, Latvia, Slovenia) to keep teacher competences up-to-date on the industry, labour market and technological developments. Some countries moved towards more flexible and innovative provision of CPD, including digital resources and provision.

### **Example 9: Continuing professional development of teachers and trainers on digital skills in Spain**

In Spain, the National Institute of Education Technologies and Teacher Training (INTEF) has been developing interactive and multimedia digital education resources for teachers' CPD, such as open and online courses; a 'Digital Competence Portfolio for Teachers'; an Open Badge Backpack for the acknowledgement of professional competencies; and a mobile app for micro self-training aimed at the improvement of Digital Competences. INTEF also promotes networking among teachers to exchange resources and experience<sup>57</sup>.

*Source: Cedefop.*

Professional developments of VET leaders received limited attention: few countries have introduced specialised programmes to prepare VET school leaders for their role, which often includes taking decisions about teacher professional development. Taking into account the number of initiatives as regards teachers' and leaders' CPD, countries will need to consider monitoring of its content, quality and effectiveness for better learning.

With the development of apprenticeships and work-based learning in most of the countries, there is a growing need for more employees from companies who can act as **trainers/mentors**. Countries (e.g. Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain) worked on (re)defining the requirements to become a trainer, introducing/updating training programmes and opening up learning opportunities through school visiting schemes.

## **3.3. Overview of EU support**

The Commission supports VET modernisation through:

1. **Legal acts** — Council recommendations on a European quality assurance reference framework for vocational education and training (EQAVET), on a European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) and on the European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships (March 2018);
2. **Mutual learning** — Focusing on the priorities defined in the EU VET agenda and leading to expert reports (e.g. 20 guiding principles for high-performance and work-based learning);

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<sup>57</sup> Cedefop (2020, forthcoming). Developments in vocational education and training policy in 2015-19: Spain. Cedefop monitoring and analysis of VET policies. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/vet-policy-developments>



3. **Policy initiatives** — Such as the European Alliance for Apprenticeships, the European Vocational Skills Week and the Centres of vocational excellence;
4. **Targeted funding** — Notably through the current European Social Fund (ESF) and Erasmus + Programmes;
5. **Monitoring of progress** — carried out by the two Agencies, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and the European Training Foundation (for candidate countries), feeding into the European Semester and annual Education and Training Monitor.

### 3.3.1. Legal acts

#### a) EQAVET

The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) defines a reference framework to support Member States in improving the quality of their vocational education and training systems. In addition, the EQAVET Recommendation also aims to contribute to increased transparency of vocational education and training policy developments between Member States, thereby aiming to promote mutual trust, mobility of workers and learners, and lifelong learning.

The importance of maintaining quality in VET was initially already included in the 2000 Lisbon strategy underlining that the transition to a knowledge-based economy requires modern and adaptable VET. The 2002 Copenhagen Declaration subsequently proposed EU cooperation in quality assurance in VET in order to enhance quality in VET as well as to support mutual trust and the recognition of vocational qualifications.

The EQAVET Framework comprises quality criteria, descriptors and indicators applicable to quality management at both VET-system and VET-provider levels organised around the quality assurance and improvement cycle (planning, implementation, evaluation/ assessment and review/revision).

Following the adoption of the EQAVET Recommendation in 2009, EU Member States cooperate in the framework of the EQAVET Network composed of the EQAVET National Reference points.

This section aims to take stock of the experience gained with the implementation of the EQAVET Recommendation over the last 10 years.

#### Progress in quality assurance for vocational education and training in the EU

Since 2009, important improvements to QA arrangements in the EU Member States have been made. A study on the EU VET instruments, notably ECVET and EQAVET, was published in 2019 which had the objective to examine the progress EU Member States have made in the implementation of these instruments since their adoption in 2019.

According to this study, 19 EU Member States have made major changes to their QA arrangements for IVET while others have made some adjustments over the last 10

years. A similar trend can be observed for CVET. Around 20 EU Member States have made changes to their QA arrangements in CVET.

The many changes between 2009 and 2018 concern:

- The introduction of new structures in charge of quality assurance such as inspectorates and new agencies in charge of quality assurance
- Creating of a new monitoring and quality assurance system comprising internal and external evaluation as well changes to guidelines for self-assessment of VET providers
- Improving quality assurance arrangements in the area of apprenticeship schemes and work based learning
- Putting a stronger focus on outcomes of VET provision through the development of new indicators for monitoring the performance of VET programmes
- Strengthening the involvement of stakeholders such as employers, trade unions and learners in the design and implementation of quality assurance procedures

### **Quality assurance developments at VET system level**

The EQAVET Framework puts a lot of emphasis on strengthening effective feedback loops in VET. The importance of feedback loops was also underlined in the Riga conclusions adopted by the EU Minister in charge of VET in 2015. The second Riga priority calls on the EU Member States to establish continuous information and feedback loops in initial VET and continuing VET systems based on learning outcomes.

Many EU Member States have worked on improving feedback loops. In the Czech Republic for example, an EQAVET project was launched in 2017 consisting among others of the development of an app for mobile devices to facilitate the dissemination of information about employers' requirements for graduates as well as labour market data.

Furthermore, a high number of EU Member States have focused specifically on the development of VET graduate tracking measures as part of their quality assurance arrangements. Greece has developed a more comprehensive and systematic VET graduate tracking mechanism, linking labour market needs to VET at a national level. The aim is to ensure that enhanced information on VET graduate tracking, as well as skills need forecast, are used as valuable input at VET system level in order to inform VET policy-making and improve VET provision and VET qualifications at all levels.

In the context of the Council Recommendation on tracking graduates, the Commission has set up a joint Expert Group for higher education and VET graduate tracking in 2018. By the end of 2020, the Expert Group is expected to assess the state of graduate tracking in Member States and prepare recommendations to the Commission and Member States how to implement the Council Recommendation.

### **Quality assurance developments at VET provider level**

Self-assessment of VET providers is one of the key instruments to foster quality and to develop a culture of quality. Several EU Member States have improved their processes for self-assessment of VET providers. In Croatia, several regional training workshops for VET schools were organised to provide support on self-assessment and promote a culture of quality.

The EQAVET Framework also emphasizes that learners' feedback is gathered on their individual learning experience and on the learning and teaching environment. The 2018 EQAVET Forum was devoted to this topic and several good practices from inter alia the Netherlands were discussed and analysed. In the framework of a EU funded project carried out by the Romanian EQAVET NRP, Romania is developing a methodology to measure students' satisfaction with the way learning outcomes are achieved and assessed.

### **Use of EQAVET indicators**

The EQAVET Recommendation includes a set of reference quality indicators for developing quality in VET which can be used to support the development and improvement of VET systems and/or VET providers. Many EU Member States are using these EQAVET indicators to improve their QA arrangements and to exchange good practices with other EU Member States on these issues.

Sweden focused on strengthening quality assurance in VET by identifying mechanisms that can be used by the National Agency for Education and national programme councils for analysing the quality in VET and for quality development over time. Study visits to other EU Member States were organised to learn from and be inspired by the QA-process in other EU Member States and to analyse how EQAVET indicators are used, as well as to learn how stakeholders and VET providers on a systemic and local level cooperate to increase quality in VET education in other EU Member States.

### **Governance**

The EQAVET Recommendation asks Member States to establish a Quality assurance National Reference Point for VET (NRPs) that is linked to the relevant structures and quality assurance set up of the Member State. The NRPs are bringing together existing specialised bodies and partners, supporting self-evaluation as a complementary and effective means of quality assurance and disseminating information on EQAVET to national partners.

These EQAVET NRPs constitute the EQAVET Network comprising representatives from all countries that signed up to deliver EQAVET, as well as members of the European Commission, Education and Training Foundation, Cedefop, social partners and the EQAVET Secretariat.

Support is provided to countries through frequently organised Peer Learning Activities, where participants discuss effective practice around priority areas identified by the Network. Additionally, materials and resources are provided by the EQAVET Secretariat, including examples of good practice and guidance documents.

Specific issues are also explored through EQAVET Network working groups. Working groups have been established for a range of topics, including adult learning and CVET, the use of EQAVET indicators, international quality management standards such as EFQM and ISO standards.

In addition, an Annual EQAVET Forum is organised during the European Vocational Skills Week since 2016. The Forum is used to discuss VET quality assurance issues and to reach out to an audience outside the EQAVET Network.

According to the 2019 Study on ECVET and EQAVET, EQAVET users generally reported a range of strengths with the current EQAVET governance structure. The NRPs were generally considered to provide a necessary point of contact in national

authorities to drive forward national developments in QA, by playing the role as “national advocates for EQAVET”.

Furthermore, the establishment of NRPs was also reported to have resulted in a ‘community of practice’ which facilitates the exchange of good practices. Many EQAVET NRP representatives also reported examples where they had contacted other NRPs to discuss their practice and how they overcome implementation challenges.

However, several EQAVET NRP representatives stated that the EQAVET Network was too diverse given that it involves policy makers, funders, QA specialists and practitioners. Each of these sub groups prefer to focus on different aspects which means that some issues cannot be discussed in sufficient depth.

Since 2016, EQAVET NRPs can also apply for a call for proposals for EQAVET NRPs. The general objective of these calls for proposals is to support EQAVET NRPs to further develop quality assurance mechanisms in VET in line with the EQAVET Recommendation as well as to focus on specific topics such as improving graduate tracking and making use of graduate tracking data in their quality assurance systems.

In the framework of the 2019 EQAVET NRP call for proposals, 20 projects were selected for a total amount of around 2.5 million Euro. These projects focus on the following main topics:

- supporting the development of a culture of continuous Quality Assurance (QA) in VET;
- collecting data concerning skill need forecast;
- improving links between the VET providers and the labour market;
- improving quality assurance mechanisms and indicators at system and/or provider level;
- developing and or improving comprehensive and reliable graduate tracking systems;
- disseminating quality assurance principles;
- promoting work-based learning;
- developing and/or implementing feedback loops and flexible learning pathways;
- adopting and/or improving the learning outcomes approach.

#### **Box 1 - Concrete examples of work of EQAVET NRP**

**Austria:** The "train the trainer" concept and its pilot training as a valuable means to enhance the knowledge of the trainers and teachers;

**Bulgaria:** Promotion of EU practices linked to feedback loops (guidelines on how to use leading indicators);

**Croatia:** Development and piloting of VET graduate tracking mechanisms;

**Czech Republic:** The training programmes for I-VET and C-VET cooperation to bridge the generation gap were designed in line with the EQAVET quality cycle and respond to the priorities of the New Skills Agenda;

**Finland:** Guide for quality management of qualification design, assessment and validation;

**Germany:** Renewed portal with relevant information on quality assurance in work-

based learning based on recent VET studies. The portal provides relevant information on the German dual system;

**Greece:** A methodological framework to tackle skills gaps;

**Hungary:** A set of guidelines for career tracking at VET provider level were developed and tested;

**Italy:** Survey on training for VET trainers and quality system in 20 Italian regions;

**Latvia:** recommendations on work-based learning and on how QA can be improved in the Latvian context;

**Lithuania:** Survey on companies' satisfaction with competences of VET graduates;

**The Netherlands:** Guidelines for teachers and students on how to enhance the quality culture;

**Romania:** The involvement of students and parents in the debate around quality assurance in VET and the EQAVET framework. Good feedback on project's impact;

**Slovakia:** The European Peer Review Methodology adapted to the Slovak context;

**Slovenia:** Transnational review of EQAVET tools to promote transparency and mutual trust;

**Sweden:** Cross-sectoral discussions and networking among National Programme Councils representing different economic sectors;

## b) ECVET

The ECVET Recommendation adopted in 2009 defines a technical framework to assess and document learning outcomes – the knowledge, skills and competences developed by learners. It also aimed to serve as a means to facilitate labour mobility by enhancing transparency and recognition of such learning outcomes.

ECVET is based on the following principles:

- Qualifications are made up of learning outcome units that can each be assessed and validated;
- Assessed units of learning outcomes represent the learners' credit, which can be transferred to another country or setting and cumulated towards a full qualification.

The validation or certification of parts of qualifications, which are the responsibility of the competent bodies in accordance with national provisions, allow that different units can be certified following learning experience in different countries, contexts (i.e. through validation of work experience), and timeframes (i.e. continuing training distributed over time). As a result, learning pathways become more flexible and mobility is supported.

This section takes stock of the 10 years of ECVET implementation. It is based on the 2014 external evaluation, on Cedefop reports, on the follow up by the Education Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency of relevant pilot projects as well as on the 2019 study on EU VET instruments.

## ECVET at VET system level

One of the main important areas of ECVET's influence at national level have been on increasing the introduction and implementation of learning outcomes approaches and the structuring of qualifications into units or groups of learning outcomes.

The concept and use of groups or units of learning outcomes have been central to reforms of VET systems in a variety of countries: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Malta and Romania attributed a strong influence of ECVET on their substantive VET reforms. In Romania, ECVET, in conjunction with the EQF, has been the main pillar for the revision of qualifications in the technical VET system, for example.

### **Box 2 - Examples ECVET contribution to reforms at VET system level**

In the French Community of Belgium, the ECVET-inspired certification by units of learning outcomes – where each unit is certified and becomes transferable – was a major element within a comprehensive reform of the VET system, also linked to the NQF.

In Finland, VET qualifications were already divided into units and a credit system was applied before ECVET was launched. However, following a sustained testing phase, the ECVET principles have been introduced in the reforms of the qualification and credit system in force since August 2015.

In Romania, where qualifications were already composed of units, ECVET triggered the development of a credit system for initial VET. It will be implemented when the NQF is fully established.

In 2012 Malta, building on the project VET-CCS, modified its well-established NQF to better take into account the validation of prior learning and to prepare the ground for the conversion of VET qualifications into an ECVET format, with transferable units and point allocation.

## ECVET for better mobility

ECVET has strongly contributed to the development of better-quality mobility experiences for VET learners, through more effective agreement on, and documentation, of learning outcomes. In some countries this has reinforced the shift to use learning outcomes acquired abroad to obtain a VET qualification, while also ensuring that the mobility experience is better structured, organised and quality assured. In addition, ECVET has contributed in a few countries to developing more flexible vocational pathways both generally (AT, MT, FI) and for learners facing barriers to learning (IE, HU, PT). Nevertheless, it is recognised that its contribution to increasing flexible learning pathways for upskilling and reskilling could be greater.

On the other hand, some stakeholders argue that the concept of units of learning outcomes which are to be assessed and certified separately for accumulation are incompatible with the key characteristics of their VET qualifications. It has also had less success with the use of ECVET credit points to transfer assessed learning outcomes. Countries which implement national credit point systems for VET programmes or ECTS for mobility have not adopted ECVET points for mobility outcomes. Despite the fact that ECVET is being implemented since 10 years, it did not result in the establishment of an EU credit system in VET.



## Governance

The Commission, following the adoption of the ECVET Recommendation, has promoted a network of ECVET stakeholders and set up the ECVET Users' Group, which is the main governance body. It includes national representatives, social partners and other stakeholders, and meets on average twice a year. The wider network includes more than 2,000 members, and is used as a dissemination list; some 100 – 200 members participate in the ECVET Forum organised once a year.

In several Member States national contact or coordination points for ECVET (NCPs) have been designated and which are financed through grants allocated to the Erasmus+ National Agencies. As they are not foreseen in the ECVET Recommendation, they don't share any terms of reference and their nature, role and activity vary significantly between countries.

The funding provided to National Erasmus+ Agencies to implement ECVET is used to support and coordinate national teams of ECVET experts. The teams provide a pool of expertise who promote the adoption, the application and the use of ECVET at national level and provide counselling to VET relevant competent bodies and institutions.

The teams of experts provide primarily consultancy to VET providers in the development of a better-quality mobility experience, namely in the application of the ECVET templates and defining, assessing and recognising (units of) learning outcomes related to transnational mobility experience. This need is intensified by the growing emphasis on long-term mobility measures including ErasmusPro. In some countries, the growing number of private providers presents a new target group. As mobility is becoming more a formally integrated element of national VET programmes, it increases the need for awareness about and application of the EU instruments including ECVET.

Some National Agencies conduct an expanded ECVET work where the primary focus is on the application of the learning outcomes approach in different contexts as a means to improve quality. Within the VET community, VET providers (teachers, headmasters, assessors) are frequently targeted to be informed about the use of learning outcomes in teaching and particularly in assessment but also in developing training programmes. ECVET teams contribute to exploiting ECVET as a tool to increase quality of domestic work-based learning schemes as well.

ECVET aims to contribute to mutual trust among the various actors involved in VET in national and international level. A number of ECVET teams work towards the application of ECVET to increase the transparency and flexibility of national qualifications systems and to facilitate lifelong learning. ECVET is also tested and used to contribute to quality assurance of validation policies and practices and to build flexible pathways in adult learning provision. Promoting ECVET as a tool to support permeability between higher education and VET is being exploited as well by several ECVET teams. The national teams work together with experts and contact points of other transparency and flexibility EU instruments such as EQF and EUROPASS NCPs, EQAVET, Euroguidance, ECTS, EPALE, EFQEA dependent on national policy priorities.

### c) Apprenticeships

The Council adopted on 15 March 2018 a Recommendation on a **European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships** (2018/C 153/01), following the Commission's proposal of October 2017. The Framework sets out 14 criteria to define quality and effective apprenticeships, ensuring both the development of job-related skills and the personal development of apprentices. It takes into account the diversity of vocational education and training (VET) systems across the EU and respects the Member States' competence in the area of VET.

The Council Recommendation on a [European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships](#) (EFQEA) sets out 14 criteria to define quality and effective apprenticeships (see below).

**Table 1: Criteria for quality and effective apprenticeships**

7 criteria for learning and working conditions	7 criteria for framework conditions
1. Written agreement	1. Regulatory framework
2. Learning outcomes	2. Involvement of social partners
3. Pedagogical support	3. Support for companies
4. Workplace component	4. Flexible pathways and mobility
5. Pay or compensation	5. Career guidance and awareness raising
6. Social protection	6. Transparency
7. Work, health and safety conditions	7. Quality assurance and tracking of apprentices

To support implementation of the Recommendation the Commission has set up an Apprenticeship Support Services and is carrying out conducting awareness raising campaigns such as the European Vocational Skills Week.

### d) Upskilling Pathways

The Recommendation Upskilling Pathways targets low-qualified adults, a large vulnerable group who have at best achieved a lower secondary education qualification, i.e. those who most need to upskill and are least motivated to do so. It supports those adults with low levels of skills and qualifications to enhance their literacy, numeracy and digital skills and/or to acquire a broader set of skills by progressing towards higher qualifications.

The Commission Staff Working Document "Taking stock of implementation measures", February 2019, found that many of the measures targeting low skilled adults promote vocational and job specific skills. What is less clear is whether they adequately deliver missing basic skills, therefore, more work is required to ensure that basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills are embedded when necessary in tailored VET offers.



Another characteristic is that measures reported are largely project-driven, often with ESF support, but a few countries do have a more sustainable approach incorporated in mainstream VET supply (Finland), or more permanent procedures to deliver basic skills (Austria, Denmark) as a precursor to VET.

Efforts to **tailor learning to individual needs**, incorporating the three steps, are not yet the norm and countries are at very different stages of development but are producing some interesting results, which also impact on the flexibility of VET programmes and the offer of more tailored pathways.

**Modularisation** of programmes is growing; modules are widely applied across further education and training in Ireland; competence-based system in Finland; modular vocational training and professional development programmes for unemployed people were introduced in Latvia; a modular basic skills programme in Croatia, and a modular format in both VET and second chance programmes in Romania. Access to single-subject courses in Denmark and the possibility to take subject at different levels concurrently offers greater flexibility for tailoring, as does the option to combine parts of various programmes in Sweden – VET with upper secondary, basic skills and language learning with VET, or an individual study plan at a Folk High School, while the VET offer for long term-unemployed or newly arrived people is tailored to local occupational shortages.

### 3.3.2. Fostering exchanges and mutual learning

#### Working groups on VET and adult learning

The European Commission facilitates groups of Member State experts and representatives of social partners and civil society that examine national policy and good practice from different countries, look at the evidence from research, and draw up key conclusions and recommendations.

In 2018-2020, the ET 2020 Working Group on **Vocational Education and Training (VET)** focuses on 'Innovation and Digitalisation: Boosting high-quality VET and Higher VET'. The purpose is to discuss innovation and digitalisation in view of creating more flexible and modern high quality VET systems. This reflection is being carried out taking into account also other key elements, such as governance and financing under tight public budgets, relevant national strategies and tools and focussing on different stakeholders' perspectives.

The key issues have been ranked, namely new pedagogical approaches, adapting curricula to labour markets, including key competences, new learning environments, use of modern learning technologies, flexible VET systems, quality and excellence in VET, governance and funding, as well as support to VET mobility. As part of the work of the group, a mapping exercise on VET excellence approaches in Europe was carried out.

In the area of **adult learning**, in the period 2016-2018 the working group focused on developing policy guidance on adult learning at the work place. The final report highlighted that adult learning in the workplace can make a significant contribution because it:

- is an accessible and attractive way for adults to maintain and update the knowledge and skills they need for life, at work and at home.

- is an efficient and effective way for employers to keep their employees' skills sets up to date, motivate their workforce and improve staff retention, as well as to improve competitiveness.
- is an economical and targeted way for Member States to increase their productivity, innovation and modernisation, maintain their competitiveness and employment rates and raise overall skills levels.
- supports social and economic (re-)integration of vulnerable groups, inclusion, social cohesion and equality.
- meets individuals', employers' and society's needs for greater adaptability to better prepare for future skills needs, mitigating projected skills shortages.
- improves adults' lifelong employability.

In the period 2018-2020 the group focuses on policies that can empower adult individuals to learn.

### **Mutual learning workshops**

The Commission designed and implemented new innovative high-level mutual learning programme for Member States in order to build their capacity for the development of concrete actions to make Upskilling Pathways a reality. The first two series organised between 2017 and 2019 were instrumental in building up national networks and mobilising countries to take decisive steps towards the implementation. As an immediate result, many of the participating countries were successful in the targeted call for proposals under the EaSI programme or are undertaking major reforms also with the support of the reform Support programme set up by the Commission.

### **DGVT Peer reviews**

One of the forms of mutual learning activities in the field of VET carried out between 2015-2020 were peer review exercises organised within the meetings of the Directors-General for Vocational Education and Training. They were used to discuss in details specific challenges and best practices of Member States in a number of topics linked to successful VET systems and country specific recommendations: national reforms and policies on apprenticeships in 2016 in Slovakia, teachers and training in apprenticeships and work-based learning and tracking VET graduates.

### **3.3.3. Policy initiatives**

#### **EaFA and Apprenticeships support services**

In 2013, the **European Alliance for Apprenticeships** was launched in response to the youth unemployment crisis in Europe. It aims to strengthen the supply, quality, image and mobility of apprenticeships, and it is open to EU Member States, Candidate countries, EFTA countries and stakeholders from these.

Altogether, 36 countries have made national commitments under the Alliance, including 27 EU Member States (bar the UK), all 5 Candidate countries and all 4 EFTA countries. Also, 314 pledges were made by various apprenticeship stakeholders by the end of 2019. Since 2013, companies, employers and intermediaries have pledged to provide over 900,000 apprenticeship and other training or first-job opportunities to young people.

**Figure 10: Pledgers in the European Alliance for Apprenticeships**



In May 2017 the Commission initiated the **European Apprentices Network** (EAN), together with the European Youth Forum (EYF) and the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU). As apprentices themselves had little opportunities to bring their contribution to discussions related to VET and apprenticeships, this network aims at giving a voice to European apprentices and enable them to support EU policy making and implementation of apprenticeship policies.

The network actively contributes to EAfA meetings and its members present the EAN position on quality apprenticeships in various meetings, conferences, events. In February 2018 they have drafted a position paper presenting the Network's view on key priorities for quality apprenticeships. Moreover, the European Youth Forum's newly adopted Position on Quality Apprenticeships is largely based on the EAN work.

As the key follow-up action to the Council Recommendation on EFQEA, the Commission launched an **Apprenticeship Support Services** at the European Vocational Skills Week in Vienna in November 2018. The aim is to support Member States in their reform process to improve apprenticeship systems. The Support Services is built on three pillars:

- a knowledge-hub to share and access information relevant to apprenticeship design and delivery and to have a simplified access to apprenticeships related studies, evidence or statistical data;
- a networking hub to facilitate the exchange of ideas and the development of cooperation amongst stakeholders;
- Benchlearning (a combination of benchmarking and peer learning) to provide a structured process and approach to mutual learning among Member States on improving their apprenticeship systems.

Within its first year, the Services actively supported EAfA stakeholders and in particular Member States in promoting the supply and quality of apprenticeships: key deliverables include, among others, the gradual deployment of online training materials, the launch of a series of webinars, as well a survey to evaluate the results of EAfA and to better understand the needs of EAfA members. 25 Member States were mobilised to take part in the bench-learning process, with the first bench-learning cycle to be launched in early 2020.

### **European Vocational Skills Week**

The European Vocational Skills Week (EVSW) is a European campaign implemented by an external contractor and supervised/organised by the European Commission, which aims to highlight VET as a great alternative to traditional education routes. It

mobilises events and activities at local, regional and national level combined with events organised by the Commission during a specific week.

Work began on a dedicated "VET Week" in **mid-2016**, inspired by discussions with associations of VET providers. A series of Brussels-based, policy and practice-focused events were organised backed by a broad communications campaign to reach VET stakeholders across Member States, and ultimately to citizens more widely. The exercise was repeated in **2017**, with a second European campaign, complemented by European events in Brussels from 20-24 November. 2017 introduced two new elements by focusing on activities in Member States and by defining main topics for events (business-education partnerships, VET from a sectoral perspective, and the importance of mobility in VET). In **2018**, the EVSW was moved to the capital of the European Union's Council Presidency (Austria). It introduced on-line voting for EVSW awards, a separate awards nominations celebration evening, and new award categories (e.g. Erasmus+, ESF). The focus of the events was on the future of VET. In **2019**, the EVSW (in Helsinki under the Finnish Presidency) was focused on VET for all – Skills for Life. **2020** (in Berlin, under the future German Presidency, the Week's fifth anniversary) will focus on VET for excellence in a digital era.

Building on the initial success experienced in 2016, the European Commission set targets every year to increase the impact of Week-associated events/activities. These were the results achieved, including targets for 2020.

**Table 2: Achievements of the European Vocational Skills Week 2016-2019**

Category	Achievements				Growth 2019/2016	2020 Targets
	2016	2017	2018	2019		
Events/activities in countries	983	1.585	1.800	1.749	78%	2.000
Outreach through these events/activities	800.000	986.000	2.400.000	2.700.000	238%	2.500.000

### 3.3.4. EU funding and support programmes

The **ESF's** mission is to promote high levels of employment, and investments in education and training are key for tomorrow's employability. To this end, in 2014-2020 one-third of the Fund's total EU budget is allocated to education and training investments – over 27.2 billion EUR out of EUR 84 billion.

The Fund supports the entire education cycle from early childhood education to adult learning, and includes higher education and vocational education and training to make sure that people get the right knowledge and skills at all stages of life. In this, the ESF places a particular focus on equal access for disadvantaged groups. Between 2014 and 2018, almost 9 million people have had the opportunity to upskill or reskill thanks to ESF support.

Within this thematic objective, a significant budget is dedicated to actions supporting vocational education and training (VET) and adult learning. These include €7,2 billion for lifelong learning and upgrading the skills of the workforce and €6,8 billion for

strengthening vocational education and training systems (for more information see Table 3).

By end 2018, 1.7 million people have directly benefitted from actions aimed at improving the overall education and training systems and the transition from education to work. Thanks to the ESF support, Member States have invested in skills anticipation, adaptation of curricula and the establishment and development of work-based learning systems, including dual learning systems and apprenticeship schemes.

As proposed by the Commission, the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) will continue to support education and training at all levels, with a particular focus on digital skills, and will be the main EU instrument to support the development of green skills. The ESF+ will support the upskilling and re-skilling of 5 million people for green jobs and the green economy.

**Table 3 - Distribution of total ESF Thematic objective 10 allocations to selected projects by area of intervention and Member State\***

	Pre- primary education	Primary education	General upper- secondary & post-secondary education/ training	Vocational upper- secondary & post- secondary education/training	Tertiary education	Job-related (non-formal) education/ training	Not Job- related (non- formal) education/ training	Total (EUR m)
AT	0.0%	0.8%	5.8%	63.7%	0.0%	3.6%	26.0%	184.6
BE	0.0%	1.2%	10.0%	7.6%	8.9%	67.2%	5.1%	535.8
BG	0.0%	0.0%	62.3%	4.2%	22.5%	11.0%	0.0%	229.4
CY	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	55.2%	0.0%	39.9%	4.9%	28.8
CZ	10.3%	24.5%	31.4%	4.4%	20.8%	6.2%	2.3%	1,040.3
DE								
DK	0.0%	0.0%	1.1%	27.0%	4.7%	67.2%	0.0%	95.4
EE	0.9%	0.4%	50.4%	22.9%	0.0%	18.7%	6.6%	200.6
ES	0.0%	0.4%	31.2%	50.0%	9.4%	6.5%	2.6%	2,870.7
FI	0.0%	0.3%	17.5%	13.5%	9.9%	51.4%	7.4%	190.6
FR								
GR								
HR	0.3%	1.1%	31.5%	5.4%	37.7%	16.2%	7.9%	294.1
HU								
IE	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	48.0%	52.0%	192.5
IT	0.2%	0.6%	48.5%	17.9%	21.6%	10.8%	0.4%	3,268.5
LT								
LU	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	7.9
LV	0.0%	0.0%	54.7%	16.7%	0.1%	28.5%	0.0%	238.8
MT	0.0%	0.0%	20.7%	20.5%	30.3%	28.5%	0.0%	40.6
PL								
PT	0.0%	0.0%	11.1%	59.0%	18.9%	7.2%	3.8%	3,925.6
RO	1.3%	2.6%	71.7%	2.0%	8.7%	13.7%	0.0%	484.6
SE								
SI	0.6%	2.1%	43.0%	6.1%	13.7%	32.6%	1.9%	251.1
SK								
UK	0.4%	7.9%	28.1%	4.2%	0.0%	59.4%	0.0%	1,784.3
<b>EU</b>	<b>0.7%</b>	<b>2.8%</b>	<b>29.9%</b>	<b>29.3%</b>	<b>14.0%</b>	<b>19.9%</b>	<b>3.3%</b>	<b>17,876.2</b>

\*Countries included in the calculation: AT, BE, BG, CZ, CY, DK, EE, ES, FI, HR, IE, IT, LU, LV, MT, PT, RO, SI, UK.

Source: Contractor's processing on list of operations published by Member States

**The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)** invests in education, training and lifelong learning infrastructure and equipment. ESF+ and ERDF work in complementarities to create incentives for educational reforms, including

development of skills. In the 2014-2020 programming period EUR 6,2 billion will be invested in education, training and lifelong learning from ERDF, nearly EUR 1 billion of that in vocational and adult education infrastructure and equipment.

Education, training and lifelong learning remain a priority in the Commission proposal for the 2021-2027 period, in the framework of the policy objective 4, 'A More social Europe - implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights', where ERDF will focus on improving access to inclusive and quality services in education, training and lifelong learning through developing infrastructure.

Development of skills should be considered as integral part of developing and implementing national or regional Smart specialisation strategies, which implies a close cooperation between education, business and wider society. As a novelty in the 2021-2027 programming period, it is proposed that ERDF may support certain skills development under specific objective 4 'Developing skills for smart specialisation, industrial transition and entrepreneurship' of policy objective 1, 'A smarter Europe by promoting innovative and smart economic transformation'. This support will focus on the smart specialisation priority areas identified in the entrepreneurial discovery process. It could include Innovation management trainings in SMEs, re-skilling and upskilling within firms, strengthening the integration of education and training institutions including high education and [centres of vocational excellence](#) within national and regional innovation, and other.

**The Erasmus+ Programme** enables millions of young Europeans to study, train or learn abroad while broadening their experience and awareness of Europe, and increasing their future chances on the job market. It finances also the mobility of teachers, trainers and staff for teaching or training.

In the area of Vocational Education and Training, €3.1 Billion has been available in the period 2014-2020 for mobility, strategic partnerships and policy cooperation in VET, directly supporting the Riga policy priorities.). It has also played a key role in developing VET business partnerships aimed at promoting work-based learning in all its forms, with special attention to apprenticeship training, by involving social partners, companies and VET providers.

Long-term mobility (i.e. 3-12 months duration) of VET learners has been promoted through introducing the ErasmusPro activity into the programme as of 2018, with the objective to facilitate long-term placements in working environments in another country, and provide young people with job specific vocational skills, as well as key competences and transversal skills.

The programme has also supported the work to raise the attractiveness and image of VET through the European Vocational Skills Week.

The Erasmus Programme post-2020, as proposed by the Commission, will be substantially reinforced, extended and more inclusive. It will provide strengthened support to VET, via increased opportunities for mobility of learners and teachers, trainers and staff; partnerships; opening up towards the world with the new international dimension; as well as the support to the Centres of vocational excellence.

According to the Commission proposal for Erasmus+, the programme will further strengthen the support for the mobility of VET learners and staff. When compared to the current funding period, the increase in the proposed budget for the period 2021 to 2027 will allow to significantly increase the number of people benefiting from VET



mobility. As the demand is much higher than what the current budget can finance, this budgetary increase seems particularly relevant and it will reinforce the opportunity for learning or work experience abroad, to be better prepared for the labour market; improve self-confidence, language skills, and the ability to interact with people, as well as the readiness to get to know other cultures. The programme will also offer people in continuing education the opportunity to live a mobility experience while they are upskilling and reskilling. The opportunity for international mobility of learners and VET staff in the same way as for higher education in the current program, is also foreseen.

In the Commission proposal, it is suggested to give more attention to study fields linked to green and digital skills, such as renewable energy, climate change, environmental engineering, and artificial intelligence. The links between Erasmus and ESF will be reinforced, including by allowing the topping up of the Erasmus grants to support learners with fewer opportunities to engage in mobility; or by scaling up at national level successful projects in the Erasmus programme

In its proposal, the Commission emphasises the promotion and quality of VET through the development of international networks and partnerships. In this context, support will be given to Platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) – see section 5.4.1 - bringing together VET providers, national and regional authorities, companies, research institutions, social partners, public employment services and other stakeholders.

The **European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)** supports European policy on rural development across the Member States and the regions of the Union. As one of the objectives for the 2014-20 programming period, the Fund focuses on achieving a balanced territorial development of rural economies and communities including the creation and maintenance of employment. Its priorities related to fostering knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture, forestry and rural areas and promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas deliver important contributions to skills development in the sector.

Some activities funded under the **EU programme for employment and innovation (EaSI)** to support implementation of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation, more or less directly related to vocational education and training. The EaSI programme is also funding call for proposals to support Upskilling Pathways, mainly aimed at national or regional public authorities as lead applicants, often with a consortium of strategic stakeholders.

The European agenda for vocational education and training is also supported by the **Structural Reform Support Programme (SRSP)** that provides tailor-made support to all EU countries for their institutional, administrative and growth-enhancing reforms. Among the different policy areas, the Directorate General for Structural Reform Support - DG REFORM - provides technical support directly to Member States upon their request in their endeavour to design and implement reforms in the fields of skills, education and training.

In 2018, BG, ES and PT have been kick-started projects in the field of VET and adult learning, as well as BE-FR, BE-NL, HU, NL and PT in 2019 – for instance on structural implementation of dual learning in Flanders or to support ES in the design of quality framework for the implementation of Dual VET. In 2020, SRSP support was requested by France, Greece and Luxemburg to raise the effectiveness of their VET



systems, by improving the implementation of their models of Centres for Vocational Excellence in the first two cases and updating the national VET strategy.

To help drive inclusive and sustainable growth, and convergence, for the next MFF (2021-27) Commission proposes a **new Reform Support Programme** that will include instruments providing financing to support the implementation of recommendations provided in the European Semester, including in the area of education, training and skills.

**The European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI)** – the central pillar of the Investment Plan for Europe, the so-called Juncker Plan – helps the EU close the investment gap in key strategic areas while creating jobs and enhancing competitiveness. The launch of the Skills and Education Guarantee Pilot facility, under EFSI, will continue to strengthen the social dimension of the Juncker Plan. The facility will support three categories of final beneficiaries: (i) individuals furthering their education and skills; (ii) enterprises and other organisations in their effort to improve skills and skills utilisation; and (iii) providers of skills, training and education services or undertakings developing educational/skills projects in the education field. The guarantee facility of EUR 50 million will partially cover the credit risk of the underlying loan portfolio that financial intermediaries will extend to final beneficiaries. As a result, the Pilot will mobilise an additional investment of around EUR 250 million to the education and skills sector.

### **Box 3 - EFSI support to skills and vocational education and training**

EFSI financing has been instrumental in supporting actions that promote skills and Vocational Education and Training.

In 2018, the European Investment Bank (EIB) matched EUR 25 million worth of funding by Bankia, a Spanish bank, to make available financing for SMEs and mid-caps in Spain. The financing facility helps young people in Spain, including vocational training students, integrate better in the labour force. By offering long-term loans to SMEs and mid-caps on favourable terms, the initiative is an incentive to companies to train and eventually hire young unemployed participating in Bankia's vocational training programme. In this way, young people put in use acquired skills that can help their long-term employability and aligns the aims of this financial facility with the vocational education and training objectives.

In this case too, the EIB is able to provide financing support SMEs and midcaps at a higher level than would have been possible without EFSI.

In 2017, Innovation Nest, a venture capital firm backed by the European Investment Fund under EFSI, provided an important equity investment in Doctrina a Slovenian healthcare platform that offers high-quality online education to pharmacists, specialist retailers, physicians and other healthcare professionals through interactive video courses. The short video courses, which are accessible from anywhere, help health professionals upgrade their skills, enhance their knowledge, and remain up-to-date with the latest developments in medicine – crucial attributes to the profession. Course content is certified and can form part of the learner's continuing professional development. Financing from EFSI helped Doctrina to scale-up the business, expand to new countries and develop its products in a way that is less costly, more efficient and ultimately more effective since the training can reach a wider audience.

Looking forward and building on the success of the Juncker Plan, the Commission put forward **the InvestEU Programme** will strengthen investment in the social dimension of the Union, supporting the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Financing under InvestEU is foreseen to consist of an EU budgetary guarantee of EUR 38 billion, covering four policy windows: (i) sustainable infrastructure; (ii) research, innovation and digitisation; (iii) SMEs; and (iv) social investment and skills. In turn, the budgetary guarantee is expected to mobilise up to EUR 650 billion of investments in the EU, over the 2021-2027 period.

The Social Investment and Skills window will stimulate access to finance in the areas of microfinance, social enterprises, social infrastructures, education and training and skills. More specifically on skills, InvestEU will support upskilling and re-skilling targeting all the key actors - employers, skills, education and training providers as well as individuals. The EUR 4 billion budgetary guarantee earmarked for this window is expected to mobilise EUR 50 billion in investments for projects supporting EU social and skills policy objectives.

To ensure the recovery is sustainable, even, inclusive and fair for all Member States, the European Commission is proposing to create a new recovery instrument, **Next Generation EU**, embedded within a powerful, modern and revamped long-term EU budget. The money raised for Next Generation EU will be invested across **three pillars**:

#### **1. Support to Member States with investments and reforms:**

- A **new Recovery and Resilience Facility of €560 billion** will offer financial support for investments and reforms, including in relation to the green and digital transitions and the resilience of national economies, linking these to the EU priorities. This facility will be embedded in the European Semester. It will be equipped with a grant facility of up to €310 billion and will be able to make up to €250 billion available in loans. Support will be available to all Member States but concentrated on the most affected and where resilience needs are the greatest.
- A **€55 billion top-up of the current cohesion policy programmes** between now and 2022 under the new **REACT-EU initiative** to be allocated based on the severity of the socio-economic impacts of the crisis, including the level of youth unemployment and the relative prosperity of Member States.
- A proposal to strengthen the **Just Transition Fund up to €40 billion**, to assist Member States in accelerating the transition towards climate neutrality.
- A **€15 billion** reinforcement for the **European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development** to support rural areas in making the structural changes necessary in line with the European Green Deal and achieving the ambitious targets in line with the new biodiversity and Farm to Fork strategies.

## 4. POTENTIAL SCENARIOS (POLICY OPTIONS) FOR DEVELOPING FURTHER UNION POLICY ON VET

### 4.1. Presentation of the potential scenarios

As part of its priorities for action ‘Making VET a first choice’, the 2016 Skills Agenda proposed supporting VET modernisation by actions such as:

- supporting opportunities for learners to undertake a work-based learning experience as part of their studies;
- supporting opportunities of students to combine learning experiences acquired in different settings;
- promoting higher VET through partnerships of VET stakeholders;
- improving data availability on the labour market outcomes of VET;
- exploring ways to streamline the existing EU level governance of the VET sector, including a more explicit coordination role for the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training;
- and the revision of the EQAVET and the ECVET.

The present chapter includes in addition to the above also the outcomes of the EQAVET and ECVET review and presents the possible policy options to carry forward the topics addressed within the overall EU policy context. It is based on the conclusions of the Study on EU VET Instruments (EQAVET and ECVET), extensive consultations with Member States, social partners and other stakeholders such as VET providers, intermediary bodies, learners' organisations, researchers and a consultation of the EQAVET and ECVET Networks. The analysis is also complemented by the *ACVT Opinion on the future of VET* and the outcomes of the follow-up discussions in the framework of the meetings of the ACVT and DGVT.

The study on EU VET instruments identified six options for EQAVET (see box 4) and five options for ECVET (see box 5).

#### Box 4 - The different options regarding EQAVET

##### Option 1: Enhanced status quo

Incorporating a set of core indicators utilised by all providers into a new EQAVET Recommendation, as well as the refinements introduced in EQAVET+.

##### Option 2: Embedding the instrument into other existing EU policy instruments

Implementing EQAVET alongside the implementation of the EQF, with the legal basis of the instrument being Annex IV of the EQF recommendation.

##### Option 3: Instruments become part of a broader policy strategy framework for VET

Introducing of an overarching Recommendation that covers quality assurance, flexibility and recognition in VET. This would be governed by a single policy group. Sub-groups would be used to take forward priority actions for particular instruments and policy areas. A PLA programme will exist, which will be instigated by the single policy group.

##### Option 4: Strengthening the Recommendation by implementing peer reviews of Member States' quality assurance arrangements in VET at system level

Revising the Recommendation to incorporate a core set of descriptors and indicators that can be used to carry out peer reviews. The governance structure would remain but include a remit to monitor the progress countries are making in developing their QA systems and to provide support.

**Option 5: Aligning HE and VET instruments, with an ambition of converging systems across HE and VET**

Creating of an overarching Recommendation for quality in education which provides high-level principles for QA that both systems adhere to, and sets out tools to do this (ESG in HE and EQAVET for VET).

**Option 6: Introduction of a voluntary certification system for national QA systems**

Specifying explicit expectations for national quality systems and introduce a certification scheme where countries must ensure their VET QA systems achieve certain standards to be certified. These could be graded so they progress towards a standard.

*Source:* Study on EU VET instruments

**Box 5: The different options for ECVET**

**Option 1: Enhanced status quo**

The concept and definition of ECVET points which would be revised. It would be repositioned as a set ECVET principles rather than emphasising the 'system' aspect.

**Option 2: Embedding the functions of ECVET into other existing EU instruments and programmes**

The promotion of VET mobility and flexible learning pathways to continue, but developments on credits will be implemented as per the provisions in Annex V of the EQF recommendation while the ECVET Memorandum of Understanding and the Learning Agreement could be integrated into Europass and the VET mobility charter could make it compulsory for Erasmus + beneficiaries of mobility actions to follow aspects of ECVET.

**Option 3: VET instruments become part of a broader European policy framework for VET**

Introduction of an overarching Recommendation that covers quality assurance, flexibility and recognition in VET. This would be governed by a single policy group. Sub-groups would be used to take forward priority actions for particular instruments and policy areas. A PLA programme will exist, which will be instigated by the single policy group.

**Option 4: VET and HE instruments are more aligned to each other, with an ambition of more convergence between HE and VET**

Introduction of a recommendation incorporating aspects of ECTS and ECVET (e.g. focus on learning outcomes, MoU, LA). Would also include a redefined concept of units of LO and credit points.

**Option 5: European framework for transfer of learning achievements and flexible progression pathways**

Facilitating the transfer, recognition and accumulation of assessed or validated LO between various contexts by proposing Member States recognise and document achievements and recognise them for access, admission and exemption. This would build on and expand the European Commission Recommendations for VNFIL and the Promoting automatic mutual recognition of HE and upper secondary education diplomas and outcomes of learning gained abroad. To aid trust the framework would also specify syntax and language for writing learning outcomes.

Source: Study on EU VET instruments

The future of the ECVET and EQAVET was also discussed in the ACVT. The 2018 ACVT Opinion on the future of VET invited the Commission to *“organise a reflection with experts from the ACVT as regards the potential for streamlining existing VET instruments and accelerate the ongoing discussions in order to come up with timely proposals. These discussions should also be carried out in close cooperation with the EQF and Europass Advisory Groups. These should be developed taking into account existing evaluations, studies and stakeholder’s views in relation to the different instruments and the interaction between them and an overarching analysis of these”*. In addition, the Opinion also invites the Commission to come up with a proposal *“to simplify the VET governance at EU level notably through increased effectiveness and efficiency of structures supporting the implementation of EU instruments in the field of VET.”*

To this end, an ad-hoc ACVT Working Group on existing European VET instruments was established in 2019 in accordance with Article 8 of the Rules and Procedures of the ACVT. The Working Group discussed the added value of EU level VET tools. It concluded that the direct EU added value of the EU tools lies in their capacity to support transparency, portability of learning outcomes and qualifications, mobility and movement of learners and workers, building mutual trust among systems which is also prerequisite for recognition of vocational qualifications by implementing, using and referencing to the tools. The EU tools can also provide indirect added value by promoting “upward convergence” related to flexibility, quality and excellence in VET as well as overall effectiveness and efficiency in VET through cooperation, mutual learning and exchanges.

To explore the synergies between EQAVET/ECVET and other European tools and initiatives and to seek for the simplification and streamlining of EU level VET cooperation, the Working Group mapped and discussed the different aspects of the implementation framework of the tools such as the possible integration or alignment of their function and content to the policy objectives of other instruments/tools/initiatives applied in the field of VET, skills and qualification, the possible legislative implications, the potential structures for governance responding to the needs of “increased effectiveness and efficiency”, working methods at EU and Member State level and the available funding.

The ACVT Working Group indicated that the ECVET objectives related to flexibility and learning outcomes approach in VET are still valid and should be pursued further, but this could also be done through other EU tools and instruments. These objectives should continue to be at the core of the VET policy framework – as called also under the ACVT Opinion on the future of VET - and could be further developed under a new overarching VET Recommendation. There is no need for a specific instrument focusing only on VET – the implementation arrangements related to EQF and Validation Recommendation can support the work on these objectives. However,



there is a need to continue specific support actions in the field of VET, including for implementing the principles of groups/units/modules of learning outcomes and accumulation and transfer of learning outcomes. Greater involvement of social partners has to be ensured in the future governance structures both at national and at European level. Working methods to support national level implementation need to be defined with a view to support streamlining and consolidating on governance level and links could possibly be created also with the implementation of the objectives pursued through EQAVET. Finally, the ACVT Working Group confirmed that EU level support and the strengthening of mutual learning activities are important for supporting Member States' efforts to increase flexibility in VET.

On the further development of EQAVET, the ACVT Working Group discussed two options both of which represent continuity and gradual improvement of the tool, the second with a more pronounced European dimension by introducing a peer review process. From the point of view of possible EU initiatives, the implication in both cases could include the revision of the 2009 Recommendation or its integration into a new overarching VET Recommendation. Regarding the content, the Working Group considered the revision of the 2009 Recommendation by giving more emphasis to work-based learning, continuous VET and validation, revising the descriptors and indicators according to EQAVET+ and ensuring a strengthened focus on provider level. Cooperation on the implementation EQAVET could continue receiving targeted support under a rolling work-plan in the future. Nurturing the culture of quality assurance in VET by continuing mutual learning activities at various levels (systems, providers) in the future was welcome by all. Some participants were in favour of the option covering a more ambitious and structured, but still voluntary approach to increase transparency in QA through collaborative peer reviews at VET system level. This could build on the new political momentum given to the importance of mutual trust and recognition of qualifications and diplomas as pursued through the European Education Area. The Europass Advisory Group and EQG Advisory Group were also consulted on the options.

Based on the feedback, discussions continued in the ACVT. On ECVET there was a general agreement to the proposed way forward on the flexibility and lifelong learning objectives to be integrated in the overarching Council Recommendation on VET. Views on mobility were mixed: some preferred building on the results of ECVET in the future as a self-standing VET mobility tool while others were in favour of its full absorption within other instruments, such as Europass, while some reservations about feasibility and timing were voiced. Concerning EQAVET, most countries were in favour of the extension of successful European level activities which have taken places since the adoption of EQAVET Recommendation in 2009 and which have helped the majority of countries to define, review and refine their QA systems. The discussion focused on the format and working methods of this reinforced European dimension and on the compatibility of a peer review process with the current toolbox approach of EQAVET. Adequate funding is crucial for good implementation of the instruments.

Based on all the above mentioned input, 3 options can be formulated:

- 1. Continuing the status quo with 2 separate Recommendations on ECVET and EQAVET** – continue the work on quality assurance and flexibility in VET based on the existing Recommendations while setting specific policy objectives through instruments such as declarations of EU Ministers in charge of VET (as for example defined in the Riga priorities adopted in 2015).

2. **Revising the ECVET and EQAVET Recommendation and adopting a new VET Recommendation** – the work on quality assurance and flexibility is continued on the basis of a revised ECVET and EQAVET Recommendation while a new VET Recommendation lays down the policy priorities for VET systems and cooperation at EU level.
3. **Repealing the ECVET and EQAVET Recommendations and integrating their (updated) content into a broader VET Recommendation** – the key (updated) elements of ECVET and EQAVET Recommendation are integrated in an overarching VET Recommendation laying down the policy priorities for VET systems and cooperation at EU level.

#### **4.2. Assessment and conclusions of potential scenarios (policy options)**

The first option would ensure stability but does not take into account the need for revising the ECVET and EQAVET Recommendations. As mentioned in section 3.2.2, both Recommendations have generated a positive impact but are also characterised by weaknesses which should be addressed. Therefore, the continuation of the status quo is not the optimal option.

Regarding option 2, this would allow addressing the identified weaknesses by revising the both Recommendations. However, this option fails to streamline the policy instruments which is a clear request from the ACVT and maintains the fragmentation of the various VET instruments.

Finally, option 3 would allow the update of the provisions of both Recommendations while ensuring that the policy instruments would be integrated in a single strategic instrument. This approach would respond to the establishment of a coherent and overarching policy framework called by the ACVT opinion.

To sum up, option 3 provides the most suitable basis for a strategic cooperation in the field of VET to contribute tackling the multiple challenges Europe is facing: climate action, digitalisation and demographic change. This option provides greater clarity on the link between different the instruments compared to the 2 other options and results in a more holistic approach to implementing the EU VET policy. At the same time, option 3 allows to update the provisions of the ECVET and EQAVET Recommendations which would not be the case for option 1. The next section 5 explains in detail the key elements of the proposal.

### **5. KEY ELEMENTS OF THE PROPOSAL**

#### **5.1. Preparatory work for the proposal – consultations and evidence**

This Commission Proposal for a Council Recommendation on vocational education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience is a result of an extensive preparatory work. It is based on a thorough and targeted consultation launched in 2017 with a view to define the cornerstones of the future-fit vocational education and training in the context of emerging trends and challenges (digitalisation, automation, robotics, artificial intelligence, climate change,



globalisation, pressure on resources, new business models, new forms of work organisation, demographic developments, ageing, migration).

The consultation was organised with all Member States and relevant stakeholders which have issued their official position on the future VET policies - notably the Directors-General for Vocational Education and Training and the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training which adopted an [Opinion on the future of Vocational Education and Training post 2020](#), European Social Partners (with their position papers: ETUC, SME United and BusinessEurope) as well as European VET providers associations.

[A survey on the challenges and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on vocational education and training](#) undertaken by the Commission in March-May 2020 with the following findings:

- Several tools are available for creating material for distance learning. However, in general VET online material is less developed, as far as the practical parts of training and work-based learning are concerned
- VET learners might be at disadvantage compared to learners from other educational tracks, as more efforts are put into general school subjects, and less into typical vocational content.
- There is substantial disruption to the apprenticeship 'supply chain'. Apprentices have largely discontinued their company attendance in the sectors whose activities have been shut down (e.g. restauration, well-being, tourism, manufacturing). In some cases, discontinuation and termination of financial compensation, where applicable, increases the rate of drop-outs.
- Little capacity for employers to focus on training either for youngsters or for their employees over concerns for ensuring business continuity. However, some employers and training providers made best use of the confinement period to support the training of their employees and to accelerate deployment of digital learning systems and content.
- While it is a significant challenge for teachers and trainers as well as learners to adapt swiftly to this dramatic change, many stakeholders have mobilised themselves to help (VET providers, local governments, publishers, NGOs, companies, etc.)
- There is a strong call for a European online platform (which is safe, quality assured, multilingual, etc.) that would offer opportunities for networking and exchanging good practices and would provide digital solutions, also for work-based learning.

A similar analysis carried out by CEDEFOP also points to some challenges for the VET sector: distance learning is piecemeal and its use very much depends on the schools' and teachers' e-skills and availability, and on the sectors concerned. Its use ranges from mere communication/keeping in touch with students, to access to resources (videos etc.), to actual teaching. The analysis also brought to light that apprentices continue their training and work, particularly in companies providing essential services such as healthcare and food, as long as health and safety measures are observed. By contrast, apprentices discontinued their company attendance in sectors whose activities have been shut down by regulation, such as,

in most countries, hospitality, wellbeing, tourism. This also affected in particular women, as they are more represented in these sectors.<sup>58</sup>

In addition, following evidence was used to define the future VET policy:

- Cedefop project on [“Changing nature and role of vocational education and training \(VET\) in Europe”](#) (2016-2018) – see details below;
- a Commission Study on [VET mobility in Europe](#) (2019);
- CEDEFOP Opinion Survey on VET (2017) based on responses of a total of 35,646 citizens of the Member States;
- the proposal to repeal and integrate the two EU VET specific instruments ECVET and EQAVET is based on (for more details see chapter 5.2);
- a dedicated [Study on EU VET instruments](#) (EQAVET and ECVET) (2019, taking into account previous evaluation studies);
- a working Group of the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training was set up to agree on the future development of European VET instruments (1st semester 2019);
- input gathered during the events of the third and the fourth editions of the European Vocational Skills Week (2018 and 2019)

### **The Opinion of the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training on future of vocational education and training post 2020**

The ACVT Opinion has identified a number of trends in vocational education and training:

- VET is expected to reposition itself within the future mix of a strong foundation of basic skills, generic, soft, transversal and professional competences. It should prove its ability to prepare people not only for existing jobs, but also – for future employment and job creation. VET is expected to continue fostering democratic citizenship and European values.
- Evidence from Cedefop shows<sup>59</sup> that with the growing weight of VET specific content in parallel with key competences, learning provision is expected to become more hybrid – in terms of blurring borders in institutional profile, target group, curricula and learning environment between VET and general education, between IVET, higher VET and CVET, between VET and higher education.
- The link between initial and continuous VET and labour market is expected to change from a one-way to two-way avenue. This means that in view of developments on the labour market mentioned above, increasingly lifelong development of employees will prove to be a necessity. It implicates that beyond the current policy focus on publicly financed initial VET, a broader approach should encourage providers of initial VET to offer training courses for adult workers (‘CVET’). Therefore, we need demand-driven, practice-oriented, flexible and responsive VET policies and frameworks, which can cater to the needs of both initial and continuing VET.

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<sup>58</sup> <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/fr/news-and-press/news/how-european-countries-manage-apprenticeships-respond-coronavirus-crisis>

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/changing-nature-and-role-vocational-education-and-training-vet-europe>

- Emerging new technologies and work organisation formats are expected to be captured faster through skills anticipation systems. Such trends should be translated to VET provision in terms of new skills, curricula and qualifications. VET systems are expected to develop 'fast response' mechanisms providing both quality assured core qualifications/skills pathways as well as flexible formats. Such provision should add new or higher-level skills. These feedback loops require strong governance involving social partners, both employers and trade unions.
- VET would need to balance a process-oriented, supply driven model with a result and outcome-oriented approach, in view of meeting expectations of learners in terms of adequate skills, of employers in terms of skills needs and productivity gains and of society in view of a contribution to growth and social cohesion.
- Governance in VET is expected to move towards a shared system with the participation of main stakeholders and implemented at national, regional, local, institutional and sector level. The involvement of social partners as well as stakeholders such as providers and VET learners in the development, implementation and governance of VET policies should be further strengthened.
- The way in which people are taught and learn will continue to evolve with the introduction of new, technology-based, educational tools and programmes.
- There is a need to significantly increase the links to innovation and efficiency in VET.
- Strong VET systems contribute to the competitiveness, innovation and growth of the European Union.

## **Changing role and nature of VET**

Cedefop's project on 'The changing role and nature of VET in Europe'<sup>60</sup> analysed how vocationally oriented education and training has changed in the European Union (as well as Iceland and Norway) in the past two decades (1995-2015) and, based on these results, investigated the main challenges and opportunities the VET sector is facing today and may face in the future.

### **Lessons from the past - the evolving character of European vocational education and training**

The changing nature and role of VET-project broadly confirms Cedefop's (2014) definition of VET as 'education and training which aims to equip people with knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences required in particular occupations or more broadly on the labour market'. Deliberately avoiding references to any particular level or sector, this definition draws attention the broad and expanding character of European VET: European VET today covers curriculum content aiming to prepare for the labour market, covering not only initial vocational education and training (IVET) at upper secondary levels (EQF 3 and 4) but also continuing vocational education and training for adults (CVET) and vocationally oriented education and training at higher levels (EQF 5-8). This understanding of VET, reflecting a de facto expansion and diversification of provisions, significantly

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<sup>60</sup> <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/changing-nature-and-role-vocational-education-and-training-vet-europe>

influences national and European VET policies. A narrow understanding of VET as exclusively linked to school and work based IVET would fail to grasp the challenges involved in addressing the needs lifelong learning and for labour market relevant education and training at higher levels. The following findings illustrate the journey travelled by European VET since 1995:

- The number of IVET students have declined in some countries (notably where the proportion traditionally has been high). This has been countered by an increase in countries with traditionally weaker VET systems. Overall the study points to a convergence between countries as regards participation in IVET.
- Many national VET systems ‘came of age’ during the two decades covered by the study (1995-2015). Departing from fragmented systems linked to a limited range of industries and sectors, the 1990s and early 2000s saw the development of comprehensive national systems in which VET came to have clearly defined roles in relation to general and academic education. While VET systems have long traditions in crafts and industry, new comprehensive systems have been better able to address wider needs, such as those of the service sector, and systemic needs, including for transparency and permeability, removing dead-ends and allowing learners to progress in learning.
- The delivery of VET has changed and evolved during these two decades. VET is now delivered by an increasingly diverse set of institutions applying a growing variety of learning formats and settings. While countries normally tend to favour either a school-based or apprenticeship-based VET model, increasingly these main models are being supplemented and complemented by alternative forms of education, training and learning. There are clear indications that there are increasingly mixed systems offering different tracks within one system.
- In almost all countries there is a trend within school-based VET towards broader vocational domains, a richer mixture of theoretical and general subject matter, and qualifications providing access to higher education at the expense of more specific practical VET. This trend can be described as hybridisation of vocational and general education, and is partly also visible within apprenticeship tracks.
- During these two decades, the number of VET qualifications on offer has steadily dwindled in most countries, refocusing VET on broader occupational areas, acknowledging that job-specific skills will inevitably change and that the ability of VET candidates to cope with this change is of essential importance. This development is also illustrated by a blurring of lines between initial VET and general upper secondary education: it is becoming increasingly difficult to say which school programmes should be defined as VET and which as general education. Hybrid or dual programmes that combine general subjects and vocational specialisations have become more common.
- A notable change is the emergence and increased visibility of what we term ‘VET at higher levels’, at European qualifications framework (EQF) levels 5 to 8. Many countries have seen a significant increase in VET at EQF level 5 and the expansion of VET at levels 6 to 8. The signal sent by Germany and Austria in levelling their master craftsman qualifications at level 6, equivalent to the university bachelor, illustrates a redefinition of what is understood as higher education that is taking place in some countries.
- There is an increasing number of apprentices preparing for a vocational baccalauréat or matura that provides general access to higher education; this is the case in Austria, France and Switzerland and recently also in Denmark. Both

the demand for higher VET skills by in economy and changing student choices may be drivers of this trend. An obvious result of these developments is longer schooling and a general shift of the centre of gravity of VET from level 3 to level 4 or even 5 (in all countries).

Almost 1500 VET stakeholders and experts from all over Europe were invited to comment on the initial findings of the study (spring 2018). When asked about past trends, there was general agreement regarding the importance and significance of the 'shift towards learning outcomes', 'increasing work-based elements in curricula' and 'growth in VET provision at higher levels'. As regards key challenges for the future, 'enhancing responsiveness to the labour market needs' was seen as critical along with the need to increase work-based elements and the priority of strengthening VET at higher levels. The respondents to the survey furthermore underlined the increasingly important role of VET 'in preparing students to participate fully in society and to become active citizens'. This emphasis on the need for a broader skills base may suggest a perception among education and training stakeholders that personal development and active citizenship are indispensable features of any kind of future learning. An alternative is that VET in Europe may assume an increasing social value and become a more mainstream educational pathway with much broader purposes.

By combining these dimensions three main development paths were identified. These three alternative paths imply highly different policy choices in the years to come:

### **1. Lifelong learning at the heart – pluralistic VET**

This scenario broadens our understanding and conception of what is meant by VET. The emphasis is on vocationally and labour-market-oriented learning at all levels and in all institutional settings. Vocationally oriented learning will not be restricted to the institutions explicitly defined as VET providers today but will form part of an integrated lifelong learning approach.

### **2. Occupational and professional competences at the heart – distinctive VET**

The distinctive scenario seeks to strengthen the existing and dominant conception of VET as focused on entry into occupations and professions.

### **3. Job-oriented training at the heart – special purpose or marginalised VET**

This scenario narrows down the understanding and conception of VET. Its focus is on training for jobs, reskilling and upskilling for short- and medium-term labour market needs.

## **Reactions to the scenarios from national authorities and stakeholders**

The scenarios have been presented to a number national authorities and stakeholders in a series of meetings and conferences during 2019. Overall, the approach has been positively received, some key reactions can be noted:

- The scenarios allow for a discussion of VET independent of traditional institutional dividing lines; allowing for a focus on VET at all levels and the relationship between initial and continuing VET.
- The scenarios point to important tensions (academic and vocational drift) and contradictions (a distinct VET focus versus a more pluralistic focus).

- The scenarios help to identify positive opportunities as well as real dangers. While all three scenarios are seen as presenting opportunities and challenges; the third scenario ('Special Purpose') is seen by many as presenting a too limited vision of future VET approaches and systems.

In this sense, and linked to the three points above, the scenarios add value to national dialogues. So far social partner organisations, employer organisations and trade union representatives, have expressed particular interest in making use of the scenarios. The argument being that this way challenges traditional perspectives on VET and its place in the overall education and training landscape. A full presentation of the scenario methodology, as well as the publication of a set of more detailed future scenarios, is scheduled for February 2020 and the publication of the synthesis report of the Changing nature and role of VET project. Cedefop will continue its work on the scenarios in the new (2019-2022) project on the 'Future of VET'.

## 5.2. Vision and actions for modernization of VET at national level

The proposal invites Member States to work towards implementing a common **vision** of vocational education and training. This vision is inspired by the ACVT Opinion on the future of VET post-2020 and adapted to the current economic and social context. Its main elements are:

- equips young people and adults with the skills to thrive in the evolving labour market and society and to manage the recovery, the just transitions to the green and digital economy in times of demographic change and throughout all economic cycles,
- ensures inclusiveness and equal opportunities and contributes to achieving resilience, social fairness and prosperity and
- establishes European vocational education and training as a global reference point for skills development;

The proposal further defines a number of actions to be taken by Member States to implement the above-mentioned vision and work towards achieving by 2025 the following objectives which are part of relevant European monitoring frameworks, including in the area of education and training and social and employment policies:

- **the share of recent employed graduates should be at least 82%<sup>61</sup>;**
- **60% of recent graduates from VET benefit from exposure to work-based learning** during their vocational education and training<sup>62</sup>. This objective refers to all forms of work based learning, and will thereby contribute to increased apprenticeship opportunities which can be supported with the Youth Guarantee;

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<sup>61</sup> This will cover the age group 20-34 with at least upper secondary education attainment and having left education and training 1-3 years ago.

<sup>62</sup> This will cover the age group 15-34, having left education and training 1-3 years ago. The indicator will be based on data that will be collected as of 2021 as part of the EU LFS.



- **8% of learners in VET benefit from a learning mobility abroad<sup>63</sup>**

The actions are structured in **seven clusters**.

### **1. *Vocational education and training is agile in adapting to dynamic labour market changes***

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the EU's economy, rapid technological developments, digitalisation, the transition to a resource-efficient, circular and climate-neutral economy, new business models and new forms of work organisation accelerate changes in the skills required by the labour market. Member States need to put in place **appropriate frameworks and measures to ensure that VET is resilient and can respond swiftly to changing labour market demands**. Better skills anticipation and graduate tracking mechanisms are needed to respond to the changes in economic sectors and occupations and to adapt accordingly the content of vocational education and training. A decisive element is the speed at which this adaptation is taking place. Levels of autonomy and funding which facilitate fast VET providers' responses to evolving skills needs are needed. VET prepares people for specific occupations. At the same time, learning content for both young and adults needs to strike a balance between key competences and more occupation-specific skills.

**Work-based learning and apprenticeships, in particular**, are effective approaches to ensure labour market relevance of VET. In times of recession, small companies might not be able to provide apprenticeship places. A stronger preventive approach and a reinforced focus of the Youth Guarantee on apprenticeships as well as appropriate support measures, in a form of inter-company training centres or expansion of digital training tools, can ensure a stable supply of apprenticeships also during unfavourable economic conditions.

### **2. *Flexibility and progression opportunities are at the core of vocational education and training***

Flexibility and opportunities to progress within education and training sectors and between them are key elements of future-fit VET systems. Furthermore, ensuring that VET programmes are **personalised and learner centred**, is essential for ensuring a strong engagement of the learners and attractiveness of VET pathways leading to increased employability.

**Modularisation** – breaking vocational qualifications into smaller parts of learning outcomes – is the way to flexibly update the content and to customise it to the needs of individuals. Validation of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal learning will facilitate up- and reskilling, leading not only to full qualifications, but to micro-credentials or partial qualifications.

### **3. *Vocational education and training is a driver for innovation and growth and prepares for the digital and green transitions and prepares for occupations in high demand***

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<sup>63</sup> This will be measured as the share of mobile learners in a calendar year, as a proportion of a cohort of VET graduates in the same year. The indicator will be based on the mobility data sourced from Erasmus+ data and VET graduate data sourced from the UOE. In addition, where appropriate, data from national authorities mobility programmes could also be used to complement the data from Erasmus+.



Responsiveness of VET to structural changes can be enhanced by a more proactive approach of **linking VET more strategically to forward-looking economic strategies, entrepreneurial and innovation ecosystems**. It is a way of not only reacting to changes which are already happening but co-creating economic and societal transitions – notably in the current context of recovery, focus on strategic industrial ecosystems (health, pharmaceuticals and others), and a resource-efficient, circular, climate-neutral and digital economy. This has potential to reduce the response time of adaptation of VET curricula.

Member States should continue to implement **VET excellence** approaches that foster integration of VET in skills ecosystems, in smart specialisation strategies, National Skills Strategies, innovation systems, circular economy strategies, renovation initiatives or National Energy and Climate Plans. Development of VET at higher qualification levels and supporting entrepreneurship and start-ups are important elements of the required response. This should be coupled with complementary structural policy measures that can help make business environments more attractive, foster investment and diffusion of innovation. **Centres of Vocational Excellence** connected via a transnational European framework can be an effective tool to drive skills development to foster transition from sectors that are in decline to new growing sectors and to embed green and digital skills (e.g. building on the EU Digital Competence Framework for Citizens, and the European e-Competence Framework for ICT professionals) in a vocational context.

**Greening the VET sector** requires first and foremost a greening of the VET programmes, curricula and content, but also managing the VET institutions with due attention paid to environmental footprint. This requires support for VET institutions in adapting their programmes, but also infrastructure and technology in line with sustainability requirements, contributing thus also to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, for example by helping to provide the skills needed for the Renovation Wave. Furthermore, as also illustrated by the COVID crisis, VET institutions need to embrace digitalisation and to have a clear digital strategy that addresses multiple dimensions: provision of digital learning content, pedagogical approaches in digital learning, but also better use of data for following learners progression, developing tailored approaches and skills forecasting.

#### **4. *Vocational education and training is attractive and based on modern and digitalised provision of training/skills***

VET still faces a challenge of low attractiveness for learners and companies in most Member States. This means that more efforts are needed in **increasing attractiveness of VET** by innovating and modernising VET, notably in terms of new learning environments, tools and pedagogies, with a special focus on digitalisation. ICT based simulator, virtual and augmented reality tools have the potential to significantly modernise and innovate VET provision, increase its efficiency and accessibility compared to expensive physical equipment. This can be particularly beneficial for small companies and apprenticeships organised in small and medium-sized companies.

New types of skills can be acquired through collaborative teaching, inter-disciplinary and project-based learning. Another aspect of attractiveness is **permeability**: education and training systems should enable vertical and horizontal pathways between VET, general school education, higher education and adult education.

Higher VET programmes should be further expanded to support increased needs for advanced vocational skills. High quality guidance services have potential to increase attractiveness of VET as well.

**Internationalisation, transnational mobility**, including virtual skills competitions<sup>64</sup>, strong links with the other education and training sectors, research and labour market actors are key to innovate how VET is designed and delivered.

**Increased quality of VET** will only be possible with well-trained and motivated teachers and trainers. Staff in VET needs to be supported in developing skills and providing tools to master new technologies, to work in multicultural environments and understand changing labour market needs. Motivation, career progression and well-being of teachers and trainers in VET are key to increase attractiveness of their profession. The so called hybrid teachers – a type of personnel who is part-time working in a company and part-time as a teacher in a vocational school - have a potential to contribute to a stronger cooperation arrangements between VET schools and companies in a more structured and frequent manner. Hybrid teachers can bring the necessary innovation to school-based environment and can address the growing shortage and ageing population of vocational teachers. The concept provides interesting career perspectives for individuals and provides benefits to both schools and companies, among others by sharing the salary costs.

#### **5. *Vocational education and training promotes equality of opportunities***

Good quality VET also contributes to the **inclusion of vulnerable groups**. This means that broad accessibility needs to be ensured and any remaining barriers to participation, including for people with disabilities, low-skilled adults, ethnic and racial minorities, including Roma and people with a migrant background be removed. This can also help address the equity concerns in access to digital learning tools, internet connection and necessary IT devices, raised during the COVID-19 crisis. Targeted measures and flexible formats of training can prevent early leaving from VET and provide opportunities for drop-outs to re-enter VET.

There is also a need to address gender bias by promoting balance between traditional ‘male’ and ‘female’ professions, including by encouraging participation of women in vocational training for what are usually traditional ‘male’ professions and of men in ‘female’ professions.

#### **6. *Vocational education and training is underpinned by a culture of quality assurance (explained below)***

#### **7. *Implementation at national level***

Sustainable partnerships between all relevant stakeholders and including public private partnerships, is key to achieve **effective governance in VET**. Member States are invited to make best use of existing European tools, such as Europass, the European Qualification Framework (EQF) or ESCO (the multilingual classification of European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations) and maximise

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<sup>64</sup> Skills competitions raise the profile and recognition of skilled people, and show how important skills are in achieving economic growth and personal success. They establish high standards for skills excellence in various professions, and measure the attainment of those standards through the competitions. They inspire young competitors to reach new heights, helping them turn their passion into a profession

synergies among them also with a view to promote automatic mutual recognition of vocational education and training qualifications/ diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad. European Union funds and instruments continue to focus on skills and provide opportunities to finance reforms of vocational education training. For more effective and efficient implementation of the Recommendation, it is proposed that responsible national authorities define measures to be taken for the implementation of this Recommendation at national level within one year of its adoption by building on relevant existing national arrangements and existing financial frameworks and follow through their implementation.

### **5.3. Integration of ECVET and EQAVET – future of the tools**

#### **EQAVET**

As mentioned in section 3.2.2, the EQAVET Recommendation has contributed to the improvement of quality assurance arrangements in many Member States. However, there were some weaknesses identified linked to the absence of specific topics in the EQAVET Framework as well as to EQAVET's contribution to increasing transparency of quality assurance arrangements and trust building

Although the EQAVET Framework as defined by the EQAVET Recommendation of 2009 is quite comprehensive and does cover a large number of topics, some topics such as learning outcomes, work based learning are not well or not explicitly addressed. As mentioned above in section 3.2., the EQAVET Network has developed in 2016 an additional set of indicative descriptors called EQAVET+ in order to address this situation. These EQAVET+ descriptors provide additional details regarding learning outcomes, involvement of social partners and other relevant stakeholders, etc. Annex 2 of the proposal for a Council Recommendation on vocational education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience therefore reflects these new elements.

Furthermore, an additional descriptor on the importance of creating flexible pathways is included in the proposed updated EQAVET Framework reflecting the increased importance for VET providers to be able to respond rapidly to changing labour market needs and to accommodate to the needs of the learners. In addition, the introductory section of the updated EQAVET Framework in annex 2 underlines that the EQAVET Framework is applicable to all types of learning environments such as school based provision and work based learning including apprenticeships schemes.

Regarding the transparency of quality assurance arrangements, it is important to recall that the EQAVET Recommendation mentions explicitly the objective to increase the transparency of VET policy developments between Member States. Transparency of quality assurance is one of the key elements for mutual trust and recognition of skills and qualifications of mobile persons. Therefore, increased transparency of quality assurance arrangements in VET can contribute to reinforced trust in qualifications as well as facilitate mobility of learners and workers between Member States. However, the 2013 external evaluation found that there is little

evidence that EQAVET supports transparency of quality assurance arrangements across Europe<sup>65</sup>. This finding was confirmed in the EU study on EU VET instruments stating that EQAVET did not contribute significantly to improving transparency of quality assurance arrangements. Linked to this, the last mentioned study also underlined that there was widespread consensus that the high level of countries' buy-in to EQAVET was attributed to some extent to the 'toolbox' approach for implementation. Stakeholders could use the EQAVET provisions that had most value to their national situation. While this was potentially necessary to gain traction, it has however resulted in significant variations and less transparency of quality assurance arrangements which were not intended.

In order to address the challenge of improving the transparency of quality assurance arrangements, it is proposed to organise EU peer reviews at VET system level in cooperation with the members of the group of Director-General for Vocational Education (DGVET). These peer reviews would analyse how quality assurance arrangements at VET system are organised and with the purpose to make suggestions to further improve quality assurance measures where relevant. The organisation of such peer reviews would require the development of a specific methodology tailored to the needs of EQAVET and could be developed by the EQAVET Network. The proposed cooperation with the DGVET would allow a stronger involvement of senior staff in the Ministries in charge of VET and contribute to an increased transparency of how quality assurance arrangements are organised in the different Member States.

Taking into account the results of the different evaluation studies as outlined above, this proposal will therefore:

- Repeal the 2009 EQAVET Recommendation and integrate the work on quality assurance in VET in the EU into the present proposal.
- Integrate the EQAVET+ initiative adding elements about learning outcomes, certification and assessment, stakeholders' consultation, the role of teachers and trainers.
- Add an additional indicative descriptor on flexibility of VET learning pathways given the increased need to develop flexible VET provision and on the need to contribute to environmental sustainability.
- Include the aspect of the digital readiness of VET systems and institutions.
- Define new working method through peer reviews of quality assurance at VET system level in order to improve mutual learning, enhance transparency of quality assurance arrangements of VET provision and reinforce mutual trust between Member States.
- Maintain the mission and functions of EQAVET national reference points (NRPs).

## ECVET

The objective of the ECVET Recommendation was to improve the recognition, accumulation and transfer of learning outcomes, supporting mobility and lifelong learning as well as the establishment of a EU credit system in VET. This initiative was further developed following the 2002 Copenhagen Declaration on the future priorities

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<sup>65</sup> External evaluation of the implementation of EQAVET, p. 69, 2013

for enhancing European cooperation in VET, which stated a need for a system supporting 'the transparency, comparability, transferability and recognition of competence and/or qualifications, between different countries and at different levels'.

According to the abovementioned study on EU VET instruments, ECVET has widely contributed to the development of a better-quality mobility experience through the use and documentation of units of learning outcomes. Since 2009, six more countries have introduced modules or units in IVET (bringing the total to 21). Credit systems have been introduced in an additional nine countries over the same period bringing the total to 17. On the other hand, the concept of ECVET points was generally not applied and ECVET did not lead to the development of EU credit system in VET.

Based on the feedback received during the stakeholder consultation and the experience gained with the ECVET implementation over the last 10 years, the present proposal incorporates and reinforces some elements of the 2009 ECVET Recommendation and abandons others that do not bring an added value or respond to a real need in the VET systems. In particular,

- The principle that qualifications are made of units of learning outcomes is integrated and reinforced in the proposal (modularisation). This is seen as a pre-requisite to increase flexibility of the VET programmes and facilitate validation as means to boost the take-up of up- and reskilling. It is also instrumental in facilitating mobility of VET learners and the recognition of learning outcomes achieved during such mobility periods. Furthermore, it can also support the automatic mutual recognition of VET qualifications and cooperation at sectoral level. To this end, a concept of European Vocational Core Profiles will be explored with the aim to define a certain share of a common training content at European level. The profiles have the potential to significantly facilitate mobility of learners and workers, automatic recognition of vocational qualifications, and the development of joint VET qualifications and curricula.
- The mobility tools developed under the 2009 Recommendation (e.g. learning agreement and memorandum of understanding) related to supporting geographical mobility of VET learners will be further developed in the framework of other EU instruments such as those supported by the Erasmus+ programme and linked to the further development of Europass.
- The credit points introduced by the 2009 Recommendation will be discontinued, due to the very low take-up and no evidence of added value. In practice, ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) applied widely in higher education is used also for post-secondary and tertiary VET.

The 2009 ECVET Recommendation will be repealed and the ECVET provisions and principles as outlined above will be taken forward on the basis of the present proposal and mainstreamed into other EU policy instruments.

## **5.4. EU support initiatives**

The following chapter provides more details on support actions proposed in the Commission Proposal for a Council Recommendation on vocational education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience.

### 5.4.1. Platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence

This subchapter provides an overview of the main features of the initiative of **Platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE)**.

#### What is Vocational Excellence?

Platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence are intended to be world-class reference points for training for both initial training of young people as well as for continuing up-skilling and re-skilling of adults. They operate in a given local context, closely embedded in the innovation ecosystems, while working with centres in other countries through international collaborative platforms.

CoVEs act as catalysts for local business investment, supporting European and regional innovation and smart specialisation strategies, development of VET at higher qualification levels and provide innovative services such as business incubators for start-ups and technology innovation hubs. They ensure high quality skills and competences that lead to quality employment and career-long opportunities, which meet the needs of an innovative, inclusive and sustainable economy.

A mapping study has been conducted to provide concrete examples of the main characteristics of CoVEs, with a view to informing the concept and the development of EU support plans.<sup>66</sup>

The concept of vocational excellence that is proposed is characterised by a **holistic learner centred** approach in which VET:

- i. Is an integrative part of **skills ecosystems**, contributing to regional development<sup>67</sup>, innovation<sup>68</sup>, and smart specialisation strategies<sup>69</sup>
- ii. Is part of **knowledge triangles**, working closely with other education and training sectors, the scientific community, and business
- iii. Enables learners to acquire both **vocational** and **key competences**<sup>70</sup> through **high-quality provision** that is underpinned by quality assurance, builds innovative forms of partnerships with the world of work, and is supported by the

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<sup>66</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8250&furtherPubs=yes>

<sup>67</sup> **Regional Development Policy** - Regional development is a broad term but can be seen as a general effort to reduce regional disparities by supporting (employment and wealth-generating) economic activities in regions. See <http://www.oecd.org/cfe/regional-policy/regionaldevelopment.htm>

<sup>68</sup> An **innovation** is the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service), or process, a new marketing method, or a new organisational method in business practices, workplace organisation or external relations. See <https://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=6865>

<sup>69</sup> **Smart Specialisation** is a place-based approach characterised by the identification of strategic areas for intervention based both on the analysis of the strengths and potential of the economy and on an Entrepreneurial Discovery Process with wide stakeholder involvement. It is outward-looking and embraces a broad view of innovation including but certainly not limited to technology-driven approaches, supported by effective monitoring mechanisms. See <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/what-is-smart-specialisation->

<sup>70</sup> As defined in the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on **key competences** for lifelong learning. See [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01)&from=EN)

continuous professional development of teaching and training staff, innovative pedagogies, mobility and internationalisation strategies.

## Context

The combined effects of rapid technological change, digitalization, climate change, circular economy, and new forms of work, call for innovative ideas to ensure that Vocational training not only adapts to change, but is also at the forefront of mastering and driving this change. These developments are not only disrupting every aspect of work and life, but also creating opportunities for innovation <sup>71</sup>and employment creation across all sectors. The capacity to innovate is increasingly becoming the key factor driving economic and social development.

VET policy makers are confronted with new challenges in anticipating and responding in due time to the fast changing skill needs of the labour market, and to the expectations of individuals. The "shelf-life" of skills is becoming increasingly short. To address this challenge, VET institutions must become much more flexible and responsive to the need for renewing their offer, companies have to become an active partner in designing and providing opportunities for work-based learning, and individuals have to embrace lifelong learning to maintain their employability, active citizenship and quality of life. The way we teach and learn has to be in tune with these new opportunities and challenges.

Developments in the VET system have been mainly of a gradual and incremental nature, and in most cases driven top-down. Business-as-usual may not be a viable option for the future. The speed and scale of change calls for innovative approaches where VET institutions are empowered to understand, engage and be an active partner in co-creating solutions for local social and economic development. A bottom-up approach where VET institutions are capable of rapidly adapting skills provision to evolving local needs, is essential to raise the attractiveness, relevance and quality in VET. The new paradigm for VET institutions is local in its nature, while the challenges they are facing is increasingly complex and global.

## The call for action

The policy drive for Vocational excellence is not new. An initiative to promote Vocational excellence has been called for since 2004 when the parties to the Copenhagen process, i.e. the Member States, the social partners, the candidate countries, the EFTA countries and the Commission, set the overall priorities for the EU VET modernisation agenda in the following Communiqués.

This was then followed up by [2012 Communication on Rethinking Education](#), proposing that excellence be pursued by aligning VET policies with regional/local economic development strategies namely for smart specialisation. Together with the 2012 Communication, a [Staff Working Document](#) gave further details on how the concept of Vocational excellence could be developed and achieved.

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<sup>71</sup> In particular of [Practice-based innovation](#) (Doing, using, interacting -DUI) as described by [Vesa Harmaakorpi](#) (see Ch 41).



The recent 2017 Communication on "[Strengthening Innovation in Europe's Regions](#)" makes a specific reference to "linking vocational education and training to innovation systems", as part of smart specialisation strategies at regional level.

In the 2018 [Communication on Building a stronger Europe](#): the role of youth, education and culture policies, the Commission announced an initiative to "support the development of trans-national platforms of centres of vocational excellence". The Centres of vocational excellence should promote an active role for VET in local and regional economic development.

On 3 December 2018, the ACVT adopted an "[Opinion on the future of VET](#)" that also puts a focus on the promotion of VET Excellence and inclusion, and calls on the Commission to provide support for the establishment of Platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence.

The Industry 2030 High Level Industrial Roundtable report "[A vision for the European Industry until 2030](#)" called for setting up of Acceleration Centres which would stimulate industrial transformation by synergistic bundling in one geographic location of various institutions, including Platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence.

### The initiative on platforms of "Centres of Vocational Excellence"

When discussing innovation, reference is often made to the "**knowledge triangle**" – *a link between businesses, education and research*. In this context, education is often understood as academic higher education, with VET playing a marginal role, and quite often being neglected. However, VET has an important role to play in the "knowledge triangle", as well as in "smart specialisation" strategies that lead to sustainable growth, innovation, job creation and social cohesion.

Some Member States have launched successful initiatives aiming at Vocational excellence<sup>72</sup>, and include VET as part of their innovation strategies. However, these are still rare exceptions, and progress has been uneven throughout Europe.

This initiative responds to this challenge, and introduces a "**European dimension**" aimed at fostering "upward convergence" of excellence by supporting the development of **Centres of Vocational Excellence**, operating at two levels:

1. **National:** in a given local context, embedding **Centres of Vocational Excellence** closely in the local innovation ecosystems and acting as technology diffusion centres for SMEs including digital learning tools (ICT based simulators, virtual and augmented reality), and connecting them at European level.
2. **International:** through **Platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence** to establish world-class reference points for vocational training by bringing together CoVE's that **share a common interest** in specific sectors<sup>73</sup>/ trades (*e.g. aeronautics, e-mobility, green technologies, ICT, healthcare, etc.*) or

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<sup>72</sup> See for example Katapult in the Netherlands <https://www.wijzjinkatapult.nl/english/>, and Tknika in Spain <https://tknika.eus/en/>

<sup>73</sup> For example those identified as being part of the "key strategic value chains", within the discussion of the Strategic Forum for Important projects of common European interest (IPCEI)

innovative approaches to tackle societal challenges (e.g. *Climate change, Digitalisation, Artificial Intelligence, Sustainable Development Goals, integration of migrants, upskilling people with low qualification levels, etc.*)<sup>74</sup>.

The **platforms** will either bring together existing CoVE's in different countries, or expand the model by linking well-established CoVE's in one country with partners in other countries, that intend to develop CoVE's in their local eco-system.

The platforms will be open for the involvement of countries with well-developed vocational excellence systems, as well as those in the process of developing similar approaches, aimed at exploring the full potential of VET institutions to play a proactive role in support of growth, competitiveness and innovation.

Platforms of Centres of Vocational excellence **are not intended to build new VET institutions and infrastructure from scratch** (although it may also require this type of investment). Instead they aim to bring together a set of local/regional partners such as initial and continuing VET providers, tertiary education institutions including universities of applied sciences and polytechnics, research institutions, science parks, companies, chambers and their associations, social partners, sectoral skills councils, professional/sector associations, national and regional authorities and development agencies, public employment services, etc.

### The essential features of Centres of Vocational Excellence

CoVE's are characterised by adopting a **systemic approach** through which VET institutions actively contribute to co-create "**skills ecosystems**", together with a wide range of other local/regional partners. CoVE's are expected to go far beyond the simple provision of a quality vocational qualification.

Below, we present a non-exhaustive (and non-compulsory) **list of typical activities** and services provided by CoVE's grouped under three clusters:

#### **Cluster 1 - Teaching and learning**

- Providing people with labour market relevant skills, in a lifelong learning continuum approach. Combining offers of initial VET qualifications, with offers of continuing training (for upskilling and reskilling), that are informed by skills anticipation.
- Providing guidance services, as well as validation of prior learning.
- Developing innovative curricula that focus both on technical skills and key competences<sup>75</sup>, while making use of European competence frameworks and tools (e.g. EntreComp, DigComp, DigCompOrg, SELFIE).
- Developing innovative learner-centred teaching and learning methodologies, including interdisciplinary, project-based, competence-based learning, and

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<sup>74</sup> The smart specialisation platforms (S3) also have thematic Platforms for Industrial Modernisation, in sectors such as Agri-food, Energy and Blue Growth, which include transnational partnerships in specific priorities within these areas that are shared by regions (see <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/s3-thematic-platforms>)

<sup>75</sup> As defined in the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on **key competences** for lifelong learning.

[makerspaces](#)<sup>76</sup>, while fully exploiting digital technologies (e.g. MOOC's, simulators, virtual reality, etc.).

- Fostering learner excellence<sup>77</sup> through actions that incentive VET learners to explore their innovation and creative potential, leading to a virtuous cycle of benefits for the learners, the teachers and the VET institution that can integrate best practices into regular programmes.
- Developing modular and learner-centred trans-national VET learning provision (curricula and/or qualifications) thus facilitating the mobility of learners and staff, as well as the recognition at regional and/or national levels.
- Providing higher level VET programmes and developing flexible pathways and cooperation mechanisms between VET and higher education institutions.
- Investing in the initial and continuing professional development of teachers and trainers, for both pedagogical as well as technical skills, as well as for the implementation of a quality culture based on defined management systems.
- Establishing strong quality assurance mechanisms aligned with European tools and instruments, which may also include working towards the certification of education and training providers based on standards developed by relevant national and/or international standards organisations - e.g. ISO 21001 or EFQM.
- Establishing effective feedback loops and graduate tracking systems that enable the timely adaptation of learning provision to evolving labour market needs.

### ***Cluster 2 - Cooperation and partnerships***

- Contributing to creation and dissemination of new knowledge in partnership with other stakeholders, e.g. through joint R&D with universities, R&D units in companies, research bodies, etc.
- Establishing business-education partnerships for apprenticeships, internships, sharing of equipment, exchanges of staff and teachers between companies and VET centres, etc.
- Providing SMEs with technical support, needs assessment, tools and methodologies, as well as tailor-made training to support their offers for apprenticeship and up-skilling/re-skilling.
- Working together with local SME's through innovation hubs, technology diffusion centres, and applied research<sup>78</sup> projects with the involvement of VET learners and staff.

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<sup>76</sup> Makerspaces are collaborative workspaces for making, learning, exploring and sharing (see JRC report)

<sup>77</sup> See example of the Dutch MBO Excellence initiative [www.rocmn.nl/up](http://www.rocmn.nl/up)

<sup>78</sup> See Canadian Colleges and institutes example that make use of applied research to strengthen their capacity to innovate and leverage their strong industry and community connections <https://www.collegesinstitutes.ca/policyfocus/applied-research/>, and Doing Applied Research in Victorian TAFE Institutes: An introductory guide. <https://www.vta.vic.edu.au/docman-sortable-list/952-doing-applied-research-in-tafes-an-introductory-guide-2/file>

- Providing or supporting business incubators for VET learners to develop their entrepreneurship skills and initiatives.
- Developing internationalisation strategies to foster trans-national mobility of VET learners, teachers and trainers, as well as leaders. This could also include preparatory work to facilitate mobility such as teaching programmes or courses on EU studies to improve understanding of Europe's integration process and its place in a globalised world (e.g. inspired on the Jean Monnet actions).
- Launching and actively participating in campaigns and activities aimed at raising the attractiveness of VET and awareness to the life and job opportunities provided by VET qualifications. These initiatives could attract more people (including learners in primary and secondary schools) to specific professions, and contribute to the European Vocational Skills Week.
- Participating in national and international skills competitions, aimed at raising the attractiveness and excellence in VET.
- Developing "International VET campus/academies" for learners in primary, secondary, and VET schools, teachers and trainers, Leaders in VET institutions, as well as for people considering future vocational study options. These could be focused on specific occupational fields, products or services.

### ***Cluster 3 - Governance and funding***

- Ensuring effective governance at all levels involving relevant stakeholders, particularly companies, chambers, professional and sector associations, national and regional authorities and social partners.
- Actively engaging in the overall national Skills governance systems and linking with employment and social policies at local, regional, national and European level.
- Integrating into economic and innovation strategies and systems at local, regional, national and European levels to proactively co-shape innovation and growth.
- Developing sustainable financial models that combine public and private funding, as well as income generating activities.
- Supporting the attraction of foreign investment projects by ensuring timely provision of skills for companies investing locally
- Making full use of national and EU financial instruments and Funds. These can include the support of education and training actions, mobility of learners and staff, applied research activities, infrastructure investments to modernise VET centres with advanced equipment, implementation of management systems to assure excellence and sustainability of VET organizations and the services they provide, etc.

### **Future roll-out of the Platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence according to Commission proposal**

The Commission has proposed that the future Erasmus programme funds the activities related to the transnational cooperation of these centres, notably related to the establishment of the transnational platforms, initial operation, and capacity building. The precise modalities of funding and design of the action are still to be defined, within the context of preparing the ground for the implementation of the

future Erasmus Regulation. The platforms should aim to be self-sustainable in the medium-term.

Pilot actions to prepare the initiative are being supported by the current Erasmus+ programme:

- In the **2019 Erasmus+ call**, the Commission launched a [call for pilot projects](#) under Sector Skills Alliances with a budget of €5 million to support a first set of up to 5 projects running for 2 years.
- In the **2020 Erasmus+ call**, the Commission published a [specific call](#) to establish Platforms of CoVE's with a budget of €20 million to support 5 fully-fledged Platforms running for 4 years, that closely resemble the future model that will be supported in the Erasmus programme in the period 2021-2027.

#### 5.4.2. Support services for VET

The Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on vocational education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience proposes that the support of the European Commission to Member States with a view to the implementation of this Recommendation will be organised through support services based on demands from all relevant stakeholders.

The services will built on existing support activities related to the implementation of the Recommendations on EQAVET, ECVET and European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships – notably its Apprenticeships Support Services.

The support of the European Commission to Member States with a view to the implementation of this Recommendation could be gradually deployed through reinforcing support for structural reforms on apprenticeships through the apprenticeship support service<sup>79</sup> and a new boost to European Alliance for Apprenticeships in synergy with the Youth Guarantee as well as expanding support services for vocational education and training together with Cedefop. The activities could cover a range of services, including mutual learning, expert advice, bench-learning, analytical work and capacity building for implementing this Recommendation.

The services will be based on rolling work programme to be defined together with the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training in cooperation with learners' representatives and providers of vocational education and training.

#### 5.4.3. EQAVET Peer Reviews

With the view to strengthen the European dimension of increased transparency and 'trust-building' the proposal proposes to introduce peer reviews on quality assurance

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<sup>79</sup> As the key follow-up action to the Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships the Commission launched an Apprenticeship Support Services in November 2018. The aim is to support members of the European Alliance for Apprenticeships to work towards more and better apprenticeships through a knowledge and a networking hub. It also includes bench-learning, a methodology combining benchmarking with peer learning, and which provides a structured process to mutual learning among Member States on improving their apprenticeship systems.

arrangements in VET. The focus on the European dimension is a logical extension of successful activities which have taken place since the adoption of EQAVET Recommendation in 2009 and which have helped the majority of countries to define, review and refine their quality assurance systems. The format and working methods of this reinforced European dimension, aimed at strengthening transparency and trust building, through a peer review exercise needs to be further discussed with all relevant stakeholders.

It is intended to make use of the new Erasmus Programme and possibly integrate the exercise in the future integrated VET support service as explained above.

The following box presents a possible approach to build the concept of peer reviews on quality assurance in VET.

#### **Box 6 - Peer reviews on quality assurance in VET**

A peer review is a type of mutual learning activity. It is hosted by a country to present and discuss in depth the specific policy responses and arrangements in place to achieve the objectives of the policy area. Both representatives of Member States and independent experts can participate. The peer review was introduced as an ET2020 tool following the 2012 Joint Report and it is used on a regular basis in the meetings of the Directors General for VET.

In the context of the proposed options for EQAVET, a peer review is a type of mutual learning activity focused on the quality assurance arrangements at VET system level. The objectives of these peer reviews are to support the improvement QA at Member State level, enhance the transparency of QA arrangements and reinforce trust between the Member States.

Therefore, peer review is not to be confused with accreditation or certification. In the framework of the EQAVET implementation, EU peer reviews at VET provider level are already frequently carried out in EU funded projects. A specific methodology for a EU peer reviews at VET provider level has been developed in the framework of Leonardo Da Vinci project in 2007 and this methodology is still used in more recent projects (for example in the projects selected in the framework of the 2017 restricted call for proposals of EQAVET NRPs).

The key principles of EU peer reviews at VET system level would need to be determined in cooperation with the participating Member States and could consist of the following features:

- The focus is on supporting countries to improve their QA and creating transparency of QA arrangements in Member States;
- The target group is those officials who have responsibilities for QA of VET at the system level;
- The peer review is not a technical and/or bureaucratic procedure but a dynamic and motivating discussion process that engages policy makers at national/system level and increases cooperation at EU level;
- A specific methodology to carry out EU peer reviews at VET system level needs to be defined in cooperation with Member State representatives and social partners.



#### 5.4.4. European Vocational Core Profiles

European VET systems have the potential to establish themselves as a global reference point for skills development. There are a number of actions to be taken at European level which can promote European leadership in a global training market, such as support to internationalisation of vocational education and training systems, promotion of skills competitions or organisation of communication campaigns to raise the attractiveness and image of VET.

An innovative element supporting excellence and internationalisation of VET is the concept of *European Vocational Core Profiles* which would define a certain share of a common training content at European level. As part of Europass platform and complemented, where possible, by vocational digital content, the Profiles have a potential to significantly facilitate mobility of learners and workers, automatic recognition of vocational qualifications, and the development of joint vocational education and training curricula, qualifications and micro-credentials.

#### 5.4.5. Capacity building of providers of vocational education and training

The 2010 Bruges Communiqué stated that: "**VET provider organisations should be encouraged to cooperate at European level**" and several deliverables in the Communiqué also imply other stakeholders to work with VET providers.

VET providers and their associations are crucial players in the implementation of the reforms in VET at national level and are directly relevant in the implementation of the EU policies and initiatives. They are multipliers, to disseminate the VET policy agenda and good practices exchanged at the EU level, while they also provide feedback and expertise from a practitioners' grass root level perspective, to the policy proposals made by the Commission.

Some European VET provider associations which have interests in IVET, CVET, and higher level VET gathered every year since 2010 for informal meetings with the EC services responsible for VET. Since 2015, an expert group called "Platform for European Associations of VET providers" (hereafter the Platform) has been created. The group is currently composed of the 6 European Associations of VET providers: EfVET (<https://www.efvet.org/>), EUproVET (<http://www.euprovnet.eu>), EVBB (<http://evbb.eu/>), EVTA ([www.evta.eu](http://www.evta.eu)) - as 4 VET centred organizations - and EURASHE (<http://www.eurashe.eu/>) and Eucen (<http://www.eucen.eu/>), the latter ones representing cross-cutting sectors of relevance, i.e. higher education and lifelong learning.

In addition, a "Community of practitioners on promoting quality in VET delivery" has been set up in 2017 by Cedefop in close cooperation with the "Platform" and the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

The Community produces concrete practical guidance for practitioners, identify good practices and maximise use of European activities and results at grass-root level. Its work is practice oriented and draw upon VET-providers' own experience. A work-programme 2017-2020 has been agreed with three axes:

1. Technology Enhanced Learning environments
2. EU mobility: reinforcing learning attractiveness and employability
3. Empowerment and integration of migrants through learning.

There is a need to reinforce a structured dialogue with VET providers with a view of empowering and strengthening their role in the EU level VET cooperation. Also in several editions of the European Vocational Skills Week the need for a European VET Community was highlighted.

The Commission aims to build on this initiative and explore options for building a European Community of learning providers, by making best use the new Erasmus Programme and of relevant existing platforms with the aim to extend and develop professional knowledge professional practice.

This Community should reach out to potential new members to the Community: school leaders, teachers and in-company trainers, HR managers, sharing information through webinars, on-line fora, and meetings.

Synergies with other platforms (School Education Gateway, e-twinning, EURES, Apprenticeships Support Services and others) should be ensured. Active participants to the Community could receive an open badge to recognize their contributions to selected topics.

#### **5.4.6. SELFIE tool for VET schools and work-based learning**

The SELFIE self-reflection tool<sup>80</sup> supports schools at different education levels (primary, lower-secondary, upper-secondary general, upper-secondary vocational and post-secondary non-tertiary education) in using digital technologies for teaching and learning. It was launched in October 2018 as an action of the Digital Education Action Plan. The tool is available in more than 30 languages and has been used by more than 640,000 participants from 7200 schools in 57 countries<sup>81</sup>. Participation in the tool is free of charge, voluntary and open to any school worldwide.

SELFIE gathers anonymously the views of the school's community (school leaders, teachers, and students) on how technology is used in their school. The questions cover areas such as leadership, infrastructure, teacher training and students' digital competence. More than thirty questions are also relevant for remote/blended teaching and learning, which make it particularly useful in the current COVID19 crisis. In addition, schools can add up to ten questions to cover more aspects, for example on emergency remote teaching and learning.

Based on this input, the tool generates a tailored-made interactive report of each school's strengths and weaknesses in their use of digital technologies for teaching and learning. The findings can help schools know where they stand, discuss technology use and develop an action plan for their school. SELFIE can then be used at a later stage to gauge progress and adapt the action plan. Participants also obtain personalised certificates of participation, while schools can receive an open badge.

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<sup>80</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/education/schools-go-digital>

<sup>81</sup> <https://schools-go-digital.jrc.ec.europa.eu>

SELFIE is a scientifically validated tool which is based on the European Framework for Digitally-Competent Educational Organisations (DigCompOrg<sup>82</sup>). SELFIE has been developed in close cooperation by the Commission in collaboration with a team of experts from schools, education ministries and research institutes across Europe<sup>83</sup>. Partner institutions include the European Training Foundation, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and UNESCO's Institute for Information Technologies in Education. Several Erasmus+ projects are currently also working on developing additional support services to the tool and its users. Apart from its use in the Member States, the European Commission has also been cooperating with the European Training Foundation to pilot and extend its use in the countries of the Western Balkans, Turkey and other partner countries.

Cedefop and the European Training Foundation have additionally contributed their expertise on VET to assure the questionnaire's relevance to the specific needs of VET schools. Therefore, a few questions have been added to the SELFIE questionnaires for school leaders, teachers and students that are specifically designed to address VET schools. These questions include topics such as the use of digital technologies in partnerships with other organisation, career guidance or the development of skills that are relevant to the vocational qualification of students.

VET schools can already use the SELFIE tool within their institutions. However, many VET schools also provide opportunities to their learners to obtain skills and gather experiences in the workplace (for example, apprenticeships and traineeships). These work-based learning (WBL) settings in VET are not yet covered by the SELFIE tool. Therefore, a feasibility study, conducted by the Commission<sup>84</sup>, and supported by Cedefop and the European Training Foundation, assessed whether and how SELFIE could be adapted to WBL systems in VET and if there was demand for such an extension of the tool. To this end, more than 30 semi-structured interviews with all relevant stakeholder groups were conducted in various European countries, including VET schools, employers, trade unions, VET providers' associations, employers' associations and international organisations. In addition, an online survey was designed to get further feedback from more actors in the field. The ongoing work was also presented to the relevant groups at EU level, e.g. the ET2020 Working Group on Vocational Education and Training and the Associations of European VET providers. The results of the study show that there is a need for a new version of the SELFIE tool specifically focussing on the WBL arrangements in VET. Among others, this new version should include a new questionnaire for in-company trainers that supports students during their time with employers. COVID-19 has shown the difficulty of maintaining the work-based learning part of VET in companies, which makes it even more important to make the dialogue between VET teachers and in-company trainers more effective via digital means, such as Selfie for WBL.

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<sup>82</sup><https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/eur-scientific-and-technical-research-reports/promoting-effective-digital-age-learning-european-framework-digitally-competent-educational>

<sup>83</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/selfie-forum-teaching-and-learning-digital-age>

<sup>84</sup> Broek, S., & Buiskool, B.-J. (2020). Adapting the SELFIE tool for work-based learning systems in Vocational Education and Training. A feasibility study. Hippe, R., & Kampylis, P. (eds.). EUR 30079 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, ISBN 978-92-76-10623-4, doi:10.2760/934724, JRC11970.

Given these results, the European Commission has been developing the SELFIE tool for work-based learning contexts in VET since January 2020. It will allow VET schools and employers to reflect jointly on how their collaboration and their use of digital technologies for teaching and learning can be improved. SELFIE for work-based learning can thus also improve the effectiveness and quality of VET systems as a whole. Pilot testing of the work-based learning tool is foreseen in several Member States in autumn 2020 (pending tender selection it should include Germany, France, Hungary or Poland), with final launch of the tool in all the official languages of the EU in 2021. Beyond the technical development of the tool, it is important to build the broader ecosystem of Selfie for WBL by raising awareness and engaging stakeholders closely throughout the process.

## 5.5. Monitoring and indicators for the VET policy framework

In order to be able to effectively steer VET systems as well as to assess the progress achieved in supporting the adaptation of EU VET systems to the changing social, economic and labour market context, an ability to monitor the changes taking place in VET systems as well as their effects is paramount.

At the European level, VET systems are at an intersection of multiple quantitative and qualitative monitoring processes. Existing approaches to monitoring either do not systematically capture VET or do not provide coherent cross-country statistical reporting. Despite lack of specific VET indicators, some ET 2020 benchmarks, such as on employability and participation in adult learning, reported data on VET (professional) and general education orientations. A further effort in the direction to develop a broader monitoring system for VET has been the compilation of a range of indicators within the CEDEFOP project “On the way to 2020: data for vocational education and training policies”.

European Statistical System has evolved a lot since 2014 and generates now regularly reported data on VET. Also, as of 2021, we will have available on an annual basis regular data on work-based learning covering all the EU Member States and as of 2022 the data on adult participation in learning will be based on a 12-month reference with a bi-annual frequency. In light of these realized and planned developments, the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training (ACVT), in its opinion on the future of vocational education and training post-2020, called for the establishment of “*A clear and light monitoring framework, against a set of indicators <...>, to enhance transparency and support mutual trust among Member States <...>*”.

An ideal monitoring framework would need to be based on a solid logical model and should also be underpinned by contextual information and interpretation which would help explain the changes of statistical indicators within the context of national education and training systems and socio-economic situation. The monitoring through statistical indicators, reported on an annual or bi-annual frequency in could be combined with reporting on the progress implementing policy priorities under the Copenhagen as well as Torino processes. This would provide a comprehensive picture of the status of VET systems, development trends and policy actions undertaken to enhance the functioning of VET systems throughout Europe and neighboring countries.

The underlying logical model that could be used for monitoring the proposed Recommendation is an input-process-output-outcome model, regularly used as the basis for the design of monitoring frameworks:

- The input aspect of the model can be covered by monitoring investment in VET (but without proposing a single indicator/ target).
- The process aspect of the model can be covered by two indicators, representing key VET policy priorities, notably
  - Exposure to work-based learning;
  - International learning mobility in formal VET;
- The outcome aspect of the models can be covered by an indicator on VET recent graduates employment rate.

The proposed indicators cover well the different stages of this model and some of these are also proposed as objectives in the proposal for the Recommendation.

### **Investment in VET**

As for all education and training programmes, financial resources are key in steering the vocational education and training systems. Financial resources can encourage institutions to offer some programmes rather than others and steer the number of places offered in each occupation. This is essential to ensure the mix of provision is responsive to labour market needs. Funding arrangements need to take into account the targeted field of study, recognising that some programmes are cheaper to deliver than others – one challenge is that the high costs of starting new programmes (e.g. new equipment, staff recruitment) encourages the continuation of existing programmes and discourages the introduction of new programmes. Financial incentives are also commonly used to encourage employers to offer work-based learning – for example in the form of tax breaks to training companies, subsidies to employers to take on an apprentice.

There are two key elements with regard to statistics on investment in VET. First, there is the well-established reporting system - Unesco-OECD-Eurostat (UOE) data collection, providing on an annual basis data on the expenditure within formal education and training systems. It has a relatively good coverage of data on VET, even if there are some weaknesses with regard to comprehensive coverage of expenditure on work-based learning (OECD, forthcoming). In part, the on-going Eurostat UOE Task Force on Education Expenditure aims to address some of the methodological shortcomings of this data collection, which would also lead to improvement on coverage of expenditure data on formal VET. Secondly, there are three additional data sources on investment into non-formal training, which do provide complementary data but even these sources on their own are not fully sufficient to provide a full picture on investment in non-formal training. These include EU Adult Education Survey (EU AES), covering individuals' own expenditure; the EU Continuing Vocational Training Survey (EU CVTS), covering expenditure on training by private sector enterprises' with at least 10 persons employed and the DG EMPL ALMP database, covering expenditure on training as part of active labour market policies. The first two data sources, however, only provide relevant information every 5 years (for EU CVTS) or every 6 years (for EU AES), given the relatively lower frequency of these surveys.

While there is no proposal to set a target for this indicator, it is considered to be a useful indicator to further develop as part of the monitoring framework for VET.



## Indicator on work-based learning in medium-level<sup>85</sup> VET

One of the main priorities in Union VET policy has been the promotion of work-based learning and apprenticeships schemes in VET systems, as tools to deliver labour market relevant skills, ease transitions to labour market, and contribute to reducing youth unemployment.

Promoting WBL has been a very important area of European cooperation in VET since the launch of the Copenhagen process. At their 2015 meeting in Riga, European Ministers responsible for VET, together with the Social partners selected WBL as the first of five priorities for the period 2015-2020. The Commission Communication on the New Skills Agenda for Europe (2016)<sup>86</sup> further reinforces the focus on WBL. The recent 2018 Council Recommendation on a framework for quality and effective apprenticeships<sup>87</sup> recommends that a substantial part of an apprenticeship, meaning at least half of it, should be carried out in the workplace and stresses the aim to progress gradually towards that share of the apprenticeship being workplace learning.

Also beyond the EU, there is strong consensus about the benefits of WBL for improving pathways to adulthood; delivering economic and labour market benefits to learners, enterprises and society more broadly; improving pedagogy; and reducing costs and increasing capacity within the system (Sweet, 2011)<sup>88</sup>. The ILO has suggested that combined school- and work-based programmes reduce skills mismatches and provide hiring possibilities for firms (ILO, 2017a)<sup>89</sup>. The latest data from the ad-hoc module of the EU-LFS on young people in the labour market, carried out in 2016, also clearly show the benefits (for example higher employment rates) of work-based learning (particularly apprenticeships) for students. Positive labour market outcomes from work-based learning have been re-confirmed in a number of recent studies using OECD and EU-level data (OECD, 2019; JRC, 2020).

While there have been some limitations in terms of regular and comprehensive data coverage of work-based learning until now, it was agreed that under the adopted Integrated European Social Statistics Framework Regulation (IESS FR)<sup>90</sup>, the variable "work experience at a workplace as part of HATLEVEL" (HATWORK) will be included into the core LFS as from 2021. This variable allows distinguishing different types of work-based learning, using dimensions such as duration of work-based learning experience as well as if it included pay or not. A dedicated European Commission Joint Research Centre Study (JRC, 2020), confirmed that this data

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<sup>85</sup> Understood as upper secondary and post-secondary non tertiary VET, according to ISCED11 classification.

<sup>86</sup> COM/2016/0381 final

<sup>87</sup> 2018/C 153/01

<sup>88</sup> Sweet, R. 2011. "Work-based learning: Why? How?", in Revisiting global trends in TVET: Reflections on theory and practice (Bonn, UNESCO-UNEVOC).

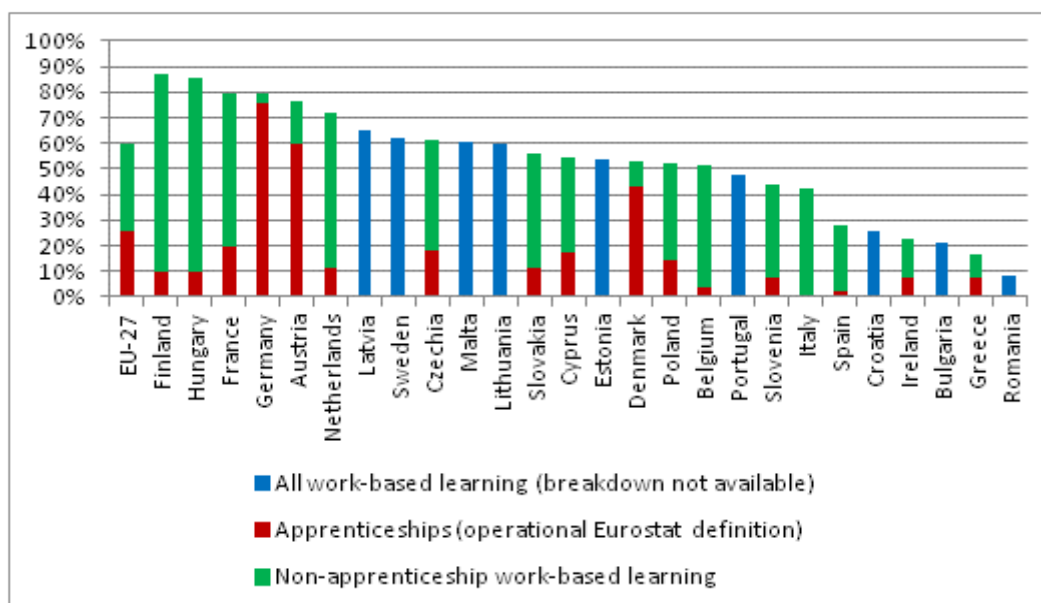
<sup>89</sup> ILO, 2017. ILO toolkit for quality apprenticeships, Vol. 1: Guide for policy-makers (Geneva).

<sup>90</sup> The Regulation (EU) 2019/1700 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 October 2019 establishing a common framework for European statistics relating to persons and households, based on data at individual level collected from samples, amending Regulations (EC) No 808/2004, (EC) No 452/2008 and (EC) No 1338/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council, and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1177/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Council Regulation (EC) No 577/98 (Text with EEA relevance) - <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.LI.2019.261.01.0001.01.ENG>



would be a good option for monitoring learners' exposure to work-based learning. This indicator focuses on medium-level VET given the lack of standardised operational definition at international level to isolate programmes at bachelors and masters levels in tertiary education belonging to vocational/professional pathway.

**Figure 11: Exposure of recent graduates (aged 15-34) with a medium-level vocational education and training qualifications to work-based learning, 2016**



Source: Eurostat, LFS ad-hoc module on young people in the labour market, 2016, special data extraction for DG EMPL. Reading note: Recent graduates are defined as individuals who have graduated 1-3 years before the survey. VET at medium level includes qualifications from upper-secondary (ISCED 3) or post-secondary non-tertiary (ISCED 4) education and training programmes. The data also includes those still enrolled in education or training. Operational Eurostat definition of apprenticeship includes remunerated, curriculum-related work-experience during studies, of at least 6 months in duration. Data on share of recent graduates exposed to all work-based learning is not reliable for Malta and Croatia; data on share of recent graduates exposed to apprenticeships is not reliable for Belgium, Cyprus, Italy, Slovenia and Spain; data on share of recent graduates exposed to other types of work-based learning apart from apprenticeships is not reliable for Cyprus.

### Indicator on learning mobility in VET

In the context of the strategic framework on “Education and Training 2020”, the European Council agreed on 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2011 on an EU benchmark for learning mobility in initial vocational education and training (IVET)(European Commission, 2015). It is stated that <sup>91</sup>

“By 2020, an EU average of at least 6% of 18-34-year-olds with an initial vocational education and training (VET) qualification should have had an initial VET-related

<sup>91</sup> [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/126380.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/126380.pdf)

study or training period (including work placements) abroad lasting a minimum of 2 weeks (10 working days), or less if documented by Europass.”

By the time of adopting the benchmark, there had been no data sources available for building up the indicator, however, in the conclusions, it has been envisaged to use existing household surveys as a future source for measuring learning mobility in IVET.

For testing the feasibility of using a general household survey for collecting the required data with the needed quality, a pilot had been implemented in 16 EU Member States (MS). Some countries did not participate in the survey as they could fall back on administrative data (e.g. Finland) or expected to achieve data on IVET learning mobility based on research among recent graduates instead of the total population (e.g. Germany, France). By using a general population survey, data of sufficient quality could be achieved only for eleven countries. It was therefore concluded that a general survey is not the best source of data on learning mobility in VET, in particular in countries with a small IVET population and with (assumingly) low rates of participation in IVET learning mobilities (European Commission 2015).

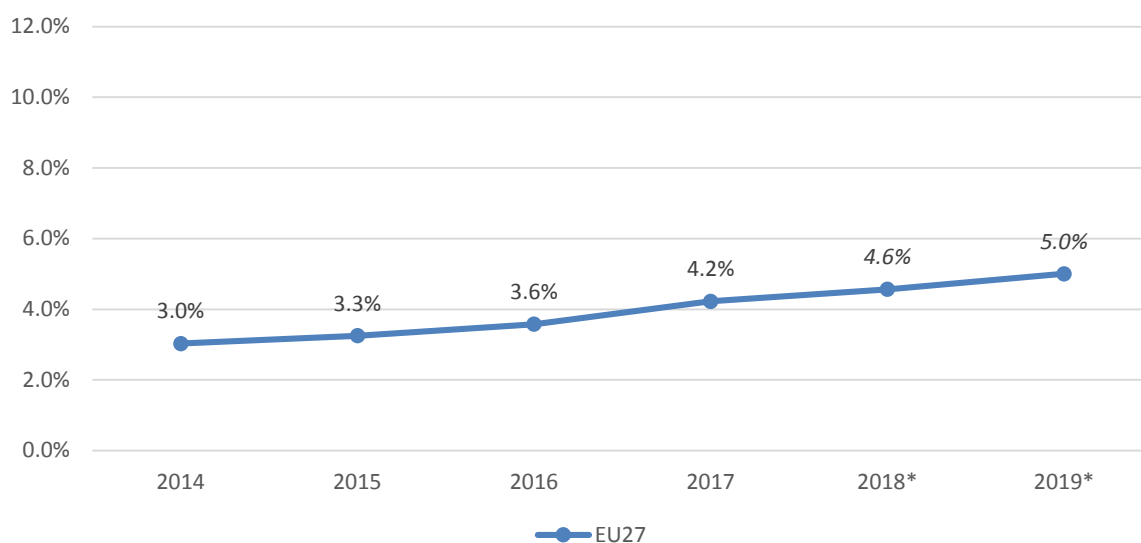
Based on the pilot data collection and discussions with Member State authorities and as requested by the Council, the Commission, in its Progress report on a learning mobility benchmark<sup>92</sup>, proposed to explore the use of administrative data and review the feasibility of using such data to underpin the benchmark on IVET mobility. Administrative data on this already exists in some EU countries as well as in other participating countries of the Erasmus + programme. Subsequently, the Commission procured a feasibility study on evaluating the possibility to compute a learning mobility indicator using administrative data sources.

The conclusions of the study point out to the possibility, using primarily Erasmus+ data, but also, where appropriate, additional data from national authorities, to compute an indicator on the prevalence of learning mobility among the population of learners in formal VET (European Commission, forthcoming). The preliminary results of the initial estimation of the indicator is provided below.

**Figure 12: the share of mobile VET learners out of a cohort of graduates from VET in a corresponding year, EU27 average**

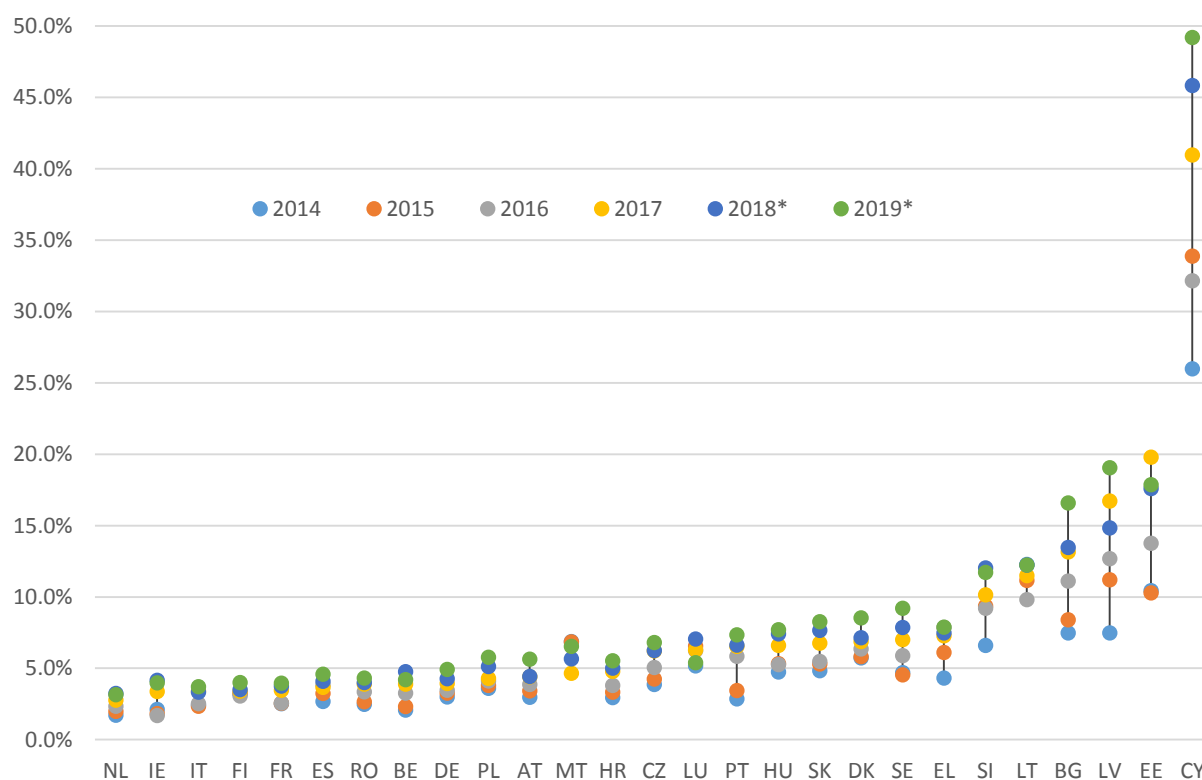
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<sup>92</sup> COM(2017) 148 final



Sources: for estimating the population of mobile VET learners – total number of contracted Erasmus+ VET KA1 mobile learners in the reference year for years 2014-2019; for estimating the reference population – the number of VET graduates in the reference year, compiled by Eurostat through the UOE data collection for years 2014-2017, online data table [educ\\_uoe\\_grad01](#). For estimating the reference population in years 2018 and 2019, the data from year 2017 (latest available) was used. This includes learners enrolled in VET programs provided by education and training institutions which are located within the EU27, who may go for a learning mobility into another EU Member States or another eligible country, benefiting from Erasmus+ (i.e. outgoing learning mobility).

**Figure 13: the share of mobile VET learners out of a cohort of graduates from VET in a corresponding year, by country**



Sources: for estimating the population of mobile VET learners – total number of contracted Erasmus+ VET KA1 mobile learners in the reference year for years 2014-2019; for estimating the reference

population – the number of VET graduates in the reference year, compiled by Eurostat through the UOE data collection for years 2014-2017, online data table [\[educ\\_uoe\\_grad01\]](#). For estimating the reference population in years 2018 and 2019, the data from year 2017 (latest available) was used.

There are benefits as well as shortcomings of using such data for monitoring learning mobility in VET. The benefits are the readily and regularly available data that would allow to provide indications on the availability of learning mobility opportunities across countries for VET learners. It could help inform both national and EU level policy, monitor trends and allow estimating the potential impact of reforms and initiatives undertaken to stimulate mobility opportunities. In the current situation, such data seems to be under-utilized both at European and national levels.

At the same time, as with almost any indicator, there are also some shortcomings that need to be taken into account when analyzing and interpreting the data. Most notably, the proposed formulation of the indicator would not allow including data on mobility which is not co-financed by Erasmus+. In a few countries there are significant alternative programs to provide financial support and stimulate learning mobility, thus under-estimating the prevalence of the phenomenon. At the same time, it is also recognized that at least in some cases alternative financing programs are used to co-finance learning mobility to many of the same mobile learners who receive co-financing via Erasmus+. This would somewhat reduce the likely level of under-estimation. Also, existing data would not provide any information on privately financed learning mobility, however again it is expected that, particularly at upper-secondary level, the number of self-financed learning mobilities are likely to be limited in most countries.

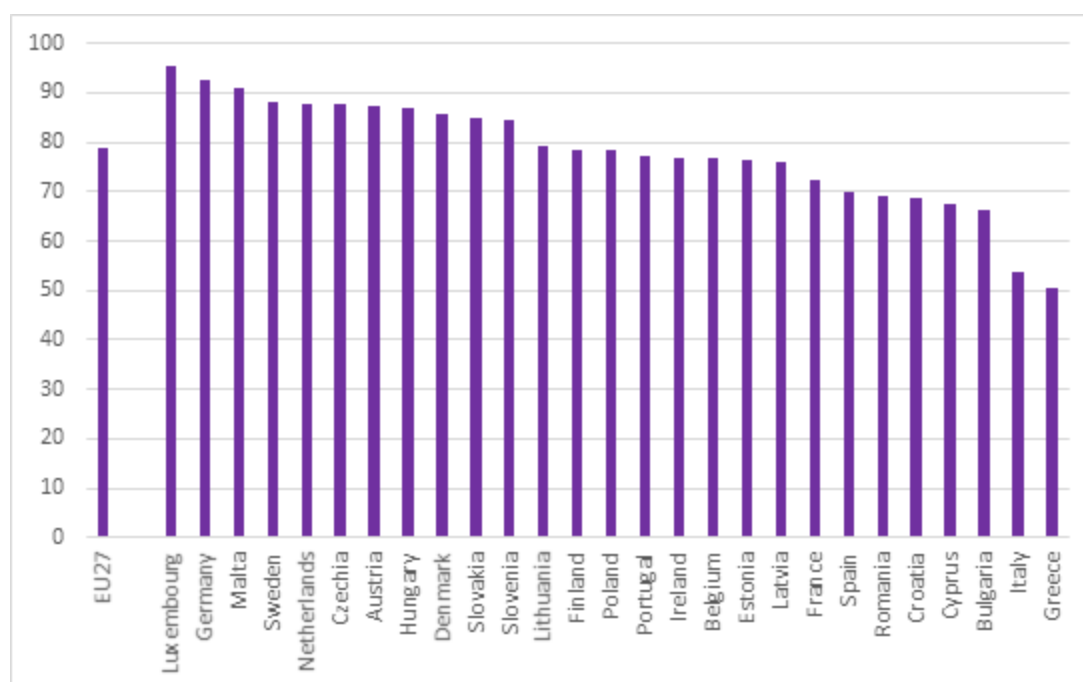
### **Indicator on employment rate of recent graduates from medium-level VET**

The employment rate of recent graduates is a well-established indicator, underpinned by the regular data collected via the EU Labour Force Survey. It is also an Education and Training benchmark: *'By 2020, the share of employed graduates (20-34 year olds) having left education and training no more than three years before the reference year should be at least 82% (as compared to 76.5 % in 2010).'*

An integral part of this benchmark, is the indicator on the employability of recent graduates from medium-level VET, measured as the share of employed graduates from VET at upper-secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary levels having left education and training no more than three years before the reference year. This indicator is well-established for the monitoring of employment rates of recent VET graduates and regularly reported by the Commission in the Joint Employment Report, European Semester Country Reports as well as Education and Training Monitor.

The proposed target, at 82%, builds upon the target set in ET2020 at 82% and which covers graduates from tertiary, upper-secondary/post-secondary non-tertiary vocational and upper-secondary/post-secondary non-tertiary general education. The current employment rates of recent graduates from medium-level VET stands at 79% for EU27, up from 72.4% in 2014 (no data is available prior to 2014). Given the expected rise in unemployment, it is proposed to keep the same level of ambition to be achieved by 2025.

**Figure 14: Employment rate of recent graduates from medium-level VET (2018)**



Source: Eurostat (EU-LFS, 2018, online data code [\[edat\\_lfse\\_24\]](#)). Data only individuals, aged 20-34, who have graduated 1-3 years before the survey from upper-secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary vocational education and training. The data exclude those still enrolled in education or training.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis and evidence developed in this Staff Working Document underlines in detail the need to further develop the European policy framework regarding VET in light of the societal, economic, technological and environmental developments and the current OCIVD-19 crisis. The proposal e aims to cater for the skills needs of both young and adult population, facilitate swift responses to changing labour market needs and equip people with the skills for the recovery, green and digital transitions and active participation in society. It also places a strong focus on the need to integrate VET into economic, industrial and innovation strategies and embed social and environmental sustainability into VET programmes.

The economic recovery from the COVID-19 outbreak is an opportunity to accelerate reforms in VET and strengthen its resilience, notably by digitalising learning tools and agile adaptation to changing labour market needs. Future-proofing VET systems means making them adaptable to any foreseen and unforeseen challenges. It means strengthening their capacity to adapt quickly throughout economic cycles, but also in light of an ever-changing world of work and skills. Once the new VET policy agenda will be adopted by the Council, it will be important to work together with all stakeholders, including social partners, at national and regional level and in particular also with VET providers and teachers to develop and put in practice measures to implement it.