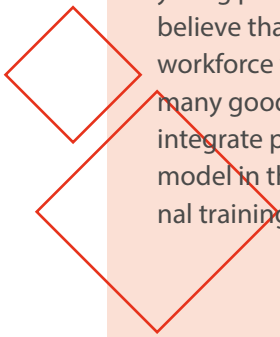




BACKGROUND PAPER

Vocational Education and Training (VET)

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is a valuable, practical education that can help secure a successful transition into the labour market and reduce youth unemployment. VET, in its many forms, provides learners with the technical skills and knowledge of a certain profession or sector, together with social and personal skills, preparing students/trainees/apprentices for the world of employment or further education after graduation. VET supports the social inclusion and reintegration of young people by easing the transition from education to the labour market, and offering flexible and alternative learning pathways tailored to the individual needs.



In face of the economic crisis and rising unemployment, which hits young people harder than others, European countries increasingly believe that VET is a solution that better matches the skills of the workforce with the needs of employers. Across Europe, we can find many good examples that showcase the success of VET in helping to integrate people into the labour market. For instance, the dual system model in the German-speaking countries where fully-fledged vocational training is provided, and apprenticeships lead to qualifications.





BACKGROUND PAPER

INTRODUCTION	5
POLICY OVERVIEW	5
FUTURE CHALLENGES	8
RECOMMENDATIONS	9
BACKGROUND MATERIAL	10







INTRODUCTION

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is a valuable, practical education that can help secure a successful transition into the labour market and reduce youth unemployment. VET, in its many forms, provides learners with the technical skills and knowledge of a certain profession or sector, together with social and personal skills, preparing students/trainees/apprentices for the world of employment or further education after graduation. VET supports the social inclusion and reintegration of young people by easing the transition from education to the labour market, and offering flexible and alternative learning pathways tailored to the individual needs.

In face of the economic crisis and rising unemployment, which hits young people harder than others, European countries increasingly believe that VET is a solution that better matches the skills of the workforce with the needs of employers. Across Europe, we can find many good examples that showcase the success of VET in helping to integrate people into the labour market. For instance, the dual system model in the German-speaking countries where fully-fledged vocational training is provided, and apprenticeships lead to qualifications.

Nevertheless, there is no single universal system that could fit the different cultural and historical contexts of European countries. VET systems in member states face a variety of challenges, depending on the country and the sector. This includes narrow specialisation reducing the permeability and the mobility of graduates, a lack of cooperation between social partners (employers and trade unions) in designing curricula and qualifications, a total lack of or inadequate quality assurance and an insufficient number of available apprenticeships.

Moreover, in many European countries, VET is seen as a less valuable education option in comparison to academic education, reserved only for so called 'low-achievers' or students from vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds with poor future prospects. There is a need to make a shift where VET is recognised as an integral and equal part of the educational systems in Europe. Its important role enabling young people to become active in the labour market should be recognised as it fosters their social inclusion.

The European Institutions have introduced a number of policy initiatives, firstly to support cooperation in the field of vocational training and secondly to guide financial support towards this sort of education. European level policies invite member states to step up efforts to develop world-class vocational education and training to raise the quality of vocational skills, and promote work-based learning.

POLICY OVERVIEW

As education remains a national competence, the European Institutions have no legislative power over VET policies at the national level. However, there are several policies and initiatives developed at the European level to encourage action in education and VET.

1. Strategy at EU level

The strategy for European VET policy was set out in the Copenhagen process, launched in 2002. The process aims to improve the performance, quality and attractiveness of vocational education and training (VET) through enhanced cooperation at European level.

The Copenhagen Declaration set the main priorities for European cooperation in VET until 2010:





- ▼
- reinforcing the European dimension in VET;
- increasing information, guidance and counselling on, as well as the transparency of, VET;
- developing tools for the mutual recognition and validation of competences and qualifications;
- improving quality assurance in VET¹.

The Copenhagen Process is reviewed every two years by setting new short-term deliverables. The original areas of focus are modified and further developed in tune with shifts in the social and economic climate. The Copenhagen Declaration has been reaffirmed in five revising stages - Maastricht (2004), Helsinki (2006), Bordeaux (2008), Bruges (2010) and Riga (2015).

In particular, the Bruges Communiqué² served as a mid-term review of VET development directions established in the Copenhagen Process. The Bruges Communiqué set a new framework for European VET policy for 2011-2020, with qualitative priorities to support the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

The Bruges Communiqué presented a vision of a modern and attractive vocational training system which ensures:

- Maximum access to lifelong learning, such that people have learning opportunities at any stage in life. Routes into education and training should be more open and flexible;
- More opportunities for experience and training abroad to boost language skills, self-confidence and adaptability;
- Higher quality courses, providing the right skills for specific jobs;

1 “The Copenhagen Declaration” 2012 http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocationalpolicy/doc/copenhagen-declaration_en.pdf

2 The Bruges Communiqué on enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training for the period 2011-2020 http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocational-policy/doc/bruges-com_en.pdf

- More inclusion and access for disadvantaged people;
- Creative, innovative and entrepreneurial thinking.

The latest **Meeting of Education Ministers in Riga** (June 2015) resulted in a new set of medium-term deliverables for the period 2015–2020 that came out of the Bruges Communiqué (2010):

1. Promote work-based learning in all its forms, with special attention to apprenticeships, by involving social partners, companies, chambers of commerce and VET providers, as well as by stimulating innovation and entrepreneurship.
2. Further develop quality assurance mechanisms in VET in line with the EQAVET recommendation and, as part of quality assurance systems, establish continuous information and feedback loops in I-VET (Initial-VET) and C-VET (Continuing-VET) systems, based on learning outcomes.
3. Enhance access to VET and qualifications for all through more flexible and permeable systems, notably by offering efficient and integrated guidance services, and making the validation of non-formal and informal learning available.
4. Further strengthen key competences in VET curricula, and provide more effective opportunities to acquire or develop those skills through I-VET and C-VET.
5. Introduce systematic approaches to, and opportunities for, initial and continuous professional development of VET teachers, trainers and mentors both in school and at work based settings³.

These new deliverables correspond to the current economic focus on increasing youth employability.

3 Riga Conclusions 2015: “On a New Set of Medium-Term Deliverables in the Field of VET for the Period 2015-2020, as a Result of the Review of Short-Term Deliverables Defined in the 2010 Bruges Communiqué”





The Riga Declaration contained fewer and clearer targets in comparison to previous communiqués.

Particular attention to VET is given in EU policies that support employability and economic growth. Within the **Europe 2020 strategy**, the **Agenda for new skills and jobs** (2010) initiative is designed to help reach the EU 2020 target of having 75% of the working-age population (i.e. people aged 20-64) in work. The agenda works to equip people with the right skills for the jobs of today and tomorrow, largely with a view to getting appropriate resources into VET.

Furthermore, the Commission Communication **Rethinking education: investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes** is designed to frame the recommendations to member states on developing world-class vocational education, promoting work-based learning, promoting partnerships between public and private institutions and promoting mobility to fight unemployment and boost the skills supply. These include delivering the right skills for employment and business creation, increasing the efficiency and inclusion of education and training institutions, and working collaboratively with stakeholders⁴.

2. EU-level measures

The Youth Guarantee and the European Alliance for Apprenticeships initiatives, both launched in 2013, also confirm the crucial role for VET in increasing the employability of young people.

The **Youth Guarantee** is an initiative adopted by the European Council in 2013 to ensure member states' implementation of the Youth Guarantee schemes. These schemes should ensure that young people under the age of 25 will be offered a job, appren-

⁴ European Commission Communication "Rethinking education: investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes", 2012.

ticeship, a traineeship or continued education within four months of leaving education or becoming unemployed. Many countries have already implemented the scheme and offered apprenticeships and other forms of vocational education and training to young people.

The **European Alliance for Apprenticeships** (EAfA), launched in 2013, is a multi-stakeholder platform aiming to strengthen the supply, quality and image of apprenticeships. It also includes initiatives to improve the mobility of apprentices in Europe. It brings together public authorities, businesses, social partners, VET providers, youth representatives, and other key actors in VET.

There are three strands of action:

1. The reform of apprenticeship systems;
2. Promoting the benefits of apprenticeships;
3. The smart use of funding and resources.

The platform is managed by the European Commission, and it is implemented through national reforms and commitments and pledges by stakeholders across Europe. So far, 26 EU member states and 5 non-EU countries have made national commitments to improve apprenticeships. In addition, 84 pledges were received from social partners, chambers of commerce, companies, VET providers, regions and youth organisations⁵.

As part of the ministerial meeting in Riga in June 2015, where the Riga Declaration was signed, the Commission and the Latvian EU Presidency organised a session on the EAfA. Ministers discussed how to further strengthen the engagement of the private sector, and 38 new pledges (linked to the 84 pledges from organisations) were signed.

⁵ European Commission on European Alliance for Apprenticeships <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1175&langId=en>





Moreover, in the framework of the Copenhagen process, several tools have been developed to support VET development at national level. The **European Qualifications Framework** (EQF) for lifelong learning is an instrument, established within the context of European cooperation in the field of Education and Training, aimed at promoting workers' and learners' mobility and lifelong learning. The EQF is a reference framework of qualification levels defined through learning outcomes. It has resulted in an ongoing process under which all member states set up their National Qualification Framework and they refer their qualifications to the European qualification levels.

The **European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training** (ECVET) is a tool that helps the recognition and validation of skills and knowledge gained during a stay abroad or in different situations. It is designed to facilitate lifelong learning, and support the mobility of European citizens. ECVET is based on a set of technical components that are underpinned by learning outcomes.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Member states have made remarkable progress in implementing European tools, principles and guidelines for VET. Supported by European initiatives, many member states have implemented national VET reforms introducing apprenticeships which focus on work-based learning. However, many challenges still remain.

First, vocational education and training systems in many countries are suffering from 'low attractiveness'. Vocational training is often perceived as a less valuable educational option in comparison to academic education, reserved only for so called 'low-achievers' or students from vulnerable

socio-economic backgrounds with a poor future prospects. There is a need to make a shift that recognises VET as an integral and equal part of the educational systems. It needs to be recognised that it has an important role enabling young people to become active in the labour market and that it fosters their social inclusion. Moreover, the quality of VET needs to be improved to change the perception of vocational training in the long run, including the working conditions of apprentices. Poor quality VET and inadequate opportunities for VET graduates in employment and further education can be a major factor in the attractiveness of VET.

Another important challenge is opening pathways and parity of esteem between vocational education and training, and general/higher education. In some countries, degrees from VET institutions are not automatically recognised as a sufficient qualification to enter university. This significantly decreases the attractiveness and quality of vocational education.

On validation, nearly all countries⁶ have developed National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and they are increasingly linking them to the EQF (European Qualifications Framework). Nevertheless, implementation of ECVET is still very limited. As indicated by CEDEFOP "although member states are increasingly committed to ECVET implementation, Europe is still far from a fully operational credit system in VET and most countries are giving priority to their NQFs"⁷. In response to this situation, the Riga Declaration states: "to help people progress in learning, and find, maintain and advance in work within and across countries, the next step should be to move from a 'tool by tool' approach to a more integrated **approach focused** on user needs, and make them

⁶ According to the latest Bologna process implementation report (2015), only three Bologna process countries are still in the first steps of NQF implementation: Russia, Andorra and Slovakia.

⁷ CEDEFOP "More effective VET and lifelong learning policies: awareness raising, analysis and advice", 2012.





widely known and use them systematically”⁸.

Moreover, Riga’s Conclusions stressed the need to promote innovation through VET and involve employers and trade unions in VET governance in order to better adjust education to the needs of the labour market: “while most national agendas focused on making VET more inclusive to help reduce early leaving and promote further learning among those at risk, less attention has been paid to promoting VET excellence through creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship – which could aid enterprise performance and job creation. Information on labour market outcomes is not yet sufficiently used to guide VET provision. Continuing professional development for VET teachers and trainers has also been less visible in national policies. Social partners have increasingly been involved in developing and implementing VET policies. However, the involvement of employers and trade unions in VET governance and management could be strengthened”⁹.

Finally, the employability of VET graduates is not the only indicator of success and should not be seen as the sole purpose of vocational education and training. VET, like all education, plays a significant role in fostering and increasing social inclusion, participation, active citizenship and lifelong learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Vocational and Educational Training (VET) is a valuable and practical education that can help to secure a successful transition into the labour market and reduce youth unemployment. In many places, development and reforms of national VET structures have been long awaited. However, reforming

⁸ Riga Conclusions 2015: “On a New Set of Medium-Term Deliverables in the Field of VET for the Period 2015-2020, as a Result of the Review of Short-Term Deliverables Defined in the 2010 Bruges Communiqué”

⁹ Ibid.

vocational education and training systems needs to be done in a sustainable way to support learners in the long run instead of finding short-term solutions to the needs of the labour market and economic development.

1. **Strengthen the New Skills and Jobs Agenda** through the New Skills Agenda for Europe, to be launched in early 2016. The New Agenda should play an important role in reinforcing the process of the development of NFIL (Non-Formal and Informal Learning) validation at national level. Bridging educational inequalities and empowering people with limited opportunities is of the utmost importance. The development of social, civic and inter-cultural competences needs to take priority in education agendas, not only within formal education settings, but they should also be made available for other learners through non-formal and informal learning.
2. **Secure investment in vocational training** to ensure quality education, and a sufficient amount of training and apprenticeship placements for young people.
3. **Direct European funding towards more inclusive educational systems**, and enable civil society organisations to exchange best practices and monitor VET policy development at member state level to strengthen the EU’s policy making. The European Institutions, despite not having legislative power in the member states, can work towards inclusive, good quality vocational education and training, through encouraging these multinational agreements, and especially through directing funding towards more inclusive educational systems
4. **Guarantee equal access to quality vocational education and training without discrimination**
5. **Create proper cooperation between the different actors involved in training** (VET providers, NFIL providers, enterprises, learners and trade





unions) to avoid the exploitation of learners or apprentices in work-based learning to ensure the quality of training.

6. **Create common guidelines for enterprises to support inclusion through apprenticeships and work-based learning**
7. **Secure the permeability and mobility of students during and after VET.** This should happen between educational pathways and courses, for example from VET to higher education and the labour market both nationally and internationally.
8. **Reform and modernise national VET systems** to support social inclusion, adapting policies and practices to suit the local contexts. Educational systems and cultures vary from country to country, and even from region to region. Policy and practice therefore need to be adapted to suit the local context when designing reforms. Implementing a specific model, successful in another region, may require a specific educational infrastructure that many countries simply do not possess. It also needs competent companies that are willing to educate, or a cultural context that promotes the new model or vocational training in general. Reforming VET systems within local realities, and ensuring access, social inclusion and quality in vocational training, is possible and it should be a priority.
9. **Reform the systems in a way that ensures firstly access to training and apprenticeships, secondly permeability between education systems, higher education and the labour market, and finally that ensures personal development for students.** Vocational education and training systems in many countries are suffering from 'low attractiveness' and quality, especially when it comes to apprenticeships and work-based learning.
10. **Review the relationship between welfare and**

apprenticeships (as well as other vocational work-based learning) ensuring that there is not an inadvertent motivation to refrain from entering VET.

11. **Open-up and develop VET for adult learners.** VET for adults can be especially helpful for refugees and adult prisoners and offenders who are struggling to integrate (back) into society. VET for adults can contribute to employment and learning pathways which can support successful re-integration and can contribute to their personal empowerment.
12. **Promote apprenticeships in the context of empowering young people who are outside the formal structures,** and offer opportunities for meaningful learning and quality employment with realistic prospects for the future. Furthermore, full potential should be unleashed from Erasmus+ among professionals and apprentices and they should be encouraged to make use of the programme.

BACKGROUND MATERIAL

1. "The Copenhagen Declaration" 2012. http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocationalpolicy/doc/copenhagen-declaration_en.pdf
2. CEDEFOP "More effective VET and lifelong learning policies: awareness raising, analysis and advice", 2012.
3. CEDEFOP Working Paper No 18 "Monitoring EC-VET implementation strategies in Europe", 2013.
4. European Commission "Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions: Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes", 2012.
5. European Commission Communication "Rethinking education: investing in skills for





- better socio-economic outcomes”, 2012.
6. European Commission on European Alliance for Apprenticeships <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1175&langId=en>
 7. Riga Conclusions 2015: “On a New Set of Medium-Term Deliverables in the Field Of VET for the Period 2015-2020, as a Result of the Review of Short-Term Deliverables Defined in the 2010 Bruges Communiqué”
 8. SOLIDAR “Social inclusion through VET - New Opportunities for NEETs”, 2014.
 9. The Bruges Communiqué on enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training for the period 2011-2020 http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocational-policy/doc/brugescom_en.pdf





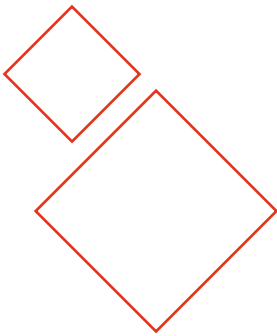


solidar

FOUNDATION

Rue du Commerce | Handelsstraat 22
1000 Brussels
Belgium
T +32 2 500 10 20
F +32 2 500 10 30

Twitter: @SOLIDAR_EU
Facebook: SOLIDAR
www.solidar.org
solidar@solidar.org



SOLIDAR Foundation, in cooperation with its national members and partners, has gathered examples of national programmes and initiatives that present the innovative and successful approaches that contribute to the process of building inclusive learning societies. The case studies are centred on themes of lifelong learning, civic and citizenship education, the validation of learning outcomes of non-formal and informal learning, and NEETs (young people who are Not in Employment, Education or Training).

SOLIDAR FOUNDATION is the cooperation platform of SOLIDAR; a European network of NGOs working to advance social justice in Europe and worldwide. SOLIDAR brings together 61 member organisations based in 25 EU member states and 6 candidate countries. We work together in Social Affairs, International Cooperation and Lifelong Learning.

Responsible Editor: Conny Reuter

Authors: Greta Drumstaitė (SOLIDAR), Agata Patecka (SOLIDAR) and Julie Roden (SOLIDAR).