

Peer Learning Activity on promoting better access to VET

25-26 February 2021
Online meeting

Conclusions from the PLA

Context

The Peer Learning Activity on **promoting better access to VET** was organized, online, between 25 and 26 February 2021, by the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education from Croatia, as a part of the Erasmus+ project: 'European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training National Reference Points'. The European Commission aims, via Erasmus+ funding, to consolidate the EQAVET National reference Points and to increase their capacity in implementing [the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council](#) (June 2009) on the Establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET Recommendation) and of the [Council Recommendation](#) of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (replacing the 2009 EQAVET Recommendation).

All recent EU policy documents underline the **need to ensure social fairness by providing equal access to additional up-skilling / reskilling opportunities** for all people and covering all territories, from big cities to rural, coastal or remote areas across the whole EU: 'All Europeans should have access to attractive, innovative and inclusive learning programmes also because skills become obsolete more quickly'. 'Learning throughout life is what will make the difference' and 'each person in the EU should be empowered and rewarded to up- and reskill'.

EQAVET PLAs, including the ones supported by the Erasmus+ Programme are designed to create an opportunity for discussion, reflection, and the sharing of knowledge and experience among participants, that can feed into the work of the Network in the area of concern. Participants are encouraged to reflect on the policy and practice implications for their own quality assurance approaches.

Peer Learning Activity Objectives and Methodology

The objective of this PLA is **to identify policies and practices to promote better access to VET** and to adapt the training programmes to the trainees' needs (individual / special, group), by **counselling**, by adapted **work-based learning** and by **other means**.

The updated EQAVET framework maintain the quality assurance and improvement cycle of planning, implementation, evaluation/assessment and review/revision of VET, supported by common quality criteria, indicative descriptors and indicators. Putting flexibility and progression opportunities at the core of VET, the new document mentions some privileged directions for 'learner centred' policy making, such as:

- Providing high quality lifelong learning and career guidance services.


- Increasing the exposure of learners to work-based learning (up to 60% from the VET graduates in 2025).
- Access to face-to-face and digital or blended learning.
- Flexible and modular pathways (modules or units of learning outcomes) including, as well, the recognition of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning (by validation mechanisms, allowing the transfer, recognition and accumulation of individuals' learning outcomes).
- Opening up career and learning progression – and avoiding the 'dead end' jobs.
- Increasing the role of continuing VET in matching the labour market, sectoral and individual upskilling or reskilling needs.
- Combining full qualification paths (as a primary goal for initial VET) with paths leading to partial qualifications.

During the PLA, prompted by presentations of experiences from seven European VET systems (Austria, Italy, Sweden, Croatia, Ireland, Montenegro and the Netherlands), the participants were encouraged to reflect on and to discuss their own policies and practices on quality assurance and to share knowledge and experience with other participants. The presentations of the 7 case studies and the subsequent group work were requested to answer some pre-established sets of questions (see the event Agenda and the Background paper)¹.

Case Studies

This PLA was organised into three thematic blocks, the first two blocks tried to see how counselling and adapted work-based learning may improve the access to quality VET, while the third tried to inventory and to discuss other policies and practices in this regard (such as modularization, digitalization etc.).

The first thematic block, dealing with the policies and practices in counselling meant to improve the access to VET, mainly for disadvantaged and non-traditional learners, was introduced by three presentations, from Italy, Sweden and Austria.

 **INAPP**
PUBLIC POLICY INNOVATION

From access on guidance to better access in VET

One of the main aims of the "National Guidelines for lifelong guidance" is to **improve the accessibility of guidance services** to all citizens in Italy. For this reason, three main actions are carried out:

- The coordination of core **guidance initiatives, campaigns and information events** (Education Fairs and Career days), shared between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of University and Research and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies.
- The development of **dedicated webpages and portals** for supporting information and guidance such as www.orientamentoistruzione.it (MI) and www.cliclavoro.gov.it (MLPS).
- The **use of ESF-funded national programmes** (as for e.g., PON Orientamento launched by the Ministry of Education) to support the development of innovative guidance services in schools, national wide.

In **Italy**, the responsibilities in this regard are shared among different institutions and organizations, at national, regional and local levels, within a National Lifelong Guidance System established in 2012 and further developed (including with national standards and guidelines), in a coordinated and integrated way. Different services are established – such as: guidance initiatives, campaigns and information events, dedicated webpages and portals (including for e-guidance), additional dedicated resources for guidance for the VET providers (financed from national funds and from the ESF). The main challenges,

now, are to invest more in infrastructure, equipment and training/upskilling career practitioners for new competences and tools.


¹ For the case studies (presentations) – see: <https://bit.ly/381Wclo>

In **Sweden**, career guidance is offered along the entire educational system. The Swedish Education Act states that all pupils in school should receive guidance and it also states that the pupils have the right to get guidance based on needs from trained counsellors (or equivalent). There are national steering documents and other general guidelines for career education and guidance: laws and other regulations, guidelines, professional development and support materials for counsellors and teachers, published information (there are several websites with this purpose) etc., the local authorities and the schools / VET providers being in charge to

offer counselling – using counsellors and teachers as well. In the Swedish system, one of the main challenges is that schools do not prioritize the career guidance, especially not as a part of regular teaching.

Goals for pupils

- can make well-informed choices regarding further education and vocational orientation,
- can examine different options and make decisions on questions concerning their own future,
- act to enrich the school as a learning environment by establishing contacts with working, cultural and organizational life, also with other activities outside the school, and
- contribute to removing any restrictions on the pupil's choice of study or vocation that are based on gender, social or cultural background.



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= OECD

AT LLG Strategy: Common goal – multiple actors

Some basic points:

- Two main guidance and counselling systems in AT:
 - guidance and counselling provided by education and training providers (institutions)
 - guidance services provided by the employment administration (in AT: AMS) and other institutions in the field of careers guidance.
- Both working in close cooperation and supported by social partners (Chamber of Commerce, Chamber of Labour)
- LLG Forum as support structure (incl. Ministries, practitioners, social partners, regional and local networks, institutions and so)
- Services for young and adults; prior to and during VET
- Encompasses wide range of specific target groups (e.g., NEETs, early school leavers, people with special needs and disabilities, immigrants)

RQB | Austrian Reference Point for Quality Assurance in General and Vocational Education and Training

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In **Austria**, there is a national Lifelong Guidance Strategy, included in the overall lifelong learning strategy, with steering documents, and involving all stakeholders in this process (ministries, practitioners, social partners, regional and local networks, VET providers etc.). There are two main sub-systems of the overall guidance system: guidance and counselling provided by education and training providers (institutions) and guidance services provided by the employment administration and other institutions. The range of services is wide and are offered, mainly to specific target groups (e.g., NEETs, early school leavers, people with special needs and

disabilities, immigrants), the career management skills being the core of lifelong guidance in both sub-systems.

The second thematic block, dealing with the policies and practices in work-based learning, was introduced by two presentations from Ireland and Croatia.

In **Ireland**, work-based learning is well established by apprenticeship schemes, understood as combinations of on-the-job employer-based training and off-the-job training in education settings. Apprenticeship is available for all professional qualifications, from level 5 to 10 (from 10, as established in the National Framework of Qualifications). Based on national regulations and specific programmes, designed at national level, there is a wide range of interventions to adapt work-based learning to the needs of all learners, especially for vulnerable groups, going from different schemes of financial

SPECIFIC POLICIES FOR VULNERABLE GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

- National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (9 grounds), HEAR, DARE- Transitions considerations and working groups with reformation oriented sub-streams.
- National Access Plan for Apprenticeship
- Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Strategy for Ireland
- National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, National Youth Strategy etc due to renew
- Variety of student funding streams- need connecting- e.g. SUSI, PATH, SAF

incentives for employer and learner, for upskilling and guidance, to adult literacy, digital literacy and networking.

Crucial challenges faced:

- Business mentors are few and most of them are neither efficiently trained yet nor motivated to work with trainees
- Employers are not in all cases willing to pay students allowance
- Lack of government interventions, incentives and tax reliefs for employers who want to take and train apprentices

In **Croatia**, the dual model of education in VET offers opportunities and includes mechanisms to adapt work-based learning to the needs of all stakeholders involved. To improve the work-based learning outcomes, the model focuses on self-assessment (of students, teachers and business mentors), on ensuring quality professional development of teachers/ business mentors (to work with students in real-work situations), on acquiring quality equipment for practical training in school, on students with disabilities but also on gifted students (mainly by business mentors training on special needs education, on cooperation between students,

teachers and business mentors.

The third thematic block, dealing with other policies and practices to ensure better access to VET, was introduced by two presentations, from Montenegro and the Netherlands.

In **Montenegro** a specific policy for students with special education needs was devised in this regard: **the individual transition plans**, a two-folded intervention, to support the transition from elementary to secondary level of education (the first tier) and after secondary education (the second tier) as preparation for employment and skills for independent living. The two interventions imply cooperation between students, parents, teachers and other professionals with employers, employment services and other public institutions. Based on the individual transition plan, the learner has access to individual, flexible and modular learning programmes and, as well, to other support services (e.g. counselling).

- **Modularization** of programs and the possibility of acquiring professional qualifications within educational programs in formal education, provide additional opportunities for access to vocational education. Flexible programs that provide education in accordance with individual capabilities, make sense of the process of providing support to students in the transition process (ITP1 and ITP2)
- An example from the field of cooking

DURATION	LEVEL OF EDUCATION	PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS
1 st and 2 nd grade	Elementary school level	Kitchen Assistant, level II
		Pizza Maker, level II
		Barbecue Maker, level II
End of the 3 rd grade	COOK, level III	Butcher in Catering, level III
		Confectioner of simple confectionery products, level III
		Cook of simple gastronomic products, level III
End of the 4 th grade	GASTRONOM, level IV1	Confectioner in the hotel industry, level IV1 Chef, level IV1

Promoting better access to VET - Flanders

- ▶ **System level**
- ✓ **Continuing VET**
 - Adult education > based on modularization
 - Modularization = meaningful sets of competences clustered in short modules, tailored to the adult student
 - NQF is the framework for all vocational programs in adult education
 - Second chance education
 - Basic education > literacy skills (language & mathematics), digital skills, ...

In the **Netherlands** (another decentralized system), there are different interventions, at system level and at provider level, to improve access and the match between VET programmes and learners' individual characteristics (such as modularization, career guidance etc.), combined with financial support, coaching for students (and their parents, if the case). The policy focuses on literacy skills, key competencies, second-chance education – all developing pupils' 'labour readiness' and knowing businesses before entering in VET programmes ('sniffing internship') –

and implies close cooperation between the ministries of education and of work (with a powerful unification tool - the NQF).

Discussion, reflection and policy issues

Starting from the input provided by the case studies, the participants discussed the **key elements** which needed to be considered to **improve access to quality VET, especially for vulnerable groups and individuals**. To facilitate the discussions, we proposed some key questions to be answered (see the Background paper and the Agenda of the PLA). These issues were of interest for all participants, but the concrete ways the VET systems and the VET providers respond to these questions were very different. Moreover, all participants put into discussion their own questions and challenges, being more than willing to learn from each other. Thus, we had, in our discussions, more questions than answers and more concerns than certainties regarding the transfer of best practices in other VET systems with different structure, governance and history.

In this chapter we will try to summarize some general conclusions and, in the following one, some questions not yet answered. To devise the summary of discussions and to inventory the unanswered questions, we used all available resources – the ‘live’ discussions, the ‘chat box’ of the application used for the online meeting and the Q&A sections of the two ‘Slido’ events (<https://www.sli.do/>), especially created for this PLA.

Target groups

Improving access to VET means, mostly, improving access (and, also, participation and results) **for vulnerable groups**. Thus, one recurrent discussion point was the **definition of vulnerable groups and individuals**. In this case, as well, the target groups considered were different, depending on the specific factors and situation in every VET system. Generally, the vulnerable groups considered were:

- Students with special needs / disabilities – the most common group with policies, programmes and measures in every system.
- Students at risk of drop-out, with lower grades, early school leavers.
- NEETs and unemployed youth.
- Long-term unemployed adults (mainly low-skilled).
- Migrants / students with low proficiency in the official / instruction language.
- Students with low income / with higher risk of poverty.

Some participants included other categories – such as students with social problems – including violence – and with work-attitude issues.

Vectors for improving access to VET

The general issues presented below were raised in **all three sections of the PLA**, being applicable to counselling services, work-based learning and, generally, to all means envisaged to increase participation to VET:

The first conclusion, agreed by all participants, was that all policies leading to better educational and social inclusion, for every learner, improve, as well, the access to quality VET. In the same respect, gender balance should be observed in all policies.

All VET systems are concerned with the issue (i.e., to promote better access to VET). The issue is raised at the EU level, as well, in several policy documents.

On the other hand, VET systems are different: they have different regulations, structure, history and culture and, therefore, even if the final outcome (i.e., improving access to VET) is the same, the ways to reach this goal, the solutions selected and implemented, are specific.

In discussions, the following policy issues were considered important vectors to improve access to quality VET:

- Usually, there are several concurrent factors inducing low participation and unsatisfactory learning outcomes for vulnerable groups and individuals. Thus, improving access to VET is feasible only by cooperation among regulating institutions (at system level – e.g., Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour, Employment Services, institutions in charge with social protection), with service providers, VET providers and employers – public and private.
- Moreover, there is a need to integrate the specific services, having the beneficiary as focal point for all interventions. Moreover, the evaluation of the effectiveness of these interventions ought to be integrated, as well. During the PLA, there were presented such mechanisms – as ‘individual learning plans’ or ‘individual transition plans’.
- Usually, the policies aiming inclusion and improving access to education and training are set in context of lifelong learning concepts and strategies (‘lifelong learning for all’). Therefore, the target groups are similar.
- The vulnerable groups and individuals being, generally, ‘hard to reach, hard to motivate’, the policies and schemes to improve access and participation in education involve considerable resources. Therefore, because there is a correlation between the resources allocated and the chances of success in implementing these policies, in most systems there are financial allocations for different initiatives aiming to mitigate educational disadvantages (e.g. in Ireland, the Netherlands etc.).
- The cooperation among different stakeholders and institutions, in order to integrate the interventions to promote better access to VET, imply a mature and sound data collection system and institutional data-sharing mechanisms.
- The quality of human resources involved - teachers/trainers, counsellors, company tutors, youth workers, other support staff - is key for successful policies promoting better access to VET.
- Several local initiatives were presented, coming from employers, VET providers, NGOs, with mainstreaming potential. So, the institutions with responsibilities in VET should ‘scout’ and inventory these initiatives to analyse their potential, to support them (as pilots) and, eventually, to mainstream them by adequate policymaking.
- The transitions – between different education and training levels, from school to work, from work back to school etc. – should be considered key action points to ensure better access to VET, because the transition points are where most of the losses, in participation, occur.
- VET provider is, usually (and not-exclusively), responsible to provide counselling services (by own personnel or by acquired external services), adapted work-based learning and other means to improve access and inclusion. In this regard, the VET provider managerial capacity is essential, including self-assessment capacity.
- Recognition of prior learning is a transversal issue for all policies aiming to improve access to VET. The same, the development of key competencies and ‘life skills’ (by counselling, work-based learning and other means).
- Regarding VET offered by schools, parents should be involved, as well, in this process (information and continuous communication, parental education etc.) and the family, as a whole, targeted by support measures – counselling included.
- It is desirable to incentivise inclusion. In Ireland, for instance, by WAM schemes (Willing, Able and Mentoring schemes) offered to employers to assist with breaking down barriers attitudinal and otherwise to support the integration and adaptation of environments for people with additional needs and disabilities.
- To reach vulnerable groups, positive role models are very important (‘If you can’t see it you can’t be it’). The same, ‘open doors’ initiatives, targeting minority groups, to reach high-status employment opportunities.

Unsolved issues

There were a lot of questions and discussion topics not tackled, that may be considered 'reflection themes' for further policy development and further peer learning activities:

- Digitalization facilitates the flexibility of learning pathways. Thus, the assessment of learning outcomes in digital-learning contexts (such as the remote learning induced by the COVID-19 pandemic) should be an urgent target for future policies.
- The mismatches / differences among the quality assurance mechanism of the sectors/ institutions / professional bodies involved. For instance, between schools and employers (for work-based learning), between schools and organizations offering counselling / guidance, between curriculum and software development (for digital learning).
- Moving from targeting narrow groups (the MOST disadvantaged / at risk groups / individuals), to adapting education, training (including work-based learning) to individual needs of all learners. For instance, the deficit in 'life skills' is common for most learners, not only vulnerable ones.
- The access to quality VET is, for vulnerable groups and individuals, only a pre-condition for inclusion at workplaces and in the society at large. Therefore, VET policies have to be complemented by other sector policies – for instance with housing policies, employment policies (for instance, aiming to encourage employers to hire persons with disabilities, migrants etc).