

Supporting SMEs to provide future-proof VET

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

PRACTICAL MEASURE/INITIATIVE

 GERMANY

Timeline

2017 Implementation	2018 Implementation	2019 Implementation
2020 Implementation	2021 Implementation	2022 Implementation
2023 Implementation	2024 Implementation	2025 Implementation

ID number 28149

Background

Since 2006, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) has been funding projects through the programmes JOBSTARTER (2006-13), JOBSTARTER CONNECT (2009-14) and JOBSTARTER plus (since 2014). The funding guidelines for the individual funding announcements set different thematic priorities, each of which is adapted to the current challenges on the training market. The funding period 2017-20 focused on digitalisation, followed by a transfer period of successful projects. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) need to adapt to the increasing demand of automatisisation and digitalisation of the labour market. They often need external assistance to adapt the initial and continuing VET they provide.

Objectives

The aim of these funding programmes is to develop suitable support structures and advisory concepts for SMEs, enabling them to meet the new requirements of working and learning processes (also with regard to quality assurance) for the apprentices and employees associated with increasing digitalisation at an early stage and to anchor them sustainably in their regions.

Description

Under the umbrella initiative, VET 4.0, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) initiated a special funding line (Initial and continuing vocational training in the economy 4.0 - Support structures for SMEs in the adaptation process of in-company training) within the JOBSTARTER plus programme, followed by a transfer period of successful projects. Under this funding line, regional projects were launched in 2017 with the aim of helping SMEs to meet, as early as possible, employee requirements associated with the digital transformation process. With these projects, SMEs receive support to develop further their dual training (IVET), especially for methodical and didactic aspects. All JOBSTARTER programmes have been implemented by the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB).

Since 2019, the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS; with ESF co-funding) has been funding 'Future centres' supporting SMEs and their employees in future-proofing their working and learning processes through customised advisory concepts as well as the development and testing of innovative qualification concepts with a focus on CVET.

2017 Implementation

2018 Implementation

2019 Implementation

26 projects of the special funding round JOBSTARTER plus for SMEs and digitalisation were planned to start in the period from December 2019 to August 2020. The projects provide guidance to SMEs in the areas of training marketing 4.0, the implementation of new or updated training regulations, the provision of basic skills for digitalisation and the provision of additional qualifications. The 26 projects are spread across 12 Federal States and are implemented by training providers, chambers and chamber-related institutions, sector-related actors, municipal institutions or business development agencies and universities.

2020 Implementation

In 2020, a total of 171 projects (costing around EUR 16.4 million) were funded. The following is a selection of significant JOBSTARTER plus activities:

- (a) a new film illustrates how JOBSTARTER plus projects support SMEs in their search for apprentices, using the example of the Training now funded project. Regional partners explain how the project provides SMEs with advice and support during the fifth round of JOBSTARTER plus funding;
- (b) JOBSTARTER plus organised between May and July 2020 a survey among 844 SMEs on the effects of the pandemic on apprenticeship and the support needed;
- (c) two new brochures were published (see sources): in October 2020, the brochure *JOBSTARTER plus strengthens apprenticeships*, and in March 2020, the brochure *Apprentices for Economy 4.0 – Fifth funding phase JOBSTARTER plus*;
- (d) during a virtual status conference on 6-7 October 2020, 500 participants followed panel discussions and expert forums on experiences and insights from six years of JOBSTARTER plus;
- (e) new funding guidelines were published in July 2020 on the sustainable transfer of pilot projects;
- (f) a practical guide on how to encourage SMEs to train apprentices was published in February 2020.

Within the funding programme 'Future Centres' (BMAS/ESF) supporting SMEs with CVET provision, the 'House of the Self-Employed' started operations in mid-2020. The House aims to strengthen the design competence of solo self-employed in the digital transformation. It also supports the establishment of interest groups and promotes self-regulatory procedures that are suitable for improving the remuneration situation and working conditions of solo self-employed and platform employees.

2021 Implementation

The following is a selection of significant JOBSTARTER plus activities for 2021:

- (a) on 31 December 2021, the term of the last 27 projects of the 4th funding round of JOBSTARTER plus ended. A total of 39 projects benefited from the support for 5 182 small and micro enterprises from 1 July 2018 to 31 December 2021. During this time, 605 apprenticeship places and 473 internship and entry-level qualification places were filled;
- (b) the results of the second JOBSTARTER plus survey were published;
- (c) the JOBSTARTER plus transfer funding round started, with six projects set up since 1 July;
- (d) new publications were issued: a revised and updated Dropping out of studies, [56]; the JOBSTARTER plus brochure was reprinted; Advising companies digitally -

service for vocational apprenticeship; Work aid for guidance staff with ideas from virtual practice; a flyer on 'Verbundausbildung' (collaborative apprenticeship).

Within the funding programme 'Future centres', new 'Regional Future Centres' in West Germany as well as the 'AI Knowledge and Further Education Centre' were launched in the 2nd quarter of 2021 in West Germany.

2022 Implementation

Until end of December 2022, hundreds of projects have been funded in five funding rounds in the JOBSTARTER plus programme; the fifth round focused on initial and further training in the economy 4.0. Eleven transfer projects were funded in total, five of them from January 2022 until mid-2023. They transferred successful JOBSTARTER PLUS instruments, materials, concepts, formats and experiences to encourage small and micro-enterprises to get involved in VET in other regions and industries.

The 'Regional Future Centres' continued their work all over Germany in 2022.

2023 Implementation

From 2014 to 2023, the JOBSTARTER plus programme funded projects that used innovative concepts to develop possible solutions for challenges relating to dual vocational training and also contributed to structural development of SMEs. Over 240 projects were launched in total (the last nine transfer projects ended in June 2023). Support for SMEs was at the centre of the funding. The projects worked to ensure that companies continue to offer their apprenticeship places, create additional training places and find suitable apprentices. They used the External Training Management (EXAM) programme developed by JOBSTARTER.

Further, BMAS and ESF were funding Future Centres, which support and enable companies and their employees as well as the self-employed to adapt to demographic, digital and ecological change, for example with innovative CVET qualification concepts (such as on AI). Twelve regional Future centres, a House of the self-employed and a coordinating Centre for the future of work are part of the programme. The 14 selected project networks were launched at the beginning of 2023 and will run until the end of 2026.

The Perfect Match programme (BMBF) aims at counteracting matching problems on the training market. It finances advisors at the chambers of industry and commerce, skilled crafts, liberal professions and other business organisations. The funding priorities were adapted to the needs of SMEs. For further information on this programme read the description of the related policy development.

DEQA-VET at BIBB published brochures on central quality assurance mechanisms which underlie the company-based part of initial training in the dual system in Germany. DEQA-VET is also monitoring the consequences of the digital transformation for standards and elements of quality assurance in VET. In 2023, DEQA-VET published a systematic inventory of quality initiatives in dual VET by the chambers of skilled trades and the chambers of industry and commerce, addressing particularly SMEs.

2024 Implementation

As from 2024, the Perfect Match and the Welcome Guides programmes have been merged, adding up to 140 chamber guides supporting companies in filling their vacant training places with suitable young people from Germany, abroad or with a refugee background. The new directive of this programme applies from January 2024 until end of 2027.

Practical guides for training SMEs on different topics can be downloaded from the BIBB website on JOBSTARTER programmes as well as a compilation of all JOBSTARTER plus projects. The f-bb research institute for VET published its in-process evaluation of the JOBSTARTER plus transfer projects in 2024: 'Strengthening the readiness of companies to provide training: How the transfer of educational innovations can succeed - Working

aid for transfer practice'.

With the initiative 'JOBvision - train. qualify. shape.', the BMBF was strengthening the attractiveness of dual vocational training and counteracting the shortage of skilled labour. The initiative supports SMEs in particular, especially micro-enterprises, which often have difficulties finding and retaining suitable apprentices. The BMBF focuses on needs- and future-orientated support for SMEs so that companies can get more young people interested in training and recruit them as skilled workers for their companies. The JOBvision initiative started on 31 July 2024 with the funding announcement 'TRAFO - Promoting Transformation'. Applications could be submitted until 31 October 2024.

The 14 projects selected for the first funding priority of the Future Centres funding programme (Promotion of sustainable and high-quality employment, start-ups and entrepreneurship as well as adaptation to change) continued their activities. Under the title 'Artificial Intelligence - Shaping the Future of Work: Participatory introduction of AI in SMEs', the second Annual Conference of the 'Future Centres' took place on 19 November 2024.

2025 Implementation

All 31 JOBvision projects began implementation between April and July 2025. Funding is provided for innovative, thematic and sustainable projects which, either individually or in collaboration with others, implement or develop and test new solution strategies for skilled labour requirements from the perspective of SMEs. The projects have a duration of 36 months. The programme is implemented and supported by the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB).

The 31 project ideas are very diverse and address topics such as 'recruitment/initiation methods for apprenticeships and employment', 'targeted approaches to young people and companies', 'digital matching tools', 'voluntary practical year', 'optimised company presentation on the web and social media channels', 'innovative learning methods', and much more.

In 2025, the Future Centres website presented the work of the 14 centres, e.g. in its Best Of section with best practice examples or an up-to-date SME project map. In its podcast series *Zukunftsmusik* – the podcast about the future of work, listeners can learn more about the work of the Future Centres with voices of entrepreneurs, employees, solo self-employed people and from politics and science. In October 2025, there were already 9 episodes.

In 2025, around 100 project implementation bodies with 200 advisors were involved in the Perfect Match and Welcome Guides programme nationwide. The high quality of the counselling is ensured by regular training and professional support from the NETZWERK Unternehmen integrieren Flüchtlinge (for the 'Welcome Guides' module) and the German Economic Institute (for the 'Perfect Match' module). In June 2025, an explanatory video and an information leaflet on the funding programme were published.

Bodies responsible

- Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMBFSFJ) (since 2025)
- Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) (until 2025)
- Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS)
- Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB)
- European Social Fund (ESF)

Target group

Entities providing VET

Companies
Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)

Thematic categories

Modernising VET offer and delivery

Reinforcing work-based learning, including apprenticeships

Supporting lifelong learning culture and increasing participation

Promotion strategies and campaigns for VET and lifelong learning

Financial and non-financial incentives to learners, providers and companies

Providing for individuals' re- and upskilling needs

European priorities in VET

VET Recommendation

VET agile in adapting to labour market challenges

VET underpinned by a culture of quality assurance

Osnabrück Declaration

Resilience and excellence through quality, inclusive and flexible VET

Subsystem

IVET CVET

Further reading

[JOBvision initiative to strengthen training in SMEs \(2024\)](#)

[JOBSTARTER plus \(2014-2023\) with project compilations and practical guides for SMES](#)

[In-process evaluation of JOBSTARTER plus transfer projects \(2024\)](#)

[Future centres supporting CVET in SMEs \(BMAS/ESF; 2023-26\)](#)

[Centre for the future of work - hub for all future centres](#)

Related policy developments

2025 Implementation

Application of Artificial Intelligence in VET

In 2018, the German Federal Government adopted and launched its AI Strategy, which provides the overarching policy framework, and also launched its AI action plan. These include investments in AI research, digital infrastructure, teacher and workforce development, and ethical governance.

 GERMANY

Type of development

Strategy/Action
plan

Subsystem

IVET CVET

2025 Implementation

Support for inter-company apprenticeship training (ÜLU)

The Federal Government provides subsidies of around EUR 50 million annually for the inter-company apprenticeship training (ÜLU), making a contribution to the course and accommodation costs for apprentices from the second year of training onwards.

 GERMANY

Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

IVET

2025 Implementation

Perfect match programme for SMEs

The *Perfect match* programme (2015-20; funding volume per year: EUR 6 million including ESF funding) is designed to counteract matching problems on the training market.

 GERMANY

Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

IVET

2025 Implementation

Supporting excellent inter-company training (ÜBA) and CoVE centres (ÜBS)

The Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) initiated the programme of

promoting digitalisation in competence centres and inter-company training centres in 2016.

 GERMANY

Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

IVET CVET

2025 Implementation

Qualifying trainers for the future world of VET

Since 2015, BIBB has funded eighteen 'VET for sustainable development' projects (BBNE). They experimented and evaluated relevant curriculum concepts, digital teaching, learning materials and examination questions on green skills for initial and continuing VET, e.g.

 GERMANY

Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

CVET

2025 Implementation

Adapting vocational qualifications to progress in digitalisation

The preliminary examination of the potential restructuring of IT occupations carried out by the Federal Institute for VET (BIBB) in 2015-16 and the subsequent research initiative 'Skills, qualifications and competences for the digitised work of tomorrow' on 14 occupations (2016-18) touched upon d

 GERMANY

Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

IVET CVET

2024 Completed

Digital media and innovative technology in VET

The web portal, Digital media in VET, has provided information since 2015 on the use of digital media in VET and selected project findings.

 GERMANY

Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

IVET CVET

2025 Implementation

Attracting university dropouts to VET

The Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) has been supporting countrywide pilots to ease access to VET for university dropouts to address predicted shortages of skilled workers. The funding volume of support has amounted to EUR 16 million for 2014-20.

 GERMANY

Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

IVET

2025 Implementation

Alliance for initial and further training

The 2015-18 Alliance for initial and further training was agreed between the Federal Government, Federal States, business and industry, the unions and the Federal Employment Agency at the end of 2014.

 GERMANY

Type of development

Strategy/Action
plan

Subsystem

IVET CVET

2025 Implementation

Sustainable development in VET

In 2015, the Federal Institute for VET (BIBB) started 12 pilot projects in VET aiming to ensure a sustainable development (*Berufsbildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung BBNE*). With the EUR 12 million budget, the projects intend to develop vocational competences in sustainability.

 GERMANY

Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

IVET CVET

2022 Completed

VET 4.0 project: effects of digital innovation on vocational training

The Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), in cooperation with the Federal Institute for VET (BIBB), started the initiative VET 4.0 for the period from February 2016 to April 2018. The initiative is based on three pillars.

 GERMANY

Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

IVET CVET

2025 Implementation

Integrating migrants and refugees in VET and work

Since 2015, in line with the federal ESF integration guideline, the IvAF integration programme (Integration of asylum seekers and refugees) has contributed to the sustainable integration of asylum seekers, asylum applicants and refugees in training and employment through comprehensive counselling

 GERMANY

Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

IVET CVET

2025 Implementation

National Skills Strategy

In November 2018, the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS) and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) launched a committee to develop a National continuing education strategy (*Nationale Weiterbildungsstrategie*).

 GERMANY

Type of development

Strategy/Action
plan

Subsystem

CVET

2025 Implementation**Expanding financial support for CVET and advanced vocational qualifications**

In 2016, the legislation promoting further training (AWStG) was amended.

 GERMANY

Type of development

Regulation/Legislation

Subsystem

CVET

“ ... ” Cite as

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