

EqUal iNclusion of LGBTIQ stUdents in VET (UNIQUE)

A European Erasmus (KA3) project on social inclusion of LGBTIQ students

Date of creation

2021

Description

The key tools developed within the context of UNIQUE are a model Curriculum, a free Massive Open Online Course for VET Teachers/Trainers, a methodological framework to analyse existing curricula, a set of policy recommendations at classroom, institutional, local/national and European levels.

One of the greatest innovations of this project is that (a) it specifically refers to the VET sector responding to an existing gap for sector-related interventions (previous projects referred to other sectors of education) and (b) the UNIQUE Curriculum draws attention to emotional intelligence which it intends to promote among VET Teachers and Students. Many VET courses are focusing on teaching technical skills, but the labour market is changing fast and requires more generic horizontal skills to be able to adapt to flexible demands. Client friendliness and attention for a range of different client groups are core competences. Promoting LGBTIQ inclusion in VET goes hand-in-hand with this. It is easier to convince students to be cautious and not display potential homophobic and transphobic attitudes, when this is presented as a core job requirement.

Furthermore, the UNIQUE approach holds that traditional training by the LGBTIQ movement, which is often focused on visibility of LGBTIQ identities and on factual knowledge, is not enough to change students' attitudes. Here again, an approach that is focused on how to deal with differences (emotional intelligence) is offered by the UNIQUE project as a more effective approach.

The project ran from January 2021 to May 2023 and ended with a European conference in Brussels. It was coordinated by AKMI (Greece).

Beneficiaries

VET students (school-based learning)

The project targeted all VET school-based learning but in its products focused on upper secondary training (young adults).

Target groups:

- VET Teachers/Trainers/other VET staff. This is the key target group since most of the UNIQUE activities are addressed to them (Curriculum, Trainings, etc.). They can become a factor of positive change, acting as a middle level group which may inspire VET students through role modelling and hopefully persuade the VET Management Board to adopt anti-discrimination policies.
- VET Providers. They may benefit through the upskilling of their teaching and administrative staff and the implicit pressure (through a bottom-up approach) to

- integrate inclusive policies
- Others (Parents, NGOs, Employers, Representatives of Educational and Social Sector). External stakeholders play an important role in the operation of VET institutes and more or less directly affect the existing conditions and policies. The focus in these cases, is to enhance the image of VET among the society and become a driving force for positive societal changes.

Countries



Type of policy/initiative



One of the project key deliverables is the development of a Set of Policy Recommendations targeting policymakers at national and EU level. Following a “bottom-up” approach, policy recommendations aim at informing policymakers about the real problems and needs of VET Teachers/Trainers, providing concrete information about much needed mechanisms and processes within VET system and hopefully inspiring them to adopt additional measures as well as invest in practical tools to make VET schools truly inclusive spaces.

Level of implementation / Scope



The project targeted all levels of implementation but focused on the classroom (teacher) level and the institutional level. Through this ‘bottom-up’ approach, policy recommendations for the local, national and European level could be formulated in line with classroom needs. The international partner of the project, GALE, also disseminated the good practice beyond Europe.

The project was implemented by a transnational partnership of 8 different countries (Greece, Germany, Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Netherlands) and aimed to provide a methodology that could be replicated by VET schools all over Europe. One of the project’s main results are Policy Recommendations, developed as concrete suggestions for both national and EU level, including recommendations to be implemented by EU umbrella organizations. In addition, the international final conference of the project was organized in Brussels in cooperation with EVBB, and the European-level speakers and panel discussion led to new intentions to mainstream LGBTQI issues in European VET umbrella organizations.

Aims of policy/initiative

1. Provide a renewed skillset to VET teachers with the intention to integrate LGBTIQ-friendly techniques and adjust courses accordingly.
2. Highlight the significance of diversifying manuals and educational materials so that they are up-to-date, inclusive and aligned with social reality through the development of innovative courses for VET teachers.
3. Introduce new training methods which promote the active involvement of VET

teachers with the aim to maximise the impact of the project and reach out to as many end users as possible.

4. Reduce school drop-out rates and enhance performance of LGBTIQ young learners while actively engaging them in the VET school environment.
5. Motivate LGBT people and provide a clear pathway towards employment, based on equal opportunities and evaluation of competences instead of gender identity.
6. Set up effective monitoring mechanisms to verify change of VET teachers' perceptions and the impact on LGBTIQ learners.
7. Raise awareness on LGBTIQ issues, combat stereotypes and stigmatisation towards a more inclusive and diversified society.
8. Promote equality, human rights and EU values to local communities, contributing to mutual respect and understanding on people's choices away from fear, embarrassment or suppression.
9. Support local economies with qualified workforce who is now being marginalised and unexploited.

Features and types of activities implemented

The project undertook the following activities:

1. Mapping LGBTIQ-related discrimination in the VET sector in the partner countries (through the use of online surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups with various stakeholders), such as VET teachers and students, and LGBTIQ activists and experts) and developing a methodology for non-discriminatory educational strategies in VET.
2. Developing an e-learning and blended (face-to-face and online) training for VET teachers (the MOOC offers 36 hours of content, divided over 4 modules and a total of 44 learning units; another 24 hours of blended training and coaching has been designed).
3. Pilot implementation of the UNIQUE Curriculum in Croatia, Cyprus, Greece and Poland.
4. Promotion of inclusion by VET Teachers/Trainers who become Ambassadors for LGBTIQ inclusion and introduction of a peer-to-peer training scheme.

Research in high schools shows that LGBTIQ students have a higher risk of dropout and lower grades due to social exclusion and discrimination. During the implementation of the UNIQUE project, it was proven that social isolation and discrimination is a trend perpetuated in VET, especially in fields that are traditionally focused on 'masculine' professions and on so-called 'hard' (less social) technical skills. The research conducted throughout the UNIQUE project has shown that homophobia and transphobia is not restricted to a certain class, culture or ethnic or racial background. However, the level and expression of homophobia and transphobia can be different across social classes, cultures and countries. National supportive or restrictive policies on sexual orientation and gender identity have significant influence on the attitudes of the population and the assessment of VET teachers with regards to the possible risks that they take when deciding to pay attention to LGBTIQ issues.

Research on effective antibullying and anti-discrimination interventions has shown that a focus on perpetrators and victims is not effective. Rather, the focus should be on social processes in classrooms, awareness of gender and sexuality, and a supportive whole-school approach which prioritises emotional intelligence and friendly behaviour to each other rather than just transferring knowledge and technical skills.

The UNIQUE approach outlines how teachers can create a safe classroom in which all students (regardless of sexual orientation and gendered identity and expression) have a friendly attitude to each other, and also work with the intention to have a friendly and inquisitive attitude towards future clients and customers. This means that VET Teachers/Trainers have to deal more with the emotions of the students, and, during this process, they will also encounter their own helpful or limiting attitudes and emotions. VET

teachers need to learn how to deal with their potential fear that focusing on emotions, or on specific controversial issues like sexual orientation and gender identity, will be a threat to their discipline or to their perception of VET professionalism (which can be perceived as being only “transfer of knowledge” or “training concrete ‘hard’ skills”). The UNIQUE project made a substantial effort to develop teacher training to tackle these issues. Our recommendations for institutional support of teachers who want to be ambassadors of tolerance and inclusion, and the related encompassing recommendations for local, national and European levels represent a bottom-up approach of a realistic change strategy of the VET sector.

Resources

Erasmus KA3 project, 80% co-funded by the European Union. The total budget was EUR 499 997 with staff costs representing 76% of the costs. Grant agreement 621478-EPP-1-2020-1-EL-EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN.

Evaluation of the measure

The project was continually monitored and evaluated by BK Consult. The project was also externally evaluated by Opinion & Action Services Ltd. The evaluation reports are internal and for EACEA.

Evidence of effectiveness of the measure

During the carry out of the project, and especially after the end of the VET Teachers/Trainers’ trainings at national level, the potential impact of the project on the VET Teachers/Trainers’ attitudes had started becoming evident. Most of the Teachers who took part in the pilot implementation voluntarily expressed their own challenges within the classrooms and actively asked for support on how to address incidents of discrimination and support their LGBTIQ+ students in the best way possible. At the same time, VET institutes and associations demonstrated a great interest to get more information about the project and engage in the asynchronous training through the Moodle platform. However, monitoring changes in the safety of the classrooms and institutions participating in the project as changing attitudes – especially training other people to adapt their own views – is a long-term process that cannot be completed within a project’s lifetime as it goes beyond the scope of this project.

Also, data about the eventual reduction of early leaving in VET, which requires large-scale comparative research, was not within the ambitions of the project; it is included, nevertheless, in the policy recommendations at national level.

Several interactions within the project gave indications of support regarding LGBTIQ inclusion. In the pilot countries, students took part in a student contest to make artworks about LGBTIQ inclusion. The submissions showed enthusiasm and willingness to engage with the subject, but also hesitation to approach LGBTIQ issues explicitly in some countries (e.g. Croatia, Poland), with a tendency to frame LGBTIQ inclusion in more general terms. During the pilot implementation of the training of teachers, most teachers expressed their willingness to be Ambassadors of social inclusion; however, some hesitation to approach LGBTIQ inclusion in a very explicit way, was also observed. Still, the participating teachers appreciated the cultural sensitivity of the offered training, as they were not forced to promote a specific kind of invisibility or engage in risks they could not manage.

Overall, it is encouraging that the VET Teachers/Trainers who originally accepted to participate (Ambassadors) and all the others that learnt about the project during peer-to-peer training activities, through word of mouth and targeted dissemination, showed a great

level of enthusiasm and commitment and keep contacting the project partners for further guidance.

The UNIQUE project has a very promising sustainability perspective as it seems through:

- the interest of other educational organisations to enrol into the courses;
- the interest of institutional organisations to inform their members;
- the interest of the VET Teachers/Trainers themselves to get more engaged in the future (requests for repeating the national trainings in the beginning of the following school year);
- the transferability of the project and the training materials into other educational levels and sectors (including adult education).

Success factors

Key innovative elements of this approach are:

- a focus on emotional intelligence to teach teachers and students on how to deal with difference, even when the difference may appear to be controversial;
- a culturally sensitive approach to LGBTIQ visibility, which goes beyond the traditional demands of the LGBTIQ movement;
- the ambassador approach, which outlines how VET teachers can be made enthusiastic for LGBTIQ inclusion, recruited as ambassadors and how can be supported through training and ongoing coaching;
- the development of a tool to monitor the level of LGBTI inclusion in VET course curricula;
- a model curriculum on LGBTIQ issues in VET courses which, among other things, makes VET Teachers/Trainers aware of the mechanisms of discrimination and bullying, offers practical tools to address them and a tool to assess risks when VET Teachers/Trainers are confronted with objections (integrated in the MOOC);
- the formulation of policy recommendations in a bottom-up way, based on supportive for effective interventions on the classroom level (bottom-up approach).

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Related intervention approaches



Community involvement



Identification of learners at risk of early leaving

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