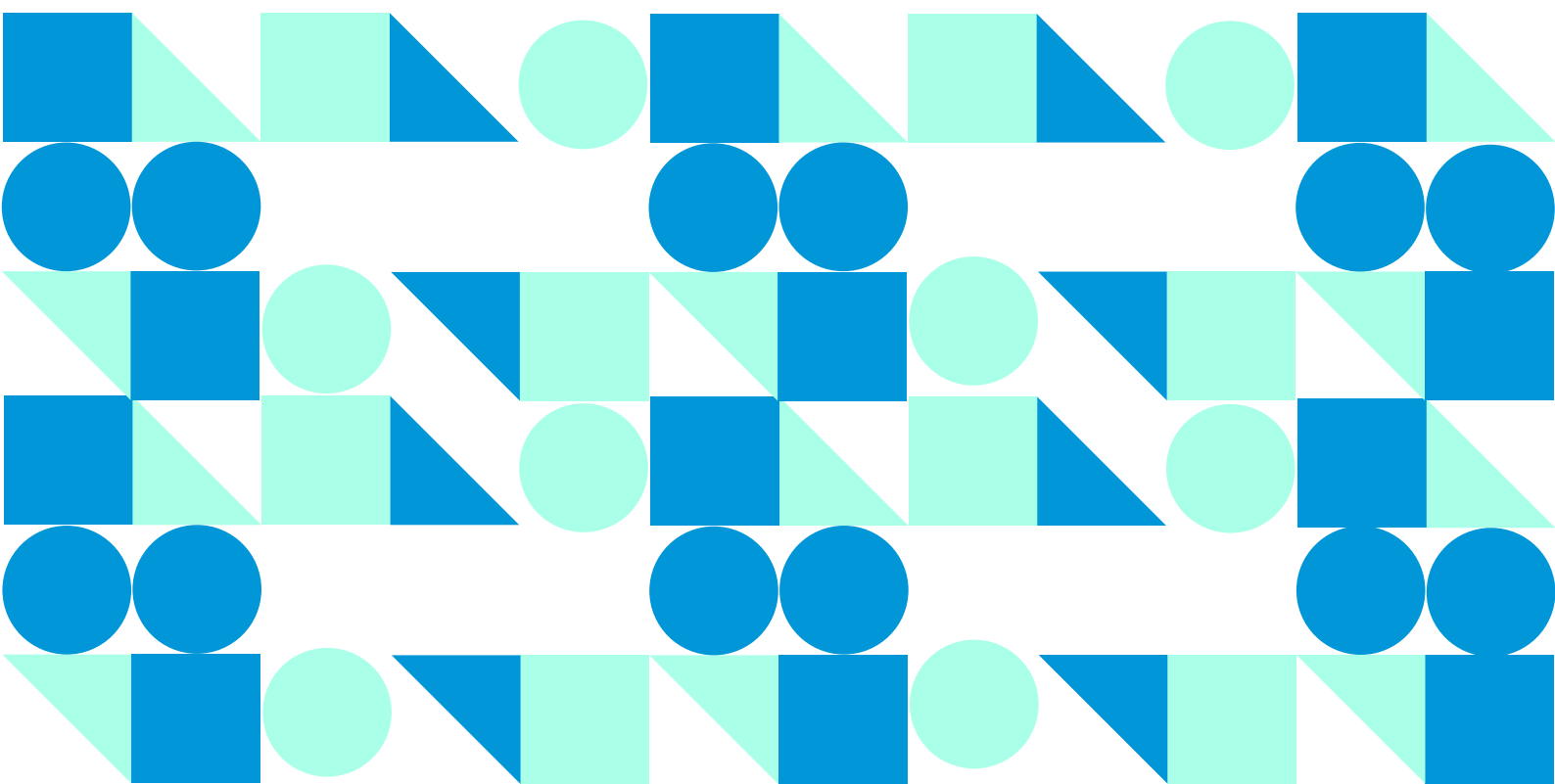




Research paper

VET excellence and inclusion for the 21st century

Mapping national VET objectives and priorities





VET excellence and inclusion for 21st century

Mapping national VET objectives and
priorities

Please cite this publication as:

Cedefop. (2025). *VET excellence and inclusion for 21st century: mapping national VET objectives and priorities*. Cedefop research paper. Publications Office of the European Union. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/4202080>

A great deal of additional information on the European Union is available on the internet. It can be accessed through the Europa server (<http://europa.eu>).

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2025



© Cedefop, 2025

Unless otherwise noted, the reuse of this document is authorised under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) licence. This means that reuse is allowed, provided appropriate credit is given and any changes made are indicated. For any use or reproduction of photos or other material that is not owned by Cedefop, permission must be sought directly from the copyright holders.

[PDF](#) ISBN 978-92-896-3911-8
ISSN 1831-5860
Doi: 10.2801/4202080
TI-01-25-098-EN-N

The **European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training** (Cedefop) is the European Union's reference centre for vocational education and training, skills and qualifications. We provide information, research, analyses and evidence on vocational education and training, skills and qualifications for policymaking in the EU Member States. Cedefop was originally established in 1975 by Council Regulation (EEC) No 337/75. This decision was repealed in 2019 by Regulation (EU) 2019/128 establishing Cedefop as a European Union Agency with a renewed mandate.

Europe 123, Thessaloniki (Pylaia), Greece
Postal: Cedefop service post, 570 01 Thermi, Greece
Tel. +30 2310490111, Fax +30 2310490020
Email: info@cedefop.europa.eu
www.cedefop.europa.eu

Jürgen Siebel, *Executive Director*
Tony Donohoe, *Chair of the Management Board*

Table of contents

Foreword	1
Acknowledgements	3
Executive summary	4
Chapter 1. Introduction	11
1.1. Context, aim and research questions	11
1.2. Overview of this report	13
Chapter 2. Setting the scene	15
2.1 Vocational excellence and inclusion as policy objectives at the European level over the past 25 years.....	15
2.1.1. Brief recap of the past 25 years of vocational training policy.....	15
2.1.2. Preliminary conclusions.....	23
2.2. Concepts of vocational excellence and inclusion in the literature	24
2.2.1. Vocational excellence.....	24
2.2.2. Inclusion in VET	32
2.3. Vocational excellence and inclusion – a holistic approach.....	38
2.3.1. Contradictory or complementary objectives?	38
2.3.2. Excellence and inclusion in future VET scenarios.....	41
2.4. Linking the concepts of vocational excellence and inclusion to the ‘orders of justification’	43
Chapter 3. Analytical Framework and research approach	47
3.1. The three-perspective model as a basis for the analytical framework.....	47
3.2. Using the three-perspective model to define signals for tracking excellence and inclusion	48
3.3. Research tool and approach	54
3.3.1. Data collection.....	55
3.3.2. Approach to analysing the data collected	58
3.3.3. Limitations of the research approach.....	59
Chapter 4. Research results	60
4.1. General characteristics of the policy documents analysed	60

4.1.1 Overall positioning in relation to vocational excellence and/or inclusion	61
4.1.2. Further characteristics of policy documents	66
4.2. Exploring the concepts of vocational excellence and inclusion	71
4.2.1 Target groups	71
4.2.2. Explicit or implicit reference to vocational excellence and inclusion.....	74
4.3. Intended changes promoted in policy documents.....	78
4.3.1 Types of intended changes and actions addressed	79
4.3.2. Content-related intended changes and actions promoted	80
4.3.3. Delivery-related intended changes and actions promoted	84
4.3.4 Other intended changes and actions promoted	93
4.4. Orders of justification.....	95
4.4.1 Strong focus on vocational excellence.....	95
4.4.2 Strong focus on inclusion	96
4.4.3 Strong focus on both vocational excellence and inclusion	98
4.5. Country perspectives.....	100
4.5.1 Changes over time	100
4.5.2 Contradictory or complementary.....	110
Chapter 5. Conclusions.....	116
5.1. Findings and observations related to the research questions	116
5.1.1 How have the objectives of excellence and inclusion been addressed in national policy documents over the past 25 years?	117
5.1.2 To what extent have priorities and objectives linked to excellence and inclusion triggered and influenced reforms and practical policies?... ..	120
5.1.3 To what extent do policies on excellence and inclusion contradict or complement each other?.....	122
5.2. Lessons learned for future policymaking	123
5.2.1 What lessons can be learned from this exploratory study with regard to informing future policymaking?	124
List of Abbreviations.....	135
References.....	127
Annexes.....	142

Annex 1. Proposed key elements of excellence in VET	142
Annex 2. Dimensions of and criteria for vocational excellence used in ISATCOVE	143
Annex 3. National experts	145
Annex 4. Additional tables from the research	146

Tables, figures and boxes

Tables

1.	The changing socioeconomic context, 1995 versus 2015.....	11
2.	Main attributes of vocational excellence.....	31
3.	Main attributes of inclusion in VET.....	37
4.	Orders of justification and their assignment to the coordination principles and policies in VET.....	44
5.	Overview of selected dimensions used, their focuses and their links to the three-perspective model.....	49
6.	Examples of signals for vocational excellence and inclusion and associated orders of justification.....	53
7.	Focus on objectives in policy documents.....	63
8.	Types of intended changes covered.....	79
9.	Content-related intended changes in policy documents, by policy objective.....	81
10.	Categories of delivery-related intended changes addressed in policy documents.....	84
11.	Grouping of countries based on the trends observed in the focus on vocational excellence and inclusion since 2000.....	101
12.	Types of policy documents.....	146
13.	Availability of dedicated funding lines.....	146
14.	Scope of policy documents.....	147
15.	Validity of policy documents.....	147
16.	Types of intended changes by decade.....	148
17.	Rating scale scores in relation to relevance to excellence and inclusion by country.....	149
18.	Number of documents with relevance to policy objectives by country.....	150
19.	Examples of types of references to excellence and aspects addressed in policy documents.....	151
20.	Examples of types of references to inclusion and aspects addressed in policy documents.....	155
21.	Types of intended changes indicated in policy documents by country.....	159
22.	Coverage of target groups among policy documents analysed.....	161
23.	Examples of dedicated funding lines by country and relevance to policy objectives.....	162
24.	Overview of country characteristics.....	173

Figures

1.	Analytical framework based on the three-perspective model	48
2.	Plot of priorities of national policies in the (potential) field of tension between vocational excellence and inclusion	52
3.	Positioning of policy documents with regard to their focus on the objectives of excellence and inclusion	62
4.	Number of sample policy documents by year of issue, 1999–2024	69
5.	Number of sample policy documents by year of issue and relevance to vocational excellence and inclusion, 1999–2024	70
6.	Policy documents containing explicit reference to objectives by year of issue, 1999–2024	75
7.	Grouping of countries based on the trends observed in the focus on vocational excellence and inclusion since 2000	102
8.	Relevance of policy documents by country grouping	168
9.	Explicit reference to policy objectives by country grouping	170

Boxes

1.	Key research questions	13
2.	Broad definition of vocational excellence	20
3.	The GIVE project	22
4.	CoVEs as defined by the ENE	28
5.	Inclusive excellence scenario	42
6.	Example policy with a strong focus on inclusion	64
7.	Example policy with a strong focus on vocational excellence	64
8.	Example policy with a strong focus on vocational excellence and some relevance to inclusion	65
9.	Example policy with a strong focus on both vocational excellence and inclusion	65
10.	Key characteristics of policy documents analysed	67
11.	Policy documents primarily addressing very talented or high-performing learners	72
12.	Policy documents primarily addressing groups at risk	73
13.	Examples of content-related changes promoted in policy documents with a strong focus on vocational excellence	81
14.	Example of content-related changes promoted in policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion	83
15.	Examples of content-related changes promoted in policy documents with a strong focus on both excellence and inclusion	83
16.	Examples of modularisation / partial qualification changes promoted in policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion	85

17.	Examples of new programme/pathway changes promoted in policy documents with high relevance to inclusion.....	86
18.	Examples of new programme/pathway changes promoted in policy documents with high relevance to both excellence and inclusion	87
19.	Examples of pedagogical approach changes promoted in policy documents with high relevance to inclusion.....	88
20.	Examples of guidance and support changes promoted in policy documents with high relevance to inclusion.....	90
21.	Example of guidance and support changes promoted in policy documents with high relevance to excellence.....	91
22.	Example of intended changes related to the CPD of VET teachers in policy documents with a strong focus on vocational excellence.....	93
23.	Example of intended changes related to quality development and assurance in policy documents with a strong focus on vocational excellence.....	94
24.	Examples from Germany and the United Kingdom.....	96
25.	Examples from Ireland, Spain and Hungary.....	97
26.	Examples from Latvia and Malta.....	98
27.	Example from the Flemish Region in Belgium.....	104
28.	Change of balance between excellence and inclusion in Denmar.....	106

Foreword

This publication was prepared as part of the Cedefop project '[VET excellence and inclusion for the 21st century](#)'. The purpose of this research is to deepen the understanding by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) of the interaction between the broad policy objectives of excellence and inclusion. The study should be considered the third step in a long-term research strategy aiming to achieve a better understanding of the future of vocational education, training and learning in Europe. The research takes into consideration developments over the past 25 years in the 27 EU Member States, Iceland, Norway and the United Kingdom. It builds on the insights acquired from the 'Changing nature and role of VET in Europe' and 'Future of VET' projects.

The research is divided into three separate but interlinked themes:

- (a) mapping how national vocational education and training (VET) systems have addressed the objectives of excellence and inclusion;
- (b) exploring the conceptual foundations of these objectives and how they inform practical policies and reforms;
- (c) examining the emerging role and characteristics of higher VET and beyond and how these influence the objectives of excellence and inclusion.

This report focuses on analysing national VET objectives and priorities and examining how these are reflected in national policy documents and standards promoting excellence and inclusion. It aims to provide a comprehensive historical overview not only of the extent to which policy documents reflect and combine excellence and inclusion but also of whether excellence and inclusion contradict or complement each other.

The results of the research demonstrate that national policy documents have increasingly focused on the policy objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion over the past 25 years, although not always using these terms explicitly. Overall, a shift from a narrower to a broader understanding of the concepts can be observed. Although the concept of 'inclusive excellence' in VET is emerging, it has yet to be adopted in national policy documents. The research also shows that balancing excellence and inclusion in VET policies is crucial to ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, have access to high-quality education and training opportunities. Achieving such a balance requires policies and programmes that simultaneously promote high-quality training outcomes and address issues of equity and accessibility. Policymakers at the European level should reflect on whether measures put in place (either as part of the VET system

or on their own) truly promote both objectives. Evidently, peer learning across countries can contribute to a better understanding of how to operationalise these concepts and implement them at the national level.

In the coming years, vocational excellence and inclusion will remain critical policy objectives for Europe, especially given challenges like the green and digital transitions, an ageing workforce, migration and rising social inequalities. We therefore hope the current research will support the development of a European strategy for VET that aims to increase the attractiveness, excellence and inclusiveness of VET, as highlighted in the recently launched 'union of skills' plan.

Jürgen Siebel
Executive Director

Loukas Zahilas
*Head of the Department for
VET and qualifications*

Acknowledgements

This publication was produced by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), under the supervision of Loukas Zahilas, Head of the Department for VET and qualifications. The paper is part of the project 'European VET for the 21st century: The balancing of excellence and inclusion', coordinated by [Anastasia Poulidou](#), Cedefop expert, and supported by [Iraklis Pliakis](#) and [Vasileios Symeonidis](#), Cedefop experts.

The research was carried out by a consortium led by 3s Unternehmensberatung (Austria), in cooperation with Ockham IPS (the Netherlands) and supervised by Karin Luomi-Messerer.

The report is based on contributions by Monika Auzinger, Simon Broek, Karin Luomi-Messerer and Jörg Markowitsch. The national experts who actively participated in the project and shared their valuable expertise, experience and opinions are listed in Annex 3. We would also like to thank Dagfinn Hertzberg, Cedefop expert, and Christopher James Lee, Cedefop trainee, for their comments and support throughout the preparation of this publication.

Executive summary

The study

The project 'European VET for the 21st century: the balancing of excellence and inclusion' constitutes the third component of a long-term research strategy aiming to achieve a better understanding of the future of vocational education and training (VET) in Europe. It builds on the results of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) projects entitled 'Changing nature and role of VET in Europe' (2015–2018) and 'Future of VET' (2019–2022) and tries to deepen Cedefop's understanding of the interaction between the broad objectives of 'vocational excellence' and 'inclusion' in VET in Europe.

This publication is the result of the first strand of the overall project and is titled 'Evolving national VET objectives and priorities – excellence and/or inclusion'. It provides an overview of how European countries address the objectives of excellence and inclusion and how VET policies have evolved over time. The study covers 30 countries: the 27 EU Member States, Iceland, Norway and the United Kingdom. It is underpinned by the following research questions.

- (a) How have the objectives of excellence and inclusion been addressed in national policy documents over the past 25 years?
- (b) To what extent have priorities and objectives linked to excellence and inclusion triggered and influenced reforms and practical policies?
 - (i) Have they influenced learning outcome expectations (in standards and curricula)?
 - (ii) Have they affected resource allocation and distribution?
 - (iii) Have they influenced individual learning opportunities?
 - (iv) Have they influenced sectoral policies?
- (c) To what extent do policies on excellence and inclusion contradict or complement each other?

Analytical framework and methodology

An exploratory analysis was conducted to examine how the concepts of 'vocational excellence' and 'inclusion' have been shaped and have developed as policy objectives at the European level over the past 25 years and how they have changed in the academic and policy-related international research literature. The results show that there is no clear and universally accepted definition of the two concepts. Instead, they are multifaceted, defined in various ways and influenced by various theoretical perspectives, assumptions and positions of stakeholders involved. In some cases, only one aspect of vocational excellence or inclusion is

emphasised. This leads to a rather narrow understanding of the concept in question, as opposed to a broader understanding that encompasses various related aspects and refers to different dimensions of VET. In a broader or holistic approach, they are considered essential components of an effective education system, mutually enforcing each other. They help create an environment in which all learners can flourish (highlighting aspects and principles such as high quality, diversity, equity and empowerment). The concept of 'inclusive excellence' is increasingly promoted as a framework that addresses all levels, components and aspects of VET as part of skills ecosystems and takes economic, social and educational aims and values into account.

The results of this exploratory analysis informed the development of an analytical framework that also draws on the 'three-perspective model' (comprising a socioeconomic or labour market perspective, an epistemological and pedagogical perspective and an education system perspective) developed and refined in previous Cedefop studies. For the purposes of this study, it was necessary to adapt this model and focus on selected dimensions and aspects related to vocational excellence and inclusion (referred to as 'signals').

The analytical framework forms the basis for the development of the research tool used for the analysis of vocational excellence and inclusion in national VET policy documents. Data were collected mainly through a structured questionnaire completed by national VET experts who were asked to select and assess five of the most relevant national VET policy documents (categorised as regulation/legislation, strategy / action plan or other policies) related to vocational excellence and/or inclusion since 2000. In total, 150 policy documents were analysed. To obtain an impression that extends beyond the five selected national policy documents, country experts were also asked to provide a short overall narrative assessment regarding the emerging national VET objectives and priorities related to vocational excellence and inclusion and changes in them over time.

Key findings and observations

Characteristics of the policy documents analysed

Of the total sample of 150 policy documents analysed, a higher share had an emphasis on inclusion than on excellence. However, it should be noted that most policy documents focus, to varying extents, on both objectives as opposed to just one.

Policy documents that focus exclusively on inclusion more frequently fall into the regulation/legislation category. It seems that inclusion in VET is seen as a political goal of great enough importance to be enshrined in legislation. While the policy objective of inclusion has generally been emphasised more strongly than that of excellence in VET policy documents over the past 25 years, policy documents with a strong focus on vocational excellence, and those related to both goals, became more common from around 2014 onwards. Three quarters of the policy documents analysed are still valid today, indicating that such policies tend to have a longer period of validity than average.

Finally, 40 % of the policy documents analysed have a broad scope that goes beyond the VET system. This is more often the case with policy documents that have a strong focus on inclusion alone. This appears to be because inclusion-related aspects relevant to VET are often emphasised in overarching education policies, including lifelong learning policies. In most of the policy documents analysed, no sectoral focus is specified; documents usually apply to all sectors.

Exploring the concepts of vocational excellence and inclusion

There is no clear and generally accepted definition of either of these two concepts; instead, they are multifaceted and defined in diverse ways. Instead, reference is often made to terms associated with excellence, such as innovation, talent, performance, quality, efficiency and effectiveness. Inclusion, meanwhile, is often associated with terms such as participation, integration, equal rights, self-determination and the protection of minorities.

Inclusion, rather than excellence, is by far the main focus of the policy documents analysed, but there is a large number of policy documents that do not explicitly use either term. Discussions on inclusion in VET that adopt a rather narrow understanding of the term refer to specific disadvantaged or vulnerable target groups who are either at risk of exclusion or already excluded due to socioeconomic, physical or language barriers (e.g. early school leavers, those not in education, employment or training, disabled learners, migrants). These groups are more often explicitly addressed in policy documents than gifted or high-achieving learners. Over time, policy documents have increasingly emphasised supporting all learners, creating VET 'for all' or meeting the needs of different groups of learners, thus promoting a broader understanding of inclusion.

Meanwhile, most references to excellence address the institutional level, in particular high-quality teaching and learning in VET (including practical training and innovative VET providers). In some cases, the VET system as a whole, is addressed, and the enhancement of the attractiveness and 'image' of the VET sector is linked to this policy objective.

Intended changes promoted in policy documents

Intended changes and actions related to delivery are generally more prevalent in the policy documents analysed than those related to content. In terms of content-related intended changes, there are no significant differences between objective focuses, except that the excellence-focused policy documents refer slightly less frequently to changes in transversal competences than other policy documents. However, they also promote, among other things, digital and critical thinking, social and personal skills, entrepreneurship, innovation and research. It can also be observed that, in inclusion-oriented policy documents, references to strengthening occupational competences tend to refer more generally to aspects such as meeting the demands of working life and fulfilling labour market needs to ensure employability. Moreover, in policy documents with a strong focus on vocational excellence, references to occupational competences repeatedly refer to increasing responsiveness to labour market needs to ensure adaptation to rapidly changing requirements.

Regarding delivery-related intended changes, about half the policy documents address the development of new programmes or pathways and the provision of guidance and support. The development of new programmes or pathways is mentioned more frequently in the documents with a strong focus on excellence (e.g. referring to the introduction of new specialisations, permeability, progression routes to higher levels and the combination of pathways) and the provision of guidance and support is a more frequent topic in the documents with a strong focus on inclusion (e.g. referring to targeted guidance and interventions for supporting specific groups but also to personalised and lifelong learning support for all learners). Excellence-focused policy documents more frequently mention infrastructure improvements and institutional changes, such as creating Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs), and the training or continuing professional development of teachers and trainers in VET, including through the use of in-company trainers.

Country perspective

With regard to the extent to which aspects of vocational excellence or inclusion have been given priority over one another since 2000, or to what extent they have been pursued together in a more balanced way, the following trends can be identified. In several countries (mainly those with moderate-to-high levels of enrolment in upper-secondary VET), the focus has consistently been on inclusion aspects. In other countries, this is also the case, but it has been accompanied by an increased focus (to varying degrees) on vocational excellence over the past 10 years. In a number of countries, a more balanced approach can be observed

over this period, and in others (in regions where VET systems have undergone significant reforms) an increasing emphasis has been placed on both objectives, especially recently. However, this assessment should be considered in the overall context of the VET system concerned. For example, in well-established and robust VET systems, there may not be as great a need to prioritise excellence in policy documents. Similarly, countries with VET systems that have historically had a strong focus on equity may not see the need to place an additional emphasis on inclusion.

In the majority of countries, it appears that the policy objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion are considered to be rather complementary. In some countries, however, these objectives are rarely included in the same policy documents; instead, they refer to different types of VET provision, or policies related to inclusion are not related to excellence (while the opposite is more often the case). A certain lack of clarity about the concepts involved and a certain degree of contradiction can also be noted in some cases.

Conclusions

Findings and observations related to the research questions

Over the past 25 years, national policy documents have increasingly focused on the policy objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion, although not always using these terms explicitly. Overall, a shift from a narrower to a broader understanding of the concepts of excellence and inclusion can be observed over the years.

- (a) **Policy documents with a strong focus on vocational excellence:** Some countries have developed policies to support gifted and high-achieving learners, but many policy documents, particularly in recent years, do not refer to a specific target group. With regard to VET institutions, these policies often emphasise the importance of high-quality education, modernisation, innovation and adaptation to the needs of the labour market. The focus is on promoting partnerships with businesses to improve VET (e.g. through the creation of Centres of Vocational Excellence or specialised institutions), strengthening the skills of teachers and trainers and in some cases developing VET programmes at higher levels.
- (b) **Policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion:** Older inclusion policies primarily target disadvantaged or vulnerable learners, including those facing socioeconomic challenges and educational barriers. Over time, the understanding of inclusion has broadened to encompass a wider range of

individuals, promoting accessible educational pathways and ensuring that all learners receive the support they need to succeed. The focus is on creating flexible and adaptable education systems that enable lifelong learning for all.

The study notes that, while changes in policy may influence resource distribution, specific data on funding are limited. It cannot be conclusively determined how these changes affect financial resources or if they favour one policy objective over another. Most documents do not specify sectoral distinctions, addressing the VET sector as a whole. However, it is possible that such policies may lead to the development of specific measures within certain sectors to support the overarching goals of vocational excellence and inclusion.

In most countries, the policy objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion are not seen as contradictory. This is substantiated by the fact that most policy documents analysed do not exclusively focus on one or the other objective. Countries also often use similar strategies to achieve both vocational excellence and inclusion. For example, high-quality VET accessible to all learners supports both goals. In other cases, excellence and inclusion are pursued through different policy mechanisms. In addition, changes oriented towards vocational excellence are more often aimed at structural advancements, which can potentially benefit all learners, but particularly high achievers. Inclusion-oriented changes, on the other hand, aim to remove barriers and provide targeted support to ensure that VET is accessible and beneficial to a wide range of learners. If these policy objectives are not pursued in an integrated way, it can be difficult to find the right balance and unintended negative consequences may occur. The success of integrating these goals in a complementary way depends on policy design and implementation and the national understanding of these concepts. The concept of 'inclusive excellence' in VET is emerging but has yet to be adopted in national policy documents.

Lessons learned for future policymaking

Vocational excellence and inclusion will remain critical policy objectives for Europe in the coming years, especially given challenges like the green and digital transitions, an ageing workforce, migration and rising social inequalities. European policy focuses on competitiveness, equity and inclusion, with a future European strategy for VET likely to emphasise these goals.

Lessons from the study highlight the importance of treating vocational excellence and inclusion as mutually reinforcing. Excellence should not be elitist, as excluding certain groups can deepen disparities. Instead, policies must balance inclusion and excellence, ensuring all learners, including high achievers and disadvantaged groups, can thrive. Flexibility in targeting different groups and promoting specific aspects at different times is also necessary. Successful

implementation requires relevant framework conditions, such as policy coordination, long-term commitment, adequate resources and monitoring systems. Policymakers should reflect on whether measures put forward (either on their own or as part of the whole VET system) truly promote both objectives. Peer learning across countries can contribute to a better understanding of how to operationalise and implement these concepts. Discussing and sharing good practices can help in the pursuit of 'inclusive excellence'.

The exploratory findings presented here create a framework for further research analysing national and higher-level VET reforms through the lens of inclusion and excellence.

Chapter 1.

Introduction

1.1. Context, aim and research questions

This study is considered the third step in a long-term research strategy aiming to achieve a better understanding of the future of vocational education and training (VET) in Europe. It builds on the results of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) projects '[Changing nature and role of VET in Europe](#)' (2015–2018) and '[Future of VET](#)' (2019–2022). The aim of the research has been to delineate the 'big picture' of developments in European VET to understand the associated influencing factors, strengths and weaknesses and provide a better basis for future decisions.

The influencing factors that are particularly pertinent to VET include economic and employment trends affecting VET demand, demographic changes (e.g. ageing populations and a decline in the number of students of the appropriate age for initial vocational education and training (IVET) in some countries), technological changes affecting the demand for certain skills, the green transition, more fluid labour markets, pressures on public finances (given that large parts of the VET system are publicly funded), migration issues and the impact of COVID-19 on skills and VET (Cedefop, 2022b, p. 111; Hogarth, 2022). The synthesis report based on the results of the project 'Changing nature and role of VET in Europe', for example, points to 'the main features of VET's socioeconomic context in 1995 and 2015 to highlight the key ways in which it has changed' (Cedefop, 2020, p. 57).

Table 1. **The changing socioeconomic context, 1995 versus 2015**

1995	2015
Limited goals: preparing for job entry and securing skilled labour	Broader goals: social as well as economic; excellence as well as integration
Industry- and sector-based standard setting and anticipation of needs	Increasing role of skills intelligence systems
Jobs requiring medium-level skills predominating in the labour market	Share of jobs requiring medium-level skills starting to decrease; future developments contested
Digitalisation one of several factors influencing VET	Digitalisation a key driving force

Source: Cedefop (2020, p. 57).

The trends identified for 2015 reflect the need for VET to, among other goals, 'support measures to combat social inequalities, since VET's key client base comprises those most adversely affected in recent decades by rising inequalities,

the young and those with low and middle level skills' (Cedefop, 2023b, p. 26). This also means that VET not only needs to respond to these influencing factors but also has a role to play in shaping trends and changes in the future.

The project 'European VET for the 21st century: the balancing of excellence and inclusion' takes into account the following – seemingly opposing – trends that can be observed in European VET policies. On the one hand, there is a growing emphasis on the increasing need for specialised VET skills at the highest possible levels of performance and, in particular, skill sets that equip people to cope with the fast-changing demands and requirements of the labour market and society at large. On the other hand, national VET policies also strongly focus on providing learning opportunities and pathways to enhance employability for all learners, including people with diverse needs and motivations who are at risk of exclusion from the labour market and society. Both trends seem to address key challenges that European VET will face in the coming decades. This raises the question of whether they contradict each other or can be considered mutually reinforcing.

As the third strand of project work on the future of VET, this study tries to deepen Cedefop's understanding of the interaction between the broad objectives of 'vocational excellence' and 'inclusion' in VET in Europe. As there are no exact, commonly agreed definitions of these concepts, they may be interpreted and operationalised from varying perspectives. The research conducted for this study aims to explore and compare how countries relate the broad VET policy objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion to each other and whether these priorities complement or contradict each other. The findings of the study will support policymakers and stakeholders in strengthening the overall relevance and quality of European VET in the 21st century.

The overall project comprises three strands.

- (a) Evolving national VET objectives and priorities – excellence and/or inclusion (this present study).
- (b) Excellence and inclusion – concept exploration and inclusion in national VET objectives. The second strand will enable a deeper understanding of the concepts of inclusion and excellence and how they interact with and influence national VET reforms in eight EU Member States.
- (c) Expanding VET at higher levels and the implications of this for excellence and inclusion. The third strand will provide insights into the expansion of VET at higher levels and how this development influences excellence and inclusion. It will provide an overview of 30 countries, with more in-depth research on eight Member States.

This first strand of the overall study provides an overview of how European countries address the objectives of excellence and inclusion and how VET policies

have evolved over time. It covers 30 countries – the 27 Member States, Iceland, Norway and the United Kingdom (UK) – and is underpinned by the research questions listed in Box 1.

Box 1. Key research questions

- (a) How have the objectives of excellence and inclusion been addressed in national policy documents over the past 25 years?
- (b) To what extent have priorities and objectives linked to excellence and inclusion triggered and influenced reforms and practical policies?
 - (i) Have they influenced learning outcome expectations (in standards and curricula)?
 - (ii) Have they affected resource allocation and distribution?
 - (iii) Have they influenced individual learning opportunities?
 - (iv) Have they influenced sectoral policies?
- (c) To what extent do policies on excellence and inclusion contradict or complement each other?

Source: Tender specifications.

1.2. Overview of this report

The use and formulation of the concepts of ‘vocational excellence’ and ‘inclusion’, in both VET policy at the European level over the past 25 years and more recent academic and policy-related international research literature, were explored to develop an analytical framework (that will, to some extent, also be used in the subsequent strands of the overall study). This process is discussed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 focuses on this tailored analytical framework to analyse the objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion in national VET policies. The framework is mainly based on the ‘three-perspective model’ that was developed and further refined in the previous Cedefop projects ‘[Changing nature and role of VET in Europe](#)’ and ‘[Future of VET](#)’. Moreover, the research tool (based on the analytical framework) and approach used for this first strand of the overall project are also presented in Chapter 3. The data collection for this first strand mainly consisted of a survey of national VET experts in which they analysed and assessed national VET policy documents related to excellence and inclusion released since 2000. Chapter 4 presents the research results and Chapter 5 contains reflections on the research questions and the lessons learned from the research.

The approach of this research can be characterised as exploratory or inductive, as it attempts to define the concepts of vocational excellence and inclusion not in the abstract but rather in relation to how they have been used in

policy documents. However, this also means that the terms are to some extent subject to normative rhetoric; in other words, the focus is on what the goals of vocational excellence and inclusion should be rather than how (successfully) they are realised in the 30 countries.

Chapter 2.

Setting the scene

Questions of vocational excellence and inclusion can be linked to the debates on the function of VET. In an analysis of the key debates about vocational education happening around 1900 in Germany, Gonon (2009, p. 45) demonstrates the importance of the ‘labour question’ or ‘social question’, that is, how education could contribute to the integration of young workers into society. The challenge was to harmonise the ‘question of labour’ with the question of ‘education and personality’ (see also Gonon & Stolz, 2012, p. 11).

To examine these two concepts, an exploratory analysis of relevant literature and EU policy documents was conducted, focusing on how vocational excellence and inclusion have been formulated and have developed as policy objectives at the EU level over the past 25 years (Section 2.1). Next, the use of the two concepts in the more recent academic and policy-related international research literature is discussed – first considering the concepts separately (Section 2.2) and then taking a more holistic perspective in which vocational excellence and inclusion are understood as complementary (Section 2.3). Finally, there is a discussion of how the concepts of vocational excellence and inclusion can be linked to the ‘orders of justification’ in order to overcome the (potential) dichotomy between the two concepts (Section 2.4).

2.1 Vocational excellence and inclusion as policy objectives at the European level over the past 25 years

2.1.1. Brief recap of the past 25 years of vocational training policy

This section is devoted to the review of recent EU VET policies and related initiatives and the ways in which vocational excellence and inclusion are expressed in them ⁽¹⁾.

The concept of social exclusion in EU VET emerged as a topic in the EU’s anti-poverty programmes between 1975 and 1994 (Osman et al., 2022, p. 169). By the mid 1990s, it had become more common; for example, combating exclusion is one of the objectives emphasised in the European Commission white paper

⁽¹⁾ Please note that the aim of this recap is to explore which characteristics these concepts are associated with. The chronological approach was chosen in order to facilitate later establishing links with chronological occurrences of the promotion of these concepts in the national VET policy documents analysed.

'Teaching and learning: towards the leaning society' (1995). Thus, 'the notion of "social exclusion" had already emerged in the period leading up to the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 that established the competence of the European Community in the field of education' (Gordon, 2015, p. 12). Although the link between lifelong learning and inclusion is by no means automatic, as people with the lowest levels of education are the least likely to participate in formal learning as adults, this connection has been frequently emphasised since the start of the 21st century. The notion of lifelong learning had its first real push forward in the 'Teaching and learning' white paper, and the lifelong learning strategy 'was confirmed by the launch in 1996 of the European Year of Lifelong Learning' (EUCEN, 2008).

EU policies in the first decade of the 21st century took into account the difficulties of addressing major social and economic issues and emphasised the need for lifelong learning, seeing VET, along with other subsystems of education, 'in a continuum of learning opportunities and provisions that can be accessed in different ways at different stages in life' (Gordon, 2015, p. 12). This was strongly linked to the aspect of social inclusion, as emphasised in the Communication on making a European area of lifelong learning a reality (2001).

The concept of vocational excellence as a characteristic of individuals also has a long tradition (Suvedi & Ghimire, 2019, p. 1194). It is well known in the context of skills competitions, such as those held by WorldSkills, which assess the level of proficiency or excellence in certain skills in a competitive environment and are intended to reflect international best practice ⁽²⁾. The notion of competition is also emphasised in the [Lisbon strategy](#), launched in March 2000: it aimed to create 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (p. 1) ⁽³⁾. Although 'excellence' is not explicitly addressed, the use of the term 'competitive', for example, could point in this direction; 'social inclusion' is clearly emphasised there as well. Following the [European Council meeting in Lisbon](#) (2000), the [Education and Training 2010](#) work programme was adopted to support national education and training systems and monitor the progress made. The work programme's strategy included the following key objectives: improving the quality and effectiveness of education and the measurement of progress through agreed instruments; facilitating the access of all to education and training

⁽²⁾ [WorldSkills](#) is considered to play an important role in supporting national skills systems to promote vocational excellence: 'Firstly, it supports the development of international benchmarks, that ensure standards in skills systems are at a world-class level. Secondly, skills competitions and the associated training provided a "third space" for trainers and trainees to experiment with innovative pedagogic approaches and practices and so respond to the latest technologies, industry developments, and emergent skills demands in an agile manner' (Relly et al., 2021, p. 9).

⁽³⁾ For research on the Lisbon strategy and its implications for national VET policies, see, for example, Grollmann and Ruth (2006).

systems; and opening up education and training systems to the wider world ⁽⁴⁾. If quality and effectiveness are viewed as aspects related to excellence, and access to education and training as an aspect related to inclusion, this strategy can be understood as the first instance of both goals, excellence and inclusion, being emphasised simultaneously in education and training policy. This approach seems to have been continued in the [Copenhagen Process](#) (2002–2010), which outlined the EU VET policy at the beginning of the 21st century ⁽⁵⁾. While the term ‘excellence’ is explicitly used in the [Helsinki Communiqué on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training](#) (2006) and has been further taken up in key policies at the EU level in recent years, the objective of VET to foster social inclusion and equity is expressed in all key documents issued as part of the Helsinki Process.

Moreover, the [Helsinki Communiqué](#) stresses the dual role of VET: ‘in contributing to competitiveness and in enhancing social cohesion. VET policies should address all sections of the population, offering attractive and challenging pathways for those with high potential, while at the same time addressing those at risk of educational disadvantages and labour market exclusion – especially early school leavers, those with low qualifications or no qualifications at all, those with special needs, people with an immigrant background and older workers. In short, VET should be equitable and efficient.’ (p.3)

This theme is continued in the [Bordeaux Communiqué on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training](#) (2008), which also emphasises that ‘VET should promote excellence and at the same time guarantee equal opportunities’ (p. 5), and the [Bruges Communiqué on enhanced European cooperation in vocation education and training for the period 2011–2020](#) (2010), which calls for fostering the excellence, quality and relevance of both initial and continuing VET (CVET). Moreover, it again stresses the role of VET in promoting social cohesion and equipping people to face societal challenges, which serves to emphasise its dual objective of excellence and inclusion:

‘[Countries should] take appropriate measures to ensure access on an equal basis, especially for individuals and groups at risk of being excluded, in particular the low-skilled and unskilled, people with special needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds, and older workers. The participation of such groups in VET should be facilitated and encouraged through financial or other means and through the validation

⁽⁴⁾ For an overview of EU education policies between 2000 and 2010, see, for example, Lawn and Grek (2012).

⁽⁵⁾ For an analysis of the effects of the Copenhagen process on VET policies in selected countries, see, for example, Trampusch (2009).

of non-formal and informal learning, as well as the provision of flexible pathways.’ (p.15)

Similarly, the [Riga Conclusions](#) (2015), which define a new set of medium-term deliverables in the field of VET for 2015–2020, emphasise both excellence and inclusion. They also state that, while ‘most national agendas have 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’ (p. 6). This is an interesting statement, as it reminds countries not to neglect either aspect of the dual role attributed to VET.

The [new Skills Agenda for Europe](#) (2016) refers to inclusion and invites VET to work on ‘personal fulfilment and development, social inclusion, active citizenship and employment’, in line with the strategy of ‘resilient, inclusive and sustainable growth at territorial level’. Excellence is not explicitly mentioned; however, aspects of innovation and higher, more complex skills are emphasised.

The term ‘vocational excellence’ is more frequently used in the EU policy context from 2018 onwards, with the promotion of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs). This initiative was first announced in the European Commission Communication ‘[Building a stronger Europe: the role of youth, education and culture policies](#)’ (2018): ‘They [CoVEs] should act as drivers of excellence and innovation and promote a proactive role for vocational education and training in local and regional economic development, including by acting as entrepreneurial incubators and catalysts for investment’ (p. 9). The implementation of CoVEs also involves the establishment of broader partnerships and more internationalisation. The [European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience](#), published in mid 2020, also refers to vocational excellence with regard to the establishment of CoVEs and the development of ‘European vocational core profiles’ that would define a certain share of common training content at the European level, with the goal of supporting the excellence and internationalisation of VET. It also aims to ensure ‘a competitive economy and cohesive society and bring to life the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning, as spelled out in Principle 1 of the European Pillar of Social Rights’ (p. 15) ⁽⁶⁾.

⁽⁶⁾ The [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) (2017) is a broad policy initiative aiming to develop a strong social EU that is fair, inclusive and full of opportunity in the 21st century; an [action plan](#) was issued in March 2021.

Similarly, two other EU VET policy documents published in 2020 promote both policy objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion⁽⁷⁾. The [Council Recommendation on vocational education and training \(VET\) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience](#) promotes CoVEs as world-class reference points for both initial training and continuing upskilling and reskilling in specific areas. It also recommends that Member States work towards implementing a VET policy that ‘fosters inclusiveness and equal opportunities and contributes to achieving resilience, social fairness and prosperity for all’ (p. 5). The [Osnabrück Declaration](#) on vocational education and training as an enabler of recovery and just transitions to digital and green economies (2020) complements the Council Recommendation on VET by outlining the policy post-2020 and presenting a new set of policy actions in VET for 2021–2025. It highlights both excellence and inclusion: ‘Excellent and inclusive European VET is equally necessary for the competitiveness of European enterprises and a well-functioning European labour market’ (p. 3). Thus, the main thematic areas in the declaration include ‘[r]esilience and excellence through quality, inclusive and flexible VET’ and ‘[e]stablishing a new lifelong learning culture – relevance of C-VET and digitalisation’ (p. 4). The European Commission Communication ‘[The Union of Skills](#)’ highlights that key deliverables at the EU, national, regional and local levels include ‘the increase of attractiveness, excellence and inclusiveness of VET with a European strategy for VET’ (p. 8). The strategy for VET mentioned aims to ‘address gender and other stereotypes in making study choices and build on benefits and labour market outcomes of VET so that VET becomes an equally valued learning pathway as higher education, including for women’ (ibid.).

For several years now, vocational excellence, inclusion and CoVEs have been high on the policy agenda, and several initiatives have been launched to promote them; this work is, in particular, supported by the European Commission and the European Training Foundation (ETF)⁽⁸⁾. Although these initiatives have ‘excellence’ in their titles (see the following examples), in some cases, explicit reference is also made to inclusion aspects. Some of the more recent initiatives are briefly presented below.

The report ‘Mapping of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs)’ (European Commission, 2019) was developed by the Working Group on VET, set up by the

(7) However, employability and competitiveness goals seem to be at the forefront, as a content analysis of official EU education policy documents published in 2020 (conducted to examine the EU’s education policy discourse and the narratives promoted therein following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic) reveals: ‘It is a common objective of all policy texts that recovery should ensure social fairness and inclusiveness, yet always be linked to employment priorities. As such, the idea of investing in people is predominantly conceptualised as a growth and competitiveness factor, and secondarily as a key instrument for social inclusion’ (Symeonidis et al., 2021, p. 111).

(8) Other relevant initiatives at the EU level include [EuroSkills](#), which holds skills competitions every two years for young professionals, and [Skills Plus](#), which holds skills competitions for people with (labour) disabilities (a project funded through Erasmus+).

European Commission under the education and training 2020 framework. It provides a rather general definition of vocational excellence by referring to it as a set of activities and a general approach to VET that ‘go beyond what VET would normally be expected to do’ (European Commission, 2019, p. 8). In this context, vocational excellence may be viewed as more than just getting the core things right but also as reaching out into new areas. Box 2 presents the definition of the concept of vocational excellence as found on the website of the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion; note that it also refers to inclusion.

Box 2. Broad definition of vocational excellence

‘The concept of vocational excellence promoted by the EU is characterised by a holistic learner-centred approach in which VET:

- (a) is an integrated part of skills ecosystems ^(a), contributing to regional development, innovation, smart specialisation and clusters strategies, as well as to specific industrial ecosystems;
- (b) is part of knowledge triangles, working closely with other education and training sectors, the scientific community, and business;
- (c) enables learners to acquire both job-specific as well as key competences through provision that is underpinned by quality assurance;
- (d) builds innovative forms of partnerships with the world of work and is supported by the professional development of training staff, innovative pedagogies, learners and staff mobility and VET internationalisation strategies.

‘By focussing on inclusive excellence, this model guarantees access to top-notch education for all learners, endowing them with essential and vocational skills. Such inclusive practices align with the goal of preparing individuals for quality employment, contributing to a dynamic, inclusive economy.’

^(a) According to Buchanan et al. (2016, p. 1), skills ecosystems ‘are defined as regional or sectoral social formations in which human capability is developed and deployed for productive purposes (Finegold 1999). Their basic elements are business settings and associated business models, institutional/policy frameworks, modes of engaging labour, the structure of jobs, as well as the level of skills and systems for their formation.’

Source: European Commission (n.d.-a). Note ^(a) is the authors’ own insertion.

Another definition from the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion’s website also emphasises the complementary relationship between vocational excellence and inclusion:

‘Vocational Excellence is about providing high-quality vocational education and training that is not only tailored to the demands of the job market but also meets the diverse needs of learners. It prepares individuals with the skills in demand while ensuring that training is accessible and inclusive, aligning with societal needs for sustainable development. Vocational Excellence fosters an environment where

every learner has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to their community, promoting social inclusion and equality in access to education.'

(European Commission, n.d.-e)

Through the Erasmus+ programme, the European Commission is supporting the establishment and development of international collaborative networks of CoVEs by bringing together partners from different countries that share common interests – specifically in particular sectors or industrial ecosystems, innovative approaches to social issues or increasing the outreach, quality and effectiveness of existing CoVEs (European Commission, n.d.-b). Coordinators of the Erasmus+ CoVE projects have established a community of practice of centres of vocational excellence (Cop CoVEs) for mutual learning and support (CoP CoVEs, 2020).

From the five rounds of calls for CoVE projects up to summer 2024, a number of projects have been selected that also relate to the goal of inclusion. However, only two CoVE projects thus far are considered to specifically focus on social inclusion in VET (i.e. [AccessCoVE](#)) or the social dimension of VET (i.e. 'Governance for inclusive vocational excellence' ([GIVE](#))) (European Commission, 2022). Overall, the Erasmus+ CoVE projects clearly address both objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion. The GIVE project from the second round of pilot CoVEs, launched in 2020, is briefly introduced in Box 3.

Box 3. **The GIVE project**

The GIVE project aimed to develop a model of governance, management and training practices for the development of inclusive VET excellence. The project understood promoting inclusive VET practices as 'constructing learning opportunities for each and every student, providing them support to engage purposefully in their development. For the GIVE network, this means designing and implementing an equitable and holistic approach, consistent with: the premise that each individual has to be accepted as unique and unrepeatable; the ability to identify and enhance personal excellence; the ability to take into consideration all aspects of the learners' life cooperating with all the main stakeholders (family, social services, etc.)' (GIVE Team – University of Bucharest, 2023, p. 43).

At their final conference, 'Including to be excellent – Make inclusive excellence real in our communities', the GIVE project presented a model for 'inclusive excellence' that emphasised the following key areas for action:

- (a) innovative learning environments that utilise inclusive pedagogies and advanced technologies;
- (b) support services, such as coaching, mentoring and personalised support;
- (c) leadership and management within the inclusive excellence ecosystem, with a focus on anticipatory and participatory governance.

From this perspective, excellence based on inclusion aims to prevent rather than combat social and economic inequalities in VET (GIVE Team – University of Bucharest, 2024).

Source: [GIVE project](#).

The ETF has established the [ETF Network for Excellence \(ENE\)](#), an international network of CoVEs in countries neighbouring the EU. The ENE encourages the sharing of ideas, practices and experience between CoVEs at both the national and international levels and is supported by the ENE self-assessment tool, which helps centres align their own development with that of other members of the network. In addition, the ENE works on development partnerships through which groups of CoVEs work together to improve in specific domains. The network currently focuses its work on eight subject areas, including one specifically dedicated to 'social inclusion and equity'.

Further, in this context, attempts have been made to define vocational excellence. The report 'Centres of Vocational Excellence – An engine for vocational education and training development' (ETF, 2020) refers to multiple aspects of this concept: 'Vocational excellence usually refers to a high quality of training and education, but also to relevance to the world of work and to the attractiveness of the educational offer to learners and to employers' (ETF, 2020, p. 8) ⁽⁹⁾.

⁽⁹⁾ For further information on key elements proposed to shape the mutual understanding of vocational excellence in VET, see Annex 1.

In addition, since 2021 the ETF has been working on behalf of the European Commission on the project 'The international dimension of centres of vocational excellence: Building a strong international cooperation dimension on vocational excellence' (European Commission & ETF, 2022). This project is focused on vocational excellence, but the characteristics of CoVEs that are emphasised in this context also include aspects of inclusion (see Section 2.2.2 for more details).

2.1.2. Preliminary conclusions

The previous section chronologically reviewed the key documents that have been intended to shape European VET over the past 25 years. This reveals that the concept of inclusion has been part of the EU VET policy environment from early on, while vocational excellence became explicitly embedded in it more recently. There is also an indication that although the term 'vocational excellence' was not explicitly used in EU policy documents until recently, it was implicitly present to some extent beforehand in the form of VET elements and related concepts such as 'world-class standards', 'competitiveness', 'innovation', 'creativity' and 'entrepreneurship'.

In some cases, inclusion in VET appears to be perceived primarily as providing a safety net for people or groups at risk of labour market and social exclusion, such as early school leavers, low-skilled people, migrants, people with disabilities and unemployed people. However, this understanding seems to have broadened in the early 2000s and now extends beyond these target groups of vulnerable people. Still, the report 'A bridge to the future – European policy for vocational education and training 2002–10', which took stock of the achievements of the Copenhagen process and pointed to a strong link between high-quality VET and promoting excellence, observed that sometimes 'VET's importance to delivering excellence is overshadowed by the support it provides to the less able. VET should not be seen purely as a remedial route for those who need extra help' (Cedefop, 2010a, p. 67). Thus, the somewhat later explicit emphasis on excellence in VET can perhaps be seen – to a certain extent – as a counterbalance to the image of VET as a second choice for learners and as a way to emphasise the notion of VET as an attractive pathway.

Overall, this brief recap shows that the role of VET in promoting inclusion and excellence in the current context of global challenges (e.g. skills shortages, unemployment, technological paradigm shifts) has been of high importance in EU policies and strategies. It appears that VET is repeatedly ascribed a dual role or dual objective. This could be understood as EU VET policies combining the two objectives of inclusion and excellence and integrating them in the pursuit of 'high-quality' VET systems that offer attractive and engaging pathways for learners from

different backgrounds. This idea is also supported, for example, by the content of the self-assessment framework for CoVEs and some of the EU-funded CoVE projects (Section 2.3).

2.2. Concepts of vocational excellence and inclusion in the literature

This section comprises an exploratory literature review scrutinising the concepts of vocational excellence and inclusion. As demonstrated in the following subsections, there is no clear and generally accepted definition of either of the two concepts; instead, they are multifaceted and defined in diverse ways. For each of these definitions, the understanding of the concept is influenced by different theoretical perspectives, assumptions and positions. As will be shown, the literature sometimes emphasises only one aspect of vocational excellence or inclusion. In these cases, a rather narrow understanding of the concept is indicated, as opposed to a broader understanding that encompasses various aspects of the concept and refers to different dimensions of VET.

The following subsections provide insight into these varying definitions in order to illustrate the multitude of viewpoints and approaches. Here, the concepts of excellence and inclusion in VET will be discussed separately, and each subsection will include a discussion of the concept with regard to future VET scenarios, building on two previous Cedefop projects, '[Changing nature and role of VET in Europe](#)' (2015–2018) and '[Future of VET](#)' (2019–2022), and the 'future VET scenarios' they developed ⁽¹⁰⁾. Each of the two subsections is rounded off with conclusions on the main characteristics of vocational excellence or inclusion according to the literature.

2.2.1. Vocational excellence

The following subsections provide a closer look at the concept of vocational excellence at the individual, institutional and system levels.

⁽¹⁰⁾ The '[Changing nature and role of VET in Europe](#)' project was concluded with the development of a series of VET scenarios aimed at identifying policy alternatives and future choices. These scenarios were developed on the basis of insights gained by analysing different VET concepts and systems across Europe and the developments VET has undergone over the past 20 years. The development process involved a scenario workshop with subject experts and subsequent refinement by the project team. The three basic scenarios identified are Scenario 1: Lifelong learning at the heart – pluralistic VET; Scenario 2: Occupational and professional competences at the heart – distinctive VET; and Scenario 3: Job-oriented training at the heart – special-purpose or marginalised VET. They also formed the starting point for the work of the follow-up project, 'Future of VET'.

2.2.1.1. *Vocational excellence at the individual level*

When focusing on the individual level, vocational excellence can be understood as individuals' ability to attain exceptional levels of competence and performance in specific vocational domains through a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes ⁽¹¹⁾. According to Suvedi and Ghimire (2019, p. 1198), 'individuals with vocational excellence strive to attain mastery by learning things as deeply as possible, and they possess high levels of technical and social skills and continually reflect on their entrepreneurial abilities'. Moreover, in this case, the concept of vocational excellence aligns with the theory of expertise development, which suggests that expertise is acquired through a gradual process of learning, practice and experience. This idea also links to lifelong learning, as vocational excellence requires continuing professional development (CPD) and staying up to date with advancements in one's vocational field. Thus, vocational excellence can also be considered closely linked to professionalism and adherence to ethical standards within a particular occupation. Moreover, vocational identity also seems to be a crucial factor for the development of excellence in the workforce (Klotz et al., 2014, based on Barrick, 2019, p. 1160).

In order to better understand how individuals develop vocational excellence, WorldSkills launched a research initiative called 'Modelling vocational excellence' ⁽¹²⁾, and a series of associated research projects has been carried out in the United Kingdom (Nokelainen et al., 2013). Moreover, to explore the acquisition of vocational excellence or expertise of high performers in Finnish skills competitions, a theoretical model and approach were created that map the development of vocational competence in terms of natural abilities, intrinsic characteristics and extrinsic conditions ⁽¹³⁾:

'Natural abilities include intellectual, affective abilities and body-kinaesthetic abilities (expressed as Multiple Intelligences domains); Intrinsic characteristics include volition (perseverance, time management), motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic factors) and self-reflection (attributions of performance to effort or ability); Extrinsic conditions include the influence of home and family, as well as trainer and teachers, work experiences and peers.'

(Nokelainen & Stasz, 2016, p. 10)

⁽¹¹⁾ Excellence is also sometimes linked to giftedness (see Ketelaar et al., 2019).

⁽¹²⁾ The research was carried out in partnership between Tampere University, Finland, the University of Oxford, United Kingdom, and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Australia, with support from Deakin University, Australia (see Messenger et al., 2020; Smith & Rahimi, 2011).

⁽¹³⁾ See also, for example, Nokelainen and Ruohotie (2009), Pylväs et al. (2015, pp. 241–263) and Nokelainen et al. (2019).

These reflections show that vocational excellence not only is linked to high-level occupational or technical skills but also refers to wider personal attributes. Moreover, developing vocational excellence requires learners to have a good grounding in key competences or soft skills (e.g. communication or interpersonal skills) to perform well in their chosen occupation. Thus, vocational excellence is understood as ‘grounded on three pillars: competence, self-regulation, and social engagement’ (Suvedi & Ghimire, 2019, p. 1202). However, despite there being common characteristics recognised in ‘excelling students’, it must be acknowledged that these students ‘are a diverse and heterogeneous group ... and there is not one type of excelling student’ (Ketelaar et al., 2019, p. 220).

2.2.1.2. *Vocational excellence at the institutional level*

The learning environment (including VET institutions, teachers and trainers) plays an important role in developing the vocational excellence of individuals⁽¹⁴⁾. At the institutional level, vocational excellence refers to excellence in the delivery of VET and the provision of VET programmes and qualifications, including educational resources, equipment and infrastructure. For instance, the pilot survey conducted as part of the ‘Feasibility study for surveying principals, teachers, learners and in-company trainers in initial vocational education and training’⁽¹⁵⁾ developed for Cedefop refers to the following examples as aspects of vocational excellence: applying the latest innovations in pedagogy and assessment; supporting learners to acquire cross-curricular skills (e.g. creativity, critical thinking); supporting learners to acquire specific key competences (active citizenship, entrepreneurship, cultural awareness); using the latest digital learning technologies; supporting learners to study or work in other countries; working together in teams in the school; developing and maintaining relationships with companies and in-company trainers to support work-based learning; developing and maintaining relationships with the wider local environment (local government, universities, non-governmental organisations, etc.); supporting the CPD of teachers; and supporting the implementation of a strategy to improve the quality of vocational education and training provision. In relation to these aspects, vocational excellence can be emphasised by all VET providers (e.g. to support innovation, collaboration with enterprises, international activities) or specific institutions can be established for this purpose (e.g. focusing on a specific sector or region). It can be assumed that the increased collaboration of VET institutions with a wide range of stakeholders, as observed in an earlier Cedefop study, is linked to the goal of vocational excellence (Cedefop, 2022a, p. 40).

⁽¹⁴⁾ See also Pylväs (2018) and Commission for Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (2012).

⁽¹⁵⁾ Final report submitted to Cedefop in December 2022.

As mentioned above, the development of CoVEs has been strongly emphasised for some time (by the European Commission, the Erasmus+ programme and the ETF); therefore, the focus here is also on this initiative. However, it must be recognised that there is also some criticism of this policy initiative, as in some countries, it could lead to a concentration of investment in certain schools (to develop the scope and performance of a single VET institution) and/or regions. There is also a risk of stakeholders and funders being blinded by the glamour of a few ambitious and excelling VET providers and leaving regular ones behind. Further, it cannot be assumed that the existence of CoVEs will automatically lead to excellence in the VET system; this would be an oversimplification of the design and dynamics of an educational reform process ⁽¹⁶⁾ (ETF, 2020).

CoVEs can vary greatly with regard to their organisation, form and specific function in a regional or national context. As this nomenclature is quite new, other terms may be used instead of 'CoVE' at the national level. For example, 'the terms "lighthouse" (Slovakia) or "beacon" (United Kingdom) are used to indicate that a particular school has been recognised as "excellent" and that it is tasked with some kind of pathfinding or exemplification purpose' (ETF, 2020, p. 135). In the context of the ETF project 'The international dimension of Centres of Vocational Excellence: Building a strong international cooperation dimension on vocational excellence', the concept of CoVEs is understood as including a broad range of activities related to vocational excellence.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Some of these challenges and ways to overcome them are addressed in ETF (2020).

Box 4. **CoVEs as defined by the ENE**

‘Centres of excellence in vocational education and training are vocational institutions recognised for excellence in identifying and imparting relevant, high-quality, specialised technical skills. In contributing to regional skills strategies, they promote employment and regional development. They work closely with employers, including small and medium-sized enterprises, to foster innovation, applied research, entrepreneurship and reskilling.

‘Centres of Vocational Excellence are:

- (a) attractive to learners because they offer responsive, flexible, personalised learning pathways, up-to-date technology, and a fast track into employment and higher education.
- (b) inspirational for teachers, trainers and managers because they offer models of advanced practice in teaching, teacher training, organisational development and leadership.
- (c) compelling for policy makers because they show how, through greater autonomy and cooperation, educational and training providers can become a driving force for the continuing improvement of education and training systems.’

Source: ETF (n.d.).

Although the understanding of the concept of excellence can also vary among these CoVE initiatives, vocational excellence usually refers to the following principles, aspects or characteristics of CoVEs:

- (a) excellence in scope, including the range and extent of objectives, activities, functions and partners;
- (b) excellence in performance, including the quality of resources, processes and results for stakeholders;
- (c) capacity for excellence, including with regard to systems, relationships, culture, knowledge and vision (ETF, 2023).

The ETF project ‘[Internationalising vocational excellence](#)’ has developed an International Self-Assessment Tool for CoVEs (ISATCOVE) and a procedure for recognising achievements in vocational excellence⁽¹⁷⁾. As a basis for the ISATCOVE, an internationally agreed framework for vocational excellence has been outlined that groups 23 criteria for vocational excellence into three dimensions (teaching and learning, partnership and cooperation, and governance and financing; see Annex 2). In order to operationalise the framework for the self-assessment tool and guide VET providers in their self-assessment process, a set of indicators for each of the criteria was developed (ETF, 2023). This understanding of vocational excellence covers all levels and not solely or specifically VET at higher levels.

⁽¹⁷⁾ The recognition procedure was tested in a feasibility study (Auzinger et al., 2022) and subsequently further developed; it was piloted in 2024/2025 (European Commission, n.d.-c). It is closely linked to ISATCOVE, as conducting the self-assessment is a prerequisite for the application for recognition.

2.2.1.3. *Vocational excellence at the system level*

The concept of excellence has not been consistently applied at the system level in comparative VET research. CoVEs are an exception here, as their setup addresses regional skills systems and therefore also contains systemic ideas. Generally, with regard to systems, notions of quality, performance and development and their corresponding attributes, such as ‘high-quality’, ‘high-performance’, ‘highly developed’ or ‘highly advanced’ VET systems, have been used and often linked to economic success. Elsewhere, it has also been suggested that excellence ‘might be the new quality’ for systems (Le Mouillour et al., 2021, p. 124).

The Apprenticeship Toolbox ⁽¹⁸⁾, for example, defines excellence as follows:

‘Excellence in VET takes many forms. It is shaped by the comprehensiveness of quality assurance mechanisms, by horizontal and vertical permeability in VET systems, by national recognition in the labour market and labour market employability, mobility and career prospects and by the rich opportunities to participate in lifelong learning. Furthermore, considerable efforts are spent on innovations in the VET system and in VET research to improve the attractiveness of VET for all key stakeholders and in monitoring the attractiveness.’

(Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, n.d.)

Insights from Cedefop’s VET policies timeline tool (Cedefop, n.d.-a), which presents national policy developments since 2015, also show the application of a broad concept of excellence in policy. While the approaches identified do not provide a firm definition of excellence, there are comprehensive strategies linking VET excellence to ‘going beyond’ in such areas as internationalisation and innovation, technological advancements (virtual reality, artificial intelligence) and establishing partnerships and collaboration with VET stakeholders (e.g. CoVEs). There is further indication that countries also link the concept of excellence to those of quality and relevance, to the quality of VET infrastructure and to the existence of digital platforms for the provision of learning.

Some VET reforms in this context relate to the area of initial and continuing training for VET teachers and trainers, as excellence and high quality in VET require highly qualified VET practitioners who can keep up with rapid technological developments and new labour market demands, cater to more diverse learners and be ‘committed to the changes being made’ (Cedefop, 2010a, p. 56). Other reforms relate to strengthening links between VET and the labour market (e.g. by

⁽¹⁸⁾ The Apprenticeship Toolbox provides insights into key aspects of the apprenticeship systems in five countries running dual VET systems: Austria, Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg and Switzerland. Their respective ministries relevant to VET support this provision.

involving labour market stakeholders in VET strategy and curricula development). Further reforms address well-balanced VET curricula that include both key competences (in particular those related to entrepreneurship, active citizenship and foreign languages) and occupation-specific skills. The explicit inclusion of key competences in VET curricula is considered of particular importance, as the 'pace of change that can transform the specific tasks of a particular job underlines the importance of key competences as a basis for people to manage technological and organisational progress' (Cedefop, 2010a, p. 67). Another aspect in the context of striving for vocational excellence is the promotion of an integrated ecosystem with flexible pathways where VET 'can become a stepping stone for further studies with a clear articulation of the different options for technical secondary and post-secondary education, and smooth integration with formal, non-formal, and informal short-term training and universities as part of a lifelong training process' (World Bank et al., 2023, p. 23).

2.2.1.4. *Vocational excellence in future VET scenarios*

Two of the scenarios developed in the course of the project '[Changing nature and role of VET in Europe](#)' (2015–2018) refer to vocational excellence. In the 'Professional champions' scenario, VET is understood as advanced 'professional learning and education':

'VET is used as a means to develop leaders, innovators and entrepreneurs in specific sectors; for a chosen few it is a 'royal road'. These 'professional champions' come from world-leading companies referred to as the 'hidden champions'. They benefit from prestigious VET programmes that develop the most up-to-date professional knowledge and know-how. For most students, however, the most common route is to stay in general education and aim at a bachelor degree.'

(Cedefop, 2020, p. 217)

The function of VET is, from this perspective, to support the development of highly specialised vocational expertise – for example, as part of advanced apprenticeships that enable progression up to European qualifications framework (EQF) level 8. This type of VET provision represents only a niche within the overall education system.

The 'Renaissance of VET' scenario includes the following characteristics:

'VET is understood as modernised apprenticeship and a precondition for excellence in innovation and entrepreneurship[.]
[...]

Explicit pathways pointing towards excellence and advanced VET are in place; traditional pathways like the Meister are modernised and expanded[.]

Learning in companies and at a new type of VET centres for excellence, entrepreneurship and innovation[.]

[...]

EU support facilitated development of VET centres for excellence, a stronger focus on the role of VET in innovation and VET mobility[.]’

(Cedefop, 2020, pp. 223, 225)

2.2.1.5. *Preliminary conclusions*

This brief review of the literature shows that vocational excellence can take many forms. Frequently, a development perspective (‘journey to excellence’) is taken: vocational excellence does not need to be seen ‘as the end of the road but rather a developmental process towards quality and improvement’ (ETF, 2020, p. 15). This perspective also considers the continuous development of individuals and their excellence and the interaction between individuals and their surroundings. Table 2 summarises the most important attributes associated with vocational excellence.

Table 2. **Main attributes of vocational excellence**

Level	Main attributes
Individual level / target group	In a narrower sense, VET is offered to individuals with exceptional levels of technical and social competences (including entrepreneurial skills) who strive to attain mastery. In a broader sense, all learners should benefit from vocational excellence.
Institutional level	VET providers offer flexible and personalised learning, innovative pedagogies, the use of up-to-date technology and equipment and the acquisition of cross-curricular skills (e.g. creativity, critical thinking) as well as high-quality, specialised technical skills. They collaborate with other education providers and enterprises (contributing to regional skills strategies), are engaged in international activities and ensure the CPD of teachers and trainers.

Level	Main attributes
System level	VET systems that are considered 'highly developed' or 'highly advanced' in terms of quality and relevance show 'high performance' in, for example, internationalisation and innovation, technological advancements, and partnerships and collaboration with VET stakeholders. VET curricula include both key competences (in particular those related to entrepreneurship, active citizenship and foreign languages) and occupation-specific skills, and VET programmes are flexible and foster progression to higher levels.

Source: Authors.

2.2.2. Inclusion in VET

According to Maurer et al. (2022), three aspects need to be considered in the discussion of social inclusion in education and particularly in VET.

- (a) **Target group.** The authors refer to three approaches in this context. The first is a more traditional understanding, which focuses on people with physical and/or intellectual disabilities. The second is a broader understanding, which includes vulnerable groups such as sexual and ethnic minorities. The third approach 'does not focus on any specific social group, in the sense of all means all' (Maurer et al., 2022, p. 4).
- (b) **Aims.** It is important to determine whether access to VET holds inherent value due to the knowledge and skills it provides or if it primarily serves as a stepping stone towards entering the labour market or pursuing further education.
- (c) **Removing barriers.** This is considered important for providing access to educational opportunities ⁽¹⁹⁾ (Maurer et al., 2022).

The history of research in VET regarding inclusion is, however, rather short (Kimmelman et al., 2022, p. 124) and there is no common definition or conceptual understanding of inclusion in education or VET ⁽²⁰⁾. Moreover, the interpretations in different educational subdisciplines (e.g. sociology, psychology, special needs education) vary, as do their concepts of target groups, including whether there should be a focus on all learners or specific vulnerable groups only. Particularly in the German-speaking area, it has been observed that scientific discussions on inclusion in educational settings tend to be controversial because of tensions, for example, between the understanding of inclusion as a human right and national educational policies or between normative principles of inclusion (related to

⁽¹⁹⁾ Maurer et al. (2022) point out that in educational literature focused on social inclusion, barriers are generally viewed in a negative light. However, sociological and comparative education research often suggests that some level of barriers within education and training systems is necessary for their functioning (e.g. certain admission requirements may be necessary to ensure quality standards).

⁽²⁰⁾ However, there is a considerable amount of literature about inclusion in the education field.

appreciation and belonging) and the achievement principle (Kimmelman et al., 2022, p. 125).

The following sections provide some insights from literature related to the concept of inclusion at the individual, institutional and system levels and in future VET scenarios.

2.2.2.1. *Inclusion at the individual level*

In contrast to vocational excellence, inclusion cannot be seen as a characteristic of a person; rather, it describes a goal, often one related to a specific target group (InclusiVET, 2023) ⁽²¹⁾. As mentioned above, in discussions on inclusion in VET that adopt a rather narrow understanding of the term, specific disadvantaged or vulnerable target groups are frequently mentioned. Such vulnerable groups include, for example, people with disabilities, low-qualified or low-skilled people, minorities, people with migrant backgrounds (including refugees) and people with fewer learning opportunities in general. Learners with fewer opportunities are people who, for economic, social, cultural, geographical, health or any other reasons, including educational difficulties, age, sexual orientation, gender identity and certain life experiences (e.g. having dealt with discrimination or violence), face obstacles that prevent them from having effective access to education opportunities. These learners may face exclusionary pressures or barriers to access, attendance, participation and learning (Crenshaw, 1989; Varsik & Goročovskij, 2023) ⁽²²⁾. This narrow understanding of inclusion is sometimes criticised because it views learners' differences from a deficit perspective (e.g. Cruz et al., 2023). However, if inclusion is understood in the broader sense of respecting diversity and aiming for equity, every individual learner is at the centre, regardless of their background, previous education or strengths and limitations.

2.2.2.2. *Inclusion at the institutional level*

Inclusion can be a characteristic of the approach of a VET institution, informing, for example, the pathways, programmes and support structures offered, the pedagogical competences of the VET practitioners and the approaches used for the delivery of VET. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive

⁽²¹⁾ These groups are sometimes called 'under-represented groups of learners. However, it needs to be noted that 'the definition of an underrepresented learner is context-dependent and can carry varying connotations depending on the country, educational institution, and/or field of study. Moreover, the boundaries between "mainstream" and "underrepresented" learners are blurred, allowing for the possibility that a learner can display mainstream attributes in certain aspects while possessing underrepresented characteristics in others simultaneously' (InclusiVET, 2023, p. 11).

⁽²²⁾ It is often also emphasised that aspects that can lead to exclusion (e.g. ethnicity, gender, disability, socioeconomic background, age) should not be considered in isolation, as all these factors interact in a complex manner and have countless intersections. The concept of 'intersectionality' was coined by Crenshaw (1989) in the feminist discourse and has found its way into many other contexts, including education (see e.g. Varsik & Goročovskij, 2023).

Education developed a comprehensive knowledge base on inclusive education and identified areas associated with inclusive VET, which include organisational aspects and the application of learner-centred, flexible approaches that put learners' abilities centre stage (Kyriazopoulou & Weber, 2013, pp. 7–8). In a broad understanding of the concept, inclusion in VET (and in education in general) can be seen as referring to diversity-sensitive pedagogy in which diversity is not limited to single dimensions (e.g. a migrant background) but rather takes into account the intersectionality of various factors (Crenshaw, 1989). Inclusion manifests 'as an interdisciplinary approach and specific view of educational processes and their qualitative development in the context of diversity' (Kimmelman et al., 2022, p. 126).

The pilot survey conducted as part of the 'Feasibility study for surveying principals, teachers, learners and in-company trainers in initial vocational education and training' ⁽²³⁾ developed for Cedefop also adopts a broad understanding of inclusion, considering all learners with their individual needs and focusing on equity ⁽²⁴⁾: 'Inclusion in vocational education and training means that every learner matters equally. This entails that teaching and learning responds to individual needs in how it is organised, delivered, and assessed to ensure high retention rates and high quality for all' ⁽²⁵⁾. The pilot survey refers, for example, to the following aspects of inclusion: providing support to learners with special educational needs or disabilities; applying learner-centred approaches in teaching; teaching groups of learners of mixed abilities; teaching groups of learners from multilingual and multicultural backgrounds; identifying and supporting learners at risk of dropping out; using inclusive learning materials (e.g. that avoid stereotypes and are accessible for all); offering inclusive learning environments; and developing relationships with wider support services (e.g. careers and guidance centres, social services, community support groups).

Learning outcomes can, in principle, also be used to support the inclusiveness of VET ⁽²⁶⁾. The flexible nature of learning outcomes enables not only meeting the needs of students with special educational requirements but also opening up VET to non-traditional learner groups (e.g. older learners), breaking gender patterns in VET enrolment and, in general, responding to the diverse needs of learners (NCAA, 2019). This can be facilitated by the modularisation (Cedefop, 2010b;

⁽²³⁾ Final report submitted to Cedefop in December 2022.

⁽²⁴⁾ This is in contrast to the approach of equal treatment and the assumption that everyone can benefit from the same support or learning opportunities (see Boston University Diversity & Inclusion, n.d.).

⁽²⁵⁾ 'Feasibility study for surveying principals, teachers, learners and in-company trainers in initial vocational education and training', final report submitted to Cedefop in December 2022. Ockham IPS was a partner in this project.

⁽²⁶⁾ While not the focus, this is implicitly addressed in the ongoing Cedefop study '[The shift to learning outcomes: rhetoric or reality?](#)', as the study explores the influence of curricula based on learning outcomes on teaching, learning and assessment practices (see also Cedefop, 2012; 2016; 2021).

2015) of programmes (enabling the validation of non-formal and informal learning and the recognition of prior learning in general), less standardised learning, learner-centred modalities, individualised learning plans, differentiated teaching approaches, personalised learning activities and flexible pacing. These aspects link to learner well-being, as the use of learning outcomes can increase transparency about what is expected of learners and reduce stress among learners (Mahajan & Singh, 2017). The link between learning outcomes and pedagogies supporting inclusion is, however, not always clear. While Bjørnåvold (2019) notes that ‘it is not clear whether aspirations regarding learner-centred education and training, or, indeed, active and open learning, can be linked to the learning outcomes shift’, the results of the survey conducted as part of the Cedefop study [‘The shift to learning outcomes: rhetoric or reality?’](#) do indeed point to this connection. Most of the VET teachers and trainers surveyed “strongly agree” or “tend to agree” that using learning outcomes makes their teaching more learner-centred (86 %), [and] helps them respond to learner diversity and include all learners in the learning process (81.3 %)’ (Cedefop, 2024, p. 90).

2.2.2.3. *Inclusion at the system level*

In many countries, inclusion is emphasised as the overall goal of education systems; however, it is conceptualised in various ways (Dunajeva, 2022). In a broad understanding, inclusion is seen not as an add-on or a ‘nice-to-have’ option for VET systems but as a core element of high-quality VET, being good for all VET learners ⁽²⁷⁾. Addressing inclusion at the VET system level entails considering various components, such as governance, the provision of VET access opportunities, the identification of skills needs, the design of qualifications and curricula, the delivery of VET (including work-based learning), assessment and certification, the education and CPD of teachers and trainers, the provision of guidance and support, and monitoring and evaluation (e.g. ILO, 2020, p. 42).

Cedefop has developed 41 structural indicators for inclusive VET. These indicators refer to relatively enduring but modifiable features, such as structures, mechanisms, roles and responsibilities, that define an inclusive VET system (Cedefop, 2019b). Cedefop’s VET policies timeline tool (Cedefop, n.d.-a) also uses a broad understanding of inclusion that relates to governing VET and lifelong learning (e.g. using skills intelligence to make decisions about VET and lifelong learning for quality, inclusiveness and flexibility), modernising VET infrastructure (e.g. modernising VET standards, curricula, programmes and training courses to

⁽²⁷⁾ As concluded in a report by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education: ‘The key outcome highlighted in the course of the project analysis is that what is good and efficient practice for learners with SEN [special educational needs] / disabilities in VET and in the transition to employment is good practice for all learners’ (Kyriazopoulou & Weber, 2013, p. 7).

ensure a balanced mix of vocational and technical skills aligned with economic cycles), supporting a lifelong learning culture and increasing participation. A separate subcategory of inclusion explicitly refers to ensuring equal opportunities and inclusiveness in education and training by making VET pathways and programmes inclusive and accessible for all. This also includes promoting permeable VET systems, avoiding dead ends and offering the opportunity to VET learners to continue their learning career at higher levels, including in higher education.

Evidence from Cedefop's policy monitoring shows that the priority of ensuring equal opportunities in VET is the most popular one among countries investigated and is systematically included in VET policies. It can be observed that '23 EU-27+ countries opted to work towards inclusion and equal opportunities – for example, by preventing early leaving from education and training and promoting gender equality. Target groups include people with disabilities, people in remote geographical areas, low-skilled, minorities, migrants and refugees' (Cedefop, 2023c, p. 4) ⁽²⁸⁾.

2.2.2.4. *Inclusion in future VET scenarios*

In the '[Changing nature and role of VET in Europe](#)' project, one of the scenarios developed implicitly reduces VET to its social inclusion function. The 'Firefighter VET' scenario suggests:

'VET is strongly connected with active labour market policies, providing mainly qualifications at low levels (EQF 2–4)[.]
Measures are mainly addressing adults (at risk), early school leavers and individuals with immediate, short-term skills needs[.]
No particular pathways; emphasis on remedial measures for people at risk or in need of immediate skills updates[.]
[...]
Risks of labour market and societal polarisation with stigmatisation of VET learners[.]'

(Cedefop, 2020, pp. 223, 225)

In addition, the 'Cottage gardens' scenario also refers to the social inclusion function of VET: 'In some sectors and regions VET has evolved into a clear, highly valued (set of) route(s) (VET as a trademark). In other spheres it predominantly fulfils a social inclusion function, as a well-designed "second chance" route for early school leavers' (Cedefop, 2020, p. 212).

⁽²⁸⁾ These 23 countries are: Austria, Belgium (both Flemish-speaking and French-speaking regions), Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia and Spain.

2.2.2.5. *Preliminary conclusions*

In a narrower understanding, inclusion in VET can be seen as referring to providing learning opportunities for people who are vulnerable or at risk of social exclusion. This could involve removing barriers to ensure access to VET and providing upskilling and reskilling opportunities to support learners in developing their potential and participating in education, society and the labour market. In a broader definition, inclusion can be seen as referring to achieving equity and dealing with diversity and the needs of diverse learners in general. Ensuring inclusion in VET requires appropriate VET institutions and programmes that include occupational and transversal competences to promote the employability of different groups of learners, empower them and enable them to have sustainable careers. Inclusive VET also encompasses teaching formats and learning environments that are suitable for removing barriers that restrict access to learning. Inclusion in VET can generally be related to learners' well-being, sense of belonging and engagement with learning for educational success. Table 3 summarises the most important attributes associated with inclusion in VET.

Table 3. **Main attributes of inclusion in VET**

Level	Main attributes
Individual level / target group	In a narrower sense, inclusion refers to VET offered to people with physical and/or learning disabilities or other vulnerable or disadvantaged groups. In a broader sense, all learners are targeted, as inclusion is understood as aiming for equity and respecting diversity and the intersectionality of different diversity factors.
Institutional level	VET providers offer teaching and learning that respond to individual needs, applying learner-centred, flexible approaches (including individualised learning plans and activities). Support and guidance are provided to learners in accordance with their needs.
System level	In a broader sense, inclusion in VET is related to policies, practical measures and funding streams that focus on developing and sustaining a VET system that reduces socioeconomic inequalities and promotes pathways for every learner regardless of their background and economic prosperity for all. It is a fundamental aspect of high-quality VET that deals with governance dimensions, including creating access and progression opportunities and removing barriers; developing VET curricula that ensure employability (including occupational and transversal competences); ensuring the adequate competences of teachers and trainers; and facilitating tailor-made pathways and targeted support, guidance, resources and infrastructures.

Source: Authors.

2.3. Vocational excellence and inclusion – a holistic approach

2.3.1. Contradictory or complementary objectives?

The history of excellence and inclusion in VET could presumably be told in the form of a debate about its production function (i.e. the labour and skills available for the production of goods and services) and its socialisation or development function (i.e. personal development and the integration of the younger generation into society). Although – as shown above – the terms used have changed over the past few decades, debates on excellence can be relatively clearly associated with the production function of VET and a meritocratic view of education. Related concepts such as innovation, talent, performance, quality, efficiency and effectiveness are usually used in the context of this understanding of excellence. Inclusion, on the other hand, is often associated with terms such as participation, integration, equal rights, self-determination and the protection of minorities. Against this background, it is hardly surprising that excellence and inclusion could be perceived as contradictory at first (ETF, 2020) ⁽²⁹⁾. This report pays particular attention to the contexts of use where these potential contradictions are resolved, and vocational excellence and inclusion are conceptualised as mutually reinforcing.

The literature analysis shows that vocational excellence and inclusion are multifaceted concepts; they are defined in diverse ways, often focus on individual features only and are influenced by different theoretical perspectives, assumptions and positions. Whether they are perceived as contradictory or complementary goals strongly depends on how they are understood and conceptualised, what aspects are associated with them in what context and what measures are used to pursue them. In particular, the nature of the different target groups at the foreground – such as gifted or high-achieving people in the case of excellence and vulnerable groups of learners at risk of exclusion from the labour market and society in the case of inclusion – can reinforce the perceived contradiction. On the one hand, there is a risk that the importance of achieving top performance in VET may sometimes be eclipsed by the focus on support for the less talented or less able (Cedefop, 2010a, p. 67). On the other hand, at the individual level, the concept of excellence is often closely associated with being better than others (the ‘elitist approach’); this raises the question of whether excellence contradicts the goal of equity in education and, therefore, inclusion.

⁽²⁹⁾ This is, for example, emphasised by the ETF (2020, p. 2): ‘Excellence in learning is the goal of all education and training systems both within and outside the European Union (EU). In the area of vocational training, excellence is traditionally contrasted with inclusiveness.’

However, both the exploratory examination of VET policy and the literature review show that the two concepts can also be seen as two sides of the same coin. This is also emphasised by Mironov et al. (2024, p. 124): ‘Even [though] apparently these terms seem contrasting, they are not to be treated as mutually exclusive perspectives, as the occurrence of one of them does not supersede the other.’ In contrast, their combination is expected to help create an environment in which all learners can flourish and succeed in their chosen professions. One type of linkage identified in the literature is a supportive and interlinked relationship between the two, as ‘excellence without equity risks leading to large economic and social disparities; equity at the expense of quality is a meaningless aspiration’ (Schleicher, 2014, as cited in GIVE Partnership, 2023, p. 9). Both are considered essential components of an effective education system, as attempting ‘to emphasise excellence while neglecting to focus on ensuring equity within education systems does not facilitate overall excellence’ (Hornby, 2020, pp. 1–2). Other research even suggests that inclusion is an inherent component of VET excellence (ETF, 2020). Some researchers echo this approach by referring to inclusive VET as a marker of excellence (Williams & Ang, 2021, p. 4) or emphasising that ‘inclusion and excellence are mutually reinforcing’ (Hazelkorn & Klemencic, 2022). The principle of ‘inclusive excellence’ reaffirms that excellence is a part of all the core missions of education and training systems – learning and teaching, research and innovation, knowledge use and diffusion, engagement and service to society and institutional governance and management. It may also refer to the consideration of diversity and individual differences in VET in general. The abovementioned GIVE project, with its focus on inclusive excellence, takes up this aspect and emphasises that pedagogy must move from a deficit model to an appreciation of the individual potential of each student. Such pedagogy must focus on the students, their needs and their characteristics to ensure that each individual in society receives personalised attention and support in a learning and working environment ⁽³⁰⁾. From this perspective, inclusion can, for example, be understood ‘as the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity, in the curriculum and in communities (intellectual, social, cultural, geographical) with which individuals might connect in ways that increase awareness, content knowledge, cognitive sophistication, and empathic understanding of the complex ways individuals interact within systems and institutions’ (Gendron, 2022, p. 56).

Majumdar (2023, p. 16) describes inclusive excellence as:

⁽³⁰⁾ Vocational excellence is sometimes criticised as elitist and something that can only be achieved by those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. However, a broader understanding of vocational excellence sees it as clearly meant for all learners.

‘a framework designed to integrate Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Excellence effort. Diversity is used to describe and accommodate the various mix of:

- (a) Human Differences: personality, learning style, life experiences etc.
- (b) Social Differences: race, ethnicity, gender, country of origin, social status etc.
- (c) Equity: The creation of opportunities for all irrespective of background
- (d) Inclusion: The policy of providing equal access to opportunities & resources[.]’

Taking this further, Majumdar even claims that excellence cannot be achieved without inclusion:

‘Excellence needs to be inclusive because it allows full realization of human potential and promotion of fair and just society. Few key reasons are as follows:

- (a) Diversity of Perspectives – recognises different backgrounds
- (b) Equal Opportunities: to excel regardless of differences
- (c) Social Cohesion: foster a sense of belonging & social bonds
- (d) Maximizing Talents: tap into wider pool of talents
- (e) Ethical Imperatives: align with principle of fairness & equality[.]’

(Majumdar, 2023, p. 18)

The (potentially) mutually reinforcing nature of the concepts of vocational excellence and inclusion is also emphasised by the ‘[Bridging innovation and learning in TVET](#)’ project ⁽³¹⁾. At the project event ‘Towards inclusive excellence in TVET’, organised in April 2024, the Italian Minister for Education and Merit, Giuseppe Valditara, emphasised in his opening speech: ‘Merit in education means promoting the unique talents of every young person, not just striving for unattainable excellence, but empowering each individual to give their best and be committed’ ⁽³²⁾.

⁽³¹⁾ The ‘Building innovation and learning in TVET’ project is a platform for policy learning and networking between TVET stakeholders in Africa, the Asia–Pacific region and Europe. It is a joint initiative of the International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the German Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) and the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF). It supports the achievement of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly goals 4 (quality education) and 17 (partnerships for the goals).

⁽³²⁾ The event focused on empowering learners at risk of exclusion through TVET and aimed to explore various approaches to inclusive excellence in TVET systems across Europe, Africa and the Asia–Pacific region. It strove to provide a platform for international policy learning, knowledge exchange, innovation transfer and networking among TVET policymakers, practitioners and researchers. For more information, see [the event web page](#).

Both concepts or objectives have the potential to contribute ‘to develop[ing] equitable educational and training approaches, where diversity and inclusion are not just accepted but actively leveraged for achieving excellence and collective improvement’ (Mironov et al., 2024, p. 124). Ultimately, balancing excellence and inclusion in VET policies seems to be crucial for ensuring that all individuals have access to high-quality education and training opportunities, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities. Achieving such a balance requires policies and programmes that simultaneously promote high-quality training outcomes and address issues of equity and accessibility.

In summary, it can be argued that the broader the perspective taken, the more complementary the concepts of vocational excellence and inclusion tend to be. In a more overarching or holistic approach, they are seen as essential components of an effective education system that reinforce each other – helping to create an environment in which all learners can flourish (emphasising aspects and principles such as high quality, diversity, equity and empowerment). ‘Inclusive excellence’ refers to a coherent VET system that provides attractive and challenging educational pathways for all learners, regardless of their backgrounds. It encompasses all levels, components and aspects of VET as part of skills ecosystems and takes into account economic, social and pedagogical goals and values.

2.3.2. Excellence and inclusion in future VET scenarios

As part of the survey for the [‘Changing nature and role of VET in Europe’](#) project, respondents were asked about the characteristics of VET desired for the year 2035. There was a common agreement that VET should have a broader focus, ensuring ‘that it also contributes to social improvement, responding to societal needs and not only to economic ones. And yet the characteristic “to promote social inclusion”, which is closely related to full participation in society and active citizenship, is at the bottom of the wish list’ (Cedefop, 2020, p. 179).

However, in the synthesis report of the [‘Future of VET’](#) project (Cedefop, 2023b), the linkage between vocational excellence and inclusion was emphasised. As part of the project, the scenario approach was applied in a workshop in Slovenia. The workshop highlighted the idea of inclusive excellence, understood as the merging of excellence and professionalism with inclusivity in systems and schools, in this way creating a diverse VET system that welcomes students of all ages, enrolled in formal or non-formal IVET or CVET. The focus would be on work-based learning and on developing the talents and abilities of students, including those with special educational needs (SEN). Schools, chambers of commerce and labour, companies and trade unions would use their human and financial resources

to actively co-create VET programmes and establish conditions conducive to high-quality implementation (ReferNet Slovenia & Cedefop, 2023). The key features of this scenario are presented in Box 5 (Cedefop, 2022c).

Box 5. **Inclusive excellence scenario**

'Understanding of VET. VET is understood as a highly diversified form of education and training with a strong element of work-based learning provided at all levels, and serving learners at all ages and with different backgrounds realizing the idea of lifelong learning. ...

'Role of VET in the education system. The principle of inclusive education has become an integrative element of a broader concept of quality assurance and therefore VET plays an important socio-integrative role. VET has become also further professionalized in terms of quality of qualifications and teachers, their education and cooperation with the environment and business. The lack of workers allowed trade unions to fight for higher pay leading to better services/conditions resulting in mores professionalism and a higher reputation of VET. The transfer of knowledge between the spheres of education and work is an important dimension of education. In practice, it is expressed by the exchange of staff between industry/businesses and schools (VET programme providers). It is for the learners to choose whether to study in school or in the company. Open qualifications are managed by the social partners. The link between different chambers and entrepreneurs is highlighted, which contributes to the contribution of VET and time-appropriate green and fair products. It all contributes to the acquisition of a quality brand.

'Target groups. VET addresses diverse target groups across all levels and serves learners at all age groups, including the disadvantaged groups. VET accounts for the highest share of learners compared to general education.

'Learning provision. Most VET takes place in large school centres, which are specialised in content and provide educational programmes at ISCED 3–5 levels, as well as various forms and types of non-formal education. They combine technical/professional gymnasiums where schooling culminates in a general baccalaureate and it is possible to enter higher education and vocational/professional schools where students can pass a final exam or a vocational bachelor's degree

'Learning approaches. Key focus and the starting point is the individual career development of young people based on their talents. Talent & Career centres are intended for wider population and represent a public interest. Support and funds are coming from different sources (public & private). Furthermore, they bring together various counsellors covering all aspects of education (general, VET, adults). Cooperation between different stakeholders, in particular the labour market (entrepreneurs) and chambers is effective.'

Source: Cedefop (2022c).

2.4. Linking the concepts of vocational excellence and inclusion to the ‘orders of justification’

The analysis of policy documents from the past 25 years and of the policy-related research literature shows that neither policy objective, vocational excellence or inclusion, seems to be linked to specific education and training or qualification levels (e.g. excellence is not a characteristic that exclusively refers to higher levels). Instead, the objectives are associated with central societal aims, values and conceptions of quality in VET – in short, with what VET should be about. Cedefop’s framework for comparing types of VET discusses the general aims of a VET system on the one hand and societal aims on the other hand, asking with regard to the former:

‘To what extent does a VET system pursue effective skills-matching and serve labour market demands, or adequate education offers for learners in terms of their interests or support to individual careers?

[...]

These aims may be rooted in deeper and more general values and may become a matter of debate when the quality of VET systems should be assessed. Is there an emphasis on efficiency, effectiveness and responsiveness, is it the resilience, legality, and sustainability which are emphasised, or is the focus on permeability, inclusiveness and equity?’

(Cedefop, 2023b, pp. 15–16)

The societal aims of VET, which basically describe the different roles VET may play, are distinguished into three broad categories: economic, social and educational aims (Cedefop, 2023b, pp. 21–22). If these terms are understood narrowly and viewed as divergent objectives, excellence can be attributed more to the economic sphere and inclusion to the social sphere. With regard to the educational aims, the division is less clear, as personal development, self-fulfilment and passion for one’s vocation can be matters of both excellence and inclusion, depending on the perspective taken. However, as discussed above, the complementary nature of these concepts and aims emerges when they are understood more broadly. Moreover, there will usually be a mix of these aims and values in every VET system, and the balance between them will vary over longer time periods, as has been shown by Bonoli and Gonon (2022) in their analysis of VET in Switzerland over the past 100 years. However, favouring one or the other perspective or value can have an impact on the policies formulated to achieve the goals of vocational excellence or inclusion and consequently lead to tensions in policy design.

In order to avoid the danger of dichotomisation (inclusion and the social sphere on the one hand, excellence and the economic sphere on the other) and to move from the level of rhetoric to the level of analysis, it is necessary to take a closer look at how vocational excellence and inclusion are ultimately manifested. For example, it should be noted that the term ‘vocational excellence’ could be ‘instrumentalised in policy-making and serve as a euphemism for other reforms: rationalisation, restructuring of governance, cost reduction, heightened accountability or greater competition’ (ETF, 2020, p. 8). It is therefore not just a question of who claims to support excellence or inclusion in which document but also of how these concepts are justified and utilised. The theory of conventions, specifically justification (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2007) has proven to be helpful for similar questions in vocational research (e.g. Berner & Gonon, 2016; Imdorf & Leemann, 2023; Leemann & Imdorf, 2015; Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2022; Smeplass et al., 2024; Zehnder & Gonon, 2017).

This approach is particularly suitable for describing the coexistence of competing and conflicting logics of action (conventions) in organisational or discourse analyses. Essentially, Boltanski and Thévenot argue that modern societies are governed not by a single social order but by multiple, coexisting ‘orders of justification’ or ‘orders or economies of worth’ (sometimes also called ‘spheres’ or ‘worlds of justification’). They identify seven (originally six) distinct ‘orders of worth’, each representing a specific ideal-type-based legitimate principle or logic that people use to justify their actions and decisions in social and economic life. They also ‘provide a framework for actors to justify their actions, critique alternative perspectives, and engage in meaningful social interactions’ (Smeplass et al., 2024, p. 7). An overview of these principles of justification adapted for VET (with respect to coordination principles and policies in VET) is presented in Table 4 ⁽³³⁾.

Table 4. **Orders of justification and their assignment to the coordination principles and policies in VET**

Order of justification	Coordination principle of VET	Vocational education and legitimate knowledge imparted
Market based	Competition, demand, profitability, price	Cost-effective education in in-demand skills with a view towards better employment prospects for learners and greater future financial rewards

⁽³³⁾ For further discussion on the application of the orders of justification in education, see, for example, Leemann and Imdorf (2019, pp. 3–45).

Order of justification	Coordination principle of VET	Vocational education and legitimate knowledge imparted
Industrial	Efficiency, productivity, expertise, innovation, technological advancement, specialisation	Transfer of applied knowledge (know-how, <i>savoir faire</i>); integration of innovative technologies and industry-relevant skills to improve the graduates' readiness for the world of work and contribute to the growth and competitiveness of the industrial sector and the economy as a whole
Domestic	Community, interpersonal relationships, well-being of individuals	Education based on respect, trust and loyalty (<i>savoir être</i>); promotion of a positive and supportive learning environment that contributes to learners' emotional well-being, motivation and overall success
Civic	Equality, justice, societal well-being, citizenship	Education open to everybody; promotion of social inclusion and of opportunities for all individuals to develop their skills and potential; transfer of general knowledge (<i>savoir</i>)
Inspired	Vocation	Promotion of education that fosters passion, creativity and artistic expression
Fame based (or opinion order)	Public opinion/image	Visible education of good reputation
Project based	Network extension	Flexibility; open education that fosters mobility; promotion of adaptability and problem-solving abilities

Source: Authors, based on Berner and Gonon (2016) and Smeplass et al. (2024).

These orders of justification can be used to understand the different rationales and values that underpin educational practices, policies and stakeholder expectations. Each order claims universal validity for itself but can also be criticised and further developed internally. When the orders of justification clash, they do not merge but retain their own order of values. This leads to disputes about which order can claim validity in a given situation. From the perspective of one order, the value of people, artefacts or arrangements in the other order may be criticised, and one order can, under certain circumstances, assert itself as a radical criticism of the other. However, compromises are often also made between different value systems to avoid or settle disputes and reach agreements. In this way, two or more

orders can coexist for a certain period of time with more or less equal weight and without problems. Recognising and acknowledging these different perspectives can help to balance the diverse values associated with and expectations placed on VET and to develop an approach that meets a wide range of social, economic and cultural needs.

Based on Table 4, initial conclusions can be drawn as to which order the justifications of vocational excellence and inclusion may follow. Excellence is quite likely to be justified by market-oriented and industrial logics, while inclusion is clearly a matter of the civic and domestic orders. Two further orders ('inspired' and 'fame based') can be reasonably expected to be used to promote both inclusion and excellence objectives. However, there is no one-to-one correspondence between vocational excellence or inclusion and the orders of justification; none of the orders of justification is reserved exclusively for one or other of these two policy objectives. As noted by Gonon and Stolz (2012, p. 10), 'inclusion and exclusion are results of the interplay of supply and demand and of the availability and accessibility of resources'. Thus, in the event of a labour shortage, for example, the inclusion of all available workers (including those who would otherwise tend to be excluded, such as migrants, people entitled to asylum, people with learning disabilities) can also follow market-based orders of justification. The 'inspired order' (e.g. passion for and creativity in an occupation) can probably support both excellence and inclusion. This can be seen, for example, when creativity and passion are honoured in a skills competition, but also when people with disabilities are offered various craft workshops in accordance with their wishes and talents. In this study, the orders of justification are used as additional lenses through which the data gathered can be viewed and analysed. However, it is not possible to carry out detailed analyses related to the theory of convention, as the related information on justifications is not always contained in the policy documents analysed.

Chapter 3.

Analytical framework and research approach

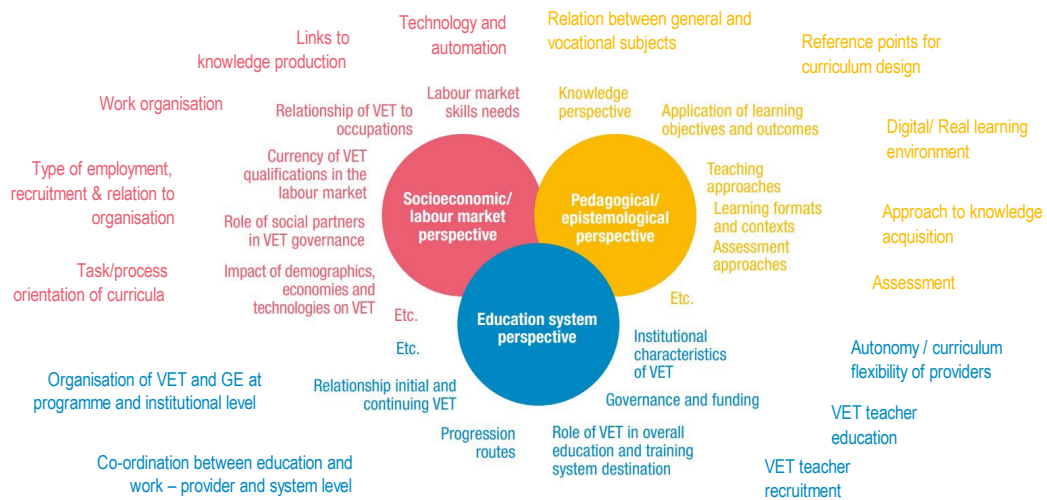
3.1. The three-perspective model as a basis for the analytical framework

The analysis of the literature shows that there are no clear and generally accepted definitions of vocational excellence and inclusion. The research approach used here is therefore based on selected aspects or attributes that are frequently associated with these concepts and that can be used as 'signals' for vocational excellence and/or inclusion when analysing national VET policy documents. The use of signals also seems necessary because policies are rarely designed with the sole aim of promoting excellence and/or inclusion.

To structure these signals, the three-perspective model, developed and further refined in the previous Cedefop projects 'Changing nature and role of VET in Europe' and 'Future of VET', was chosen. The three-perspective model, initially designed to analyse conceptions of VET among different countries and changes in them over time, describes three, partly overlapping, main perspectives: a socioeconomic or labour market perspective, an epistemological and pedagogical perspective and an education system perspective (Cedefop, 2023b). Overall, the model includes 50 dimensions for analysing VET systems and their component parts, structured around the three overlapping main perspectives. For the purposes of this study, it was necessary to adapt the model and focus on selected dimensions to describe signals of vocational excellence and inclusion and link them to potential orders of justification. The components of the analytical framework are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. **Analytical framework based on the three-perspective model**

The three-perspective analytical model - overlapping lenses



Source: Authors, based on Cedefop (2023b).

The use of this analytical framework for the development of the research tool for analysing VET policy documents and identifying to what extent and how vocational excellence and/or inclusion are addressed as policy objectives is discussed before the research tool and approach are presented. The current part of the study focuses on the development of a conceptual basis to serve as the foundation for more in-depth research in the subsequent parts of the study.

3.2. Using the three-perspective model to define signals for tracking excellence and inclusion

The model is not directly applicable to analysing or comparing national VET policy documents and approaches in terms of excellence and inclusion. However, as shown in the previous related Cedefop projects, the three-perspective model can be applied as an analytical framework for different purposes by ‘zooming in’ and ‘zooming out’ on certain dimensions, such as vocational excellence and inclusion, and viewing them through the lens of all three perspectives in the model. Based on the discussions of excellence and inclusion in EU policy documents and in the

literature (Chapter 2), and the research questions underlying this project, an analytical research tool was developed using a step-by-step approach ⁽³⁴⁾.

As the first step, the attributes linked to the concepts of vocational excellence and inclusion, as identified in Chapter 2, were mapped in the structure of the dimensions and categories of the three-perspective model (Cedefop, 2023a) ⁽³⁵⁾. This was an important exercise to help distinguish between different approaches to the concepts and sharpen our focus on what goals and priorities can be identified in national VET policy documents, with a view towards answering the research questions underpinning this study. To this end, the dimensions from the model that were deemed most relevant to identifying the characteristics associated with excellence and inclusion were selected. The original structure of assigning the dimensions to the three perspectives was abandoned to a certain extent by combining (and in some cases also renaming) some of them. Moreover, to some extent, the aspects and options these dimensions cover had to be changed to do better justice to the topics of excellence and inclusion ⁽³⁶⁾. In particular, the key aspects referred to in relation to vocational excellence and inclusion (i.e. the target group and the central aim) and the aspects addressed in research question 2 were considered.

Table 5. **Overview of selected dimensions used, their focuses and their links to the three-perspective model**

Dimensions used	Focus	Link to the three-perspective model
Central aim	The focus here is on the central aim emphasised by the policy, at the individual, institutional, VET system and societal levels.	Role of VET in the overall education and training system: 1. Education system aims, 2. Quality criteria and values, 3. Parity of esteem / VET status VET in society: 21. Societal aims Pedagogical aims and objectives: 33. Pedagogical/personal aims

⁽³⁴⁾ Thus, our starting point can be considered 'informed assumptions', due to a lack of commonly agreed definitions of these concepts. It is acknowledged that this is a somewhat normative approach that needs to be balanced with a more explorative approach, particularly in the following two strands of this study.

⁽³⁵⁾ This exercise had already given an indication of which dimensions were most important for which of the three strands of the study.

⁽³⁶⁾ In addition, it needs to be acknowledged that the three-perspective model and the dimensions and categories included were developed for analysing and comparing VET systems. The aim of the current research is to analyse VET policy documents (which may relate to broader reform objectives or focus on specific aspects of a VET system or subsystem). As VET policy documents tend to be positive and forward-looking, it is unlikely that a VET policy will, for example, aim to strengthen the status of VET if it is currently characterised by a lower status than general/academic education. However, this current status may be addressed in the explanation of the rationale for a particular VET reform aimed at improving the situation or implicitly in the wording and presentation of a policy document.

Dimensions used	Focus	Link to the three-perspective model
Target group	This dimension refers to the target group specifically addressed by the VET policy document. This could be, for example, all VET learners, learners in a subsystem of VET (e.g. apprenticeship training), a specific age group (e.g. adult learners) or VET learners with specific characteristics (e.g. very talented or high-performing learners, vulnerable groups ^(a) and learners with fewer opportunities ^(b)).	Learner status and target groups: 31. Learner status/identity, 32. Target groups
Content of curriculum	Here, the focus is on whether the VET policy document analysed has an intended impact on the content of curricula (e.g. intended learning outcomes), for example in terms of transversal or occupational competences or in terms of setting higher or lower requirements.	Type and use of skills and knowledge: 25. Type and portability of knowledge and skills Knowledge approach and acquisition: 36. Knowledge approach and focus, 38. Character and use of knowledge Role of general and civic content Curriculum design
Delivery	This dimension refers to the forms of teaching and learning emphasised in the VET policy document, including modularisation / partial qualifications, the development of new programme or pathways in VET (e.g. extracurricular activities, catch-up or bridging pathways, the validation of non-formal and informal learning for gaining access to VET programmes or granting exemptions), the pedagogical and didactical approach (e.g. learning format and context) and the guidance and support offered to VET learners.	Knowledge approach and acquisition: 37. Approach to knowledge acquisition Teaching approaches and role of teachers Assessment approaches Learning formats and contexts

Dimensions used	Focus	Link to the three-perspective model
Funding	This dimension refers to whether the VET policy document includes any indication of a specific budget earmarked in relation to the objectives and measures presented and whether there is any indication of intended changes to resource allocation, for example in terms of target groups, VET subsystems or sectors.	Governance and funding: 29. Sources of funding

- (^a) Such vulnerable groups include people with disabilities, low-qualified/low-skilled people, minorities, people with migrant backgrounds, including refugees, and people with fewer opportunities due to their geographical location and/or their socially/economically disadvantaged situation.
- (^b) Learners with fewer opportunities refers to people who, due to economic, social, cultural, geographical or health reasons, having a migrant background, a disability and/or learning difficulties, or any other reason, including those that can give rise to discrimination under Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, face obstacles that prevent them from having effective access to education opportunities.

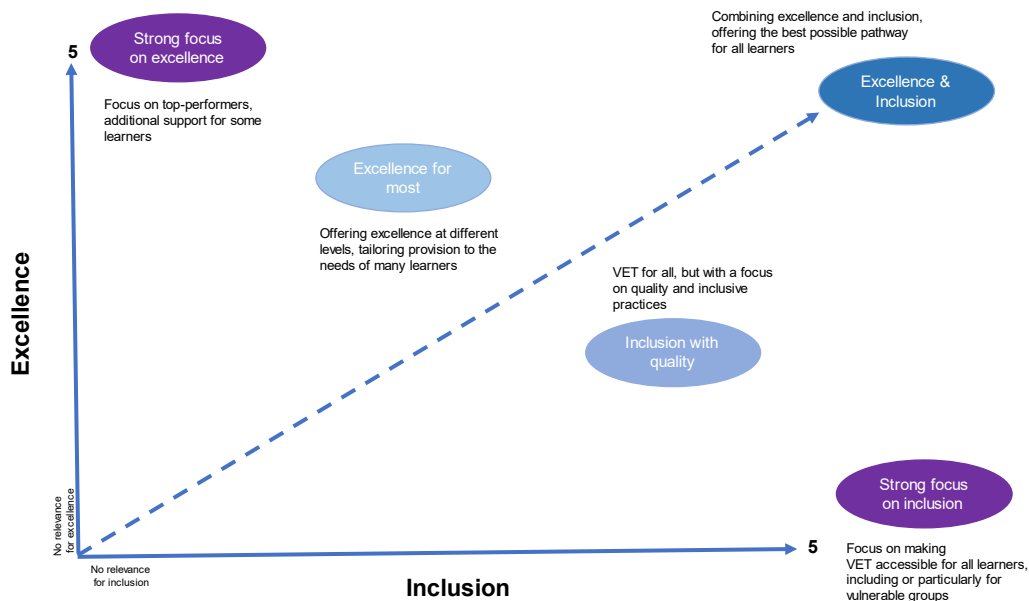
NB: See Cedefop (2023a).

Source: Authors.

These dimensions form the core of the categories of the research tool for this study (presented in Section 3.3), which was used to analyse the intended changes expressed in VET policy documents in terms of vocational excellence and/or inclusion. As there may also be other relevant aspects addressed in the policy documents (e.g. in relation to the CPD of teachers and trainers or the infrastructure of VET institutions), the research tool includes an ‘other’ category.

Since research question 3 aims to determine whether the policies on excellence and inclusion contradict or complement each other, this potential area of tension is considered from the outset. With regard to the mapping of national policy documents, the research aims to examine whether the objectives they express or the content they contain are more or less relevant to vocational excellence than to inclusion or whether these concepts are equally addressed. Figure 2 shows that the concepts and orientation of a VET policy document cannot be presented and differentiated in a linear fashion but must be localised in a grid.

Figure 2. **Plot of priorities of national policies in the (potential) field of tension between vocational excellence and inclusion**



Source: Authors.

The mapping exercise resulted in a table that provides ‘signals’ for identifying vocational excellence and inclusion based on a selected number of (slightly adapted) dimensions of the three-perspective model (37). Moreover, whenever possible, these signals were tagged with the (assumed) corresponding orders of justification (see Table 6).

To operationalise the underlying research questions, we start with a – to some extent – contrasting orientation of excellence and inclusion (as pursued as objectives in national policy documents) and focus on their opposing aspects wherever possible when identifying the signals. However, when, for example, vulnerable groups are mentioned as target groups and the instance is counted as a signal for inclusion, this is founded on a rather narrow understanding of inclusion, which is not necessarily the one the research wants to promote. Rather, the exercise is about using contrasts analytically to sharpen the subject focus and facilitate the assessment of the extent to which a policy document is more relevant to vocational excellence or inclusion (Figure 2).

(37) The dimensions are also included as categories in the research tool introduced in Section 3.4.

It also needs to be noted that identifying vulnerable groups as the target groups of a policy is only one of the potential signals indicating the relevance of this policy document to inclusion; other aspects are also analysed before an overall assessment is made. It is possible that the same policy document may address both objectives to some extent and, for example, refer to very talented learners in addition to vulnerable ones and to intended changes for both target groups. It is therefore important to consider several characteristics together before determining the predominant focus and orientation of a policy document (i.e. its relevance to excellence, inclusion or both). It should also be noted that some aspects that are considered signals may be linked to both vocational excellence and inclusion (e.g. the introduction of individualised programmes or pathways or the use of artificial intelligence in teaching and learning in VET). As indicated above, the contrasting orientations used are sometimes related to a narrower understanding of these concepts, which can be seen as a risk if one or the other concept is emphasised more strongly. For example, a strong focus on excellence could be seen as an ‘elitist focus’ (related to the market-based or industrial order of justification) and the signals presented may be understood as based on a narrow understanding of vocational excellence. This could be interpreted (at least by some stakeholders) as having a negative connotation if other target groups are neglected. Nevertheless, this approach is considered useful as it helps to identify the orientation of a policy document and potentially also the order of justification. It can also trigger a critical reflection on the unintended or unmentioned consequences of a policy and help to locate the focus of the policies analysed in the context of this potential area of tension.

To illustrate this approach, Table 6 presents possible signals for vocational excellence and inclusion and potential orders of justification based on the key aims that the VET policy documents analysed might contain.

Table 6. **Examples of signals for vocational excellence and inclusion and associated orders of justification**

Dimension	Signals for excellence (and potential orders of justification)	Signals for inclusion (and potential orders of justification)
Central aim	VET (policy) addressing the: individual level: supports high achievers in getting high-quality employment positions and progressing quickly in their careers (<i>market-based</i>), supports advanced professional learning and education to develop leaders and innovators	VET (policy) addressing the: individual level: supports diverse groups of learners and predominantly aims to support vulnerable groups and learners with fewer opportunities to develop their potential in order to provide them with a basis for participating in society and the labour market (<i>civic</i>);

Dimension	Signals for excellence (and potential orders of justification)	Signals for inclusion (and potential orders of justification)
	for technological advancement in specific sectors (<i>industrial</i>);	
	<p>institutional level:</p> <p>focuses on quality criteria for VET providers associated with excellence in delivering VET (in terms of teachers' and trainers' competences, pedagogy, infrastructure and innovative technologies, collaboration with labour market organisations, research institutions, etc.) (<i>market-based, industrial</i>);</p>	<p>institutional level:</p> <p>focuses on quality criteria for VET providers associated with promoting equal opportunities in delivering VET (civic) and ensuring the emotional well-being of learners (<i>domestic</i>) (in terms of teachers' and trainers' competences, pedagogy, tailored programmes, targeted support, infrastructure);</p>
	<p>VET system level:</p> <p>aims to underpin VET's standing as a high-quality educational opportunity that is aligned with labour market demands (market order) and contributes to the growth and competitiveness of the industrial sector and to the economy as a whole (<i>industrial</i>);</p>	<p>VET system level:</p> <p>aims to remove barriers and counter possible risk factors for marginalised groups seeking access to training and employment (<i>civic, domestic</i>)</p> <p>aims to reduce the number of early school leavers and young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) (<i>civic, domestic</i>);</p>
	<p>societal level:</p> <p>emphasises the high relevance of VET for providing a high-quality workforce (particularly high achievers, innovators, entrepreneurs, leaders) with a view to economic prosperity (<i>market-based, industrial</i>)</p>	<p>societal level:</p> <p>aims to reduce socioeconomic inequalities (<i>civic</i>),</p> <p>emphasises economic prosperity by providing as many workers as possible for the labour market (particularly for low-skilled tasks, including low-status jobs and employment types for specific target groups) (<i>market-based</i>).</p>

Source: Authors.

3.3. Research tool and approach

The following sections describe the tasks undertaken in the process of data collection and present the research tool developed. Moreover, the approach for analysing the data collected and the limitations of the research approach are outlined ⁽³⁸⁾.

⁽³⁸⁾ Recognised VET experts from the 30 countries covered in this study (selected based on their proven expertise in the field of VET – see Annex 3) were involved in conducting country research. They were equipped with the research tool and a guidance note; moreover, a briefing session was organised to address any open questions. Individual consultation meetings were also organised online if required.

3.3.1. Data collection

3.3.1.1. *Selection of national VET policy documents to be analysed*

The aim of this study is not to analyse national VET systems in terms of excellence and inclusion but rather to examine how the objectives of excellence and inclusion have been addressed in national VET policy documents. Thus, as research question 1 asks how the objectives of excellence and inclusion have been addressed in national policy documents over the past 25 years, it is important to clarify the understanding of ‘national policy documents’ and specify what was covered in the research.

As this research is closely aligned with Cedefop’s [timeline of VET policies in Europe](#), similar categories to those used in the timeline are used for this study. Cedefop distinguishes between three broad types of policy documents: strategy/action plan, regulation/legislation and practical measure/initiative. As the third type refers to tangible, practical arrangements, it is excluded from this first strand of the study. The other two categories, however, are useful for this context. They are defined as follows ⁽³⁹⁾ (Cedefop, n.d.-c):

- (a) Strategy/action plan or similar refers to national, regional or sectoral strategies, action plans, alliances or partnerships, proposals for the creation of a competent body, assignments by government to commissions or competent bodies to prepare a proposal or a plan to address an issue. It can cover a broader thematic field and include areas related to or affecting VET. e.g. an employment strategy can include measures to strengthen guidance or provide work-based training to the unemployed.
- (b) Regulation/legislation refers to documents that set the legal and/or operational framework for (re)defining rules/conditions or (re)organising structures, setting up measures and actions. This type includes laws, decrees, acts, directives, legislative and ministerial orders.

The term ‘policy development’ is used in Cedefop’s timeline tool as an overarching category. However, the category ‘other policy’ was added here, as some countries may have addressed excellence and/or inclusion in overarching national VET policies:

‘A ‘policy’ means major objectives or principles which are intended to guide the implementation and resource allocation decisions. Policies can be supported by national laws, regulations, and relevant institutions. Policies can be set for any area of practice – trade, foreign investment,

⁽³⁹⁾ [Cedefop timeline of VET policies in Europe](#).

demographic processes, employment and labour markets, as well as for education and training.’

(Aggarwal & Gasskov, 2013)

Thus, compared with a strategy, a policy is a more generic document that sets out the overall direction of activities (without necessarily specifying how to achieve the related objectives) and covers a longer period. Overall, more general national education-related policies were also included.

Country experts were asked to select the five national VET policy documents for their country from 2000 onwards that they consider to be the most relevant in terms of vocational excellence and/or inclusion. The selection was limited to five items for practical reasons: the number of policy documents to be analysed per country had to be limited to keep the study manageable, but at the same time it had to be large enough to enable the identification of developments over time. It was further decided to select the same number of policy documents for each country in order to be able to draw at least some conclusions about the similarities and differences in the approaches pursued by each country. The country experts were advised to consider the following aspects:

- (a) the selected national policy documents should each have a broad scope, for example in terms of target groups, areas of VET or intended changes related to vocational excellence and/or inclusion;
- (b) in the case of national policy documents that were adopted a few years ago, the effects that have (or have not) materialised (particularly related to vocational excellence and/or inclusion) should also be taken into account when assessing their relevance.

Country experts were asked to ensure, to the extent possible and reasonable, that their selection of five national VET policy documents include no more than three with a strong focus on (only) the same one concept. However, it was permitted to choose VET policy documents with a (strong) relevance to both concepts. Each policy document would later be rated on two separate scales, one for excellence and one for inclusion, from 5 (strong focus on excellence/inclusion) to 1 (no focus on excellence/inclusion); see Section 4.1.1. In this framework, policy documents that were considered to have a strong focus on both vocational excellence and inclusion and were rated 5 or 4 on both scales could be included.

Country experts were advised that – in addition to national sources – the following sources could be used as a starting point for identifying relevant VET policy documents:

- (a) Cedefop’s [timeline of VET policies in Europe](#);
- (b) Cedefop’s *VET in Europe* country reports from ReferNet, which cover 2005–2018 (Cedefop, n.d.-b);

- (c) Cedefop policy reports in the [VETbib bibliographic database](#), going back to 2002;
- (d) current policies listed on the [Eurydice](#) website;
- (e) The International Labour Organization's [Natlex database of national labour, social security and related human rights legislation](#).

3.3.1.2. *Analysis and assessment of selected national VET policy documents*

An Excel file was prepared that contains text fields for entering information and, for some aspects/questions, answer options to be selected. The questionnaire includes a mix of both closed-ended (mostly multiple choice) and open-ended questions (usually for justifying the selection of answer options). Country experts were asked to assess the five selected policy documents based on the categories included in the research tool, containing information on the VET policy document examined, its positioning in relation to excellence and inclusion, its key characteristics, its target group and its intended changes, including changes to the content of curricula or qualifications, the delivery or provision of VET programmes or qualifications and the availability of financial resources through a specific funding line.

The assessment related to the overall positioning of the policy document with regard to excellence and inclusion is expected to provide an indication of the priorities expressed in the national VET policy documents; however, this exercise was not just about categorising the policy documents and recording the corresponding numbers but also, in particular, about finding out how the concepts of excellence and inclusion are understood, how they are promoted and what (practical) measures they are associated with⁽⁴⁰⁾. This objective was also considered when designing the research instruments.

3.3.1.3. *Overall assessment*

Recording the number and type of national VET policy documents identified as having a focus on excellence or inclusion enables only very limited conclusions to be drawn about the priorities and intentions of a country's VET system⁽⁴¹⁾. Thus, in order to get an impression beyond what the five selected national policy

⁽⁴⁰⁾ For the last of these elements, the term 'intended impact' is used in the research tool. In the context of this study, it refers to the intended changes and actions promoted in a policy document, particularly in relation to the content and delivery of VET, but also to other aspects. This term is used to emphasise that the intentions of a policy document are the focus of this part of the study rather than the actual implementation of the change processes associated with vocational excellence and inclusion. This understanding therefore differs from the use of the term 'intended impact' in the context of the 'theory of change' in evaluations (see e.g. Todman, 2019).

⁽⁴¹⁾ Country experts were also advised that this study is not about evaluating the success of the selected policies or of the VET systems as a whole in terms of excellence and inclusion, nor is it possible to do so on the basis of the data to be collected.

documents (categorised as regulation/legislation, strategy / action plan or other policy) could provide, country experts were asked for a short overall assessment based on the following questions.

- (a) To what extent have the national VET objectives and priorities related to vocational excellence and inclusion changed since 2000?
- (b) What is your overall assessment of the current situation in the national VET context regarding vocational excellence and inclusion?
- (c) To what extent do national VET policies on excellence and inclusion contradict or complement each other?
- (d) What other observations and conclusions in this context can you share with us?

3.3.2. Approach to analysing the data collected

The analysis is based on the data included in the country expert questionnaire. In addition, documents provided by the experts were analysed to some extent (using automated translation tools) to gain further details and inform findings.

To prepare the data for analysis, the completed questionnaires were fed into a comprehensive Excel database⁽⁴²⁾. A coding scheme was used to identify examples of the use of specific orders of justification. It was developed based on what the orders of justification emphasise (as presented in Section 2.4). Since this part of the study focuses on texts translated into English (and does not deal with original documents, written in the relevant national language), a simplified approach was chosen for the coding scheme and few keywords were selected. These keywords include 'labour market demands', 'employability' (market based), 'efficiency', 'innovation', 'specialisation' (industrial), 'individual support', 'learners' well-being' (domestic), 'equality', 'equity', 'education open for all' (civic), 'creativity', 'passion' (inspired), 'prestige', 'reputation', 'public image' (fame based), 'collaborative learning', 'projects' and 'networks' (project based)⁽⁴³⁾. This was to verify whether there was sufficient evidence collected related to one of the orders of justification. Based on the approach taken for collecting and analysing data and on patterns identified in the data, corresponding conclusions were drawn.

⁽⁴²⁾ The resulting dataset was checked for errors and inconsistencies (e.g. missing data); open-ended questions were coded whenever applicable. For quantitative data preparation, new variables were created as needed (e.g. a composite variable for the explicit reference to both inclusion and excellence). For variables from closed-ended questions, descriptive statistics were calculated (e.g. frequency and median, as applicable) to summarise the data. After the variables were analysed individually, cross-tabs between different variables (and corresponding figures) were created to visualise and interpret the data.

⁽⁴³⁾ If these keywords were identified in the database as being present in one of the policy documents (in particular, the statements on the overarching objectives identified in the selected policy documents and presented by the country experts were used for this purpose), the entire description provided for this policy document was analysed.

3.3.3. Limitations of the research approach

This research takes an exploratory approach, aiming to achieve a better understanding of developments in national VET objectives related to vocational excellence and inclusion in 30 countries. Since these concepts lack universally accepted definitions, indicators ('signals') of excellence and inclusion were identified to aid the analysis of national policy documents. While the signals are useful to some extent, it is important to note that different documents emphasise various aspects of these concepts. The varying interpretations among countries may lead to inconsistencies in analysis. Another challenge comes from the linguistic diversity of the documents, as some key terms may lack direct translations or have subtle differences in meaning between languages, which could impact the interpretation of policy objectives.

While focusing on the qualitative analysis of policy documents can have disadvantages⁽⁴⁴⁾, the study's 25-year scope provides valuable insights into the development of vocational excellence and inclusion, offering an overview of how these priorities have been addressed over time. Although the analysis focuses on five key policy documents per country, which may not capture every policy shift or recent development, this approach still provides a strong foundation for understanding long-term trends. The overall assessments by the country experts also provide a more comprehensive picture that goes beyond the policy documents analysed. Moreover, the focus on policy intentions highlights the direction and ambitions of national VET policies, setting the stage for future research on policy outcomes.

In addition, while many policy documents do not provide explicit information regarding their underlying justifications (i.e. the reasoning behind policy choices), the study sheds light on their goals, strategies and intended change processes and the actions they use to promote excellence and inclusion. Even without the detailed rationale behind every decision, the analysis offers insights into how vocational excellence and inclusion are framed in various national contexts and how these policy objectives are promoted. This exploration lays the groundwork for the next part of the overall project, which will undertake deeper investigations into the underlying socioeconomic and cultural motivations shaping VET policies.

Overall, while the study provides valuable exploratory insights into vocational excellence and inclusion, the findings presented in the following chapter should be understood within the context of the above-mentioned constraints.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ For a discussion on advantages and disadvantages, see, for example, Cardno (2018); for a substantial critique of this method, see, for example, Codd (1988).

Chapter 4.

Research results

This chapter presents the detailed analysis of the 150 policy documents examined. It starts with an overview of the general characteristics of these policy documents in terms of their overall positioning in relation to vocational excellence and/or inclusion, type, year of issue, current validity, scope and sectoral coverage (Section 4.1). It then examines how and in what sense the concepts of vocational excellence and inclusion are used in these policy documents (Section 4.2), and explores the intended changes and actions promoted in the policy documents in terms of the content of curricula or qualifications (including intended learning outcomes), the delivery of VET programmes or qualifications and the provision of financial resources through a specific funding line, along with any other intended change (Section 4.3). Some insights into the orders of justification identified are also provided (Section 4.4). Finally, the way in which and the extent to which national VET objectives and priorities (related to vocational excellence and inclusion) have changed over time is discussed in this chapter (Section 4.5). Whenever possible, the findings and characteristics identified are elucidated in the individual sections with examples from the policy documents.

4.1. General characteristics of the policy documents analysed

Key messages

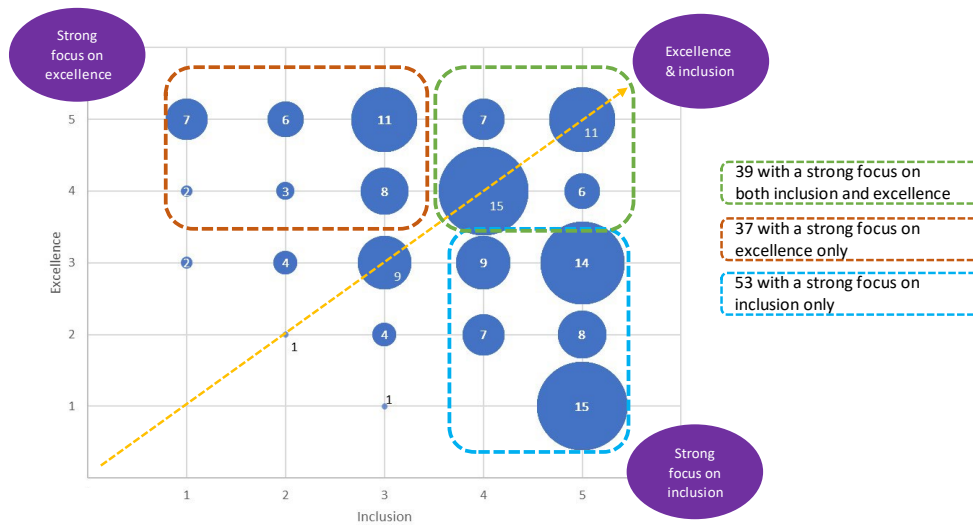
- (a) The policy objective of inclusion has generally been emphasised more strongly than that of excellence in VET policy documents over the past 25 years.
- (b) A strong focus on vocational excellence becomes more common from around 2014 onwards, as does a shared focus on both objectives.
- (c) 26 % of the policies identified have a strong focus on both inclusion and excellence.
- (d) Policy documents that have a strong focus on inclusion (frequently categorised as regulations/legislation) often have a broad scope that goes beyond the VET system.

4.1.1. Overall positioning in relation to vocational excellence and/or inclusion

As explained earlier, for each of the 30 countries covered, experts were asked to select the five national VET policies in their country that they considered to be the most relevant in terms of vocational excellence and/or inclusion since 2000. Country experts were asked to consider that the selection of five national policy documents should include, to the extent possible, no more than three with a strong focus on (only) the same one concept. This was to ensure that there would be enough policy documents focusing on each of the objectives in the sample to enable an in-depth analysis (see Section 3.3.1 for information on data collection). The outcome of this rating exercise is shown in Figure 3.

Based on country experts' assessment, the 150 policy documents were rated on a scale of 1 (no relevance) to 5 (strong relevance or focus) based on their positioning in relation to the objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion. While this positioning is relatively clear for some of the policy documents, it is less clear for others. As will be shown below, the two policy objectives are not always explicitly mentioned in the documents analysed. Moreover, rating a policy document as strongly focused on one of the concepts does not necessarily mean that the other concept is not addressed at all. On the contrary, scores of 2 or 3 still indicate that at least some aspects related to the policy objective in question are promoted.

Figure 3. Positioning of policy documents with regard to their focus on the objectives of excellence and inclusion



NB: The numbers on the axes of this grid refer to the scales used to assess the positioning of the VET policy documents in relation to their focus on excellence and/or inclusion (x-axis: 1 means no relevance to inclusion, 5 means high relevance to inclusion; y-axis: 1 means no relevance to excellence, 5 means high relevance to excellence). Each policy document was assessed with regard to both excellence and inclusion following the analysis of the document (with the help of a set of categories) and including a justification for the assessment—see Section 3.3.

Source: Authors, based on country research.

Building on this positioning, the subsequent analysis consistently uses the following categories for policy documents ⁽⁴⁵⁾:

- (a) a strong focus on both excellence and inclusion (values of 4 and 5 for excellence and inclusion);
- (b) a strong focus on excellence (values of 4 and 5 for excellence and below 4 for inclusion);
- (c) a strong focus on inclusion (values of 4 and 5 for inclusion and below 4 for excellence);
- (d) no strong focus on either objective (but with some relevant aspects; values of 3 and lower).

Among the 150 policy documents analysed, 53 (from 26 countries) have a strong focus on inclusion, 37 (from 23 countries) have a strong focus on excellence and 39 (from 23 countries) have a strong focus on both inclusion and excellence. The remaining 21 policies (from 14 countries) had moderate or little relevance to

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Document values of 4 and 5 (high relevance) and of 3 and lower (some or little relevance) were merged, on the one hand to help reduce the bias in the assessment of the country experts, as no precise criteria were specified for the assessment, and on the other hand to obtain a meaningful group size that could be linked to other aspects of the analysis. Please note that the phrases 'high relevance to ...' and 'strong focus on ...' are used synonymously in the presentation of the results.

either objective (i.e. they were assigned values of 3 or below). However, as mentioned above, this does not mean that this final group of policy documents contain no important aspects relating to the pursuit of these policy objectives. The reason the country experts chose such policy documents (with values of 1–3) is that they were asked to select five, regardless of the actual number of relevant policy documents in the country in question. However, countries with low-scoring policy documents also have other policy documents belonging to one of the other categories ⁽⁴⁶⁾.

Table 7. **Focus on objectives in policy documents**

Focus	Number of initiatives	Share (%)	Number of countries
Strong focus on both	39	26	23
Strong focus on excellence only	37	25	23
Strong focus on inclusion only	53	35	26
No strong focus, but with relevant aspects (rating of 1–3)	21	14	14
Total	150	100	

Source: Authors, based on country research.

Of the policy documents with a strong focus on excellence (values of 4 and 5; 76 in total), 18 have little or no relevance to inclusion (values of 1 or 2) (24 %). Of the policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion (values of 4 and 5; 92 in total), 30 have little or no relevance to excellence (values of 1 or 2) (33 %).

Some examples of policy documents with different positionings in relation to relevance to excellence and inclusion are presented in Boxes 6–9 to show the different variations identified.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ Country experts were asked to select a balanced mix of policy documents based on their relevance to vocational excellence and inclusion. Specifically, they were encouraged to include no more than three VET policy documents that had a strong focus on only the same one concept. All countries included at least one document with a strong focus on inclusion (values of 4 or 5 on the 5-point scale). All but two countries included at least one document with a strong focus on excellence. Austria and Sweden were the only exceptions, as neither had a policy document rated above 3 in terms of relevance to vocational excellence.

Box 6. **Example policy with a strong focus on inclusion**

Integrative IVET – 2003 amendment to the Vocational Training Act (Austria, 2003)

Integrative vocational training provides customised apprenticeship training for disadvantaged young people with special consideration for their needs, enabling them to complete training. The training targets young people with SEN at the end of compulsory schooling, young people without a lower secondary-school leaving certificate and young people who are unable to complete an apprenticeship without special support. Integrative IVET can be implemented in two ways.

- (a) IVET provision in an apprenticeship can be prolonged by one or two years.
- (b) IVET can also be restricted to sub-areas of an apprenticeship occupation (*Teilqualifizierung*, 'partial qualification'). This means that the apprentices only acquire some of the skills and competences of the apprenticeship occupation, and possibly also supplementary competences from other apprenticeship occupations. The duration of training can be between one and three years, depending on the training content.

The training relationship must be accompanied and supported by vocational training assistance. The task of vocational training assistants is to advise and support the training companies and young people before and during the apprenticeship. They also act as a point of contact for all those involved and coordinate the training.

Sources: Authors, based on country research from Austria, and Republik Österreich (2003).

Box 7. **Example policy with a strong focus on vocational excellence**

Strategy for higher vocational education (Norway, 2021)

The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research has proposed a strategy to improve and strengthen higher vocational education. It outlines four key priorities.

- (a) First, the government will focus on expanding the tertiary vocational college sector to meet labour market demands for skilled workers, with the allocation of study places based on market needs.
- (b) Second, the quality of higher vocational education will be enhanced by granting colleges greater autonomy in developing and adjusting study programmes. This includes allowing vocational schools to apply for institutional accreditation, in a similar way to universities, through the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education. Further priorities include raising the quality of web-based and in-person teaching by focusing on skills development, and fostering international collaboration to promote renewal and innovation in vocational education.
- (c) Third, the government plans to introduce a pilot scheme for centres of excellence, through which vocational colleges can collaborate with labour market representatives and experts to boost quality.
- (d) Fourth, the government will evaluate the option of raising the level of certain higher vocational education programmes within the national qualifications framework (above level 5), which would potentially enhance the recognition and value of these vocational certifications.

Sources: Authors, based on country research from Norway, and Kunnskapsdepartementet (2021).

Box 8. Example policy with a strong focus on vocational excellence and some relevance to inclusion

Trades and qualifications campuses excellence label – National terms of reference for awarding or renewing the label (France, 2019)

The trades and qualifications campuses (*campus des métiers et des qualifications*) label was launched in 2014 and identifies, in a given territory, a network of stakeholders working together to develop a wide range of vocational, technological and general training courses at the secondary and higher education levels. Training and retraining programmes targeted at specific sectors and fields of activity corresponding to a national or regional economic challenge are also developed by the network.

This 2019 policy document sets out the criteria for awarding or renewing the label and introduces a new ‘excellence’ category with a higher level of requirements.

‘Excellence campuses address the issues faced by a specific economic sector at a national level. They will have a specific location, in contrast to current campuses, some of which are run as local networks. Excellence campuses will include infrastructures for educational purposes, business development and innovation, research, sports, cultural life, etc. Emphasis is placed on an international dimension’ (Cedefop, 2019a).

Regarding inclusion, the document states, for example, that:

- (a) the courses will also be aimed at people who are in difficulty or struggle to access the labour market;
- (b) the campus will have facilities for people with special needs, especially young people and adults with disabilities.

Sources: Authors, based on country research from France, and Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse (2019).

Box 9. Example policy with a strong focus on both vocational excellence and inclusion

Strategic plan for vocational education and training, lifelong learning and youth 2022–2024 (Greece, 2022)

The document describes the strategic plan for VET, lifelong learning and youth education for 2022–2024. It includes national goals for the improvement and enhancement of VET, placing emphasis on quality, collaboration, mobility and the digital and green transitions.

One of its main objectives is to promote excellence, research and innovation in teaching in VET. There is also a specific emphasis on the inclusion of vulnerable social groups in the training system. The strategy promotes equal participation for everyone in all facets of VET and adult learning (e.g. second-chance schools), with special emphasis on people with disabilities and members of socially vulnerable

groups (Roma, immigrants). Moreover, it seeks to combat social exclusion through targeted interventions to ensure equality of opportunity.

The strategy seeks to have an impact on:

- (a) enhancing the quality of education provided, the quality of management systems and the professional development of teachers;
- (b) promoting research and innovation;
- (c) boosting mobility and utilising partnerships;
- (d) strengthening digital skills, digital learning and digital governance;
- (e) upgrading equipment and infrastructure;
- (f) improving connections with the labour market.

The Romanian education and training strategy 2016–2020 (Romania, 2016)

The VET strategy proposed a consistent approach to IVET and CVET with the goal of developing an accessible, attractive, competitive and relevant VET system. The promotion of excellence in VET was explicitly mentioned.

The strategy aimed to improve the relevance of vocational training systems to the labour market in order to increase employability. Another objective was to develop innovation and national and international cooperation in VET and offer entrepreneurial spirit development programmes.

Although the term ‘inclusion’ was not explicitly used, the strategy specifically refers to improving participant access to VET programmes and reducing unemployment among people under the age of 25. One of the areas associated with the strategic objective ‘Increase participation and facilitate access to VET programmes’ is ‘Facilitate youngsters’ access to vocational training programmes in the educational system, focusing on vulnerable groups’. The strategy holds that all individuals should benefit from the opportunity to acquire high-level competences relevant to the labour market and society.

Sources: Authors, based on country research from Greece and Romania, Greek Ministry of Education and Culture (2022) and Ministerul Educației Naționale (2016).

4.1.2. Further characteristics of policy documents

Box 10 presents an overview of further characteristics of the 150 policy documents analysed, and more details are then provided in the text that follows.

Box 10. **Key characteristics of policy documents analysed**

Type

- (a) Policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion fall into the category of regulation/legislation (27 out of 53 policy documents or 51 %) more frequently than policy documents with a focus on excellence (38 %) or policy documents focusing on both themes (33 %).

Year of issue and validity status

- (a) The majority of policy documents, almost 70 %, have been issued since 2015.
- (b) Three quarters of the policy documents remain valid as of the writing of this report (111 out of 150 policies).
- (c) Policies with a strong focus on inclusion tend to have a longer period of validity.

Scope

- (a) More than 40 % of policy documents (63 out of 150) are quite comprehensive in scope in the sense that they go beyond the VET system.
- (b) Among the policy documents with a strong focus on vocational excellence, however, only 22 % go beyond the VET system. The majority (78 %) focus on the VET system or parts thereof.

Sectoral coverage

- (a) In most policy documents analysed, a sectoral focus does not play a significant role.

Funding

- (a) 53 out of 150 policy documents (35 %) are linked to a specific funding line; however, further details on the resources are only available in a few cases.
- (b) Policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion only are significantly less likely to be linked to a specific funding line (26 %) than policy documents focusing on excellence or on both objectives (46 % each).

Source: Authors, based on country research.

4.1.2.1. *Types of policy documents*

Concerning the types of policy documents analysed, 68 out of 150 (corresponding to 45 %) are classified as regulations or legislation (i.e. new laws or amendments to existing laws), and another share almost equal in size are classified as strategies or action plans. The remaining 19 policies, accounting for 13 %, are classified as 'other policy documents' ⁽⁴⁷⁾. These include policy documents that did not fit into the two main categories of 'regulation/legislation' and 'strategy/action plan', such as white papers, policy guidelines or government programmes (Figure 4).

⁽⁴⁷⁾ The sample of 150 policy documents includes strategy / action plan documents from 28 (out of 30) countries, regulation/legislation documents from 24 countries and other policy documents from 14 countries.

Half of the policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion are classified as regulations or legislation (27 out of 53 policy documents, corresponding to 51 %). Policy documents with a high relevance to excellence or a joint high relevance to both themes are more likely to be classified as strategies or action plans. This could be an indication that inclusion in VET is seen as a policy objective of high importance, prompting its enshrinement in legislation to ensure its realisation. Laws, in contrast to strategies, action plans, or other policy documents, can be enforced and therefore used as strong steering instruments.

There are significant differences among countries with regard to which types of policy documents are primarily used to address the objectives of excellence and inclusion. In Cyprus, Ireland, Malta, Norway and the United Kingdom, for example, the policy documents most relevant to addressing these objectives all come in the form of strategies, action plans, or other policy documents such as white papers.

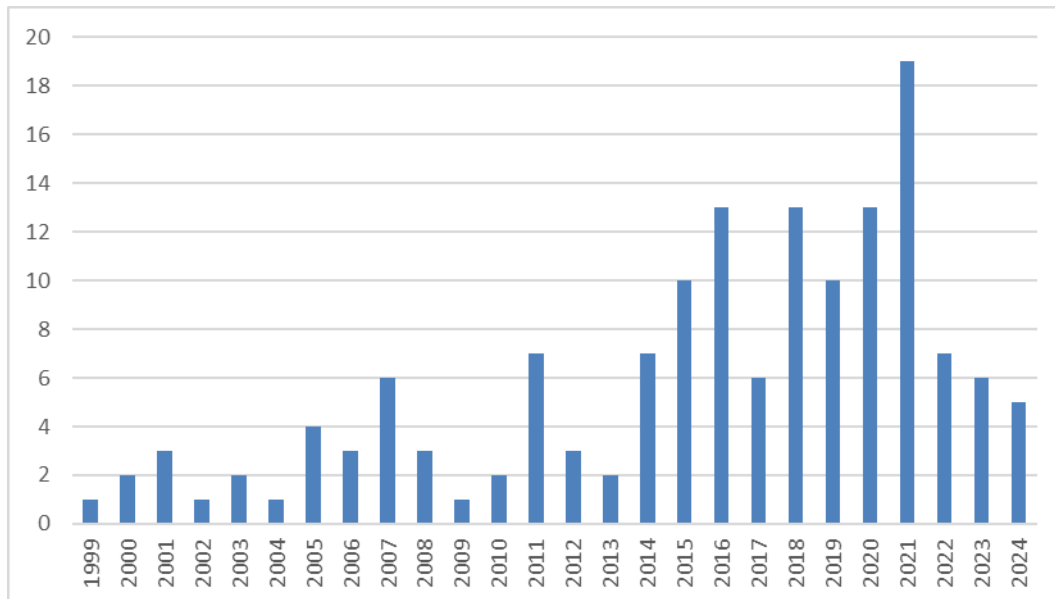
In many other countries, regulation- or legislation-type documents take a more prominent role. In Austria, for example, it can be observed that, with regard to VET, strategies and other policy documents are less of a focus than legal regulations (i.e. new laws or amendments to existing laws). Austria's track record with strategies in the education sector (e.g. the strategy for lifelong learning and the validation strategy) indicates that although it is possible for different stakeholders to agree on the common principles and lines of action set out in strategies and that this can also prompt practical developments, implementation often remains limited. In this respect, a strategy can sometimes be a rather ineffectual instrument.

4.1.2.2. *Year of issue and validity*

With regard to chronology, the 150 policy documents analysed were issued between 1999 and 2024. Most of them, almost 70 %, were issued from 2015 onwards ⁽⁴⁸⁾.

⁽⁴⁸⁾ This could be due, at least in part, to the fact that Cedefop's timeline of VET policies in Europe (which was used as a starting point) begins in 2015 and to the fact that country experts may have considered more recent policies to be more relevant in general. Further, it can be assumed that a right to education (and therefore also inclusion) is generally considered a state obligation and that inclusion-related aspects are therefore embedded as principles in overarching education policies. This is confirmed, for example, by Dunajeva (2022, p. 11). However, such policy documents issued from 2000 onwards were usually not selected by the national experts in this study, which focuses on the VET sector rather than education broadly (although inclusive VET has been discussed since the beginning of the century in EU education policy documents).

Figure 4. Number of sample policy documents by year of issue, 1999–2024

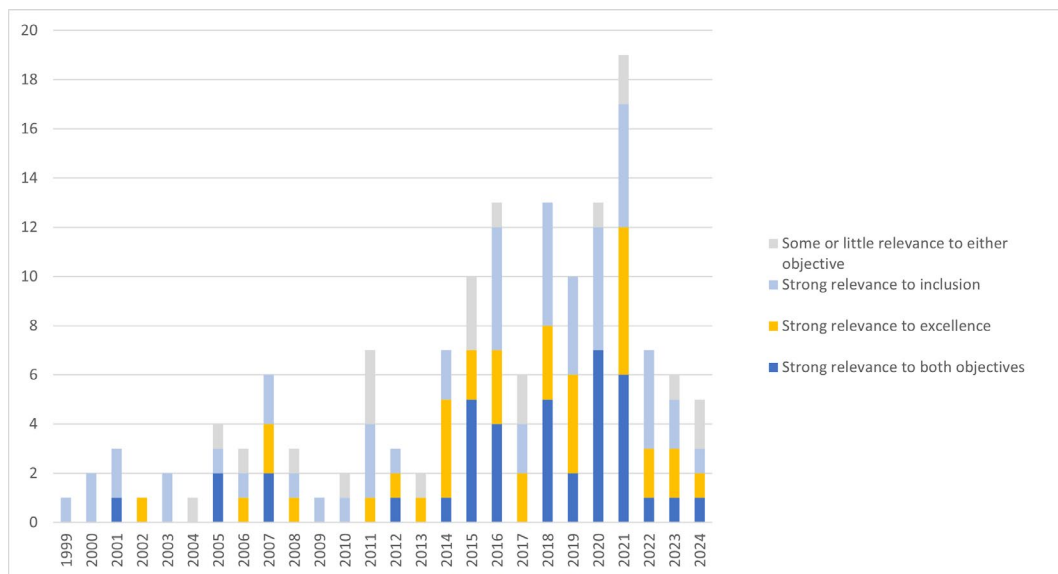


NB: $n = 150$ policy documents.
Source: Authors, based on country research.

Figure 5 displays the timeline of the policy documents in relation to their indicated relevance to the objectives. It clearly shows that policy documents with a strong focus on vocational excellence and those with a joint high relevance to both objectives are more frequent from around 2014 onwards ⁽⁴⁹⁾.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ High relevance to one of the policy objectives refers to a rating of 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 (no relevance) to 5 (strong relevance or focus).

Figure 5. Number of sample policy documents by year of issue and relevance to vocational excellence and inclusion, 1999–2024



NB: $n = 150$ policy documents.
Source: Authors, based on country research.

Figure 7 later in this chapter groups countries according to the relevance of the policy objectives as observed over time.

4.1.2.3. Scope

Looking at the overall scope of the policy documents analysed shows that slightly more than 40 % (corresponding to 63 out of 150) are quite comprehensive in scope in the sense that they go beyond the VET system. Slightly more than one third of policy documents analysed refer to the entire VET system, whereas the remainder, accounting for close to one quarter of the documents, refer to a specific part or parts of the VET system. There are significant variations in the scope of policy documents depending on their perceived relevance to excellence and inclusion.

Among the policy documents with a strong focus (but not exclusively) on vocational excellence, 22 % go beyond the VET system, with a majority (corresponding to 78 %) focusing on the VET system or parts thereof. Conversely, among the policy documents with a strong focus (but not exclusively) on inclusion, 53 % have a scope that goes beyond the VET system. As mentioned above, this is due to the fact that inclusion-related aspects are often emphasised in overarching education policies, including lifelong learning policies. One third of policy documents with a strong focus on both excellence and inclusion have a scope that goes beyond the VET system.

4.2. Exploring the concepts of vocational excellence and inclusion

Key messages

- (a) While many policy documents do not explicitly mention the terms ‘vocational excellence’ and ‘inclusion’, inclusion is explicitly referred to more often than vocational excellence in the sample analysed; it is frequently enshrined in legislation, possibly to ensure or enforce its implementation.
- (b) Policy documents make more frequent references to vulnerable or marginalised groups (e.g. early school leavers, those not in education, employment or training (NEETs), learners with disabilities, migrants) than to gifted or highly achieving learners.
- (c) Earlier policy documents mainly emphasise access to VET for disadvantaged groups, which implies a narrower understanding of inclusion. More recent documents increasingly promote VET ‘for all’ and the fulfilment of diverse learner needs.
- (d) References to excellence tend to focus on institutional quality, particularly in teaching and learning. Some refer to improving the attractiveness and image of the VET system as a whole.

This section explores how the objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion are interpreted in the policy documents and which aspects of them are discussed. Since these two terms are not always explicitly mentioned in the policy documents, but there are several ‘signals’ that indicate their presence, this study also traces how and in what form these concepts and the associated policy objectives are included without being explicitly mentioned. As the target group is considered an important signal, the first subsection is dedicated to this aspect. In the following subsection, the aspects (signals) that country experts have indicated as relevant to assessing whether these concepts are explicitly or implicitly included will be further explored.

4.2.1. Target groups

The policy documents examined most often target young people (aged 15–29 years) (119 out of 150 policy documents, or 79 %), while the second most common target group is learners at the upper-secondary level (68 %). This is followed by adult learners (65 %) and then by apprentices (58 %).

Policy documents with a strong focus on excellence are less likely to address NEETs, learners at risk of early leaving, migrants, more mature learners or learners from other groups at risk of exclusion (e.g. minorities, those with social or geographical disadvantages). In contrast (and not surprisingly), inclusion-centred policies tend to target groups that are either at risk of exclusion or already excluded

due to socioeconomic, physical or linguistic barriers: early school leavers, NEETs, learners with disabilities and migrants.

In policy documents that address very talented or high-performing learners, the focus is often simultaneously on groups at risk, such as early school leavers, NEETs and low-skilled or low-qualified people. Only a few policy documents in the sample (four) address high-performing learners without at the same time actively addressing certain groups at risk. The most prominent examples are listed in Box 11.

Box 11. **Policy documents primarily addressing very talented or high-performing learners**

The excellence initiative for VET (Germany, 2022)

The excellence initiative is part of Germany's overarching skilled labour strategy. In order to give new impetus to VET, the excellence initiative focuses on three central fields of action.

- (a) **Talented individuals.** Better individualised support for talented learners in VET should ensure that skilled workers and young people can develop their potential to the best of their ability.
- (b) **Quality and innovative provision.** Targeted initiatives for innovative and high-quality VET programmes are aimed at establishing an attractive and modern VET landscape.
- (c) **Internationality.** As the international focus of VET is expanded, young people and skilled workers should be able to benefit more actively from international cooperation, exchange and global opportunities (see also Box 24).

Announcement of the Act on Vocational Education and Training and the political agreement on better and more attractive VET programmes (Denmark, 2014)

This 2014 reform laid down four objectives for Denmark's VET programmes:

- (a) more pupils should choose to continue into VET after basic schooling;
- (b) more VET students should complete a VET programme;
- (c) VET programmes should challenge all VET students to become as proficient as possible;
- (d) trust in vocational schools should be improved and the general well-being of VET students increased.

The reform had a strong focus on attracting higher-achieving students to VET, including an emphasis on the Erhvervsfaglig studentereksamen i forbindelse med erhvervsuddannelse (EUX) programme and the 'talent track'. (EUX is a VET programme for people who wish to combine a vocational education with an upper-secondary exam that gives access to higher education.) One of the objectives of the reform was to increase the number of higher-achieving students within the VET programmes. The schools are obliged to register the number of students completing an EUX programme or a talent track. The reform also introduced a grade requirement

for students entering VET (Regeringen (Socialdemokraterne og Radikale Venstre) et al., 2014; Undervisningsministeriet, 2014).

Guidelines for the optimisation of the network of vocational education institutions for 2010–2015 (Latvia, 2012)

The main aims of these guidelines are to create a modern, attractive and prestigious system of professional education and ensure high-quality professional education in accordance with the requirements of the labour market. The focus is on improving the network of VET schools, improving quality and ensuring the training of high-class specialists, especially in VET competence centres (Ministru Kabinets, 2010).

Sources: Authors, based on country research from Denmark, Germany and Latvia, and Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (2022).

A larger number of policy documents in the sample primarily address groups of learners at risk, such as NEETs, learners at risk of early leaving, low-skilled or low-qualified people or learners from other groups at risk of exclusion. At the same time, these policy documents (38) are assessed to have little or no relevance to vocational excellence and do not target very talented or high-performing learners. Some examples are presented in Box 12.

Box 12. Policy documents primarily addressing groups at risk

'Reform 2000' (Denmark, 1999)

The aim of 'Reform 2000' was to simplify pathways into the VET system by merging 89 courses into seven broader courses organised around related occupational profiles. The idea was to make it possible for students to acquire the required competences at their own pace. Thus the time limit for basic courses was extended to 60 weeks for the technical training programmes – as opposed to the standard 20 weeks. The main objective of the reform was to attain the goal of 95 % of a youth cohort completing a secondary education programme. The reform specifically targeted the so-called 'residual group', namely young people who do not complete a youth education programme (Undervisningsministeriet, 1998; 1999).

Training Obligation Act (Austria, 2016)

The legislation introducing a training obligation up to the age of 18 stipulates that young people who would otherwise not continue education and training beyond compulsory schooling (which ends at age 15), or who would be likely to discontinue a programme they have taken up, must undertake some form of training until they have reached the age of 18. The principal aim of this law is to reduce the number of early school leavers and young NEETs (Republik Österreich, 2016).

Introduction of the Vocational Orientation programme (Estonia, 2019)

This law introduced a preparatory study programme for young people who lack the skills or readiness to choose a profession or vocational study programme. The target group includes students at risk of dropping out of education (those not admitted to any further education or training programmes upon completing compulsory education), those who have already dropped out, students with SEN, migrant

students and others who are not prepared to pursue further studies (Estonian Government, 2019; Riigikogu (Estonian Parliament), 2024).

Law No 2007-297 on the Prevention of Delinquency (France, 2007)

After France piloted the first second-chance schools set up for school dropouts at the end of the 1990s and turned them into a national network in 2004, the promulgation of this law and associated legislative and regulatory texts in 2007 guaranteed a national framework for the schools. The second-chance schools specifically target young people aged 16–25 years who have left the school system without a diploma or qualification (République Française, 2007a; b).

Source: Authors, based on country research from Denmark, Estonia, France and Austria.

4.2.2. Explicit or implicit reference to vocational excellence and inclusion

The country experts were asked to indicate whether the terms ‘vocational excellence’ and ‘inclusion’ are explicitly used in the policy documents selected and whether there is any indication that these objectives are being pursued. As mentioned earlier, the analysis of explicit or implicit references to these objectives should be viewed with caution, as the documents were written and examined in their original languages and there are not always direct translations of these terms, which may therefore be interpreted relatively broadly.

Of the 150 policy documents in the sample, 49 (from 21 countries) contain an explicit reference to inclusion and 7 (from 7 countries) contain an explicit reference to excellence, whereas 31 (from 14 countries) include explicit references to both objectives⁽⁵⁰⁾. This means that there are more explicit references to the policy objective of inclusion than to that of vocational excellence and that 63 of the policy documents analysed (from 21 countries) use neither of these terms explicitly.

Of the 76 policy documents that were assessed as having a strong focus on excellence (values of 4 or 5), half of them (38) contain an explicit reference to excellence. This means that half of the policy documents strongly promoting aspects of vocational excellence do not use this term explicitly. One reason for this is that policies often tend to refer to objectives that are related to the notion of vocational excellence without using the exact term; objectives such as high-quality education and training, attractiveness of VET, the relevance of VET systems to labour market needs, and innovative educational processes are examples. Linguistic aspects play a role here too; the literal translation of the English term ‘excellence’ is not always widely used in this educational context in all countries. For example, Denmark’s 2014 political agreement on better and more attractive VET programmes uses the term *‘fagligt løft’*. The term can be literally translated as

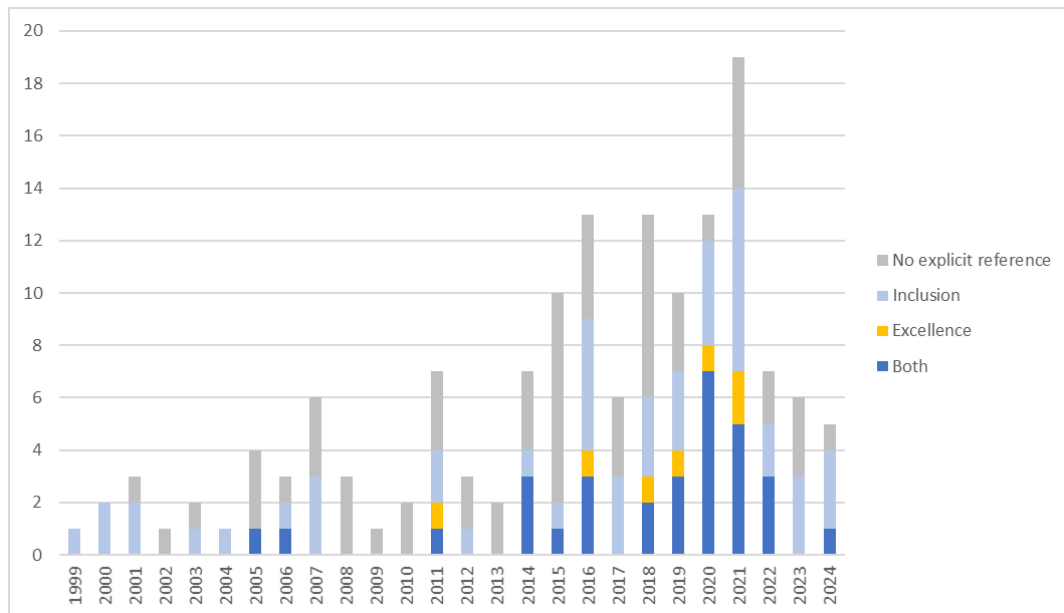
⁽⁵⁰⁾ Overall, an explicit reference to inclusion can be identified in policy documents from 24 countries and an explicit reference to excellence in policy documents from 19 countries.

‘professional boost’ and in this context can be understood as meaning vocational excellence (Regeringen (Socialdemokraterne og Radikale Venstre) et al., 2014).

Among the policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion, a higher share of 85 % (corresponding to 79 out of 92 policy documents) contain an explicit reference to inclusion.

As Figure 6 shows, the earliest policy documents identified as making explicit reference to excellence were issued in 2005 and 2006, with the next one following in 2011. From the year 2014 onwards, the number of policy documents with an explicit reference to excellence increased. As far as explicit reference to inclusion is concerned, this can be found in earlier policy documents, with examples starting in 1999.

Figure 6. **Policy documents containing explicit reference to objectives by year of issue, 1999–2024**



NB: *n* = 150 policy documents.

Source: Authors, based on country research.

The earliest explicit references to excellence within the data sample can be found in policy documents from Hungary (2005), Spain (2011) and the United Kingdom (2006, 2011) – most of which also included an explicit reference to inclusion. In terms of vocational excellence, the policy document from the United Kingdom (2006), for example, refers to the development of VET providers into CoVEs specialising in specific areas, while the policy document from Spain (2011) focuses more generally on quality and excellence, with an emphasis on innovation.

- (a) In 2006, the UK Department for Education and Skills issued the report *Further Education: Raising skills, improving life chances* (see Box 24). This document set out the government's plans to reform further education (VET). Its goals included creating a new specialist system in which every further education provider develops one or more areas of 'specialist excellence' that will 'become central to the mission and ethos of the institution and ... drive its improvement' (i.e. CoVEs); designating sixth-form colleges (for learners aged 16–18 years) that meet the required standards as centres of excellence; and strengthening the role of colleges in providing higher education programmes (Department for Education and Skills, 2006, p. 6).
- (b) In 2011, Spain introduced Royal Decree 1147/2011 of 29 July, which established the general organisation of vocational training in the education system. It refers to encouraging the efforts of training centres to improve the quality and excellence of vocational training within the education system (Article 56). In the text, excellence is understood as innovation, both didactical and technological, and the transfer of knowledge (Ministerio de Educación, 2011). While there is an explicit reference to excellence, the overall relevance of this policy document to the objective of vocational excellence is considered small.

The majority of policy documents with an explicit reference to excellence (31 out of 38) contain an explicit reference to inclusion as well. Conversely, among the policy documents with an explicit reference to inclusion, more than half (49 out of 79) do not contain any reference to vocational excellence.

A small number of references to or signals for excellence relate to the level of individual learners – these sometimes refer to promoting gifted or highly talented learners. In other cases, the reference is more broadly to helping individual learners reach their full potential by giving them an 'excellent grounding' and promoting their successful integration into social and professional life. Among this small group of policy documents, the reference to excellence is in all cases accompanied by a reference to or signal for inclusion as well. A reference to excellence at the individual level without a simultaneous reference to inclusion cannot be identified in any of the policy documents. Poland's integrated skills strategy of 2019 (Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej, 2019), for example, makes direct reference to the support of highly talented learners (though referring to all sectors of education, not exclusively VET). At the same time, the strategy also draws a direct reference to the inclusion of learners with various needs, referring mostly to children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, migrants and unemployed people but sometimes also to lower-performing learners.

The majority of references to excellence, though, relate to the institutional level, emphasising high quality and innovation within VET institutions. In the references, high quality may refer to the quality of teaching and learning, the quality of infrastructure and equipment and sometimes also specifically quality management. In some cases, the notion of excellence is specifically used with reference to the quality of practical training. Most of these documents simultaneously refer to inclusion. Examples include the following:

- (a) The amendment to the VET Act (Croatia, 2018) introduced the opportunity for a VET institution to be appointed a regional centre of competence, understood and referred to as a place of excellence in VET. With regard to inclusion, the document specifies that these centres are places that offer work-based learning for a more efficient inclusion of VET learners in the labour market, respecting the needs of students with disabilities and other vulnerable groups (Republike Hrvatske and Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja, 2018).
- (b) The national programme for the development of education (Slovakia, 2018) refers to the development of centres of excellence in VET with the goal of creating higher-quality and more attractive VET. At the same time, the programme specifically aims to improve the quality of education of children from generational poverty, children with a health disadvantage, children from minority groups and otherwise disadvantaged pupils who are predominantly leaving education and training early (Ministerstvo školstva, 2018).
- (c) The Dutch quality agreements for 2015–2018 (see Box 11) are among the few examples where a reference to vocational excellence at the institutional level can be found without an explicit corresponding reference to inclusion. Stimulating excellence is the most recurring theme mentioned in the policy document (part of its budget is specifically reserved for institutions that stimulate excellence). Stimulating inclusion is not explicitly mentioned.
- (d) Finland's 2019 strategy 'Aiming for excellence – Quality strategy for vocational education and training 2030' (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2012) features 'excellence' in its title and is geared towards improving quality management in line with the principle of continuous improvement towards excellence by 2030. It has no explicit reference to inclusion.

A third, even smaller group of references to excellence can be linked to the larger scale of the VET system level. References here particularly tend to address the attractiveness and image of the VET sector – and are again, in the majority of cases, accompanied by a reference to inclusion.

When taking a closer look at the policy documents, as one would expect, references to inclusion (especially the explicit use of the term) are much more frequent than references to vocational excellence. References to inclusion are

often explicit, using the exact term, but in many cases also use related terms referring to equality of access or participation for various groups of learners.

Over time, one can observe that policy documents increasingly tend to refer to inclusion in the sense of supporting all learners, making VET 'fit for all' or meeting the needs of various learner groups, rather than addressing and naming specific groups of individuals with fewer opportunities ⁽⁵¹⁾.

As pointed out above, among documents with an explicit reference to inclusion, more than half (49 out of 79) do not contain a specific reference to the objective of vocational excellence. Examples of policy documents in this group include the following:

- (a) Austria's Training Obligation Act of 2016, which introduced a training obligation up to the age of 18, refers to the term 'participation' in the sense of increasing young people's 'changes of sustainable and comprehensive participation in economic and social life' (Republik Österreich, 2016).
- (b) Ireland's national skills strategy for 2025 (Department of Education and Skills, 2016) makes one of its strategic objectives the promotion of a specific focus on active inclusion to support participation in education and training and the labour market.

4.3. Intended changes promoted in policy documents

Key messages

- (a) Intended changes and actions related to delivery (e.g. developing new educational programmes or pathways or including provisions for learner guidance and support) are more prevalent than those related to content in the policy documents analysed.
- (b) In terms of content-related intended changes, there are no significant differences between excellence- and inclusion-oriented documents, except that the policy documents on excellence refer slightly less frequently to changes in transversal competences than other policy documents do.
- (c) The strengthening of occupational skills is addressed in slightly different ways in relation to the two objectives: for inclusion, it is more about meeting the demands of working life and the requirements of the labour market to ensure employability in general, while vocational excellence is repeatedly associated

⁽⁵¹⁾ Annex 4 contains tables with demonstrative examples of the types of references to vocational excellence and inclusion included in the policy documents.

with increased responsiveness to the needs of the labour market to ensure adaptation to rapidly changing demands.

- (d) The pursuit of excellence is more often linked to infrastructure improvements and institutional changes like the creation of CoVEs and the training or CPD of teachers and trainers in VET, including in-company trainers.

4.3.1. Types of intended changes and actions addressed

All the policy documents analysed contain statements about actions to be implemented to influence the VET system in some way. This section explores the intended changes and actions promoted in the policy documents, particularly in relation to the content of curricula or qualifications (in terms of intended learning outcomes), the delivery of VET programmes or qualifications and the provision of financial resources through a specific funding line. To analyse this, the term 'intended impact' of a policy document has been used.

Table 8 provides an overview of the main type(s) of intended changes addressed by the policy documents and the combinations in which they occur ⁽⁵²⁾. Almost all (95 %) of the policy documents studied refer to some form of delivery-related intended changes (compared with 65 % of policy documents referring to content-related changes). In one fifth of the policy documents, other intended changes are mentioned (that do not directly fall into the categories of content or delivery). 53 % of the policy documents refer to both delivery- and content-related aspects, whereas 12 % of policy documents address all three broad categories of intended changes (content, delivery and other). The focus of the policy documents in terms of their intended impact thereby remains remarkably stable over time (see Annex 4 for an analysis by decade).

The following sections take a closer look at the forms of intended changes referred to by the policy documents. As an introduction, Table 7 provides an overview of the different aspects addressed by the documents.

Table 8. **Types of intended changes covered**

Type of change	Subcategory	No of policies	No of countries
Content	All	98 (65 %)	27
	Transversal competences	66 (44 %)	24
	Occupational competences	66 (44 %)	25
	Other content-related impact	28 (19 %)	18
Delivery	All	143 (95 %)	30

⁽⁵²⁾ Country experts were asked to refer to the main intended changes and actions promoted by the policy document.

Type of change	Subcategory	No of policies	No of countries
	Modularisation / partial qualification	56 (27 %)	24
	New programme/pathway	89 (59 %)	29
	Pedagogical and didactical approach	74 (49 %)	28
	Guidance and support	83 (55 %)	29
	Other delivery-related impact	41 (27 %)	24
Other	All	30 (20 %)	19

Source: Authors, based on country research.

4.3.2. Content-related intended changes and actions promoted

A content-related impact may refer to any changes to curriculum content, particularly to the intended learning outcomes (e.g. transversal competences, occupational competences). As pointed out above, 65 % of the policy documents examined refer to some form of content-related intended changes (corresponding to 98 policy documents out of 150, from 27 countries). There are no policy documents in the sample that exclusively refer to content-related impact aspects. In general, policy documents that refer to content-related impact aspects also address some form of delivery-related changes; almost half of the policy documents (73 out of 150) jointly refer to both content- and delivery-related impact aspects.

Policy documents (from 24 countries) that promote content-related intended changes often refer to strengthening transversal competences (including general education components). Documents from 25 countries refer to occupational competences. Other content-related changes (mentioned in documents from 18 countries) emphasise the introduction of a learning outcomes approach, the modernisation of curricula and the enhancement of VET responsiveness to labour market needs. They also cover strengthening the acquisition of basic competences and practical or academic skills in VET and ensuring the constant updating of training curricula in accordance with economic and social changes.

Table 9 takes a closer look at content-related intended changes by policy objective. Policy documents with a strong focus on vocational excellence refer to changes in transversal competences slightly less often than other policy documents. Other than this finding, there are no significant differences between policy documents with a strong focus on excellence, inclusion or both objectives.

Table 9. **Content-related intended changes in policy documents, by policy objective**

Objectives addressed by policy documents	Transversal competences	Occupational competences	Other	No content-related change
All (<i>n</i> = 150)	44 %	44 %	19 %	35 %
Strong focus on excellence (<i>n</i> = 37)	38 %	43 %	16 %	38 %
Strong focus on inclusion (<i>n</i> = 53)	45 %	45 %	21 %	36 %
Strong focus on both (<i>n</i> = 39)	49 %	49 %	18 %	28 %

Source: Authors, based on country research.

Some policy documents with a strong focus on vocational excellence refer to transversal competences, for example in relation to the strengthening of general education components and the development of the digital, critical thinking, social and personal competences essential for social and professional integration (including entrepreneurship, innovation and research competences). References to occupational competences typically relate to increasing the responsiveness to labour market needs to ensure adaptation to rapidly changing requirements. This suggests an objective of producing well-rounded, highly skilled graduates ready for a dynamic labour market.

A joint focus on promoting both transversal and occupational competences can be identified in the examples detailed in Box 13.

Box 13. **Examples of content-related changes promoted in policy documents with a strong focus on vocational excellence**

Post-16 skills plan (United Kingdom, 2016)

This document, published by the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, introduces a plan to develop a ‘world-class’ technical option for learners aged 16 years as an alternative to the established academic option. The plan includes the provision of support to learners who are not yet ready to access the technical track at age 16 based on prior attainment and aspirations. The document refers to the needs for students to have an ‘excellent grounding’, equivalent to that required to access more academic qualifications, at age 16 and for the technical option to be ‘a distinctive, prestigious, high-quality offer in its own right; a positive, informed choice’ (Department for Education, 2016).

Regarding content, the plan envisages a common core comprising English, mathematics and digital skills that will be part of each technical option, alongside a ‘common set of transferable workplace skills’ (e.g. communication, teamwork, problem-solving) applicable across all routes (Department for Education, 2016). At the same time, each new programme ‘must have genuine labour market value’, and

employers will have a 'much stronger role in setting standards and specifying the knowledge, skills and behaviours an individual needs in order to perform well in an occupation' (Department for Education, 2016).

Reforms to careers education and guidance are planned as part of the reform package; this will include placing a duty on schools/colleges to provide independent and impartial guidance, recruiting a 'new generation of high-flying mentors to support and inspire young people who are most at risk of not fulfilling their potential' before the age of 16 (Department for Education, 2016).

This plan is for a system change – providing a new set of technical qualifications positioned at the upper-secondary level but also open to adults – but it will also involve structural reforms to schools, colleges and teacher/trainer development.

Amendment to the VET Law (Lithuania, 2017)

This law sets out the objectives and principles of VET, the structure of VET qualifications, the organisation and quality assurance of VET, the assessment of competences, the awarding of qualifications, the rights and obligations of participants in VET and the financing and management of VET. The law establishes that the relevance of qualifications and VET programmes to the needs of the labour market must be ensured through alignment with sectoral qualification standards and the involvement of sectoral professional committees in the development of qualifications systems. In addition, VET programmes need to set out the key competences that will enable learners to establish themselves and compete in the changing labour market, to undertake lifelong learning and to develop and update their qualifications.

Source: Authors, based on country research from Lithuania and the United Kingdom, Department for Education (2016) and Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo ir mokslo ministerija (2017).

Among policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion, content-related intended changes tend to refer to the development of transversal competences and occupational competences equally. References to transversal competences are featured in almost half (24 out of 53) of the policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion. They refer to basic or fundamental skills and the development of key competences. Examples include Austria's 2017 strategy for lifelong learning (Republik Österreich, 2011) and France's 2019 strategy to modernise IVET (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse, 2019). References to strengthening occupational competences more generally refer to aspects like meeting the demands of working life and the needs of the labour market. This signals a strategy to equip all learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with adaptable skills that are applicable across various contexts. It also suggests a focus on ensuring employability in changing environments.

Finland's 2019 reform of continuous learning (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2019a), for example, refers to enhancing basic skills, such as communication skills. Occupational competences are referred to in the context of the need to develop new skills to meet the demands of the world of work. Another example is presented in Box 14.

Box 14. **Example of content-related changes promoted in policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion**

Future FET: Transforming learning – Ireland’s national further education and training strategy for 2020–2024 (Ireland, 2020)

This document aims to open up access to VET for all and stresses issues of quality in relation to provision. It is based around three pillars: building skills, fostering inclusion and facilitating pathways.

‘Fostering inclusion’ is a strategic priority. Its goals are to improve consistency in learner support (which is currently too variable), promote the targeting of priority cohorts (e.g. learners with disabilities, migrants, Travellers, long-term unemployed people, people who have been in prison, women returning to education) and develop literacy and numeracy support.

Regarding content, the document refers to strengthening transversal competences as key to enabling learners to ‘integrate and engage effectively with society’ (SOLAS, 2020, p. 24). It also mentions them in relation to communication, entrepreneurship and digital skills and as being key for employability. Promoting occupational competences is mentioned in relation to enabling learners to ‘lead fulfilled lives ... and build successful careers’ (SOLAS, 2020, p. 51). Further, attention is paid to embedding literacy and numeracy support across all further education and training provision.

Sources: Authors, based on country research from Ireland, and SOLAS (2020).

Policy documents with a strong focus on both excellence and inclusion often promote changes regarding (emerging) occupational and transversal competences and the strengthening of general education, although sometimes with different emphases.

Box 15. **Examples of content-related changes promoted in policy documents with a strong focus on both excellence and inclusion**

The **Estonian vocational education programme 2018–2021** (2018) (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2018) emphasised the effective integration of key competences and specialised training alongside the acquisition of general competences in all VET programmes and the development of curricula in line with labour market needs.

The **Spanish plan for the modernisation of VET** (2020) (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2020) places a special emphasis on transversal competences related to employability, digitalisation, innovation and entrepreneurship (e.g. initiative, responsibility, commitment, autonomy, teamwork, analytical skills, knowledge transfer and decision-making skills) and includes actions for the regular updating of training curricula in accordance with economic and social changes. Moreover, the updating of the range of VET training courses available, structured around strategic and

emerging sectors, is considered. This entails the development of new professional competences related to innovation, entrepreneurship, sustainability and more.

The **Icelandic education policy until 2030** (2020) (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2020) stresses the goal of providing high-quality education to learners throughout their lives, underpinned in particular by transversal competences and the values of resilience, courage, knowledge, sustainability and happiness. The integration of 'skills for the future' and the adjustment of programmes to foster greater employability are also promoted.

Source: Authors, based on country research from Estonia, Iceland and Spain.

4.3.3. Delivery-related intended changes and actions promoted

As pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, almost all of the policy documents studied refer to some form of delivery-related intended changes and actions – either on their own (27 % of the policy documents studied) or in conjunction with content-related impacts (53 %) or other types of impacts (5 %). The analysis distinguished five different categories of delivery-related intended changes (see Annex 4 for details on the scope of specific delivery-related impacts):

- (a) modularisation / partial qualification;
- (b) new programme/pathway;
- (c) pedagogical and didactical approach (including learning format and context);
- (d) guidance and support;
- (e) other delivery-related intended impacts.

Policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion more often address aspects related to guidance and support and less often address pedagogical and didactical approaches or modularisation.

The categories of delivery-related changes most frequently addressed in the policy documents are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. **Categories of delivery-related intended changes addressed in policy documents**

Policy document Group	Modularisation /partial qualification	New programme/pathway	Pedagogical & didactical approach	Guidance and support	Other delivery-related change	No delivery-related change
All	37 %	59 %	49 %	55 %	27 %	5 %
Strong focus on excellence	27 %	62 %	49 %	49 %	35 %	8 %

Strong focus on inclusion	40 %	49 %	45 %	72 %	23 %	2 %
Strong focus on both	41 %	64 %	56 %	59 %	31 %	5 %

Source: Authors, based on country research.

4.3.3.1. *Modularisation / partial qualification*

Modularisation is the intended change least often mentioned out of the categories presented. Structuring programmes into smaller components, such as modules, units or partial qualifications, is considered one way of enhancing the flexibility of obtaining a VET qualification. Examples of policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion that refer to this intended change are presented in Box 16.

Box 16. **Examples of modularisation / partial qualification changes promoted in policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion**

In Hungary, **Government Decision No 1057/2005 (31.V.) on the measures necessary for the implementation of the vocational training development strategy** (Magyar Közlöny, 2005) included a number of operational measures that launched the creation of inclusive VET in Hungary. The introduction of a modular system was supposed to ensure a broad occupational foundation and the development of a system of qualifications based on it.

The 2018 French **Law for the freedom to choose one's professional future** (République Française, 2018), which reinforces access for all to lifelong learning, is a reform of the entire CVET and apprenticeship system. Its aim is to address inequalities in access to CVET in favour of the least qualified and employees of small and medium-sized enterprises. The law has made it compulsory to divide the qualifications registered in the National Vocational Qualifications Directory into 'skills blocks'.

The 2022 **amendments to the VET Law** in Latvia (Latvijas Republikas Saeima, 2022) state that a certificate of completion of part of a professional qualification must be issued to a learner who has mastered the set of units and achievable learning results that form that part of the professional qualification. The amendment defines a module as an independent part of the professional education programme. It is based on the idea of achievable learning results as an evaluable and demonstrable set of knowledge, skills, professional independence and responsibility.

Source: Authors, based on country research from France, Latvia and Hungary.

An example of a policy document with a strong focus on excellence that refers to the use of modules is the 2018 law reforming VET in Poland (Kancelaria Sejmu, 2018). The reform intends to enhance the quality and attractiveness of VET and to

increase its responsiveness to the needs of the labour market. It also emphasises flexibility and talented learners and offers learners the opportunity to acquire additional skills and competences beyond the core VET curriculum, depending on the occupation and the regional demand. In addition, learners in IVET can apply for market qualifications (i.e. qualifications awarded outside the formal system by, for example, social organisations, associations, professional groups) that are included in the Integrated Qualifications System free of charge as part of their formal school education.

4.3.3.2. *New programme/pathway*

Some policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion refer to the development of flexible and personalised pathways, including the introduction of alternative routes to qualifications (e.g. based on the validation of non-formal and informal learning), adjustments to programmes based on personalised needs (e.g. providing the opportunity to extend learning periods), permeability and bridging pathways, second-chance routes and focused training for vulnerable groups (e.g. in work-based learning environments). Flexible pathways for disadvantaged young people were, for example, introduced by the 2003 amendment to the Vocational Training Act in Austria (Box 6). Further examples are presented in Box 17.

Box 17. **Examples of new programme/pathway changes promoted in policy documents with high relevance to inclusion**

Provisions of the 2003–2012 state education strategy (Lithuania, 2003)

The purpose of the provisions of the 2003–2012 national education strategy was to provide a basis for the implementation of the vision for education in Lithuania. The following practical measures for inclusive VET are outlined: the development, validation and implementation of VET programmes for people with special needs (including assessment of the need for training, the development of an action plan for the programmes' gradual implementation, the continuous expansion of the range of these programmes, the creation of new adapted learning venues and the training of VET teachers); and the development, validation and implementation of learning programmes for unqualified or underqualified people (including the development of methodological material for second-chance vocational training, the creation of a module for the development of VET teachers' qualifications, analysis of the need for second-chance training and the creation of an action plan).

Royal Decree 395/2007 of 23 March 2007 regulating the vocational training subsystem for employment (Spain, 2007)

This royal decree sought to guarantee access to training for unemployed people with more difficulties than average in finding employment (e.g. those at risk of social exclusion, those with disabilities). It also sought to secure access to lifelong learning for workers employed by small and medium-sized enterprises and established measures to promote equal access for all people, specifically women, people aged

over 45, people with disabilities and victims of gender-based violence. This was to be supported by the validation of non-formal and informal learning and labour experience and by second-chance routes (e.g. public employment and training programmes aimed at improving the skills and employability of certain groups of unemployed people).

Sources: Authors, based on country research from Spain and Lithuania, Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo ir mokslo ministerija (2003) and Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales (2007).

Some policy documents with strong relevance to excellence refer to the introduction of new specialisations (e.g. related to the strengthening of innovation and modernisation), the promotion of permeability and progression routes to higher levels and the combination of pathways (e.g. apprenticeship training at higher education levels). An example of such a policy is the Norwegian strategy for higher vocational education of 2021 (Box 7).

Policy documents with joint high relevance to excellence and inclusion promote both objectives through a combination of the abovementioned delivery-related aspects, as examples in Box 18 demonstrate.

Box 18. Examples of new programme/pathway changes promoted in policy documents with high relevance to both excellence and inclusion

The 2015–2020 strategic plan for technical and vocational education and training (Cyprus, 2015)

The vision of this strategic plan is clearly to ensure an integrated, attractive, flexible and high-quality VET system that meets the current and future needs of the Cypriot economy and society. The strategic plan promotes the accreditation of post-secondary VET institutions as public schools of higher VET, the development of new VET curricula oriented towards learning outcomes (with a particular emphasis on key competences), the introduction of second-chance routes (e.g. the apprenticeship system and evening schools) and measures to keep early leavers (or those at risk of early leaving) in the education system and provide them with alternative pathways.

Law on the establishment of a technological–professional training chain (Italy, 2023)

The overall objective of this law is to formalise the equal value of different educational pathways and integrate them, and a new curricular model built around the idea of ‘4 + 2’ years’ duration. In this model, technological–professional paths are equivalent to four years of high school (EQF level 4) and can be followed by the two-year *istituti tecnici superiori* academy paths (EQF level 5) or ‘traditional’ university paths.

By establishing a single ‘4 + 2’-year pathway between secondary and post-secondary education, an educational framework is activated that aims to develop the talents and excellence of each individual. It is expected that the link between the four-year secondary school and the two-year *istituti tecnici superiori* technical high school will

improve students' employability. The reform is directed towards learners at risk of exclusion and to particularly gifted and high-performing students.

Sources: Authors, based on country research from Italy and Cyprus, Ministry of Education (2015), Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana (2024) and Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito (2023).

Even in the case of policy documents that do not explicitly emphasise the objectives of vocational excellence or inclusion, the new programmes or qualifications they introduce can be seen as contributing to developments towards excellence and/or inclusion. Microcredentials, for example, have the potential to serve both objectives, as they can be used at lower and higher levels for reskilling and upskilling purposes and have the potential to be used as a social inclusion tool. References to microcredentials can be found in policy documents from Croatia, Czechia and Slovakia. For example, Slovakia's 2021 lifelong learning and counselling strategy for 2021–2030, a policy document with high relevance to both excellence and inclusion, promotes microcredentials as a means to increase the flexibility of the qualifications system (Ministry of Education Science Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2021).

4.3.3.3. *Pedagogical and didactical approach*

Policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion (45 %) frequently mention pedagogical and didactical approaches that support individualisation, that is, adapting learning to the individual needs of all learners, especially those with special needs or other vulnerable groups. Work-based learning in various forms, including apprenticeship training, is also often emphasised.

Box 19. **Examples of pedagogical approach changes promoted in policy documents with high relevance to inclusion**

Organic Law 3/2022 of 31 March 2022 on the organisation and integration of vocational training (Spain, 2022)

The organic law on the organisation and integration of vocational training aims to transform the VET system as a whole and turn it into a single system providing a gateway to high-quality employment for young people. The law states that the system should be capable of responding flexibly to people's interests, expectations and aspirations for professional qualifications throughout their lives and to the demands of industry sectors. It refers to a universal design for learning (i.e. inclusive education), active teaching methodologies aimed at the integral development of pupils, the elimination of any type of discrimination and individualised training plans.

Joint Order No 1083/2000 of 20 November on adult education and training courses (Portugal, 2000)

This initiative is tailored towards low-qualified adults. Adult education and training courses are a flexible training pathway of variable duration, depending on the

certification level. They promote the development of social, scientific and professional skills needed for the exercise of a professional activity and simultaneously enable learners to obtain a basic school-level certificate (fourth, sixth or ninth grades) or an upper-secondary-level certification (12th grade).

The methodology behind the adult education and training courses relies on the following principles: (i) it is focused on the development of competences; (ii) it values the recognition, validation and certification of competences acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts of learning; (iii) it follows the learner-centred approach; and (iv) it is founded on project-based learning.

Sources: Authors, based on country research from Spain and Portugal, Boletín Oficial del Estado (2022) and Ministérios do Trabalho e da Solidariedade e da Educação (2000).

Policy documents with strong relevance to excellence include references to the training of students to use modern technological equipment in modern facilities, essentially through partnerships with higher education institutions and businesses (e.g. in CoVEs). Thus, work-based learning is also strongly emphasised, aiming to strengthen practical skills in alignment with industry needs. Moreover, using technology to personalise the learning experience and cater to students with diverse needs is mentioned, as is facilitating learners' mobility. The latter is, for example, one of the criteria to be met in order to receive the trades and qualifications campuses excellence label in France (as indicated in Box 8).

Several of the policy documents with strong relevance to both excellence and inclusion refer to increasing work-based and workplace learning, supporting innovative teaching and learning methods based on digital technologies and promoting open online educational resources. The Italian law on the establishment of a technological–professional training chain of 2023 (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito, 2023) refers to extensive flexibility in teaching and organisation to increase innovation and laboratory activities, experiential learning and interdisciplinary perspectives, and the involvement of professionals and experienced workers from different fields as teachers.

4.3.3.4. *Guidance and support*

Policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion very often refer to targeted guidance and interventions for supporting specific target groups and to personalised and lifelong learning support for all learners (72 %). In some cases, the introduction of new professions (e.g. vocational training assistants, mediators) or the further professional development of educators or career counsellors is also emphasised.

Box 20. **Examples of guidance and support changes promoted in policy documents with high relevance to inclusion**

Implementation regulation on the regional reporting and coordination function for early school leaving (Netherlands, 2006)

As part of the discontinued implementation regulation on the regional reporting and coordination function for early school leaving (Uitvoeringsregeling Regionale meld- en coördinatiefunctie voortijdig schoolverlaten), VET institutions were to offer more guidance for students at risk of dropping out and collaborate more with high schools to smooth the transition from high school to VET (Ministerie van Onderwijs, 2006; van der Steeg and Webbink, 2006).

Act No 35/2009 (Iceland, 2009)

This is the country's first national act (law) on guidance and counselling. According to this act, every student at the compulsory, upper-secondary and university levels is entitled to guidance and counselling. Regarding delivery, the act stipulates that every school should have qualified guidance counsellors on staff to improve the choices of learners with regard to upper-secondary study programmes and to support students during their upper-secondary studies through high-quality guidance counselling.

Law No 2018–771 of 5 September 2018 for the freedom to choose one's professional future (France, 2018)

The law for the freedom to choose one's professional future constituted a reform of the entire system of CVET and apprenticeship in France. Its aim was to correct historical inequalities in access to CVET in favour of the least qualified and employees of small and medium-sized enterprises. The law introduced a free universal career guidance service accessible to employees and jobseekers. It also made it possible for employers to use personnel training funds to finance 'skills assessments' (*bilan de compétences*) and support for the validation of acquired experience.

VET 4.0 – medium-term vocational policy strategy for the renewal of vocational and adult education and training (Hungary, 2023)

The core values of VET 4.0 are diverse career options, dual training, retention, transparency and permeability. This strategy holds that, in addition to career guidance, a career counselling system should be developed as a priority before the start of dual training. There is a need to coordinate the work of the organisations involved in career guidance and to plan the career counselling system as a multiannual process. Instead of large-scale career guidance events, experiential forms of career guidance (e.g. digital community creativity workshops, thematic summer camps, role model programmes, a 'one day at work' programme) should be strengthened. The period of career guidance should begin earlier than the final academic year, instead starting two to three years before learners make their career choices.

Sources: Authors, based on country research from France, Hungary, Iceland and the Netherlands, Menntamálaráðuneytið (2009), République Française (2018) and Magyar Közlöny (2023).

Many policy documents with strong relevance to excellence (49 %) refer to the introduction or strengthening of services (including career guidance and

mentoring) to guide students through various stages of their educational and career journeys. This might include the development of new professions, the CPD of career guidance professionals and the establishment of dedicated services at VET providers. Examples include the United Kingdom's post-16 skills plan (Box 13) and the Polish law detailed in Box 21.

Box 21. Example of guidance and support changes promoted in policy documents with high relevance to excellence

2018 law reforming VET (Poland, 2018)

This 2018 reform to the Education System Act focuses on actions to promote practical learning and deliver higher-quality work-based learning, including using apprenticeships to strengthen cooperation between VET schools and businesses and increasing the role and involvement of social partners and sectoral representatives in VET delivery.

The significant modernisation of career guidance and the philosophy behind it was a subject of this legislative change. The reform held that educational and job-related guidance should start as early as kindergarten and continue through the later stages of education. It also states that depending on the educational stage and type of school, educational and job-related guidance should be conducted differently.

Sources: Authors, based on country research from Poland, and Kancelaria Sejmu (2018).

Similarly, policy documents with strong relevance to both excellence and inclusion refer to the provision of accessible and quality services for comprehensive career guidance that supports learners' transition and entry into the labour market in general, as stated in the 2021 Bulgarian strategic framework for the development of education, training and learning (Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science, 2021). Guidance and support are also considered key features in the Danish announcement of the Act on Vocational Education and Training of 2007 (Undervisningsministeriet, 2007). Meanwhile, the national development plan for Latvia for 2021–2027 (Republic of Latvia, 2020), among others, refers to raising the prestige and accessibility of VET institutions and colleges by offering career guidance.

4.3.3.5. Other delivery-related intended changes

Further intended changes related to delivery that were not covered by the categories described above were mentioned in 41 policy documents (corresponding to 27 %) from 24 countries. These include, for example, intended changes related to infrastructure or equipment (mentioned in six policy documents, of which four have a strong focus on vocational excellence), which mainly refer to the upgrading of equipment or the introduction of more modern equipment and the

provision of adequate laboratories and resources. Malta's *Strategic Plan 2022–2027 – A community college for all* (MCAST, 2021), for example, which has a strong focus on vocational excellence, also reflects efforts to implement the green transition, with initiatives aimed at making campuses more environmentally friendly and supporting the circular economy.

Intended changes related to VET providers in general tend to refer to either setting up new providers – such as the Greek model vocational VET schools and experiential and thematic VET centres for enhancing quality and excellence in VET, which were established by law in 2020 (Government Gazette of the Hellenic Republic, 2020) – or establishing CoVEs⁽⁵³⁾. The latter topic is, for example, mentioned in the following policy documents:

- (a) the UK government's report *Further Education: Raising skills, improving life chances* (2006) (Box 24);
- (b) the Spanish plan for the modernisation of VET (2020) (Box 15), which emphasises the establishment of a network of centres of excellence in VET;
- (c) the national development plan for Latvia for 2021–2027 (Republic of Latvia, 2020), which refers to strengthening VET institutions and making them into specialised centres for excellence and innovation, with a special focus on the area of smart specialisation, through creating flexible adult education options, promoting interinstitutional and international cooperation and introducing new technologies;
- (d) the Bulgarian strategic framework for the development of education, training and learning (Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science, 2021);
- (e) the Norwegian strategy for higher vocational education (2021) (Box 7);
- (f) the Slovak lifelong learning and counselling strategy for 2021–2030 (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2021), which recommends the establishment of CoVEs to increase the attractiveness and quality of VET and sets out the steps to accomplish this in its action plan (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2022):
 - (i) finalising the requirements for establishing CoVEs by the third quarter of 2024;
 - (ii) identifying existing VET centres for transformation into CoVEs by December 2024;

⁽⁵³⁾ CoVEs are mentioned in policy documents in relation to both content-based and delivery-based intended impacts, as changes in both areas can support the transformation of VET providers into CoVEs. However, it should be noted that CoVEs are explicitly mentioned in only a few of the policy documents analysed. This may be due to the fact that CoVEs are promoted less frequently in policy documents that are categorised as regulations/legislation or strategies / action plans (see also Cedefop's [timeline of VET policies in Europe](#)). The limitation of the selection to five policy documents per country from 2000 or later may also play a role here.

(iii) embedding the concept of CoVEs into legislation by the second quarter of 2025.

In France, trades and qualifications campuses with the related excellence label are also considered CoVEs; the terms of reference for awarding and renewing the trades and qualifications campuses excellence label were issued in 2019 (Box 8).

4.3.4. Other intended changes and actions promoted

In 30 out of 150 policy documents (corresponding to 20 %), other intended changes not covered by the categories already discussed were also indicated. These policy documents come from 19 of the 30 countries covered ⁽⁵⁴⁾.

The education or CPD of VET teachers and trainers, including in-company trainers, is the other intended impact most often mentioned (in 21 policy documents) ⁽⁵⁵⁾. It appeared most frequently in policy documents with high relevance to vocational excellence (8) or high relevance to both policy objectives (7). An example from the former group is presented in Box 22.

Box 22. Example of intended changes related to the CPD of VET teachers in policy documents with a strong focus on vocational excellence

Programme for the development of practical vocational training resources (Lithuania, 2007)

One of the specific aims of the programme was 'to provide vocational teachers with technological competences necessary to work on a new practical training basis (of sectoral centres)' (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania, 2007). The group of related activities is set out in the document 'Development and implementation of the system for updating of VET teachers' technological competences' ('Profesijos mokytojų ir dėstytojų technologinių kompetencijų tobulinimo sistemos sukūrimas ir įdiegimas'). It is also claimed that this will 'ensure implementation of innovative teaching methods and transmission of innovations to learners' (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania, 2007).

Source: Authors, based on country research from Lithuania.

Many of the policy documents that relate to vocational excellence also refer to improving the quality of VET provision in general. The other intended changes recorded here in relation to quality development and assurance (explicitly highlighted in 10 policy documents) are about improving the quality management

⁽⁵⁴⁾ It is quite possible that the remaining policy documents also contain aspects of other intended changes or actions that were not directly asked about in the research questionnaire. The aspects presented here are the ones that were particularly emphasised by the country experts.

⁽⁵⁵⁾ The large number of policy documents referring to the education or CPD of VET teachers and trainers suggests that this could have been included as a separate category in the research tool. This important aspect will therefore be given greater consideration in the following strands of the study.

system – as indicated, for example, in the Greek 2022–2024 strategic plan for vocational education and training, lifelong learning and youth (Greek Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022) or the abovementioned Slovak lifelong learning and counselling strategy for 2021–2030 and accompanying 2022–2024 action plan. The example in Box 23 also explicitly relates to VET quality development.

Box 23. **Example of intended changes related to quality development and assurance in policy documents with a strong focus on vocational excellence**

VET quality strategy for 2020–2030 (Finland, 2019)

The Vocational Education and Training Act (531/2017), which entered into force on 1 January 2018, gives education providers more autonomy in the targeting and implementation of their provision. As part of this, education providers are required to have an efficient quality management system and to implement quality management at all levels of their operations.

In a report on the quality strategy, the working group set up by the Ministry of Education and Culture proposes a vision for VET and its quality management, which should be implemented with the help of five effectiveness targets. The targets are ‘to implement comprehensive quality management; to have customer orientation as the basis for activities; to have continuous improvement for excellence integrated into activities; to have evidence-based decision making, guidance and leadership; and to set clear objectives for the quality and effectiveness of activities, including systematic monitoring of results and progress towards objectives’ (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2019b).

The strategic targets are expected to ‘provide comprehensive long-term guidance for quality management in VET’ (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2019b). The report sets out development actions over three years (2020–2022). The plan was to monitor and review the quality management strategy at the end of the three-year period, after which ‘the strategic intentions and measures [would] be revised as necessary’ (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2019b).

The quality strategy is intended as a tool for VET providers and their staff, education administrations, the National Centre for Educational Evaluation (Karvi) and other VET stakeholders.

Source: Authors, based on country research from Finland.

Strengthening the link to the labour market and meeting the needs of the labour market are strongly emphasised in several policy documents that are intended to have an impact on the content of curricula and qualifications or on the delivery of VET programmes. These topics are sometimes also mentioned as part of the objective of overall quality improvement in VET. In two policy documents, they are explicitly emphasised in the context of skills governance. For example, the aim to strengthen the influence of employer representatives and reduce the influence of education sector authorities is stressed in the Slovak amendments to the Act on VET (Act No 61/2015) (Národná rada Slovenskej republiky, 2015),

which is of high relevance to vocational excellence. Meanwhile, the Hungarian VET 4.0 strategy (Magyar Közlöny, 2023), which has a strong focus on inclusion but to some extent also addresses aims related to vocational excellence, refers to the establishment of sectoral skills councils, which are to formulate their proposals on the structure and content of vocational training.

4.4. Orders of justification

Key messages

- (a) Explicit justifications for the policy objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion and the related measures are often either absent or articulated only in broad, general terms.
- (b) The examples identified confirm that there is not a one-way relationship between the policy objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion and the orders of justification.
- (c) Accordingly, in policy documents with a strong focus on excellence, references to market-based, industrial or fame-based justifications can often be found, but so can references to the civic order of justification. Similarly, in policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion, other orders of justification can be identified alongside the civic one.

The assignment of the orders of justification is primarily based on the analysis of the overarching objectives that country experts identified in the policy documents selected. However, as previously noted, explicit justifications for these objectives and the related policy measures are often either absent or articulated only in broad, general terms. Consequently, the assignment of specific orders of justification is based on interpretation of the available texts and should therefore be approached with caution. Some examples are included for illustrative purposes in the following subsections. These examples clearly show that there is no one-to-one correspondence between vocational excellence or inclusion and the orders of justification; in each case, more than one of the orders of justification can be identified.

4.4.1. Strong focus on vocational excellence

In policy documents with a strong focus on excellence, references to market-based, industrial or fame-based justifications can often be identified. At the same time, indications of the civic order of justification can also be observed, as objectives related to inclusion are also sometimes mentioned (even though this may not be the main focus of the policy in question).

Box 24. **Examples from Germany and the United Kingdom**

Excellence initiative for VET (Germany, 2022)

Short introduction

Through the excellence initiative for VET, different projects are combined into an overarching agenda. Individual activities are scheduled to launch successively between 2022 and 2026. Over EUR 750 million has been earmarked for this purpose. In order to give new impetus to VET, the excellence initiative focuses on three central fields of action: talented individuals, high-quality and resourceful provision and internationality.

Orders of justification

- (a) **Civic.** The initiative provides for parts of vocational training and apprenticeship training to be carried out abroad. This option is also open to learners with disabilities.
- (b) **Market based / industrial.** The excellence initiative is an important component of the Federal Government's skilled labour strategy, as the shortage of skilled workers is one of the greatest challenges facing Germany and more professionally qualified skilled workers are needed to ensure prosperity and growth.
- (c) **Fame based.** With the excellence initiative for VET, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) is providing a targeted impetus for a necessary modernisation and boost in attractiveness. The aim is to contribute to strengthening society's appreciation for VET.

Further Education: Raising skills, improving life chances (United Kingdom, 2006)

Short introduction

This document sets out the government's plans to reform further education (VET) so that it can achieve 'its full potential as the powerhouse of a high skills economy' and 'to make us a fairer society, offering equal opportunities for all based on talent and effort, not background' (Department for Education and Skills, 2006, pp. 1, 3).

Orders of justification

- (a) **Civic.** The policy refers to equal opportunities, inclusion is mentioned as a goal and some policy measures to help people from disadvantaged backgrounds access programmes are included.
- (b) **Market based.** The policy refers to ensuring labour market relevance.
- (c) **Industrial.** The policy includes goals such as creating a new specialist system in which every further education provider develops one or more areas of 'specialist excellence' that will 'become central to the mission and ethos of the institution and ... drive its improvement' (i.e. CoVEs) (p. 6); designating sixth-form colleges (for students aged 16–18) that meet the required standards as centres of excellence; and strengthening the role of colleges in providing higher education programmes.

Sources: Authors, based on country research from Germany and the United Kingdom, Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (2022) and Department for Education and Skills (2006).

4.4.2. Strong focus on inclusion

Several documents that are strongly focused on inclusion objectives refer to the aim of ensuring equal rights, opportunities, participation or access for all, in

education in general or in VET specifically. This can be considered an indication that the civic order of justification is used. In many policy documents (often the ones with a broader scope, going beyond the VET system), other orders of justification can be identified in addition to the civic one. This is demonstrated by the examples in Box 25.

Box 25. **Examples from Ireland, Spain and Hungary**

Learning for Life: White paper on adult education (Ireland, 2000)

Short introduction

The paper was Ireland's first policy statement on adult education (the domain in which VET – called further education and training in Ireland – is located) and marked the adoption of lifelong learning as the 'governing principle' of educational policy. It set out the overall policy framework, including for further education and workplace education, together with a programme of change and development.

Orders of justification

- (a) **Civic.** Equality of access, participation and outcomes for participants in adult education is a key principle of the paper, which emphasises implementing proactive strategies to counteract inequalities and targeting investment towards those most at risk to promote an inclusive and democratic society.
- (b) **Market based.** The document sets out a change agenda for all aspects of post-compulsory education and training, and hence covers support for learners as well as institutional change, with an overall eye on how lifelong learning supports both the economy and the creation of an inclusive society. It also aims to build closer relationships with industry.

Digital education strategy (Hungary, 2016)

Short introduction

The main objective of the strategy is to create the opportunity to effectively develop digital competences at all levels of the education system in line with sectoral strategies and professional objectives.

Orders of justification

- (a) **Civic.** The strategy emphasises equity and seeks to improve social inclusion and the active social participation of citizens by increasing the level of digital skills in society and the participation of adults in digital learning. The strategy contains several explicit references to the inclusion of disadvantaged pupils in VET. For example, reference is made to the development of an inclusive approach, which should be a priority for all stakeholders and an important element in the fight against geographical inequalities and disadvantages due to socioeconomic status.
- (b) **Market based / industrial.** The outcomes of the strategy should contribute to increasing Hungary's competitiveness. The overall strategic objective is to ensure that public education provides opportunities for students to acquire the digital skills that are in demand in society and the labour market. Particular

attention is paid to the needs of VET, higher education and lifelong learning and to effectiveness and efficiency.

Organic Law 3/2022 of 31 March on the organisation and integration of vocational training (Spain, 2022)

Short introduction

This law replaces the previous VET law (from 2002) and integrates all the changes introduced in subsequent regulations. It is, therefore, a total reform of the VET system, which includes training for employment, lifelong learning and VET as part of the educational system.

Orders of justification

- (a) **Civic.** Its guiding principles are equal opportunities and quality of training. The law specifically emphasises the centrality of the person, promoting the maximum development of their capacities and avoiding any type of discrimination based on gender, educational and social vulnerability. It adopts the principles of Universal Design for learning (learning model for inclusive education).
- (b) **Market based.** The aim is to make vocational training a key driver of economic and social transformation for the country and leads to quality employment. It is a law that transforms the entire VET system to ensure that it responds to the needs of the economic system and the demands of the productive sectors, highlighting digitalisation and ecological transition.
- (c) **Inspired.** This law aims to transform the VET system as a whole and turn it into a single system, capable of responding flexibly to people's interests, expectations and aspirations for professional qualifications throughout their lives.

Sources: Authors, based on country research from Ireland, Spain and Hungary, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2000), Government of Hungary (2016) and Boletín Oficial del Estado (2022).

4.4.3. Strong focus on both vocational excellence and inclusion

Not surprisingly, in policy documents with a strong focus on both the objectives of excellence and inclusion, different orders of justification can also be identified. The example from Malta in Box 26 also refers to a close link to EU VET policies.

Box 26. Examples from Latvia and Malta

National vocational education and training policy (Malta, 2015)

Short introduction

This policy document sets out a strategic vision that focuses on both excellence and inclusion in line with the Bruges Communiqué.

Orders of justification

- (a) **Civic.** The policy emphasises the importance of making VET accessible to all, including vulnerable groups. It highlights efforts to reduce early school leaving by integrating VET into compulsory education and expanding foundation courses for students with special needs. Special attention is given to promoting

VET among female students, adults seeking lifelong learning and disadvantaged groups, such as unemployed people. The expansion of the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology pathway programme and the creation of an Access Committee ensure that students with disabilities or learning difficulties receive individual support and guidance, reinforcing a more inclusive VET system in Malta.

- (b) **Market based.** The policy refers to ensuring labour market relevance.
- (c) **Industrial.** The policy encourages research and innovation through the establishment of centralised units and joint programmes between VET providers and higher education institutions. In addition, it introduces new funding mechanisms, such as a trust fund to attract private investment in VET research, and provides government scholarships to support student mobility and development.
- (d) **Fame based.** It aims to position Malta as a VET centre of excellence, attracting foreign students and expanding VET qualifications up to EQF / national qualifications framework levels 6 and 7.

National development plan for 2021–2027 (Latvia, 2020)

Short introduction

This is the main national medium-term development planning document for Latvia. It aligns with the implementation of Latvia's sustainable development strategy until 2030 and the United Nations sustainable development goals, with the goals of all Latvian residents achieving an improvement in their quality of life by 2027. The plan is intended to foster a knowledge society. Its priority 2 is about building 'Knowledge and skills for personal and national growth'.

Orders of justification

- (a) **Civic.** The document emphasises the aims of making lifelong education available to all citizens of Latvia and creating a sustainable democratic society by ensuring high-quality, accessible and inclusive education.
- (b) **Market based / industry.** Education is considered an important factor for achieving economic growth. The document emphasises that, in 2027, Latvia's education system at all levels should not only meet today's requirements but also be open to future challenges, preparing students to be critically thinking, emotionally intelligent and digitally skilled specialists in their profession. The plan aims to foster an internationally excellent science sector, innovative companies and a competent workforce in both the private sector and public administration in Latvia.
- (c) **Fame based.** For VET institutions, the improvement of 'their reputation as centres of excellence and innovation' is emphasised (Republic of Latvia, 2020).

Source: Authors, based on country research from Latvia and Malta, MCAST (2015) and Republic of Latvia (2020).

4.5. Country perspectives

Key messages

- (a) Countries with moderate-to-high upper-secondary VET enrolment consistently focus more on inclusion aspects.
- (b) A balanced approach or an increased emphasis on both objectives over time is observed in regions that have undergone significant VET system reforms.
- (c) Vocational excellence and inclusion are considered complementary objectives but are addressed separately in different policy documents or VET provisions.
- (d) The lack of clarity about the concepts of excellence and inclusion can lead to contradictions in policy approaches.

In this section, the focus is on the overall situation in 30 countries, so the following questions emerge.

- (a) What changes can be observed over time among the countries in terms of the policy objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion?
- (b) To what extent are these two objectives seen as complementary or contradictory?

4.5.1. Changes over time

In order to compensate for the potential bias caused by the selection of a limited number of policy documents (five per country), country experts were asked to briefly summarise to what extent the national VET objectives and priorities related to vocational excellence and inclusion have changed since 2000. In this section, the 30 countries analysed are grouped based on the types of changes observed in this regard. The groupings relate to the extent to which one or the other policy objective tended to be prioritised, versus the extent to which they tended to be pursued together in a more balanced way, and whether these tendencies increased or decreased over time. It should be noted that aspects of both policy objectives can be identified in documents from all 30 countries; the allocation to the groups here is based on the more strongly observable tendency for each country overall. In general, the assessment of the potential shift in priorities over time should be considered in the overall context of the VET system concerned and its historical development. For example, in well-established and robust VET systems, there may not be as great a need to prioritise excellence in policy documents. Similarly, countries with VET systems that have historically had a strong focus on equity may not see the need to place an additional emphasis on inclusion. What is emphasised in the policy as a priority goal can therefore be understood as an indication of problems identified that are then addressed by

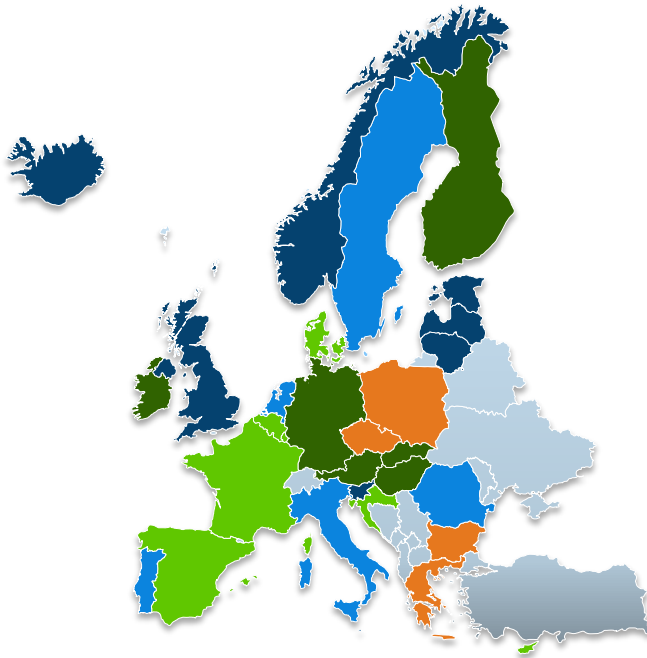
specific changes. Keeping these considerations in mind, the country groupings as given in Table 11 can be distinguished.

Table 11. **Grouping of countries based on the trends observed in the focus on vocational excellence and inclusion since 2000**

Groups	Countries
Countries where the (explicit) focus of VET policy documents has been consistently more on inclusion than excellence	Austria, Czechia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland
Countries with a strong focus on inclusion where vocational excellence has gained prominence in national policy documents over the past 10 years (approximately)	Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, Spain
Countries with a strong focus on inclusion where an increasing focus on vocational excellence can be observed, but the increase is moderate compared with that of the group above	Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Sweden
Countries where a more consistent and balanced approach to emphasising both vocational excellence and inclusion can be observed	Estonia, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Norway, Slovenia, United Kingdom
Countries where both goals – vocational excellence and inclusion – have been increasingly emphasised in policy documents in recent years	Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Slovakia

Source: Authors, based on country research.

Figure 7. **Grouping of countries based on the trends observed in the focus on vocational excellence and inclusion since 2000**



NB: Colour coding corresponds to the categories shown in Table 11. Please use the table as a key.
Source: Authors, based on country research.

If we correlate these country groups with other factors characterising the 30 countries, such as geographic area, changes in enrolment in upper-secondary VET or the share of upper-secondary students in VET (see Table 21 in Annex 4), no clear patterns emerge, but the following observations can be made for each country group.

- (a) **Consistently stronger focus on inclusion than on excellence.** Countries with a consistently stronger focus on inclusion aspects tend to have moderate-to-high shares of upper-secondary VET enrolment (except for Ireland). Countries in this group show either increasing (Finland, Hungary, Ireland) or decreasing (Austria, Czechia, Germany) trends in upper-secondary VET enrolment.
- (b) **Strong focus on inclusion and increased focus on vocational excellence in the past 10 years and strong focus on inclusion and moderate increase in emphasis on vocational excellence.** Many of the 12 countries in these two groups show decreasing or stable trends in vocational upper-secondary enrolment (except for Cyprus and Portugal). These countries tend to have moderate shares of students in VET, mostly in the 40–59.5 % range, except for Croatia and the Netherlands (with higher shares of VET enrolment).

- (c) **More balanced approach.** Except for Norway and Slovenia, these countries tend to have lower shares of upper-secondary VET enrolment – however, in several cases, a trend towards increasing VET enrolment can be observed (e.g. in Estonia, Iceland, Latvia, Malta).
- (d) **Recently increasing emphasis on both objectives.** Countries in this group are from regions that have been undergoing significant reforms of their VET systems, often as part of broader social and economic reform developments. With the exception of Slovakia, these countries tend to have moderate or lower shares VET enrolment at the upper-secondary level. These countries also exhibit mixed trends in VET enrolment, varying from stability (Bulgaria, Greece) to increases (Poland) or decreases (Slovakia).

The trends observed in the 30 countries are briefly outlined in the following subsections on the basis of this grouping.

4.5.1.1. *Consistently stronger focus on inclusion than on excellence*

In some countries, the general (explicit) focus of VET policy documents has been consistently more on inclusion aspects than on excellence, though the emphasis and approach vary by nation. In Czechia and Hungary, VET reforms have prioritised addressing inequalities and the needs of disadvantaged learners, and in Ireland inclusion has been a consistent priority in VET policies since the early 2000s and has become deeply embedded in the system. The continuous stronger emphasis on inclusion-related aspects in this group of countries does not mean that vocational excellence is not given any importance. In Germany, while inclusion is constantly at the centre of attention, both policy objectives are used at different times to pursue more specific purposes. For example, in recent years, vocational excellence has been promoted as a way to increase the attractiveness of VET careers, especially in response to demographic changes leading to labour shortages. Austria is an example of a country where legislation often supports the inclusion of disadvantaged learners, while vocational excellence is primarily promoted through other initiatives, such as those of the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber. The chamber coordinates national skills competitions and rewards companies for running high-performing apprenticeships, while other organisations promote excellence through talent development initiatives. Similarly, in Finland, VET has long been seen as a sector that supports weaker learners, and recent reforms have strengthened this focus. The extension of compulsory education and the 2018 VET reforms have developed individual study paths for learners, improving access to education for disadvantaged groups. However, excellence is

promoted through national competitions and strategies like VET 2030, which encourages regional quality management improvements.

4.5.1.2. *Strong focus on inclusion and increased focus on vocational excellence in the past 10 years*

In some countries, a shift in emphasis can be observed, with vocational excellence gaining importance in national policy documents over (roughly) the past 10 years. In some countries (e.g. Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Spain), a marked shift towards excellence since around 2015 has been observed, while in others (e.g. Denmark, Luxembourg) this trend started a bit earlier. The developments in Belgium (an example from the Flemish Region is presented in Box 27) show that excellence is promoted to improve the image of VET ⁽⁵⁶⁾.

Box 27. Example from the Flemish Region in Belgium

There have been many ups and downs in terms of the balance between excellence and inclusion in Belgium's VET-related policies, but, overall, a shift towards excellence can be observed. From 2000 to 2010, there were several years in which inclusion was an important factor, but, since 2015, the emphasis has shifted more and more towards excellence.

The main reason for this shift towards excellence is the fact that young people in Belgium do not always take up a VET path as a first choice. Young people who opt for VET often have relatively poor academic results, are held back a grade, or are at risk of dropping out of school. They seek an alternative path to 'general' education in the VET system. Those young people who opt for a combination of school-based and vocational learning (i.e. dual learning) have traditionally been students at risk of dropping out of school.

In order to increase the popularity of dual learning, the government has decided to introduce a new, integrated system of dual training courses at the secondary level that aims to distinguish itself as a positive option (in terms of students' motivation to complete vocational training and academic schooling). The concept of dual education is to be officially introduced in the 2025–2026 school year but has already been in force at the upper-secondary level since 2019. Dual training courses are also already being piloted for adults. So far, however, dual learning has not yet improved the attractiveness of VET (European Commission, 2024).

At the same time, the system for recognition of prior learning is gaining momentum and focuses more on the inclusion of vulnerable groups (compared with the policy related to dual education and training) by focusing on the validation of experiences and skills rather than on study outcomes and diplomas.

Source: Authors, based on country research from Belgium.

⁽⁵⁶⁾ The shift towards excellence also applies to the French Community (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles), as seen in the Pact for Excellence in Education launched in 2015. The pact aims to strengthen the quality of education for the benefit of all learners in the French Community. It also has a strong emphasis on inclusion, aiming to make the school system more inclusive and egalitarian. This pact has an impact on the entire education system, not just on VET (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, n.d.).

In France, the theme of inclusion has long been central to VET policies, particularly in addressing youth unemployment and social inequalities. Since 2014, there has been an increased emphasis on vocational excellence, partly driven by the rise of apprenticeships in higher education. The concept of 'pathways of excellence' is now used to highlight the improved integration outcomes of vocational training (thanks to the relevance and high quality of VET). This balance between inclusion and excellence is reflected in recent reforms and initiatives such as skills competitions and mentoring programmes that support both excellence and disadvantaged youth.

In addition to France, Croatia and Spain are examples of countries that have emphasised the role of VET providers in developing vocational excellence in recent years, in forms very similar to CoVEs.

- (a) The French Ministry of Education has set up a network of trades and qualifications campuses that unites secondary and higher education institutions to provide skills relevant to high-demand industry sectors, promoting collaboration between communities and businesses to achieve regional and national economic impacts. They also developed national specifications for obtaining or renewing the trades and qualifications campuses label (2014) and excellence label (2018).
- (b) In Croatia, the 2014 strategy for education, science and technology introduced the concept of centres of excellence (Republike Hrvatske, 2014) and 25 regional competence centres were appointed in 2018. Specifically, the national plan for the development of the education system until 2027 states that regional centres of excellence (i.e. centres of excellence in VET) will be further promoted by strengthening the professional capacities of employees, networking the centres with partner institutions and economic entities at the local and national levels and providing support for the digital and green transformation of the economy.
- (c) In Spain, the objective of excellence has been mentioned progressively more often in the past 25 years in different policies and plans. The concept has related to criteria of quality and innovation without specifying an orientation towards very talented or high-performing students. In the latest approved law (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2022), the term 'excellence' is mentioned several times and the concept is used in two contexts: (1) converting VET into a training path for excellence, as a result of collaboration between training centres and companies; and (2) establishing a network of centres of excellence in VET (centres specialised in innovation, applied research and active entrepreneurship in each industry sector).

In the case of Denmark, inclusion (the words used in Danish would be translated as ‘residual groups’, ‘weak learners’ and ‘dropouts’) and excellence (*faglighed* in Danish, equivalent to the German *Fachlichkeit* or ‘high skills’, ‘quality’ or ‘proficiency’ in English) have been objectives in all the reforms, but with different priority levels. Further information is presented in Box 28.

Box 28. Change of balance between excellence and inclusion in Denmark

In the 2000s, the idea of the knowledge society was driving Danish education policies, and the emphasis was on higher education, especially science, technology, engineering and mathematics. The role of VET was to achieve the target of 95 % of a youth cohort completing secondary education, focusing on the ‘residual group’, that is, the group of young people at risk of not completing an upper-secondary education programme. VET programmes were made more flexible and vocational schools had to focus on reducing the dropout rate.

From 2012, the focus changed. The idea of the knowledge society was altered – if not abandoned altogether – to focus on strengthening national production capacity, and VET became a central theme in this strategy. The social partners also pushed to strengthen the *faglighed* (excellence) in the VET programmes and make the programmes more attractive to young people. The reform in 2014 is the work of the social partners, who were pushing to introduce admission requirements to VET programmes ^(a). Vocational schools were to work with the general school system and strengthen links with other upper-secondary programmes to encourage more young people to opt for VET directly after school. The 95 % target was lowered to 90 % and a new programme was set up for students who were not able to meet the admission requirements that had been introduced.

The 2018 reform also focuses on *faglighed* and on increasing the attractiveness of VET. One of the effects of the 2014 reform was that more adult VET students dropped out, and the reform in 2018 focused on creating attractive pathways for adult VET students as well.

The 2023 reform of higher education is part of a reform that aims to encourage more young people to enter either VET or the welfare profession programmes (social work, teaching, nursing).

To summarise, the balance between inclusion and excellence has changed since the 2000s. Now, the focus is on strengthening VET and welfare professions in order to avoid a lack of skilled workers and welfare professionals in the near future.

^(a) Other measures to support excellence included the introduction of talent tracks and the option to combine a VET programme with A-levels.

Source: Authors, based on country research from Denmark.

4.5.1.3. Strong focus on inclusion and moderate increase in emphasis on vocational excellence

In some countries, a strong focus on inclusion and an increasing focus on vocational excellence can be observed during the period under review, but the increase in the emphasis on excellence is rather moderate compared with that of the foregoing group.

In Sweden, the Nordic welfare model, with its core values of equity and inclusiveness, ensures that education is accessible to all; thus, a strong emphasis on inclusion is prevalent. Nevertheless, although excellence is not explicitly mentioned in policy documents (the sample analysed does not include a Swedish policy document with a value higher than 3 in terms of relevance to vocational excellence), there is a focus on 'improving quality' and helping all students reach their potential.

While inclusion is a strategic objective of VET policies in all countries in this group, some of them have introduced specific VET offerings to promote excellence. This is the case, for example, in Italy, with the reform of *istituti tecnici superiori* (ITS) (higher technical institutes) and the introduction of new curricular models. These initiatives aim to provide high-quality post-secondary education, promoting both inclusion and excellence by offering flexible, innovative teaching and greater internationalisation. This is also the case in Portugal, with the provision of technological specialisation courses and higher professional technical courses.

In addition, in Dutch VET policies, excellence is a relatively new objective, formally introduced in 2015. However, initial evaluations did not reveal any direct results of this objective. In 2019, there was no evidence that excellence programmes at VET institutions improved the labour market position of their graduates, and an increase in the positive attitude of students was not measurable (Buisman et al., 2019). In Romania, excellence has not been a very prominent theme on the VET agenda. Nevertheless, starting in early 2000, within the technical and VET programmes of the 'Poland and Hungary: Assistance for restructuring their economies' (PHARE) instrument, the best-performing VET schools were selected to act as VET resource centres, with the aim of supporting the development of other VET schools providing training programmes within a specific economic sector. The concept of VET resource centres, which is the main initiative addressing vocational excellence in the Romanian policy documents, became more meaningful in 2019 when VET school networks that included different VET schools operating in a specific sector (e.g. agriculture, mechanics) were organised under the leadership of a VET resource centre.

4.5.1.4. *Balance between promoting excellence and inclusion*

Other countries appear to have taken a more balanced approach to emphasising vocational excellence and inclusion over the past 25 years. This is the case for the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), which regained independence in 1990–1991 and joined the EU in 2004. Over the years, the content and structure of their VET systems changed substantially, and, like other newer Member States, the Baltic states were also quite open to the EU's education policy goals and

instruments. Although the three countries did not always follow the same approach, there are some similarities. VET is intended to fulfil a function of social cohesion, has a rather low reputation and is not seen as the first choice. Vocational excellence is promoted through measures that emphasise relevance to the labour market, quality improvement, modernisation, the incorporation of new technologies and the enhancement of the image of VET. Aligning VET with the needs of the labour market is a constant challenge, as is also the case in Slovenia, where the overall framework is designed to support both excellence and inclusion (see Box 5).

In the two Nordic countries in this group (Iceland and Norway), the objectives and priorities of VET seek to strike a balance between inclusion and excellence, with challenges being experienced in relation to both. Both countries support inclusion – for example, through the right of all students to access upper-secondary education. In Norway, the unlimited extension of the legal right to complete upper-secondary education was introduced with the Completion Reform (2020–2021). At the same time, there is a kind of consensus that inclusion should not be achieved by lowering formal qualification levels and there is a commitment within the overall VET policy to provide the labour market with high-level vocational skills.

In the United Kingdom, VET policies have consistently featured a balance between excellence and inclusion, with a strong focus on improving the quality of provision to create a world-class system. While the term ‘inclusion’ is less prominent, access for all remains a key principle, with various measures supporting disadvantaged learners and those with special needs. Excellence is linked to high skills development, and there is a continued emphasis on making VET and apprenticeships globally competitive. Inclusivity is addressed through initiatives like the equity, diversity and inclusion strategy, which aims to remove barriers to access across the system. The education system in Malta has been influenced by the UK one. During the past few years, the Maltese VET system has evolved to balance inclusion and excellence. While the initial focus was on providing education for early school leavers and disadvantaged groups, recent efforts have aimed to foster research and entrepreneurship through institutions like the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology. However, inclusion remains a key priority, with efforts to accommodate students with SEN and recent initiatives addressing multicultural inclusion. Excellence is also promoted through internationalisation and innovation, though challenges persist in relation to the quality of smaller private VET providers.

4.5.1.5. *Increasing emphasis on both objectives, especially recently*

A few countries (e.g. Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Slovakia) were found to have emphasised both goals – vocational excellence and inclusion – in policy documents, particularly in recent years. While these objectives were also pursued to a certain extent in the early years of the period of investigation, they tended to receive more attention in the later years. The most important reforms in this context include the following.

- (a) In Bulgaria, efforts since 2013 to modernise the VET system have affected both objectives. Legal frameworks and strategic documents, such as the strategic framework for the development of education, training and learning (2021–2027), offer a balanced focus on vocational excellence and inclusion. In contrast, documents specific to CVET, like the Employment Promotion Act and the national employment action plan, tend to emphasise inclusion by providing new pathways for adults, facilitating the acquisition of partial qualifications and offering funding for training opportunities.
- (b) In Greece, a clear shift towards vocational excellence and inclusion can be attributed to the reform introduced by Law No 4763/2020, which aimed to address issues such as the low social recognition, weak labour market alignment and poor effectiveness of VET.
- (c) In Poland, VET has received more attention since the late 2010s, with reforms in 2017–2019 aimed at improving the system’s responsiveness to labour market needs. Though the term ‘excellence’ is not explicitly used, there has been a strong focus on high quality, modernisation and employer involvement. Key reforms include the modernisation of VET curricula and exams, the promotion of work-based learning and the holding of skills competitions. Inclusion efforts have been less prominent, though important changes were made to integrate learners with mild intellectual disabilities into VET.
- (d) Slovakia has also seen a gradual shift towards excellence and inclusion in VET, with the 2017 ‘Learning Slovakia’ document highlighting inclusion as a priority. Recent reforms aim to improve VET quality and address the needs of socially disadvantaged groups, especially the Roma minority. Efforts include the introduction of alternative lower-secondary education pathways and pilot programmes for preventing early school leaving. Excellence is promoted through quality assurance measures, international cooperation and the development of CoVEs. However, challenges remain in ensuring that the centres balance short-term labour market needs with broader educational goals.

4.5.2. Contradictory or complementary

As discussed in Section 2.3, vocational excellence and inclusion do not need to be considered two opposing objectives but can be seen as two sides of the same coin. Figure 3 shows that of the 150 policy documents analysed, more than one third (53) have a strong focus on inclusion only, 37 have a strong focus on excellence only and 39 have a strong focus on both inclusion and excellence. Thus, more than a quarter of all documents are assessed as having strong relevance to both policy objectives. The two objectives are often used in a complementary manner. This can be observed in relation to the explicit reference to policy objectives. Most policy documents with an explicit reference to excellence (31 out of 38) also contain an explicit reference to inclusion. In contrast, among the policy documents with an explicit reference to inclusion, more than half (49 out of 79) do not contain any reference to vocational excellence.

Complementarity can further be seen in the extent to which different target groups, such as high- or low-performing learners (to name a pair of opposites), are included in the policies. As shown in Section 4.2.1, of the 150 policy documents analysed, very few (four) of those related to vocational excellence are aimed primarily at very gifted or high-performing learners. It is therefore noted by some experts that this target group is not sufficiently considered in the policies. However, it should be borne in mind that in some cases there is talk of the 'individual needs of all learners', which in turn includes all groups of learners (i.e. reflecting a broader understanding of inclusion).

Although policies for excellence and inclusion generally tend to complement each other, challenges and contradictory elements can be identified. These aspects are presented in the following subsections.

The policy objectives related to vocational excellence and inclusion are viewed as complementary rather than contradictory in several countries (e.g. Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Norway, United Kingdom). This complementarity is evident in the following ways. In Bulgaria, for example, policies focus on making VET more attractive and responsive to labour market needs, thereby supporting both excellence and inclusion indirectly (as the policy documents analysed are not explicitly linked to vocational excellence or inclusion). Similarly, in Estonia, vocational education centres provide both IVET and CVET, including programmes for learners with SEN. Apprenticeships are used to improve the image of VET (and indirectly to achieve excellence, as an important aspect of vocational excellence is the labour market connectivity of VET), while at the same time addressing students who are less interested in academic pathways (inclusion). Finland's VET policies are designed to meet diverse student needs across different career phases. For

example, the introduction of individual study paths is supposed to be beneficial for all types of learners. However, there are implementation challenges, mainly arising from inconsistent funding. When the legislation for youth and adult VET was merged as part of the 2018 reform, the different needs of the various age groups were not sufficiently taken into account. Adult VET particularly needs holistic planning to balance excellence and inclusion, ensuring access to education for both workforce development and personal career transitions.

Greece's national strategy promotes a unified VET system that aligns with the EQF and ensures the recognition of qualifications for all learners, including those from vulnerable groups, thus combining high-quality education with inclusive practices. The Hungarian VET policy also positions excellence and inclusion as rather complementary, as it deals with a common goal to be achieved through the promotion of both policy objectives: to meet the needs of the labour market and provide the workforce necessary to sustain the economy. Latvia, Luxembourg and Slovakia similarly emphasise that excellence and inclusion are complementary, focusing on improving the quality of VET while ensuring it is accessible to all learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is also the case in Slovenia, where aspects of inclusion (beyond the traditional target groups of minorities and people with special needs) have been given more attention at all levels in recent years. Malta, through Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology, offers high-quality VET courses to students of diverse backgrounds, aiming to help each student reach their potential. In Norway and Sweden, excellence and inclusion are also seen as complementary and a strong emphasis is put on inclusive policies, while in the United Kingdom, the two objectives are reconciled by ensuring that excellent education is accessible to all, with additional support available for those who need it. Overall, these countries demonstrate that vocational excellence and inclusion can be pursued together to enhance both the quality of VET and its accessibility to all learners.

In some other countries (e.g. Austria, Belgium, Croatia), the goals of vocational excellence and inclusion are also seen as rather complementary, but they are rarely combined in the same policy documents. In Austria, while many policies emphasise inclusion, fewer focus equally on vocational excellence. However, broader strategies related to lifelong learning and digitalisation tend to integrate both objectives. For example, the policy for higher VET aims for vocational excellence by training high-level skilled workers, while also promoting inclusion by offering advanced qualifications to individuals with a background outside traditional higher education. In Belgium, vocational excellence and inclusion are quite aligned. Vocational excellence is encouraged to motivate students to pursue vocational training, while inclusion is promoted through the

provision of alternative pathways, such as adult education, the validation of informal learning and inclusive entrepreneurship projects funded by the European Social Fund, for those who do not succeed in traditional training. In Croatia, VET policies tend to separate the concepts of excellence and inclusion, with the latter focusing mainly on supporting students with disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the establishment of 25 regional competence centres in 2018 marked a shift, bringing vocational excellence and inclusion together by combining high-quality VET with the inclusion of vulnerable groups, innovative teaching methods and opportunities for vertical mobility and continued education.

In some countries (e.g. the Netherlands, Romania), policies related to inclusion are usually not related to excellence, but policies related to excellence are usually also related to inclusion. This unbalanced dynamic can, for example, be observed in the Netherlands: while the policies relating to inclusion generally have no reference to excellence, the policies that promote excellence in students contain references to inclusion. Inclusive language and references to diversity are usually part of policies on student excellence. This supports the notion that excellence and inclusion are not competing or contradictory objectives. Inclusion policies are designed to ensure that counselling and support to foster excellence are available to all students ⁽⁵⁷⁾. Meanwhile, in Romania, VET policies that directly target inclusion generally do not include aspects related to excellence. On the other hand, VET policies that address excellence generally feature inclusion as an important component of an excellent VET approach. In the case of broader VET policies, both policy objectives are considered and seem to complement each other. A strong example is the plan to develop regional consortia for dual VET that promote both inclusion – by supporting VET students from disadvantaged groups through free accommodation and transport – and excellence – by supporting VET students to achieve higher qualifications up to EQF level 7.

There are also some cases (e.g. in Czechia, Italy, Poland) where the policy objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion are promoted in the context of different types of VET provision, which often creates tensions between the objectives. In Czechia, vocational excellence and inclusion coexist in the VET system due to a wide variety of institutions and qualifications. While some schools focus on excellence and others on inclusion, political and academic discourse often stigmatises VET as less promising, emphasising general or academic programmes over vocational pathways. The dual focus of the system reflects the push for excellence, as evidenced by the promotion of ‘inspiring practices’ in excellent VET schools, but contrasting efforts to include marginalised students create a tension between these goals. In France, the concepts of excellence and inclusion are

⁽⁵⁷⁾ See the statement on [equal opportunities and inclusion](#) (in Dutch) from MBO Raad.

becoming increasingly intertwined, particularly as excellence is linked to the relevance and quality of VET and the job opportunities it provides. The interaction between inclusion and excellence varies by diploma level. For lower levels (EQF levels 3 and 4), excellence focuses on improving pedagogy and content to support academic success and labour market integration. For higher levels (EQF level 5 and above), excellence focuses on faster professional integration and better job outcomes. In the Irish further education and training system, there is no clear contradiction between excellence and inclusion, though excellence is not a central policy focus. Further education and training aims to provide high-quality, accessible education to all, reconciling the goals of inclusion and excellence by opening pathways to higher education. However, the focus on inclusion in apprenticeship strategies is less pronounced than the focus on excellence. In Italy, the focus is shifting from merely supporting weaker students to promoting both inclusion and the development of individual talents and excellence. This shift is most evident in tertiary vocational education (i.e. ITS), which is benefiting from reforms and funding, while secondary vocational education is still often seen as a pathway for students at risk of dropping out. In Poland, VET policies complement each other in terms of excellence and inclusion. While less talented students tend to enrol in three-year basic vocational schools, the system provides solid support for developing core competences. Ambitious students and schools have opportunities to pursue additional qualifications or participate in skills contests, ensuring that excellence does not clash with inclusion. In Portugal, the objectives of inclusion and excellence are complementary at EQF levels 3 and 4, where VET programmes focus on upskilling and reskilling. However, this complementarity is less visible at EQF level 5, where VET is more oriented towards high-performing and talented learners.

In other countries (e.g. Cyprus, Lithuania), excellence and inclusion also appear to be complementary, but there is some lack of clarity around the understanding of these concepts. In Lithuania, there is no conflict between the two objectives. However, policy documents tend to be more specific and detailed about measures related to vocational excellence, making this objective more visible. Inclusion-related measures, though applicable to VET, are more generic and less defined. Meanwhile, in Cyprus, vocational excellence and inclusion generally seem to complement each other, especially thanks to recent efforts to integrate excellence into an inclusion-oriented system. However, there is a need for clearer objectives and processes to create a cohesive vision for the VET system. This would involve better monitoring of both excellence and inclusion to inform policy and practice effectively.

In some countries (e.g. Denmark, Germany, Iceland), some degree of contradiction has been identified between policy objectives related to vocational excellence and inclusion. This is the case, for example, in Denmark, where in the 2000s, VET was tasked with including the 'residual group', which undermined the prestige of VET programmes and increased the focus on higher education, particularly science, technology, engineering and mathematics, for global competitiveness. This created a divide in political priorities. Since 2014, efforts have been made to restore the status of VET by shifting the responsibility for the 'residual group' to a separate preparatory education programme. The repeated reforms in VET have created dilemmas, with policies oscillating their focus between inclusion, attractiveness and catering to different target groups, and very often 'reforms tend to have multiple and contradictory effects' and 'unintended consequences' (Helms-Jørgensen, 2023). In the context of discussing issues with VET, the concept of 'wicked problems' should be considered; instead of just focusing on VET policies and systems, it is necessary to take into account the problem's embedded interlinkages with wage structures, working conditions and the hierarchy of professions and trades in the labour market, not to mention lifestyles and life expectations. The complexity of these connections means the problem cannot be addressed through VET policies alone⁽⁵⁸⁾. In Germany, although vocational excellence and inclusion generally seem to complement each other, there are some contradictory elements, which are particularly visible with regard to the image of VET. The dual VET system has traditionally been open to diverse learners, and inclusion has improved over the years. However, there could be a potential conflict between the promotion of vocational excellence to improve the image of VET on the one hand and the increasing recognition of foreign qualifications on the other. There are fears that recognising VET qualifications from abroad could lower standards in VET in general, which in turn would not be favourable to the image of VET. In Iceland, national VET policies on excellence and inclusion are largely complementary, focusing primarily on supporting vulnerable groups and learners with fewer opportunities. Complementarity is particularly evident in the focus on developing transversal competences and the recent reforms to work-based learning, which emphasise quality and learning outcomes rather than the duration of training. These changes are expected to improve both excellence and inclusion by reducing the number of dropouts and increasing completion rates. However, there are some imbalances in how excellence and inclusion are addressed, especially concerning curriculum content

⁽⁵⁸⁾ It was noted in the course of research that maybe the 'wicked problem' is finding a solution through enhanced admission requirements to general upper-secondary education and a reduction in the number of programmes at the higher education level. This seems to be the direction that education policies are taking at the moment.

and study pathways. Flexibility in study programmes has primarily benefited marginalised groups, such as students with disabilities, and has not supported advanced learning opportunities for high achievers. Pedagogical approaches and funding, which focus more on inclusion than excellence, also contribute to this imbalance.

Chapter 5.

Conclusions

This first strand of the wider study offers exploratory insights into how vocational excellence and inclusion have been addressed in national VET policies across 30 countries over time. While the lack of a universally accepted definition of these concepts led to some variation in how national policy documents were interpreted and analysed, the signals we identified provided a useful framework for exploring these complex themes. The analysis of policy documents, together with assessments by national experts, enabled us to gather informed perspectives on national VET priorities, even though the limited selection of five documents per country may not have captured the full spectrum of policy shifts and reforms over the past 25 years. In addition, the diversity of language and terminology highlighted the ways different countries approach vocational excellence and inclusion, enriching the understanding of the variety of interpretations among national contexts. Thus, the study revealed significant trends in how vocational excellence and inclusion are conceptualised and pursued across countries.

This final chapter draws conclusions in relation to the research questions (Section 5.1), discusses some lessons learned that may inform future policymaking (Section 5.2) and provides an outlook for the next parts of the overall study (Section 5.3).

5.1. Findings and observations related to the research questions

The first two research questions of the study focus on how the goals of excellence and inclusion have been addressed in national policy documents over the past 25 years and the extent to which the priorities and objectives associated with these goals are linked to changes in expectations with regard to learning outcomes or the delivery of VET. The aspects of reforms, measures and instruments identified in Chapter 4 are not all new, as they refer to recurring themes in European countries (59); most of them have also been identified in other studies, including in relation to changes over time. The report *The future of vocational education and training in Europe* (Cedefop, 2023b), for example, also points to changes related to the profile and nature of VET, such as a greater accentuation of general and transversal skills, increased workplace learning, increased flexibility and more

⁽⁵⁹⁾ Many of these topics were also identified by Gordon (2015), for example, around 10 years ago when she looked back on the (then) past 25 years of VET development in Europe.

alternative pathways, strengthened links to higher education levels and the increasing importance of CVET and lifelong learning. The aim of this research has been to draw a ‘big picture’ of European VET developments to understand strengths and weaknesses and to provide a better basis for future decisions. The current research builds on and deepens the insights acquired by linking them to the practical objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion. It is from this point of view that the conclusions in relation to the research questions should be read.

5.1.1. How have the objectives of excellence and inclusion been addressed in national policy documents over the past 25 years?

This section briefly summarises how the concepts of vocational excellence and inclusion have been understood and promoted in the national VET policy documents of the past 25 years. The research shows that the term ‘vocational excellence’ is not frequently used: only half of the policy documents assessed as having a strong focus on excellence make explicit reference to this term, with a slight increase in frequency in the past 10–15 years. This would suggest a strong link to the corresponding objectives communicated in EU policy documents (Chapter 2). The actual term ‘inclusion’ is also not explicitly mentioned in all VET policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion as a policy goal, despite more documents being dedicated to this theme ⁽⁶⁰⁾. Therefore, this summary is mainly based on the analysis of the subject signals identified in the policy documents and the country experts’ justifications for their assessment that a policy document has a strong focus on one of these objectives. In the following subsections, reference is made firstly to the target groups addressed in the policy documents and secondly to the signals at the institutional and national levels, which are regarded as implicit references to the pursuit of the policy goals of vocational excellence and inclusion.

5.1.1.1. Vocational excellence

The policy documents related to vocational excellence that address high-performing learners come from 18 countries. The target group in these policy documents is referred to as talented or gifted learners, high-achieving or excellent students (including those taking part in skills competitions) or highly skilled or competent individuals (with a focus on developing advanced skills and career progression, including highly skilled professionals being trained to a higher level). Nevertheless, in most countries, the focus is not limited to high achievers or exceptionally gifted individuals but covers varied groups, as vocational excellence

⁽⁶⁰⁾ However, it must be recognised that in most European countries, high-level policy documents have been published that refer to concepts related to equity in education in general (European Commission, EACEA & Eurydice, 2020).

is more related to improving the overall quality of VET than to specific target groups.

In the context of the provider level or the national level, the terms ‘high quality’, ‘innovation’ and ‘modernisation’ (e.g. of the programmes, the curricula, the infrastructure of the VET institutions) are frequently associated with the objectives of vocational excellence. So is the aim of aligning VET programmes with the labour market or industry needs to help students gain relevant, high-demand skills (including entrepreneurship) for the job market. These excellence-related activities particularly involve the development of strong partnerships with businesses to improve the quality and relevance of VET (e.g. by enhancing work-based learning). In recent years, this has extended to the creation of CoVEs ⁽⁶¹⁾ to drive innovation, applied research and industry partnerships (e.g. in Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Malta, Slovakia, Spain, the United Kingdom), some specialised VET institutions or resource centres (e.g. in Luxembourg, Romania) or sectoral expert councils (e.g. in Latvia). An emphasis is also often placed on developing human resources and particularly on enhancing the standards of teacher or in-company trainer education and training and CPD (e.g. in Estonia, Lithuania, Romania, the United Kingdom). In some countries, the promotion of vocational excellence is also linked to the development of ‘higher VET’ offerings or a new ‘higher VET’ sector (e.g. in Austria, Italy, Norway).

While the measures mentioned above are intended to benefit all VET learners as far as possible and therefore appear to be based on a broader understanding of vocational excellence, in some cases specific measures are in place that relate to a particular target group. They often aim to create dedicated pathways and opportunities for high-performing learners, such as measures for VET students aiming for higher education in Estonia, ‘pathways for excellence’ programmes in France, the possibility for high-achieving students of following individualised study programmes that enable them to achieve more advanced learning outcomes in Iceland. Other measures at the individual level include scholarships (e.g. in Poland) and skills competitions (e.g. in Austria, Finland, France, Poland).

5.1.1.2. *Inclusion*

The policy documents analysed either emphasise certain ideals or principles related to the promotion of equity in VET (or more generally in education) or focus on specific groups facing inequalities or barriers in access to VET. The analysis of the VET policy documents and the additional information provided by national

⁽⁶¹⁾ This development needs to be explored further, as progress in the promotion of CoVEs has not been sufficiently captured by the analysis of national VET policy documents. Relevant activities could be included in more practical plans or promoted by encouraging participation in Erasmus+ projects.

experts show that ‘disadvantaged or vulnerable learners’ are the target group most frequently referred to in relation to inclusion in VET. This group includes those facing socioeconomic challenges, those from rural backgrounds, those at risk of social, economic and educational exclusion and NEETs. Very often, these policies also refer to learners with special needs or disabilities, low-skilled or ‘weaker’ learners and those at risk of dropping out (e.g. low-performing students or those with poorer academic results), ethnic minorities (e.g. Roma), migrants (including refugees) and adults needing reskilling or upskilling. In some cases, it can be observed that the scope of the target group of disadvantaged people has expanded over the years. For example, in Czechia, the understanding of target groups in schools has expanded from pupils with disabilities to include ethnic minorities (especially Roma), people with social disadvantages and, more recently, people with geographical disadvantages and refugees from Ukraine. If a specific target group is addressed or focused on in a country’s policy documents at a certain time, this seems to reflect the current issues and challenges in the country’s context.

A broader understanding of inclusion was also identified in some countries’ policy documents. One example of this is Sweden, whose welfare values and approach traditionally emphasise support for diversity and the accessibility of education for all, regardless of background, socioeconomic status or gender. From this perspective, education must be accessible to all and students should receive the support they need; there should be no ‘dead ends’ in the education system and everyone should be able to fulfil their potential. In other countries, a broader understanding of inclusion and the profile of the target group has developed over time. In Austria, for example, earlier policies related to inclusion often refer to the provision of vocational training for people with SEN or support needs (focusing on ‘integration’), while later policies more often reflect a broader understanding and refer to individual needs in general.

The inclusion of disadvantaged groups at the provider or national level is commonly promoted by providing direct support through social mechanisms, tailored programmes (e.g. reducing theoretical coursework in favour of practical training in Hungary) and employability-focused initiatives. More specifically, this includes ensuring access to VET for those facing barriers, such as students with disabilities, creating flexible pathways for VET, particularly for adults and immigrants (e.g. in Norway), the validation of non-formal and informal learning (e.g. in Belgium, Bulgaria, Iceland, Latvia) and individualised guidance and other support services (e.g. in Bulgaria, Spain). In some cases, there are attempts to enhance inclusion through digitalisation and modernised educational infrastructures or through implementing early warning systems and interventions for preventing early school leaving and dropouts (e.g. in Slovakia).

In the policy documents that reflect a broader understanding of inclusion, the promotion of inclusion focuses on ensuring access to VET for all (e.g. in Ireland), providing flexible and high-quality educational pathways for all learners regardless of their background or socioeconomic status (e.g. in Denmark, Finland), removing barriers and ensuring that educational systems are adaptable and inclusive for all. These policies generally emphasise continued learning opportunities throughout life (e.g. in Luxembourg) and ensure that all students receive the support they need to succeed (e.g. in Austria).

5.1.2. To what extent have priorities and objectives linked to excellence and inclusion triggered and influenced reforms and practical policies?

The analysis of the policy documents shows that these countries are working towards excellence and inclusion using various means and instruments. The policy documents set out intended changes and activities that can be linked to the goals of excellence and inclusion, that is, they were identified as signals for the pursuit of these objectives or are explicitly geared towards them.

Changes related to the delivery of VET are promoted in almost all the documents analysed, and those dealing with the provision of flexible and individual learning opportunities and career guidance can be linked to both policy objectives. In policy documents with a strong focus on vocational excellence, individual learning opportunities relate to providing new specialisations, using technology to personalise the learning experience, strengthening workplace learning and facilitating learners' mobility. Further, the modernisation of infrastructure or equipment is indicated, as are overall changes to VET institutions, including the establishment of CoVEs. Career guidance or mentoring services to support students through various stages of their educational and career journeys are also frequently mentioned. Policy documents with a strong focus on inclusion particularly emphasise flexible and personalised pathways (e.g. bridging or second-chance programmes) and pedagogical approaches that support individualisation. Further, the adaptation of teaching and learning to the individual needs of specific vulnerable or disadvantaged target groups (and to the needs of all learners over time) is promoted. Finally, personalised and lifelong learning guidance is frequently mentioned, with a strong emphasis on various support provisions.

Changes related to the content of VET curricula (i.e. changes in learning outcome expectations emphasising transversal or occupational competences) are less frequently promoted in the policy documents analysed (only in about two thirds). However, this must also be understood against the background of the development noted in previous research, which points to 'evidence of a trend

towards general and/or transversal skills but there are also counter examples and often advances in one direction turn out to be like a pendulum that swings back' (Cedefop, 2023b, p. 59). The following observations can be made. A strong focus on vocational excellence (38 %) is accompanied by a strengthening of components relating to general education and transversal and occupational competences ⁽⁶²⁾. Transversal competences focus on the development of digital and critical thinking skills and also social and personal skills that are important for social and professional inclusion, including entrepreneurship, innovation and research. Regarding occupational competences, reference is repeatedly made to improving responsiveness to the needs of the labour market in general. In the case of a strong focus on inclusion (45 %) in policy documents, the development of key competences and basic skills is emphasised, while references to strengthening occupational competences tend to be more general (e.g. 'meeting the demands of working life').

In this part of the study, it was possible to touch only briefly on the sub-questions relating to the impact of these policies on resource allocation and distribution and their influence on sectoral policies.

- (a) It can be assumed that the changes promoted in the policy documents analysed have (at least to some extent) affected resource allocation and distribution. However, the data collected do not support definitive conclusions about the extent of this impact, as only a few policy documents contain information on funding lines. However, even if specific budget figures are given, it cannot be concluded to what extent a reallocation or redistribution of financial resources is associated with this or serves to promote either vocational excellence or inclusion more strongly (thus taking budgetary resources away from the pursuit of the other policy objective). One question that future studies could address is the extent to which 'needs-based funding' is applied (e.g. whether the VET schools that strive for inclusion and/or excellence receive more funding and from whom).
- (b) In most policy documents analysed, the sectoral focus does not play a significant role: they refer to the VET sector as a whole or to a wider area and make little reference to specific economic sectors. Still, these policy documents have led to the development of specific sectoral policies or the implementation of specific sectoral measures to pursue the overarching goals of vocational excellence and/or inclusion in a particular sector.

⁽⁶²⁾ The previous Cedefop report on the future of VET observed such curriculum changes over time and understood this as reflecting 'the claim that VET should also prepare for higher and further education' (Cedefop, 2023b, p. 61).

5.1.3. To what extent do policies on excellence and inclusion contradict or complement each other?

The sample of policy documents analysed includes a higher share with a strong focus on inclusion. The analysis of policy documents further shows that most of them do not exclusively focus on one or the other objective. Even when they are assessed as having strong relevance to or prioritising one of the objectives, usually the other objective is also addressed to some extent. This is an indication that both goals are high on the agenda in the 30 countries examined and confirms that a dual role or dual objective is repeatedly being attributed to VET (as suggested in Section 2.1).

When it comes to the extent to which aspects of vocational excellence or inclusion have been emphasised since 2000, different trends can be identified. The number of countries that consistently place a stronger emphasis on inclusion in policy documents is higher. However, there are also many countries where there has been an increased focus (to varying degrees) on vocational excellence over the past 10 years. This can be linked to the [Riga conclusions](#) (2015), which, among other things, stressed the need not to neglect the promotion of vocational excellence in favour of the goal of making VET more inclusive.

In addition, a more balanced approach to pursuing these policy objectives simultaneously has been observed in a number of countries since 2000. Meanwhile, in other countries, there has only recently been an increased focus on both objectives. These developments must be seen in the overall context of the VET system in question, of which only a part and a specific period have been considered in this study.

For most countries, the policy objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion are assessed by country experts as being rather complementary. Countries sometimes also use the same instruments to pursue both goals. For example, providing high-quality VET that is accessible for all learners, aligning VET with labour market needs and offering flexible and individualised learning pathways seem to benefit both objectives.

In some cases, excellence and inclusion are seen as complementary but are pursued through different policy mechanisms. For instance, policies aimed at achieving excellence may focus on raising the standards of teaching, improving school infrastructure or increasing investments in areas like technology and curriculum development. On the other hand, inclusion policies may focus on providing support for disadvantaged learners, such as those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, students with disabilities or individuals at risk of dropping out. Although these measures are not always brought together in a single framework or policy document, they share a common goal: to create an equitable

and high-quality VET environment. For example, a country may invest in CoVEs that promote high educational standards (e.g. with a focus on state-of-the-art equipment and regional and international cooperation) while taking measures to ensure that these programmes are accessible to disadvantaged or vulnerable groups of learners through bridging courses or targeted support services.

In some contexts, the focus on one objective may unintentionally undermine the other, particularly where policies do not explicitly integrate both goals. There are also cases that show how difficult it is to pursue both objectives at the same time. For example, the combination of policy measures related to inclusion and vocational excellence is sometimes used with the aim of attracting more learners to VET (see Box 28). Given the fact that the image of VET in some countries is rather poor (Billett, 2020; Cedefop, 2017) (and this perception is quite persistent), specific efforts to provide disadvantaged or vulnerable learners with access to VET or to fast-track students through VET programmes to increase completion rates may further undermine the reputation and perceived value of VET.

Overall, the extent to which policies on vocational excellence and inclusion complement or contradict each other depends on policy design and implementation, but also on how these objectives are conceptualised and understood. If a broader understanding is used at the national level, as advocated in EU policy documents in recent years, then these concepts are understood as mutually encompassing or even mutually dependent or reinforcing. Finally, it seems the concept of 'inclusive excellence' in VET, which has been emphasised in recent discourse (see Section 2.4), has yet to find its way into national policies, as it was not addressed in the policy documents analysed. This is something that will need to be considered in terms of future policy development.

5.2. Lessons learned for future policymaking

The policy objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion are expected to remain pivotal in the coming years, particularly in light of the significant challenges facing Europe. These challenges encompass the rapidly changing environment, technological developments, the green and digital transitions, the demands of an ageing workforce, the necessity of addressing migration while managing related societal concerns and the persistence or exacerbation of socioeconomic inequalities. To meet these challenges, it is strongly emphasised that Europe must remain competitive, ensuring productivity growth and innovation while preserving the values of equity and social inclusion (European Commission, 2024). Von der Leyen (2024), in *Europe's Choice: Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2024–2029*, also highlights the need to ensure the EU's

competitiveness, prosperity and fairness, outlining the plan to establish a 'union of skills' and stressing the importance of embedding lifelong learning into education and careers. It can be assumed that vocational excellence and inclusion – or even 'inclusive excellence' – will feature as important objectives in the planned European strategy for VET. As the concept of 'inclusive excellence' is currently strongly promoted in EU and international education policy, it is important to ensure that related national policies – that reflect political, economic and social priorities and principles at a given time – are put into practice.

5.2.1. What lessons can be learned from this exploratory study with regard to informing future policymaking?

The research points to the benefits of a complementary pursuit of vocational excellence and inclusion. These two objectives should be understood as mutually reinforcing. Inclusion, when viewed through the lens of equity and as a means of addressing the unique needs of all learners, must also encompass high-achieving or exceptionally talented students. Conversely, vocational excellence cannot thrive in an environment that excludes certain groups, as such an elitist approach risks deepening social and economic disparities. Policies should treat inclusion and excellence as two sides of the same coin, fostering an environment where every learner, regardless of their abilities, can flourish and succeed in their own way.

The results of the study show that policy documents place greater emphasis on inclusion and vulnerable groups than on excellence. This could be the reason why VET is seen in some contexts as a second choice and safety net in education and therefore sometimes has a less favourable image. However, a balanced approach in VET policies is key to achieving both excellence and inclusion, even though a specific focus on certain target groups may be necessary at different phases. Policies should be flexible enough to adjust the focus as needed, depending on the phase or circumstances, ensuring that neither vocational excellence nor inclusion is sidelined.

The key to the success of the joint pursuit of vocational excellence and inclusion lies in its practical implementation. In adopting a practical approach, policymakers must always ask the question, 'What should excellence and inclusion or inclusive excellence in VET be pursued in relation to?' The three-perspective model used in this study can help policymakers choose intended change processes. It is useful for not losing sight of the essential aspects of excellence and inclusion and reflecting on the extent to which they are sufficiently considered in policies or need to be emphasised. Therefore, the three-perspective model also contributes to understanding 'inclusive excellence in VET' as a framework that takes into account all components and aspects of VET.

Research shows that certain interventions can serve both goals, but it is essential to reflect on whether the measures being used really promote both of them effectively. Of course, focusing on both policy objectives at the same time adds complexity. As the literature (Chapter 2) and the analysis of policy documents (Section 4.3.3) show, the emphasis on flexible and individualised educational pathways, for example, is linked to both objectives. Previous research has shown that various efforts have been made in this regard in European countries in recent years and ‘that the degree of choice for learners has increased over time’ (Cedefop, 2023b, p. 52). However, the question is whether all learners can benefit from increased choice or whether it is more beneficial for those following programmes at higher levels of education (since the more autonomy VET providers have, the higher the level of choice tends to be) (Cedefop, 2023b, p. 53). The validation of non-formal and informal learning is also promoted as a means of supporting flexible and individualised educational pathways. Related measures are often intended to support low-skilled or disadvantaged learners but are in fact under-utilised by these same groups, making it difficult to reach those most in need (European Commission, 2020, p. 50). Thus, constant reflection is needed on the intended and unintended consequences of policies, whether the measures aimed at the objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion are effective and, if not, what needs to be changed or what accompanying interventions are required.

Realising the policy objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion requires an enabling environment, including relevant laws, strategies and programmes, but also long-term commitment and coordination across different policy areas. In addition, appropriate resources and (support) structures must be in place to implement the relevant measures, as must monitoring and evaluation systems to assess their effectiveness.

Encouraging cross-national peer learning among policymakers and stakeholders can contribute to a better understanding of how to operationalise these concepts. This can also lead to the analysis and sharing of good practices on how to combine vocational excellence and inclusion in a balanced and effective way. Successful examples from one context can inspire innovative solutions in another, ensuring continuous improvement towards ‘inclusive excellence’ in VET.

List of abbreviations

CoVE	Centre of Vocational Excellence
CPD	continuing professional development
CVET	continuing vocational education and training
ESA	European Skills Agenda
ENE	European Training Foundation Network for Excellence
EQAVET	European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training
EQF	European qualifications framework
ETF	European Training Foundation
EUX	Erhvervsfaglig studentereksamen i forbindelse med erhvervsuddannelse (Vocational education programme qualifying for access to higher education)
FET	Further Education and Training (Ireland)
ILO	International Labour Organization
ISATCOVE	International Self-Assessment Tool for Centres of Vocational Excellence
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
ITS	<i>istituti tecnici superiori</i> (higher technical institutes)
IVET	initial vocational education and training
LLL	lifelong learning
MCAST	Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology
NEET	not in education, employment or training
NOKUT	Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education
NQF	national qualifications framework
PPP	public private partnerships
RCC	Regional Centres of Competence (Croatia)
SEN	special educational needs
SMEs	small and medium-sized enterprises
STEM	science, technology, engineering, mathematics
UN	United Nations
VET	vocational education and training

References

(All URLs accessed on 5 June 2025)

- Aggarwal, A. & Gasskov, V. (2013). *Comparative Analysis of National Skills Development Policies: A guide for policy makers*. International Labour Organization.
- Arribas, J. M. G. (2020). Centres of Vocational Excellence and Innovation (CoVEs): A new era for vocational education and training (VET) institutions? *Academia*, 18, 58–84.
- Auzinger, M., Broek, S., Luomi-Messerer, K. & McCoshan, A. (2022). *Quality Award on Vocational Excellence*. Concept Paper.
- Barrick, R. K. (2019). Competence and Excellence in Vocational Education and Training. In: S. McGrath, M. Mulder, J. Papier & R. Suart (eds). *Handbook of Vocational Education and Training: Developments in the Changing World of Work*. *Springer Nature*, 1(12), 1155–1166.
- Berner, E. & Gonon, P. (2016). *The Genesis of Vocational Education in Switzerland from the Perspective of Justification Theory: On the Development of a Dual Vocational Education Model in the Cantons of Geneva and Lucerne*. Peter Lang.
- Billett, S. (2020). Perspectives on enhancing the standing of vocational education and the occupations it serves. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 72(2), 161–169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2020.1749483>
- Bjørnåvold, J. (2019). The role of learning outcomes in governing and reforming education and training; reflections on strengths and limitations. In: Cedefop, ETF, UNESCO, & UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. *Global inventory of regional and national qualifications frameworks 2019. Volume I: Thematic chapters*. https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/2224_en_0.pdf
- Boletín Oficial del Estado. (2022). *Ley Orgánica 3/2022, de 31 de marzo, de ordenación e integración de la Formación Profesional* [Organic Law 3/2022, of March 31, on the organisation and integration of Vocational Training]. <https://www.boe.es/eli/es/lo/2022/03/31/3>
- Boltanski, L. & Chiapello, E. (2005). *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Verso.
- Boltanski, L. & Thévenot, L. (2007). *Über die Rechtfertigung: eine Soziologie der kritischen Urteilskraft*.
- Bonoli, L. & Gonon, P. (2022). The evolution of VET systems as a combination of economic, social and educational aims: the case of Swiss VET. *Hungarian Educational Research Journal*, 12(3), 305–316.
- Boston University Diversity & Inclusion. (n.d.). *Inequity, Equality, Equity, and Justice*. <https://www.bu.edu/diversity/resource-toolkit/inequity-equality-equity-and-justice/>

- Buchanan, J., Anderson, P. & Power, G. (2016). Skill Ecosystems. In: J. Buchanan, D. Finegold, K. Mayhew & C. Warhurst (eds). *The Oxford handbook of skills and training*. Oxford University Press.
- Buisman, M., Voncken, E., Meijden, A. J. H.v.d., Petit, R., Schooten, E.v. & Meijer, J. (2019). *Op zoek naar excellentie. De opbrengsten van drie jaar excellentieonderwijs in het mbo*. K. Instituut.
<https://www.nro.nl/sites/nro/files/migrate/Op-zoek-naar-excellentie-De-opbrengsten-van-drie-jaar-excellentieonderwijs-in-het-mbo-Eindrapportage-405-15-606.pdf>
- Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science. (2021). Стратегическа рамка за развитие на образованието, обучението и ученето през целия живот в Република България (2021–2030). [Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training, and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021–2030)]. <https://www.mon.bg/nfs/2021/03/strategicheska-ramka-obrobuuchene-110321.pdf>
- Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (2022). Exzellenzinitiative Berufliche Bildung. [Excellence initiative for VET]. https://www.bmbf.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/de/2022/eckpunkte-exzellenzinitiative-berufliche-bildung.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=4
- Cardno, C. (2018). Policy Document Analysis: A Practical Educational Leadership Tool and a Qualitative Research Method. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 24(4), 623–640.
- Cedefop. (2010a). *A bridge to the future European policy for vocational education and training 2002–10*. Publications Office of the European Union.
https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/3058_en.pdf
- Cedefop. (2010b). *Learning outcomes approaches in VET curricula: A comparative analysis of nine European countries*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/5506>
- Cedefop. (2012). *Curriculum reform in Europe. The impact of learning outcomes*. Publications Office of the European Union.
https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/5529_en.pdf
- Cedefop. (2015). *The role of modularisation and unitisation in vocational education and training*. Publications Office of the European Union.
https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/6126_en.pdf
- Cedefop. (2016). *Application of learning outcomes approaches across Europe*. Publications Office of the European Union.
https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/3074_en.pdf
- Cedefop. (2017). *Cedefop European public opinion survey on vocational education and training*. Publications Office of the European Union.
<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/5562>
- Cedefop. (2019a). *France: excellence in VET – a new generation ‘Trades and qualifications campuses’*. Cedefop National news.

- <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news/france-excellence-vet-new-generation-trades-and-qualifications-campuses>
- Cedefop. (2019b). *VET toolkit for tackling early leaving: Reflection tool for policy makers*. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-toolkit-tackling-early-leaving/evaluate/reflect>
- Cedefop. (2020). *Vocational education and training in Europe, 1995–2035: scenarios for European vocational education and training in the 21st century*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/3083>
- Cedefop. (2021). *Review and renewal of qualifications: Towards methodologies for analysing and comparing learning outcomes*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/5582>
- Cedefop. (2022a). *Defining, writing and applying learning outcomes: a European handbook – second edition*. Publications Office of the European Union. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/703079>
- Cedefop. (2022b). *The future of vocational education and training in Europe: volume 2: delivering IVET: institutional diversification and/or expansion?* Publications Office of the European Union. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/780431>
- Cedefop. (2022c). *Workshop ‘The Future of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Slovenia’, 17 November 2022. Conclusions of the working groups: description of the scenario ‘Inclusive Excellence’*. https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/slovenia_national_scenario_workshop_-_the_future_of_vet_2022_0.pdf
- Cedefop. (2023a). *The future of vocational education and training in Europe: 50 dimensions of vocational education and training: Cedefop’s analytical framework for comparing VET*. Publications Office of the European Union. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/57908>
- Cedefop. (2023b). *The future of vocational education and training in Europe: synthesis report*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/3094>
- Cedefop. (2023c). *Working together towards attractive, inclusive, innovative, agile and flexible VET*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/9180>
- Cedefop. (2024). *The influence of learning outcomes on pedagogical theory and tools*. Publications Office of the European Union. https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/5605_en.pdf
- Cedefop. (n.d.-a). *Timeline of VET policies in Europe*. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/timeline-vet-policies-europe>
- Cedefop. (n.d.-b). *VET-in-Europe country reports*. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/vet-in-europe-country-reports>

- Cedefop. (n.d.-c). *Annex 1 – Structure of the policy developments (PDs) and guidelines*. Unpublished.
- Codd, J. A. (1988). The construction and deconstruction of educational policy documents. *Journal of Education Policy*, 3(3), 235–247.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093880030303>
- Commission for Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning. (2012). *Reaching excellence in English vocational education and training*.
- CoP CoVEs. (2020). *Community of Practice Centres of Vocational Excellence*.
<https://www.copcov.es/>
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1, 139–167.
- Cruz, R. A., Kramarczuk Voulgarides, C. M., Firestone, A. R., McDermott, L. & Feng, Z. (2023). Is Dis-Ability a Foregone Conclusion? Research and Policy Solutions to Disproportionality. *Review of Educational Research*, 94(6)
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.3102/00346543231212935>
- Department for Education and Skills. (2006). *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances*. TSO, The Stationery Office.
<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7cd43740f0b6629523c104/6768.pdf>
- Department for Education. (2016). *Post-16 Skills Plan*.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a80d94ded915d74e6230cbe/Post-16_Skills_Plan.pdf
- Department of Education and Skills. (2016). *Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 – Ireland's Future*. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/69fd2-irelands-national-skills-strategy-2025-irelands-future/#objectives>
- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. (2000). *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education*.
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/26c15-learning-for-life-white-paper-on-adult-education-july-2000/>
- Dunajeva, K. (2022). *Comparative analysis report on the evolution of concepts, definitions and prioritisation of vulnerable groups in public policy documents*.
https://www.pioneered-project.eu/public-deliverables/PIONEERED_WP3_D3.1_PPMI_final.pdf
- Estonian Government. (2019). *Kutseharidusstandard*. [Amendment to the Standard of Vocational Education].
<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/117042019006>
- ETF. (2020). *Centres of Vocational Excellence. An engine for vocational education and training development. An international study*.
https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-07/centres_of_vocational_excellence.pdf

- ETF. (2023). *The international dimension of Centres of vocational excellence: Building a strong international cooperation dimension on Vocational Excellence. Training for ISATCOVE Pilot.*
- ETF. (n.d.). *Vocational excellence – ENE.* <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/what-we-do/vocational-excellence-ene>
- EUCEN. (2008). *Progress in implementation.* <http://lifelonglearning-observatory.eucen.eu/III-implementation>
- European Commission. (2019). *Mapping of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs). ET 2020 Working Group on Vocational Education and Training (VET).* Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/646482>
- European Commission. (2020). *Study supporting the evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.* Publication Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/55823>
- European Commission. (2022). *Centres of Vocational Excellence in Erasmus+* <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=27311&langId=en>
- European Commission. (2024). *The future of European competitiveness. Part A | A competitiveness strategy for Europe. Report by Mario Draghi.* https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en
- European Commission. (n.d.-a). *Centres of Vocational Excellence.* <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1501>
- European Commission. (n.d.-b). *Erasmus+ Programme Guide – Part B – Key Action 2 – Centres of Vocational Excellence.* <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-2/centres-vocational-excellence>
- European Commission. (n.d.-c). *EU Support for Vocational Excellence.* <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1636&langId=en>
- European Commission. (n.d.-d). *European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO). Transversal knowledge, skills and competences.* <https://esco.ec.europa.eu/en/about-esco/escopedia/escopedia/transversal-knowledge-skills-and-competences>
- European Commission. (n.d.-e). *FAQ: Supporting Vocational Excellence in Europe – What is Vocational Excellence?* <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1638&langId=en>
- European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. (2020). *Equity in school education in Europe: Structures, policies and student performance. Eurydice report.* Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/658266>
- European Commission & ETF. (2022). *The European Commission and the ETF sign an agreement to promote the international dimension of CoVEs.*

- [https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-03/ETF Factsheet EU ETF Agreement final.pdf](https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-03/ETF_Factsheet_EU ETF_Agreement_final.pdf)
- Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training. (n.d.). *Apprenticeship Toolbox – Key Features – Attractiveness and Excellence*.
<https://www.bibb.de/en/147147.php>
- Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles. (n.d.). *Pacte pour un Enseignement d'excellence* [Pact for Excellence in Education].
<https://pactepourunenseignementdexcellence.cfwb.be/>
- Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana. (2024). Legge 8 agosto 2024, n.121, 'Istituzione della filiera formativa tecnologico-professionale' [Law on the 'Establishment of the technological-professional training chain'].
https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/serie_generale/caricaDettaglioAtto/originario?atto.dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=2024-08-22&atto.codiceRedazionale=24G00139&elenco30giorni=true
- Gendron, B. (2022). Bienvivance and Inclusive Vocational Excellence through Enabling and Collaborative Pedagogy, an Essay and Reflexive Analysis on Transformative Learning. In: M. L. Herrera (ed.). *Learning, teaching and policy making in VET (Emerging issues in research on vocational education & training)*. Stockholm: Atlas Förlag, Vol. 8, pp. 47–101.
- GIVE partnership. (2023). GIVE – Updated Reference Framework on Vocational Excellence through for Innovative and Inclusive Pedagogies. GIVE partnership (2023). The G. I. V. E. Model: Innovations in the VET system for Inclusive Excellence <https://www.thegiveproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/D.2.6.b.pdf>
- GIVE Team – University of Bucharest. (2023). GIVE Reference Framework on Vocational Excellence through for Innovative and Inclusive Pedagogies. In: The G. I. V. E. Model: Innovations in the VET system for Inclusive Excellence. pp. 43. www.thegiveproject.eu/
- GIVE Team – University of Bucharest. (2024). *Including to be excellent*.
<https://www.thegiveproject.eu/including-be-excellent/>
- Gonon, P. (2009). *The quest for modern vocational education: Georg Kerschensteiner between Dewey, Weber and Simmel*. Peter Lang.
- Gonon, P. and Stolz, S. (2012). *Inclusion and exclusion. A challenge in the context of globalisation*. Peter Lang.
- Gordon, J. (2015). Glimpsing the Future in the Past: VET in Europe. *European Journal of Education*, Vol. 50, pp. 440–460.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12151>
- Government Gazette of the Hellenic Republic. (2020). ΝΟΜΟΣ ΥΠ' ΑΡΙΘΜ. 4763 Εθνικό Σύστημα Επαγγελματικής Εκπαίδευσης, ενσωμάτωση στην ελληνική νομοθεσία της Οδηγίας (ΕΕ) 2018/958 του Ευρωπαϊκού Κοινοβουλίου και του Συμβουλίου της 28ης Ιουνίου 2018 σχετικά με τον έλεγχο αναλογικότητας πριν από τη θέσπιση νέας νομοθετικής κατοχύρωσης των επαγγελματιών (ΕΕ L 173), κύρωση της Συμφωνίας μεταξύ της Κυβέρνησης

- της Ελληνικής Δημοκρατίας και της Κυβέρνησης της Ομοσπονδιακής Δημοκρατίας της Γερμανίας για το Ελληνογερμανικό Ίδρυμα Νεολαίας και άλλες διατάξεις [Law No 4763 National Vocational Education System, incorporation into Greek legislation of Directive (EU) 2018/958 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 June 2018 on the proportionality check prior to the adoption of new legislation on professions (“EU L 173”), ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Hellenic Republic and the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany on the Hellenic-German Youth Foundation and other provisions].
Government Gazette, No 254.
https://www.minedu.gov.gr/publications/docs2021/nomos_4763_2020_fek_254_a_.pdf
- Government of Hungary. (2016). Zöld és digitális átállás a magyar szakképzésben (Magyarország Digitális Oktatási Stratégiája) [Green and digital transition in the Hungarian VET (The Digital Education Strategy of Hungary)].
<https://digitalisjoletprogram.hu/files/0a/6b/0a6bfcd72ccbf12c909b329149ae2537.pdf>
- Greek Ministry of Education and Culture. (2022). Στρατηγικό Σχέδιο Επαγγελματικής, Εκπαίδευσης Κατάρτισης, Διά Βίου Μάθησης και Νεολαίας 2022–2024 [Strategic Planning in the Field of Education] (in Greek).
https://gsvetlly.minedu.gov.gr/publications/docs2023/STRATIGIKO_SXEDIO_EEKDVMN_2022-2024.pdf
- Grollmann, P. and Ruth, K. (2006). The ‘Europeanisation’ of vocational education between formal policies and deliberative communication. Research in Comparative and International Education, Vol. 1, No 4, pp. 366–380. DOI: 10.2304/rcie.2006.1.4.366
- Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium. (2018). Kutsehariduse programm 2018–2021 (Vocational education programme 2018–2021).
https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2022-07/7_kutseharidusprogramm_2018-2021.pdf
- Hazelkorn, E. and Klemencic, M. (2022). Strategy seeks ‘inclusive excellence’ for European HE. University World News.
<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20220120133817396>
- Helms-Jørgensen, C. (2023). Dilemmas of policy measures to increase retention. Danish experiences. NIFU. Oslo 25 May 2023.
https://forskning.ruc.dk/files/96228177/ChrHJ_Policy_Dilemmas_in_VET_NIFU_25.5.2023.pptx
- Hogarth, T. (2022). Delivering VET – The way forward.
- Holford, J. and McKenzie, L. (2013). Analysing Lifelong Learning Policy in Europe through Policy Trails. In: draft paper presented at International Conference on Public Policy.

- Hornby, G. (2020). *The Necessity for Coexistence of Equity and Excellence in Inclusive and Special Education*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1231
- ILO. (2020). Guide on making TVET and skills development inclusive for all. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/@emp_ent/documents/publication/wcms_755869.pdf#:~:text=Guide%20on%20making%20TVET%20and%20skills%20development%20inclusive%20for%20all
- Imdorf, C. and Leemann, R. J. (2023). Education and conventions. In: *Handbook of Economics and Sociology of Conventions* Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 1–33.
- InclusiVET. (2023). Characteristics, challenges & opportunities of inclusive learner engagement in VET. http://inclusivet.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/84/2024/03/InclusiVET_Mapping-Report_Final.pdf
- James Relly, S., Robson, J., Emms, K., Laczik, A., Randhawa, A., Aizawa, I., Dong, L., Hwang, S., Pinto, V. and Zlock, L. (2021). *Drivers of technical excellence in the skills economy*. London: WorldSkills UK. <https://www.worldskillsuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/SKOPE-final.pdf>
- Kancelaria Sejmu. (2018). Ustawa z dnia 22 listopada 2018 r. o zmianie ustawy – Prawo oświatowe oraz niektórych innych ustaw [Act of 22 November 2018 amending the Education act and certain other acts]. <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20180002245>
- Ketelaar, E., Smulders, H. & Wagemakers, S. (2019). *Excellence in creative-technical upper secondary VET: Characteristics of excelling students*. In: *Trends in vocational education and training research. Vol. II. Proceedings of the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER), Vocational Education and Training Network (VETNET)*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3371498>
- Kimmelman, N., Miesera, S., Moser, D. & Pool Maag, S. (eds). (2022). *Inclusion for all in VET? A comparative overview of policies and state of research about migration, integration and inclusion in Germany, Austria and Switzerland* (Vol. 8). Atlas Förlag.
- Krischler, M., Powell, J. & Pit-ten Cate, I. (2019). What is meant by inclusion? On the effects of different definitions on attitudes towards inclusive education. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2019.1580837>
- Kunnskapsdepartementet. (2021). *Videre vekst og kvalitet – Strategi for høyere yrkesfaglig utdanning*. [Further growth and enhanced quality – strategy for tertiary vocational education]. https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/73bad6b273184a5b9d41f7da9db50e4a/no/pdfs/strategi_yrkesfaglig-utdanning_kd.pdf
- Kyriazopoulou, M. & Weber, H. (2013). *European Patterns of Successful Practice in Vocational Education and Training. Participation of Learners with*

- SEN/Disabilities in VET*. European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education.
- Latvijas Republikas Saeima. (2022). *Grozījumi Profesionālās izglītības likumā*. [Amendments to the VET law]. <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/330784>
- Lawn, M. & Grek, S. (2012). *Europeanizing education governing a new policy space*. Symposium Books. DOI: 10.15730/books.78
- Le Mouillour, I., Berthoud, F., Gramlinger, F., Lippuner, C. & Schuster, T. (eds). (2021). *Going for attractiveness and excellence. A cross-country review of excellence in apprenticeship in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2801/085907>
- Leemann, R. J. & Imdorf, C. (2015). Cooperative VET in training networks: analysing the free-rider problem in a sociology-of-conventions perspective. *International journal for research in vocational education and training*, 2(40), 284–307.
- Leemann, R. J. & Imdorf, C. (2019). Das Potenzial der Soziologie der Konventionen für die Bildungsforschung. In: C. Imdorf, R. J. Leemann & P. Gonon (eds). *Bildung und Konventionen. Die Economie des conventions in der Bildungsforschung*, 3–45. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-23301-3>
- Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo ir mokslo ministerija. (2003). Valstybinės švietimo strategijos 2003–2012 metų nuostatos. [Provisions of the 2003–2012 state education strategy]. <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.D63799D18558>
- Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo ir mokslo ministerija. (2017). *Profesinio mokymo įstatymo pakeitimo įstatymas* [Vocational Education Law Amendment Law]. TAR, Vol. 2017–22266. <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/093a9010eb0b11e7acd7ea182930b17f>
- Magyar Közlöny. (2005). 1057/2005. (V. 31.) Korm. határozat a szakképzés-fejlesztési stratégia végrehajtásához szükséges intézkedésekről [Government Decision No 1057/2005 (31.V.) on the measures necessary for the implementation of the vocational training development strategy]. <https://njt.hu/jogszabaly/2005-1057-30-22>
- Magyar Közlöny. (2023). *Szakképzés 4.0 – A Szakképzés És Felnőttképzés Megújításának Középtávú Szakmapolitikai Stratégiája, A Szakképzési Rendszer Válasza A Negyedik Ipari Forradalom Kihívásaira*. [Vocational Training 4.0 – A Medium-Term Vocational Policy Strategy for the Renewal of Vocational Training and Adult Education, the Response of the Vocational Training System to the Challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution]. https://api.ikk.hu/storage/uploads/files/szakepzes_40_strategiapdf-1701278626294.pdf
- Mahajan, M. & Singh, M. K. S. (2017). Importance and Benefits of Learning Outcomes. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 22(3), 65–67. <https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-2203056567>

- Majumdar, S. (2023). *New era of future society based on Resilience, Solidarity & Inclusive Excellence*.
- Marhuenda-Fluixá, F. (2022). Conflicting roles of vocational education: Civic, Industrial, Market and Project Conventions to address VET scenarios. *Hungarian Educational Research Journal*.
- Maurer, M., Morshed, M. & Spasovski, O. (2022). Why Is It So Difficult to Contribute to Social Inclusion Through Vocational Education and Training? An Analysis of Policies to Promote the Recognition of Prior Learning in Bangladesh, North Macedonia, Sweden and Switzerland. *NJCIE*, 6(3–4). <https://doi.org/10.7577/njcie.4855>
- MCAST. (2015). *National Vocational Education and Training Policy*. <https://mfhea.mt/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/National-Vocational-Education-and-Training-Policy.pdf>
- MCAST. (2021). *MCAST Strategic Plan 2022 – 2027: a community for all*. <https://mcast.edu.mt/strategic-plan-2022-2027/>
- Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið. (2020). Menntastefna til ársins 2030 [Education policy until the year 2030]. <https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/03-Verkefni/Menntamal/Menntastefna/menntastefna-vefur.pdf>
- Menntamálaráðuneytið. (2009). Lög um náms- og starfsráðgjafa 2009 nr. 35 3. apríl [Act on Educational and Career Counselors 2009]. Ministry of Education of Iceland. <https://www.althingi.is/altext/stjt/2009.035.html>
- Messenger, S., Shackleton, J. & Shakleton, E. (2020). Setting a Benchmark for Excellence: A Case Study of a Chinese and UK Collaboration Based on the WorldSkills International Standards Model. In: *Global Innovation and Entrepreneurship Challenges and Experiences from East and West*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse. (2019). Cahier des charges national pour l'obtention ou le renouvellement du label Campus des métiers et des qualifications /Campus excellence [Trades and Qualifications Campuses Excellence Label – National terms of reference for awarding or label renewal]. <https://www.education.gouv.fr/bo/19/Hebdo38/MENE1925423A.htm>
- Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap. (2006). Uitvoeringsregeling Regionale meld- en coördinatiefunctie voortijdig schoolverlaten [Implementation Regulations Regional reporting and coordination function for early school leaving]. <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0013827/2006-03-17>
- Ministerie van Onderwijs, C.e.W. (2016). Wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs [VET Act]. BWBR0035923. <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0035923/2016-07-20>
- Ministerio de Educación. (2011). Real Decreto 1147/2011, de 29 de julio, por el que se establece la ordenación general de la formación profesional del sistema educativo [Royal Decree 1147/2011, of 29 July, which establishes

- the general organisation of vocational training in the education system].
<https://www.boe.es/eli/es/rd/2011/07/29/1147/con>
- Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional. (2020). Plan de Modernización de la Formación Profesional [Plan for the modernisation of VET].
<https://www.todofp.es/dam/jcr:5d43ab06-7cdf-4db6-a95c-b97b4a0e1b74/220720-plan-modernizacion-fp.pdf>
- Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales. (2007). Real Decreto 395/2007, de 23 de marzo, por el que se regula el subsistema de formación profesional para el empleo [Royal Decree 395/2007 of 23 March regulating the subsystem of vocational training for employment].
<https://www.boe.es/eli/es/rd/2007/03/23/395/con>
- Ministérios do Trabalho e da Solidariedade e da Educação. (2000). Despacho Conjunto n.º 1083/2000, de 20 de novembro [Joint Order No 1083/2000, november 20th]. <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/despacho-conjunto/1083-2000-984686>
- Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito. (2023). Decreto Ministeriale n. 240 del 7 dicembre 2023 concernente il progetto nazionale di sperimentazione relativo all'istituzione della filiera formativa tecnologico-professionale [Ministerial Decree No 240 of 7 December 2023 concerning the national experimental project relating to the establishment of the technological-professional training chain]. <https://www.miur.gov.it/-/d-m-n-240-del-7-dicembre-2023>
- Ministerstvo školstva, v., výskumu a športu Slovenskej republiky. (2018). Národný program rozvoja výchovy a vzdelávania [National programme for the development of education]. <https://www.minedu.sk/narodny-program-rozvoja-vychovy-a-vzdelavania/>
- Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej. (2019). Zintegrowana Strategia Umiejętności 2030: Część szczegółowa [Integrated Skills Strategy 2030].
<https://www.gov.pl/web/edukacja/zintegrowana-strategia-umiejtnosci-2030-czesc-szczegolowa--dokument-przyjety-przez-rade-ministrow>
- Ministerul Educației Naționale. (2016). Strategia educației și formării profesionale din România 2016–2020 [Romanian VET Strategy 2016–2020].
<https://edu.ro/strategia-educa%C5%A3iei-%C5%9Fi-form%C4%83rii-profesionale-din-rom%C3%A2nia>
- Ministru kabinets. (2010). Par Profesionālās izglītības iestāžu tīkla optimizācijas pamatnostādņēm 2010.–2015.gadam [Order of Cabinet of Ministers On the guidelines for the optimisation of the network of vocational education institutions 2010- 2015]. <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/203373-par-profesionalas-izglitibas-iestazu-tikla-optimizacijas-pamatnostadnem-20102015gadam>
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth of Cyprus. (2015). ΣΤΡΑΤΗΓΙΚΟΣ ΣΧΕΔΙΑΣΜΟΣ ΤΕΧΝΙΚΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΕΠΑΓΓΕΛΜΑΤΙΚΗΣ ΕΚΠΑΙΔΕΥΣΗΣ ΥΠΟΥΡΓΕΙΟ ΠΑΙΔΕΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΣΜΟΥ [Strategic plan for technical and vocational education and training].

- Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania. (2007). *Įsakymas dėl praktinio profesinio mokymo išteklių plėtros programos patvirtinimo*. [Adoption of the Programme for the Development of Practical Vocational Training Resources]. <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.8EF99218F148>
- Ministry of Education Science Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic. (2021). *Strategy for Lifelong Learning and Guidance 2021–2030*. https://zakladnezrucnosti.sk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/EN_Strategia-CZVaP_fin.pdf
- Ministry of Education Science Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic. (2022). *Action Plan of the Strategy of Lifelong Learning and Guidance for 2022: 2024*. <https://zakladnezrucnosti.sk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Akcny-plan-2022-24-EN-final.pdf>
- Mironov, C., Ciolan, L., Iliescu, D., Nedelcu, A., Zanfirescu, S., Serban, M. & Avarvare, D. (2024). An Empirical Investigation into the Utility of Descriptions of Inclusive Vocational Excellence Practices. *Journal of Educational Sciences*, XXIV(1)(47), 123–124. https://rse.uvt.ro/pdf/2024/Nr1_update/RSE1_2024-7.pdf
- Národná rada Slovenskej republiky. (2015). Novelizácia zákona o odbornom vzdelávaní a príprave (61/2015) [Amendments to the Act on VET (61/2015)]. <https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2015/61/>
- NCAA. (2019). *Focus on Learning: Learning outcomes*. https://ncca.ie/media/4107/learning-outcomes-booklet_en.pdf
- Nokelainen, P., Pylväs, L. & Rintala, H. (2019). Skills Competitions for Promoting Vocational Excellence. In: S. McGrath, M. Mulder, J. Papier & R. Suart (eds). *Handbook of Vocational Education and Training: Developments in the Changing World of Work*. Springer Nature, 1(12), 1239–1250.
- Nokelainen, P. and Ruohotie, P. (2009). *Characteristics that Typify Successful Finnish World Skills Competition Participants*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association.
- Nokelainen, P. & Stasz, C. (2016). *What Contributes to Vocational Excellence? A study of the characteristics of WorldSkills UK participants for WorldSkills*
- Nokelainen, P., Stasz, C. & James, S. (2013). *Developing and Understanding Vocational Excellence (DuVE)*. <http://vocationalexcellence.education.ox.ac.uk/publications/reports/>
- Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö. (2012). *Koulutus ja tutkimus vuosina 2011–2016: Kehittämissuunnitelma*. [Education and research 2011–2016: development plan]. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-263-657-7>
- Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö. (2019a). *Jatkuvan oppimisen uudistus. Parlamentaarinen jatkuvan oppimisen uudistus*. [Continuous Learning Reform]. <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/projects-and-legislation/project?tunnus=OKM033:00/2019>

- Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö. (2019b). *Kohti huippulaatua. Ammatillisen koulutuksen laatustrategia vuoteen 2030*. [Towards top quality: A quality strategy for vocational education and training to 2030]. <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/161772>
- Osman, A., Teräs, M. & Eliasson, E. (2022). The concept of social exclusion and its ideological and theoretical roots: Towards an alternative discourse of exclusion and inclusion. In: L. Moreno Herrera, M. Teräs, P. Gougoulakis & J. Knotio (eds). *Migration and Inclusion in Work Life: The Role of VET*. Bokförlaget Atlas, 166–195.
- Pylväs, L. (2018). *Development of Vocational Expertise and Excellence in Formal and Informal Learning Environments*. University of Tampere.
- Pylväs, L., Nokelainen, P. & Roisko, H. (2015). The Role of Natural Abilities, Intrinsic Characteristics, and Extrinsic Conditions in Air Traffic Controllers' Vocational Development. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 22(3), 241–263.
- ReferNet Slovenia & Cedefop. (2023). *Towards an educational reform*. National news on VET. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news/slovenia-towards-education-reform>
- Regeringen (Socialdemokraterne og Radikale Venstre), Venstre, Dansk Folkeparti, Socialistisk Folkeparti, Konservative Folkeparti and Liberal Alliance. (2014). *Aftale om Bedre og mere attraktive erhvervsuddannelser*. [Political Agreement on Better and more attractive VET programmes]. <https://www.uvm.dk/-/media/filer/uvm/udd/erhverv/pdf19/190220-aftale-om-bedre-og-mere-attraktive-erhvervsuddannelser.pdf>
- Republic of Latvia. (2020). National Development Plan of Latvia for 2021–2027. Riga: Cross-Sectoral Coordination Centre. <https://www.mk.gov.lv/lv/media/15165/download?attachment>
- Republik Österreich. (2003). *Änderung des Berufsausbildungsgesetzes, des Bundesgesetzes über die Beschäftigung von Kindern und Jugendlichen 1987 und des Bäckeriarbeiter/innen-gesetzes 1996*. BGBl. https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblPdf/2003_79_1/2003_79_1.pdf
- Republik Österreich. (2011). *Strategie zum lebensbegleitenden Lernen in Österreich*. https://pubshop.bmbwf.gv.at/index.php?rex_media_type=pubshop_download&rex_media_file=442_IIIarbeitspapier_ebook.pdf
- Republik Österreich. (2016). *Änderung des Schulorganisationsgesetzes*. [Amendment to the School Organisation Act]. BGBl. I Nr. 62/2016. https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblAuth/BGBLA_2016_I_62/BGBLA_2016_I_62.pdf
- Republike Hrvatske and Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja. (2018). Odluka o proglašenju zakona o izmjenama i dopuni Zakona o strukovnom obrazovanju. [Decree on Amendments to the Law on Vocational Education]. *Narodne novine*, 25 https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2018_03_25_478.html

- République Française. (2007a). *Décret n° 2007–1756 du 13 décembre 2007 relatif aux écoles de la deuxième chance*. [Decree No 2007–1756 of 13 December 2007 on second-chance schools].
<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000017649609>
- République Française. (2007b). *Loi n° 2007–297 du 5 mars 2007 relative à la prévention de la délinquance (1)*. [Law No 2007–297 of 5 March 2007 on delinquency prevention].
https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/article_lc/JORFARTI000001860302
- République Française. (2018). *Loi n° 2018–771 du 5 septembre 2018 pour la liberté de choisir son avenir professionnel*. [Law for the freedom to choose one's professional future].
<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000037367660>
- Riigikogu (Estonian Parliament). (2024). *Kutseõppeasutuse seadus*. [Amendment to the Vocational Educational Institutions Act].
<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/102072013001?leiaKehtiv>
- Smeplass, E., Haugseth, J. F. & Schmees, J. K. (2024). Understanding Plurality, Engagement, and Change in Vocational Education and Training through French Pragmatic Theory. *bwp@ Spezial 19: Retrieving and recontextualising VET theory*, 1–20.
https://www.bwpat.de/spezial19/smeplass_etal_spezial19.pdf
- Smith, H. & Rahimi, M. (2011). *Modelling of Vocational Excellence: An International Perspective*. AVETRA's 14th Annual Conference.
- SOLAS. (2020). *Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020–2024*.
https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf
- Suvedi, M. & Ghimire, R. (2019). Attributes of Vocational Excellence. In: *Handbook of Vocational Education and Training: Developments in the Changing World of Work*. Springer Nature, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-49789-1_66-1
- Symeonidis, V., Francesconi, D. & Agostini, E. (2021). The EU's education policy response to the Covid-19 pandemic: a discourse and content analysis. *CEPS Journal*, 11, Special Issue, 89–115. DOI: 10.26529/cepsj.1137
- Todman, V. (2019). *All I want for Christmas is a Theory of Change*.
<https://blogs.kcl.ac.uk/behaviouralinsights/2019/12/20/all-i-want-for-christmas-is-a-theory-of-change/>
- Trampusch, C. (2009). Europeanization and institutional change in vocational education and training in Austria and Germany. *Governance*, 22(3), 369–395. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468–0491.2009.01444.x
- Undervisningsministeriet. (1998). *Forslag til lov om ændring af lov om erhvervsuddannelser, lov om erhvervsskoler og lov om de erhvervsgymnasiale uddannelser til højere handelseksamen og højere teknisk eksamen: Fornydelse af de tekniske erhvervsuddannelser m.v.* [Proposal for an Act to amend the Act on Vocational Education and Training]. LBK, 90. <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/ft/19981XX00098>

- Undervisningsministeriet. (1999). Lov om institutioner for erhvervsrettet uddannelse. [Act on Institutions for Vocational Education and Training]. LBK, 234. <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lt/1999/234>
- Undervisningsministeriet. (2007). *Bekendtgørelse af lov om erhvervsuddannelser* [Announcement of the Act on Vocational Education and Training]. <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lt/2007/1244>
- Undervisningsministeriet. (2014). *Bekendtgørelse af lov om erhvervsuddannelser*. [Announcement of the Act of Vocational Training]. <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lt/2014/1309>
- van der Steeg, M. & Webbink, D. (2006). *Voortijdig schoolverlaten in Nederland: omvang, beleid en resultaten*. [Early school leaving in the Netherlands: incidence, policies and results]. <https://www.cpb.nl/sites/default/files/publicaties/download/voortijdig-schoolverlaten-nederland-omvang-beleid-en-resultaten.pdf>
- Varsik, S. & Gorochovskij, J. (2023). *Intersectionality in Education: Rationale and practices to address the needs of students' intersecting identities*. OECD Education Working Paper, 302. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/dbb1e821-en.pdf?expires=1728122782&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=D7C68C3633274A0D943F3609AF807A85>
- von der Leyen, U. (2024). *Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2024–2029*. https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf
- Williams, J. & Ang, C. (2021). *Taking Stock. Defining an Excellence Framework for Vocational Education: An international literature review prepared for the Food and Fibre Centre of Vocational Excellence*.
- World Bank, UNESCO & ILO. (2023). *Building Better Formal TVET Systems: Principles and Practice in Low- and Middle-Income Countries*. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099071123130516870/pdf/P175566137a5e20651a657168b5152205bf.pdf>
- Zehnder, L. & Gonon, P. (2017). Civic and market convention as driving forces of the development of Swiss VET. In: *Vocational education beyond skill formation: VET between civic, industrial and market tensions*, 271–291

Annexes

Annex 1.

Proposed key elements of excellence in VET

VET features	Remarks
Multi-level governance	Leadership and coordination at national level deployed with delegated functions to lowest levels (sector, regional/local, and provider) to align VET to local economic development (smart specialisation approaches). Public Private Partnerships (PPPs): Sector Councils/Alliances operate to unite training institutions, enterprises and professional organisations to participate in VET (e.g. designing curricula, occupational standards etc.). Measuring performance of VET systems (including teachers and learners). VET schools: increased autonomy, financial sustainability and accountability.
Quality	Assured and Managed: Quality Assurance (Q.A) frameworks are available (quality recognised, rewarded). Quality of teaching and trainers and professional recognition of VET teachers is a reality. VET standards: continuously improved.
Relevance	Qualifications and curricula are up to date. Innovation, creativity, problem solving, and entrepreneurship are integral part of VET – multidisciplinary-curricula.
Effectiveness	Delivery of skills modernised according to demand needs and –new learning methods. Mechanisms for early identification of skill needs are in place.
Employability	Vocational skills fit to real working world: economy, employers and employees' benefit. Policy labs (incubators) support job-creation and startups.
Flexibility	All type of learning counts and no dead ends: VET system-enabling permeability with other educational offers, developing cycles of tertiary qualifications (e.g. two years).
Lifelong learning	A comprehensive qualifications framework is operational for all ages and backgrounds. CVET policies are in place for upgrading, updating, acquiring new skills (etc.) and companies (SMEs) profit it.
Image	VET parity of esteem to become optimal option for learners and society. Guidance and Counselling policies feed into VET public services.
Innovation	VET public policies and communities are embedded in a culture of innovation and creativity based on permanent delivery of -new- curricula, pedagogic and teaching practices, technological capacity of VET providers, effective networks and partnerships, and granting good governance and performance of VET system and learning pathways. VET generates value for individuals, society and employers. Innovation hubs are institutionalised.

Source: Arribas (2020, pp. 63–64).

Annex 2.

Dimensions of and criteria for vocational excellence used in ISATCOVE

Dimension 1: Criteria for teaching and learning

1. Skills provision is relevant and responsive to the labour market and to social needs.
2. Lifelong learning, transition and progression are supported in an inclusive and comprehensive manner.
3. Enables green transition and operates sustainably.
4. Provides relevant digital skills: coding and programming; key digital competences and digital skills related to academic subjects and vocational occupations.
5. Teachers and learners integrate digital and on-line learning into teaching, learning and assessment in all environments and programmes in accordance with their needs.
6. Includes and engages all learners and potential learners in all of its activities and communities, and acts to remove barriers, compensate for disadvantage and to adapt and tailor curriculum and teaching to support success for all;
7. Provides careers education and guidance to all potential and current learners, explicitly addressing careers stereotypes and tailoring support to individual and group need.
8. Curricula are renewed, developed and modified to take account of international, national and local needs of employers and learners.
9. Teachers and trainers have mastered a wide range of pedagogies, learning resources, methods of assessment and educational technologies for VET and they collaborate to improve and innovate teaching and learning throughout the CoVE.
10. Recognises, validates, valorises and documents learning and skills, wherever and whenever they are acquired, applied or assessed.

Dimension 2: Criteria for partnership and coordination

1. Collaborates sustainably and effectively with enterprises to design, deliver and improve training and skills acquisition.
2. Collaborates with SMEs to provide them with tailor-made skills, support, services and expertise.

3. Teaches enterprise competences to all and entrepreneurship is facilitated extensively in partnership with other organisations.
4. Collaborates with enterprises and innovation/technology/research centres to conduct, apply and diffuse innovation and research.
5. Collaborates internationally to provide skills, develop resources, staff and curriculum with international value.
6. Collaborates with other organisations to raise awareness and attractiveness of VET.
7. Collaborates with other skills providers and educational organisations to develop and share resources, provide skills, staff and curriculum and to develop as a learning organisation.

Dimension 3: Criteria for governance and funding

1. Exercises sufficient autonomy to fulfil its own mission, exercising governance and leadership that fully engage all stakeholders at all levels.
2. Engages actively in the development of local, national and international skills systems.
3. Jointly creates and coordinates a skills ecosystem with a strategic approach to innovation, smart specialisation and socio-economic development.
4. Funding needs for all activities are met from multiple sources in a sustainable, transparent and fully accountable manner.
5. Infrastructure, technology, learning accommodation and other resources reflect those of corresponding industries and professions for which skills are being developed.
6. Develops strategically, inclusively and systematically as a learning organisation, making use of feedback and review and employing quality assurance mechanisms in line with EQAVET principles.

Annex 3. National experts

Country	Name
Austria	Karin Luomi-Messerer
Belgium	Sofie Cabus
Bulgaria	Mariya Dzhengozova
Croatia	Marija Pavkov
Cyprus	Charalambos Vrasidas
Czechia	Dominik Dvorak
Denmark	Pia Seidler Cort
Estonia	Meril Ümarik
Finland	Maarit Virolainen
France	Vincent Joseph
Germany	Philipp Grollmann
Greece	Nefeli Dimopoulou
Hungary	Magdolna Benke
Iceland	María Kristín Gylfadóttir
Ireland	Andrew McCoshan
Italy	Francesco Magni
Latvia	Baiba Ramina
Lithuania	Lina Vaitkutė
Luxembourg	Jo Noesen
Malta	Suzanne Gatt
Netherlands	Simon Broek
Norway	Torgeir Nyen
Poland	Horacy Dębowski
Portugal	Andreia Monteiro Maria Miguel Rodrigues Pedro Costa
Romania	Dana Stroeie
Slovakia	Juraj Vantuch
Slovenia	Tomaž Deželan
Spain	Elena Quintana Murci Francisca Salvá Mut
Sweden	Marianne Teräs
Norway	Torgeir Nyen
Iceland	María Kristín Gylfadóttir
United Kingdom	Andrew McCoshan

Annex 4.

Additional tables from the research

Table 12. **Types of policy documents**

Policy document group	Policy document type	Share (%)
All (<i>n</i> = 150)	Regulation/legislation	45
	Strategy / action plan	42
	Other policy document	13
With high relevance to excellence (<i>n</i> = 37)	Regulation/legislation	38
	Strategy / action plan	54
	Other policy document	8
With high relevance to inclusion (<i>n</i> = 53)	Regulation/legislation	51
	Strategy / action plan	34
	Other policy document	15
With high relevance to both excellence and inclusion (<i>n</i> = 39)	Regulation/legislation	33
	Strategy / action plan	54
	Other policy document	13

Source: Authors, based on country research.

Table 13. **Availability of dedicated funding lines**

Policy document group	Dedicated funding line available	Share (%)
All (<i>n</i> = 150)	Yes	35
	No	37
	Not known	28
With high relevance to excellence (<i>n</i> = 37)	Yes	26
	No	40
	Not known	34
With high relevance to inclusion (<i>n</i> = 53)	Yes	46
	No	32
	Not known	22
With high relevance to both excellence and inclusion (<i>n</i> = 39)	Yes	46
	No	36
	Not known	18

Source: Authors, based on country research.

For more than one quarter of the policy documents (42 out of 150), information on the existence of a specific funding line was not available ⁽⁶³⁾.

Table 14. **Scope of policy documents**

Policy document group	Scope	Share (%)
All (<i>n</i> = 150)	Entire VET system	35
	Beyond the VET system	42
	Part of the VET system	23
With high relevance to excellence (<i>n</i> = 37)	Entire VET system	43
	Beyond the VET system	22
	Part of the VET system	35
With high relevance to inclusion (<i>n</i> = 53)	Entire VET system	24
	Beyond the VET system	53
	Part of the VET system	23
With high relevance to both excellence and inclusion (<i>n</i> = 39)	Entire VET system	54
	Beyond the VET system	33
	Part of the VET system	13

Source: Authors, based on country research.

Table 15. **Validity of policy documents**

Policy document group	Validity status	Share (%)
All (<i>n</i> = 150)	Yes, still valid	74
	No, cancelled or expired	23
	Not known	3
With high relevance to excellence (<i>n</i> = 37)	Yes, still valid	67
	No, cancelled or expired	30
	Not known	3
With high relevance to inclusion (<i>n</i> = 53)	Yes, still valid	77
	No, cancelled or expired	19
	Not known	4
With high relevance to both excellence and inclusion (<i>n</i> = 39)	Yes, still valid	67
	No, cancelled or expired	31
	Not known	2

Source: Authors, based on country research.

⁽⁶³⁾ 'No' was indicated if it was clear that there was no specific funding line; 'not known' was indicated if this could not be determined from the documents analysed.

When we take a closer look at the validity of the policy documents examined, the data show that three quarters of them remain valid to date (111 documents), while 35 have been cancelled or expired (corresponding to 23 %). The share of policy documents cancelled or expired is lower among those with a strong focus on inclusion only than among those with a strong focus on excellence or on both objectives (19 % compared with 30 %). This suggests that policies with a strong focus on inclusion tend to have a longer period of validity.

Table 16. **Types of intended changes by decade**

Impact type	Impact subcategory	No of policy documents	1999–2000s	2010s	2020s
Content		98	19 (19 %)	47 (48 %)	32 (33 %)
	Transversal competences	66	21 %	47 %	32 %
	Occupational competences	66	18 %	50 %	32 %
	Other content-related impact	28	25 %	43 %	32 %
Delivery		143	26 (18 %)	69 (48 %)	48 (34 %)
	Modularisation / partial qualification	56	30 %	39 %	30 %
	New programme/pathway	89	24 %	45 %	31 %
	Pedagogical approach	74	19 %	49 %	32 %
	Guidance and support	83	16 %	49 %	35 %
	Other delivery-related impact	41	10 %	46 %	44 %
Other		30	3 (10 %)	13 (43 %)	14 (47 %)
Share of all policy documents by decade			18 %	49 %	33 %

NB: Policy documents can belong to more than one subcategory within each main category.

Source: Authors, based on country research.

Table 17. **Rating scale scores in relation to relevance to excellence and inclusion by country**

Country	Relevance to excellence – maximum value for any one policy document	Relevance to inclusion – maximum value for any one policy document
Austria	3	5
Belgium	5	5
Bulgaria	5	4
Croatia	5	5
Cyprus	5	5
Czechia	5	5
Denmark	5	5
Estonia	5	5
Finland	5	5
France	5	5
Germany	5	4
Greece	5	5
Hungary	5	5
Iceland	5	5
Ireland	4	5
Italy	5	5
Latvia	5	5
Lithuania	5	5
Luxembourg	5	4
Malta	5	5
Netherlands	4	5
Norway	4	4
Poland	5	4
Portugal	5	5
Romania	5	5
Slovakia	5	5
Slovenia	5	5
Spain	4	5
Sweden	3	5
United Kingdom	5	5

NB: Policy documents were rated on a scale of 1 (no relevance) to 5 (strong relevance) based on their relevance to the objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion.

Source: Authors, based on country research.

Norway is the only country without a policy document rated 5. Austria and Sweden do not have a policy document rated higher than 3 in terms of relevance to vocational excellence.

Table 18. Number of documents with relevance to policy objectives by country

Country	Number of documents			
	High relevance to excellence	High relevance to inclusion	Explicit reference to excellence	Explicit reference to inclusion
Austria	0	3	0	3
Belgium	2	2	0	0
Bulgaria	2	0	1	0
Croatia	1	2	2	5
Cyprus	1	3	0	2
Czechia	1	3	2	5
Denmark	1	1	1	1
Estonia	1	1	0	0
Finland	1	2	1	3
France	1	4	2	5
Germany	2	1	0	1
Greece	2	1	2	4
Hungary	0	3	1	3
Iceland	0	3	1	0
Ireland	0	3	2	5
Italy	2	0	0	0
Latvia	1	2	2	2
Lithuania	3	1	0	2
Luxembourg	2	1	0	0
Malta	2	0	5	4
Netherlands	1	3	1	2
Norway	1	1	1	3
Poland	3	0	2	5
Portugal	1	1	0	2
Romania	1	2	2	4
Slovakia	1	2	2	4
Slovenia	0	2	0	5
Spain	0	3	4	5
Sweden	0	2	0	1
United Kingdom	4	1	4	3
Total	37	53	38	79
Number of countries (out of 30) with policy documents in each category	23	26	19	24

NB: High relevance is defined as a rating of 4 or 5 on the 5-point scale.

Source: Authors, based on country research.

Table 19. **Examples of types of references to excellence and aspects addressed in policy documents**

Year	Country	Relevance	Title of policy document ^(a)	Reference
Individual level				
2014	Czechia	EX (moderate focus on IN)	Plan of supporting the development of talent and care for the gifted for the period 2014–2020	Support for giftedness
2016	United Kingdom	EX (moderate focus on IN)	Post-16 skills plan	The need for students to have an 'excellent grounding' equivalent to that required to access higher academic qualifications at age 16
2019	France	IN (moderate focus on EX)	Modernising IVET	Successful integration of young people trained through IVET
2019	Poland	EX (moderate focus on IN)	Integrated skills strategy	Highly talented learners (not specific to VET)
2021	Romania	EX (moderate focus on IN)	Educated Romania	Reaching the maximum potential of each student
Institutional level				
2006	United Kingdom	EX (moderate focus on IN)	<i>Further Education: Raising skills, improving life chances</i>	CoVEs
2016	Netherlands	Both	Quality arrangements 2015	Stimulating excellence (most frequent explicitly mentioned theme in the document, which focuses on the improvement of VET in general)
2016	Romania	Both	Romanian education and training strategy for 2016–2020	Improving vocational training quality
2018	Croatia	EX	Amendments to the VET Act	Regional centres of competence as places of excellence in VET, where, in addition to the basic activity of vocational education, the centres organise training, further development and other activities that contribute to improving the quality of VET and its adaptation to the needs of the economy and the labour market
2018	Malta	Both	MCAST strategic plan for 2019–2021: 'Inclusion – excellence – equity'	Upgrading IT infrastructure to enhance teaching and learning; maximising the benefits of IT innovations; ensuring well-trained staff and efficient administrative functions; focusing on sustained quality improvement; working with international awarding bodies for the continued relevance of the study programmes offered

Year	Country	Relevance	Title of policy document ^(a)	Reference
2018	Slovakia	Both	National programme for the development of education Implementation plan of the national programme for the development of education and training: Strategic policy framework for the system of education and vocational training at all levels for the years 2024–2026	Systemic support of supra-company training centres and centres of excellence in VET; higher-quality and more attractive VET
2019	Finland	EX	'Aiming for excellence – Quality strategy for vocational education and training for 2030'	Quality management in VET; continuous improvement towards excellence by 2030
2019	France	EX	Trades and qualifications campuses excellence label – National terms of reference for awarding or renewing the label	Excellence label that is intended to distinguish trades and qualifications campuses that address strategic socioeconomic challenges
2020	Greece	Both	Law No 4763 on the national vocational education system – Reforming VET governance	Enhancing quality and excellence in VET through the model VET schools (Pepals) and experiential and thematic VET centres
2020	Iceland	Both	Iceland education policy until 2030	References to excellence practices (e.g. developing innovators, excellence in learning delivery, transversal competences and values to enable students to excel in a professional context, incorporating societal/technological changes into delivery/pedagogy, strengthening guidance counselling and ensuring efficient use of funds)
2020	Latvia	Both	National development plan for Latvia for 2021–2027	Strengthening vocational education institutions as specialised centres of excellence and innovation, especially in the areas of smart specialisation, by creating flexible adult education offers; promoting interinstitutional and international cooperation; and introducing new technologies
2021	Bulgaria	Both	Strategic framework for the development of education, training and learning in the Republic of Bulgaria	Development of centres of excellence (high achievement) in VET on a territorial and/or sectoral basis
2021	Latvia	Both	Guidelines for the development of education: Future skills for the future society 2021–2027	Highly qualified, competent and excellence-oriented educators and academic staff

VET excellence and inclusion for 21st century
Mapping national VET objectives and priorities

Year	Country	Relevance	Title of policy document ^(a)	Reference
2021	Malta	EX (moderate focus on IN)	MFHEA national strategic plan for 2022–2030	Making vocational education more responsive to technological developments and promoting excellence in the provision of innovative technical and tertiary vocational education
2021	Norway	EX	Further growth and enhanced quality – Strategy for tertiary vocational education	Stimulating excellence; plan to establish centres for vocational excellence
2021	Romania	EX (moderate focus on IN)	Educated Romania	Excellence in teaching through stimulating best-practice models among teaching staff
2021	Slovakia	Both	Lifelong learning and counselling strategy for 2021–2030 2022–2024 action plan	Centres of excellence in VET
2022	Greece	Both	Strategic plan for VET, lifelong learning and youth for 2022–2024	Promoting excellence, research and innovation in teaching in VET
2022	Spain	IN (moderate focus on EX)	Organic Law 3/2022 of 31 March 2002 on the organisation and integration of vocational training	Establishing a network of centres of excellence in vocational training (centres specialised in innovation, applied research and active entrepreneurship in each industry sector)
VET system level				
2005	Hungary	Both	Government of the Hungarian Republic's strategy on lifelong learning	Training and upskilling the highly skilled workforce needed for the widespread establishment of innovative and knowledge-intensive sectors
2015	Malta	Both	National vocational education and training policy	National initiatives in view of the Bruges communiqué 'Fostering the excellence, quality and relevance of both IVET and CVET'; reference to promoting the country's VET institutions as centres of excellence for foreign students; providing a VET option for level 6 in all areas of study
2016	Croatia	Both	VET system development programme for 2016–2020	Strengthening the excellence and attractiveness of VET
2016	United Kingdom	EX (moderate focus on IN)	Post-16 skills plan	VET as a distinctive, prestigious, high-quality track in its own right and a positive, informed choice
2019	France	EX	Trades and qualifications campuses excellence label – National terms of reference for awarding or renewing the label	Aiming for a sense of pride in and a change of the image of IVET

Year	Country	Relevance	Title of policy document ^(a)	Reference
2021	Malta	EX	MCAST strategic plan for 2022–2027: 'A community for all'	Making vocational education more responsive to technological developments and promoting excellence in the provision of innovative technical and tertiary vocational education
2022	Germany	EX (moderate focus on IN)	Excellence initiative for VET	Attractive offers and quality innovative programmes in VET and CVET
2022	Spain	IN (moderate focus on EX)	Organic Law 3/2022 of 31 March 2022 on the organisation and integration of vocational training	Converting VET into training for excellence through collaboration between training centres and companies

^(a) Titles of documents were translated by country experts when there was no official translation available. NB: 'EX' indicates a strong focus on vocational excellence, 'IN' a strong focus on inclusion and 'both' a strong focus on both objectives. MCAST, Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology; MFHEA, Malta Further and Higher Education Authority.

Source: Authors, based on country research.

Table 20. **Examples of types of references to inclusion and aspects addressed in policy documents**

Year	Country	Relevance	Title of policy document ^(a)	Reference
Individual level				
2020	Netherlands	IN	Strengthening the position of VET students	Preventing fines or other measures against students who have problems with the administrative aspect of their education and financial support
2022	Spain	IN (moderate focus on EX)	Organic Law 3/2022 of 31 March 2022 on the organisation and integration of vocational training	Centrality of the person, promoting the maximum development of their capacities and avoiding any type of discrimination based on gender or educational and social vulnerability
Institutional level				
2001	Czechia	IN (moderate focus on EX)	Strategy for the education policy of the Czech Republic up to 2030+	Creating an 'inclusive climate' in the schools and to achieve broader 'inclusion' of disadvantaged pupils in mainstream schools
2022	Croatia	IN	Amendments to the VET Act	Inclusion of students in VET curricula for acquiring qualifications relevant to the labour market
VET system level				
1999	Denmark	IN (moderate focus on EX)	Act on the Amendment of the Vocational Education Act, the Vocational Schools Act and the Act on the Vocational Upper Secondary Education for Higher Commercial Examination and Higher Technical Examination	Inclusion of 'weak learners'
2000	Ireland	IN	<i>Learning for Life: White paper on adult education</i>	Equality of access, participation and outcome for participants in adult education
2003	Austria	IN	Integrative IVET – 2003 amendment to the Vocational Training Act	Integrative VET
2005	Hungary	Both	Government of the Hungarian Republic's strategy on lifelong learning	Ensuring equal opportunities for disadvantaged and disabled children, eliminating all forms of segregation and creating an inclusive school environment in public education
2007	Spain	IN	Royal Decree 395/2007 of 23 March 2007 regulating the vocational training subsystem for employment	Guaranteeing access to training for unemployed people with more difficulties in finding employment (risk of social exclusion, people with disabilities)

Year	Country	Relevance	Title of policy document ^(a)	Reference
2014	Cyprus	IN (moderate focus on EX)	Integration of the unemployed and inactive into employment	Integration of the unemployed and inactive into employment
2015	Portugal	Both	<i>Quality Assurance in Double Certification Modalities – A guide for VET operators</i>	'Inclusive growth' and 'inclusive access to VET'
2016	Austria	IN	Training Obligation Act	Use of the term 'participation' – enabling young people to obtain a qualification through education or training that increases their chances of sustainable and comprehensive participation in economic and social life and meets the increasing qualification requirements of the economy
2016	Croatia	Both	VET system development programme for 2016–2020	Strengthening the inclusion of all groups in danger of exclusion from education
2016	Ireland	IN	Ireland's national skills strategy for 2025	Active inclusion to support participation in education and training and the labour market
2016	Romania	Both	Romanian education and training strategy for 2016–2020	Increasing participation and facilitating access to VET programmes among vulnerable groups of young learners
2018	Croatia	IN	National curriculum for VET	Ensuring access and rights to initial and CVET for all students and providing support and ensuring success in vocational education in accordance with their developmental needs, potential, interests and abilities
2018	Slovakia	Both	National programme for the development of education Implementation plan of the national programme for the development of education and training: Strategic policy framework for the system of education and vocational training at all levels for the years 2024–2026	Improving the quality of education of children from generational poverty, with a health disadvantage or with another disadvantage who are often leaving education and training early
2019	Finland	Both	Government programme for 2019–2023	Developing pedagogies to meet the needs of diverse student populations
2019	Finland	IN	Guidelines for the reform of continuous learning	Meeting the needs of adults with low skills

Year	Country	Relevance	Title of policy document ^(a)	Reference
2020	Greece	Both	Law No 4763 on the national vocational education system	Removal of discrimination and social exclusion through the provision of lifelong learning
2020	Lithuania	Both	2021–2030 national progress plan	Expanding inclusiveness and accessibility of formal and non-formal education at various levels for SEN learners, people with disabilities and people experiencing poverty or psychological and other difficulties, with the aim of assuring everyone's right to participate in education and receive a high-quality education and the necessary support in an educational environment adjusted to various educational needs
2020	Netherlands	IN	Inclusive education for VET	Making VET fit for all
2021	Finland	IN	Law on the extension of compulsory education	Preventing the discontinuation of education, enabling continuing education and preventing unemployment
2021	Ireland	Both	Action plan for apprenticeship for 2021–2025	Improving access to apprenticeships and making delivery more flexible
2021	Latvia	Both	Guidelines for the development of education: Future skills for the future society for 2021–2027	Support for everyone's growth
2021	Norway	IN	Completion reform	Making VET and upper-secondary education in general more flexible to meet the heterogeneous needs of various learner groups
2022	Greece	IN	Law No 4921: Jobs again – Reorganisation of the public service, public employment service and digitisation of services upgrading the skills of the workforce	Inclusion of unemployed people and youth in the labour market, through education and training
2022	Greece	Both	Strategic plan for VET, lifelong learning and youth for 2022–2024	Inclusion of vulnerable social groups in the training system; promoting equal participation of all and especially of people with disabilities and members of socially vulnerable groups
2022	Spain	IN (moderate focus on EX)	Organic Law 3/2022 of 31 March 2022 on the organisation and integration of vocational training	Adopting the principles of universal design for learning (learning model for inclusive education)

Year	Country	Relevance	Title of policy document ^(a)	Reference
2024	Slovenia	Both	National education programme for the period 2023–2033 submitted to the Minister of Education (2024) – Proposal	Equally including learners in education regardless of their national and cultural origin, racial, ethnic and religious background, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, educational and psychosocial characteristics and any physical and intellectual disabilities

^(a) Titles of documents were translated by country experts when there was no official translation available.
 NB: 'EX' indicates a strong focus on vocational excellence, 'IN' a strong focus on inclusion and 'both' a strong focus on both objectives.

Source: Authors, based on country research.

Table 21. **Types of intended changes indicated in policy documents by country**

Country	Number of policy documents										
	Any content-related intended changes	Specific content-related intended changes			Any delivery-related intended changes	Specific delivery-related intended changes					Any other intended changes
		Transversal competences	Occupational competences	Other		Modularisation or partial qualifications	New programme or pathway	Pedagogical approach	Guidance and support	Other	
Austria	2	2	1	0	5	1	3	3	3	1	1
Belgium	0	0	0	0	5	2	2	2	1	2	0
Bulgaria	5	1	1	3	5	3	2	3	2	1	2
Croatia	5	4	2	1	5	4	4	3	1	0	3
Cyprus	5	1	4	2	4	0	3	3	2	1	2
Czechia	5	4	4	3	5	3	3	2	4	1	1
Denmark	2	0	2	0	5	2	5	2	3	2	0
Estonia	4	3	2	2	5	0	3	2	2	2	2
Finland	3	2	1	2	4	2	1	2	4	1	1
France	4	3	3	0	5	3	4	5	4	2	1
Germany	3	2	2	0	5	1	3	2	3	0	0
Greece	3	2	3	0	5	0	3	2	5	2	2
Hungary	4	4	1	0	5	3	4	5	4	0	2
Iceland	3	2	3	1	5	0	2	2	3	1	0
Ireland	4	3	2	1	5	4	5	3	4	1	0
Italy	0	0	0	0	5	0	3	4	0	2	0
Latvia	2	1	0	1	4	1	2	1	1	2	1
Lithuania	4	4	4	0	5	4	4	4	3	0	3

Country	Number of policy documents										
	Any content-related intended changes	Specific content-related intended changes			Any delivery-related intended changes	Specific delivery-related intended changes					Any other intended changes
		Transversal competences	Occupational competences	Other		Modularisation or partial qualifications	New programme or pathway	Pedagogical approach	Guidance and support	Other	
Luxembourg	2	1	1	1	3	1	1	1	2	0	2
Malta	3	1	2	0	5	2	4	4	3	2	0
Netherlands	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	1	4	2	1
Norway	4	0	3	2	5	1	3	0	2	3	0
Poland	5	5	5	2	5	4	4	5	4	0	0
Portugal	4	3	4	1	5	3	3	2	2	2	0
Romania	5	5	4	0	5	1	3	1	2	2	1
Slovakia	1	0	0	1	4	2	2	1	3	2	2
Slovenia	4	3	3	2	5	3	4	2	2	2	1
Spain	5	5	5	1	5	4	4	4	5	1	0
Sweden	2	1	1	1	4	1	2	0	1	2	1
United Kingdom	5	4	3	1	5	1	3	3	4	2	1
Total	9	66	66	28	143	56	89	74	83	41	30
Number of countries (out of 30) with policy documents in each category	8	24	25	18	30	24	29	28	29	24	19

Source: Authors, based on country research.

Table 22. Coverage of target groups among policy documents analysed

Policy document group	Education groups				Vulnerable groups			Age groups			Employment status groups		Performance groups	
	Upper - secondary students	Apprentices	NEETs	ESL students	Migrants	Other at-risk groups	People with disabilities	Young people	Adults	Older people	Unemployed people	Employed people	Low-skilled learners	High-performing learners
Relevance to excellence	70 %	59 %	19 %	16 %	24 %	30 %	43 %	86 %	68 %	19 %	27 %	22 %	35 %	41 %
Relevance to inclusion	53 %	49 %	58 %	62 %	43 %	60 %	58 %	77 %	55 %	28 %	47 %	36 %	43 %	17 %
Relevance to both	79 %	72 %	54 %	72 %	56 %	56 %	67 %	85 %	74 %	33 %	33 %	36 %	51 %	46 %
Total	68 %	58 %	45 %	51 %	41 %	50 %	55 %	79 %	65 %	26 %	35 %	33 %	42 %	33 %

NB: ESL, English as a second language.

Source: Authors, based on country research.

Table 23. Examples of dedicated funding lines by country and relevance to policy objectives

Country	Policy document	Funding	Central aims
High relevance to inclusion			
Finland	Reform of continuous learning (2019)	The budgets for 2020 and 2021 included EUR 20 million for developmental projects at the regional level and meeting competence demands in the labour market, EUR 2.5 million for community services for immigrants' education, over EUR 20 million for continuous learning actions, EUR 10 million for open university education and EUR 0.5 million for a developmental study about a digital service network for continuous learning. In 2021, an additional EUR 40 million was allocated to developing the skills of adults in the workplace and those with low basic skills and reducing barriers to employment for older unemployed people.	Education providers are expected to make their provision more flexible and accessible and to be open to developing new content.
	Law on the extension of compulsory education (2021)	For the 2021–2024 framework period, the budgetary plan envisaged additional amounts of EUR 22 million in 2021, EUR 65 million in 2022, EUR 107 million in 2023 and EUR 129 million in 2024 to cover the changes planned.	The extension of compulsory education is directed towards all young people. Special measures are planned to meet the needs of particular groups, such as learners with special needs, immigrants and young people with minority first languages (e.g. Sami, Roma).
France	Investment in skills plan: Building a skills society (2017)	EUR 14.6 billion for 2018–2022.	Aims include financing the training of 1 million low-skilled jobseekers and 1 million young people who are far from the labour market, modernising training provision to better meet the needs of businesses and helping training providers to digitise their provision.

VET excellence and inclusion for 21st century
Mapping national VET objectives and priorities

Country	Policy document	Funding	Central aims
High relevance to excellence			
Cyprus	Further development of technical and vocational education and training (2014)	EUR 15.9 million for 2014–2020. The project continues with increased European Social Fund Plus funding (in the 2021–2027 programming period).	Aims include developing the structures and supports for the five programmes that constitute the main pillars of the Technical and Vocational Education and Training System, with a focus on the education and empowerment of students and the participation of adults in lifelong learning.
Czechia	Plan of supporting the development of talent and care for the gifted for the period 2014–2020 (2014)	Approximately CZK 50 million (EUR 20 million) annually for the support of competitions.	Aims include developing an ambitious integrated system to promote support for gifted learners, which Czechia lacked. This does not specifically focus on VET.
Denmark	Announcement of the Act on Vocational Education and Training and the political agreement on better and more attractive VET programmes (2014)	EUR 48 million for 2014–2020.	There is a strong focus on attracting higher-achieving students to VET, especially the EUX programme and the 'talent track'. The VET programmes should challenge all VET students to become as proficient as possible, and more students should complete an EUX programme, that is, a programme integrating VET and subjects from the higher commercial or technical programmes (A-levels).
	Agreement on the framework for the reform of the higher education programmes in Denmark (2023)	Share for VET: EUR 2.5 million for 2024–2030. (Although the reform targets higher education, funding is targeted towards VET in order to strengthen the quality of VET, introduce more modern equipment at the schools and support the transition to the green economy.)	The objective is to make higher education more oriented towards the needs of the labour market and, further, to curb the number of young people entering higher education. The political aim is to direct young people towards VET and welfare professions. One means of doing this is providing additional funding to VET.

Country	Policy document	Funding	Central aims
Finland	'Aiming for excellence – Quality strategy for vocational education and training 2030' (2019)	According to the funding scheme by the Ministry of Education and Culture, education providers may receive a maximum of 4 % of the total funding amount for strategy funding. The strategy work may include quality management, for example in the form of leadership development. In 2023, strategy funding was allocated to leadership. The emphasis on strategy funding differs from year to year.	The strategic intentions set out in the report are expected to provide comprehensive long-term guidance for the quality management of VET institutions.
Germany	Excellence initiative for VET (2022)	EUR 750 million for 2022–2026.	Aims include giving new impetus to VET and increasing its attractiveness by focusing on three central fields of action: talented individuals, quality and innovative provision and internationality. The excellence initiative is part of Germany's overarching skilled labour strategy.
Italy	National recovery and resilience plan investments to upgrade ITS labs and expand ITS offerings (2023)	EUR 1.5 billion for 2023–2025.	Aims include quantitative but especially qualitative increases in ITS (higher VET at the tertiary level) training offerings.
	Higher technological education reform (higher VET) (2022)	National recovery and resilience plan and NextGenerationEU – EUR 700 million by 2026.	Aims include providing pathways to excellence at the post-secondary level (EQF levels 4 and 5).

VET excellence and inclusion for 21st century
Mapping national VET objectives and priorities

Country	Policy document	Funding	Central aims
Lithuania	Programme for the development of practical vocational training resources (2007)	LTL 534.64 million (EUR 154.8 million) for 2008–2013.	Aims include developing practical VET resources, co-financed through EU Structural Funds. Specific objectives are to increase the flexibility of VET, improve the quality of VET, enable teachers and lecturers to continuously improve their qualifications and enable learners to improve their skills for adaptability to the social environment.
	Concept for the establishment of the sectoral practical training centres (2007)	LTL238 million (EUR 68.9 million) for 2007–2013.	Aims include creating modern practical training facilities that will better meet the VET needs of learners and better match the economic situation and employer requirements, utilising modern technologies to open up opportunities for the development of new training services and increasing the efficiency, quality and profitability of VET institutions.
High relevance to excellence and inclusion			
Denmark	Agreement 'From primary school to skilled worker – Vocational education for the future' (2018)	EUR 300 million for 2019–2022.	This is a political agreement to make VET programmes more attractive to young people. The focus is on introducing vocational elements into basic schooling, but also on increasing the number of vocational schools that offer grade 10 level as part of a bridging pathway into a VET programme. The background to the reform are projections for 2030 indicating that there will be a lack of skilled workers.

Country	Policy document	Funding	Central aims
Estonia	Action plan for the development of the vocational education system in Estonia in the years 2001–2004	EEK 566 890 for 2002, EEK 645 820 for 2003 and EEK 717 950 for 2004; note EUR 1 = EEK 15.6466.	The action plan focuses on (a) the VET system (e.g. reorganisation of the network of VET schools), (b) VET institutions (development of applied higher education curricula, continuous training of vocational teachers) and (c) learners, though indirectly (e.g. training of higher quality, training places for SEN students).
	Vocational education programme for 2015–2021 (2018)	EUR 54 816 000 for 2018 and similar amounts for 2019–2021.	The programme has been prepared as part of the implementation of the Estonian lifelong learning strategy for 2020. The purpose of the vocational education programme is to create for the population of Estonia the vocational education and training opportunities that correspond to their needs and abilities, are high quality, flexible and varied and that correspond to the development needs of the labour market.
Greece	2022–2024 strategic plan for vocational education and training, lifelong learning and youth (2022)	National strategic reference framework for 2014–2020: EUR 224 847 738. Restructuring and resilience fund: EUR 162 579 414. National strategic reference framework for 2021–2027: EUR 548 750 000.	The focus is on learners in VET (upper secondary and lower secondary), apprentices, learners with special needs and disabilities, adult learners (enrolled in lifelong learning and adult VET programmes), NEETs, low-skilled people, migrants and more (e.g. those enrolled in second-chance schools). This strategy is part of the national implementation plan for VET, based on and in accordance with the priorities of the Osnabrück Declaration.

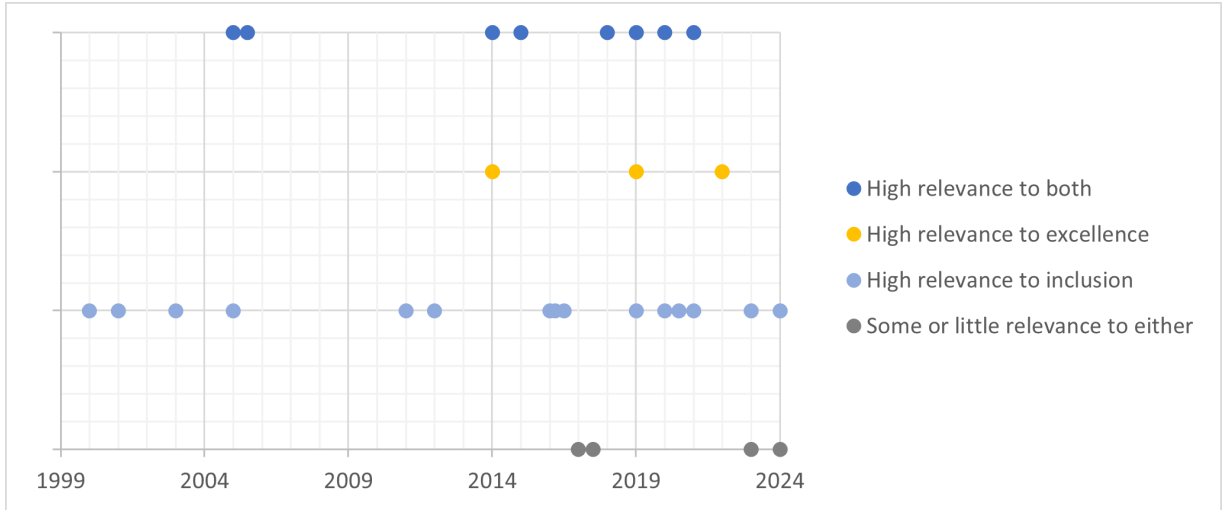
VET excellence and inclusion for 21st century
 Mapping national VET objectives and priorities

Country	Policy document	Funding	Central aims
Lithuania	2021–2030 national progress plan (2020)	EUR 1 180.6 million is allocated for 2021–2030. From this amount, EUR 186 million is allocated to the objective 'To improve the match between the competences acquired in education and those needed in the labour market and to adapt to a changing environment'. It is difficult to calculate the share of funding dedicated to other VET-related actions (e.g. making VET inclusive, teacher training), since other measures are not dedicated solely to VET.	Aims include attracting foreign migrants, creating favourable conditions for them to enter VET and higher education institutions to study/train.
Netherlands	Quality arrangements 2015 (2016)	General investment in VET improvement consisted of an additional EUR 163.5 million for 2015, with up to EUR 24 million per year earmarked for VET institutions to stimulate excellence.	Aims include establishing support institutions that stimulate excellence among students. While this particular law is no longer active, the policy concerning quality arrangements in VET is still in place in an updated form.

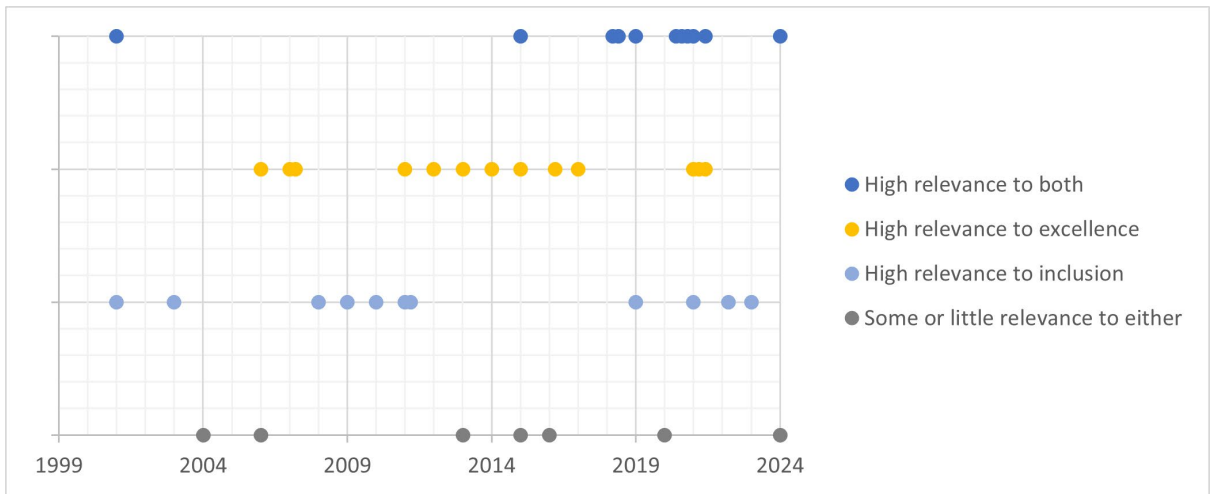
Source: Authors, based on country research.

Figure 8. **Relevance of policy documents by country grouping**

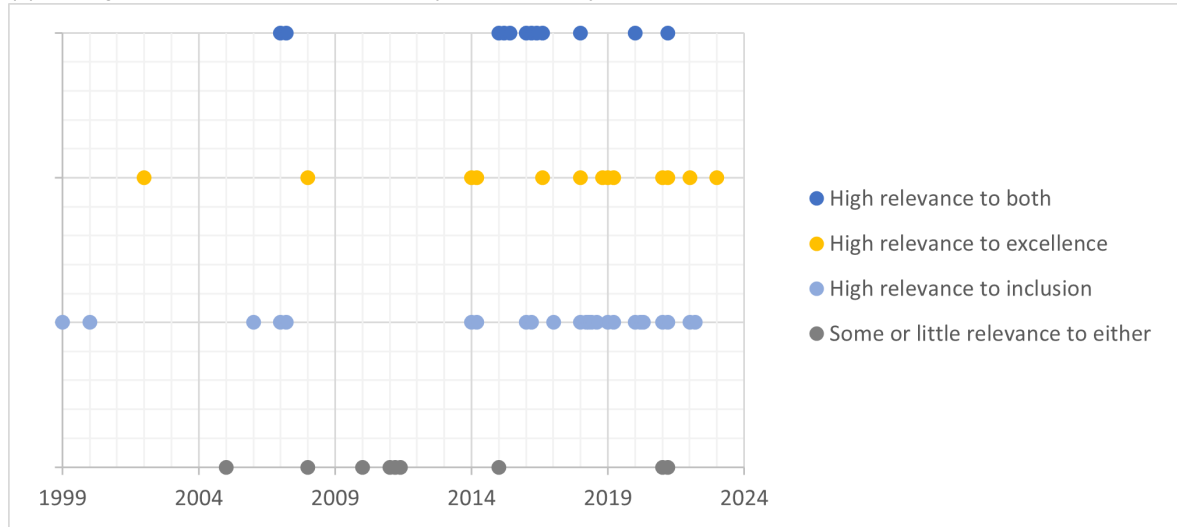
(a) Consistently strong focus on inclusion



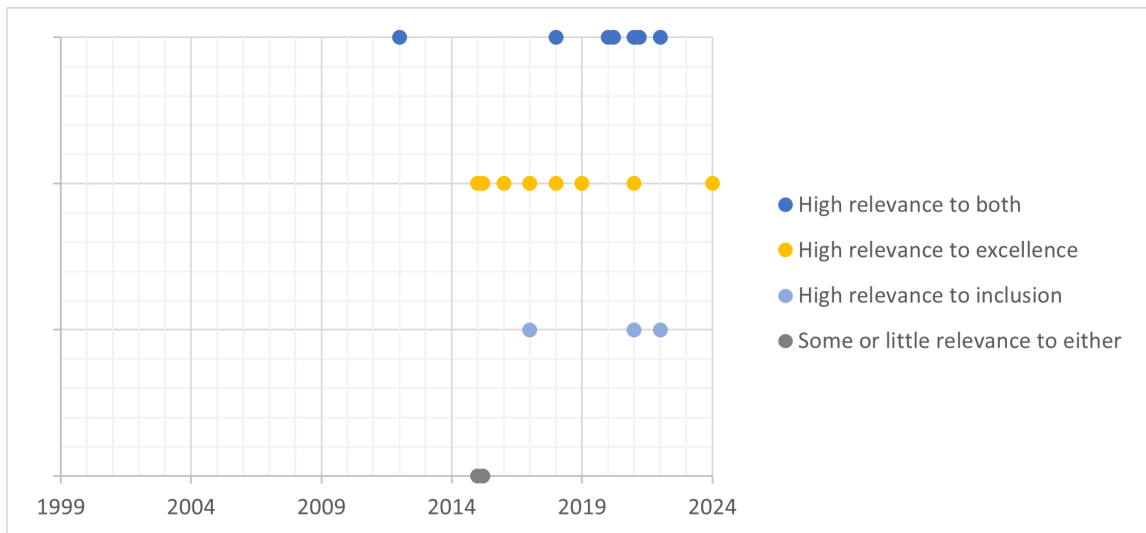
(b) Consistently balanced approach



(c) Strong focus on inclusion with notably or moderately increased emphasis on excellence



More recently observed balanced approach



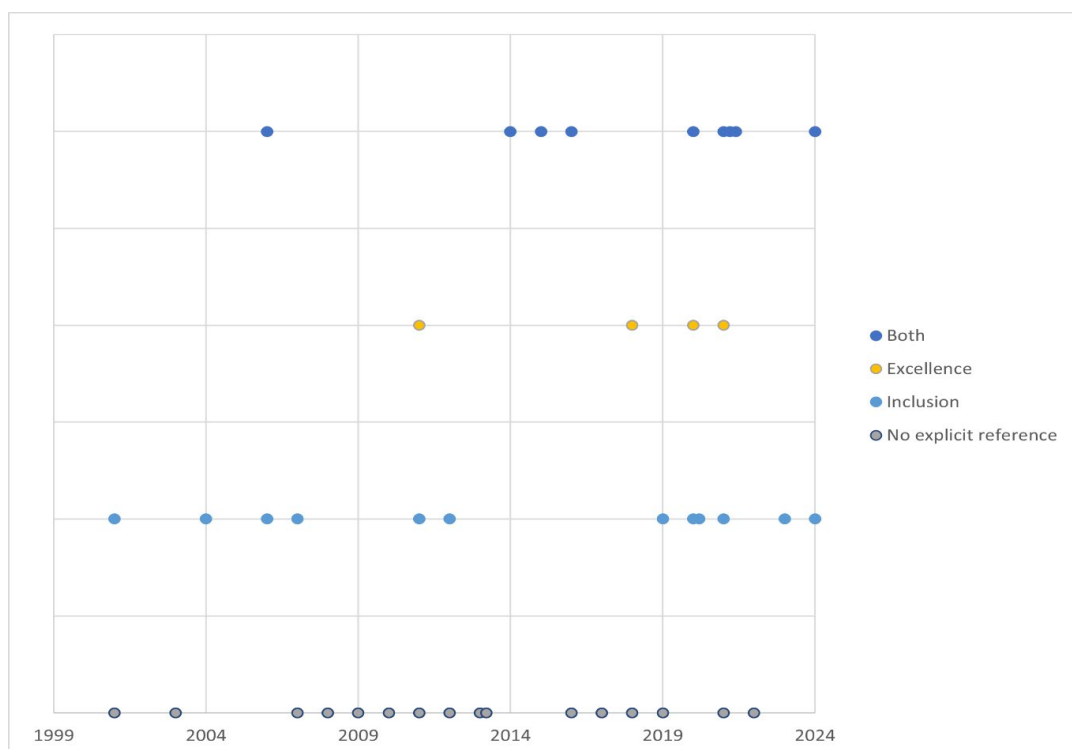
Source: Authors, based on country research.

Figure 8 presents the relevance of policy documents by country grouping. For each of the country groups introduced in Section 4.5, the policy documents analysed in these countries have been plotted in terms of their relevance to the policy objectives of vocational excellence and inclusion. Each dot represents one policy document. For illustrative purposes, the second and third country groups identified in Section 4.5 (countries with a strong focus on inclusion and a (1) notably or (2) moderately increasing focus on vocational excellence) have been

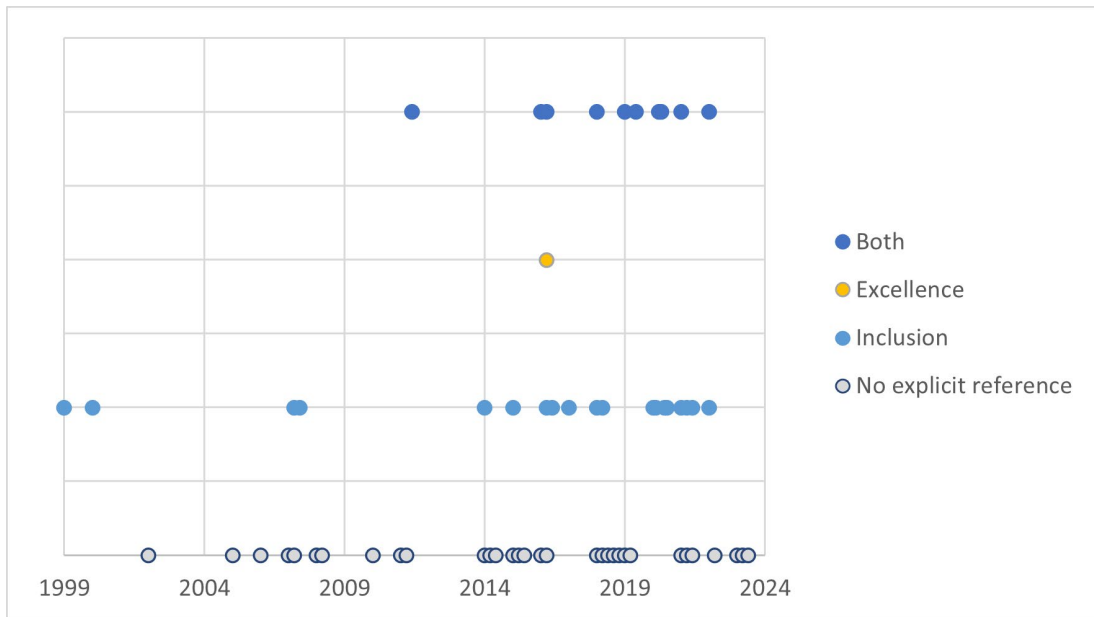
merged into one group (panel c). Panel b, representing countries with a consistently balanced approach, clearly shows that in this group, policy documents with a high relevance to vocational excellence are found much more frequently over time than in the other groups, where an increased focus on excellence tends to begin only in the later years of the survey period. Given the method of data collection (a maximum of five policy documents per country, with at least two referring to each policy objective), it is likely that panel c specifically ('Strong focus on inclusion with notably or moderately increased emphasis on vocational excellence') underestimates the focus on inclusion to a certain extent. There are few policy documents focusing on inclusion before 2014 included in the sample, although the overall country assessment suggests a consistently strong focus on inclusion throughout. This is mainly because inclusion aspects are often embedded as an overarching principle in comprehensive education policies. However, such policy documents issued from 2000 onwards were generally not selected by the national experts in this study, which focuses on the VET sector.

Figure 9. **Explicit reference to policy objectives by country grouping**

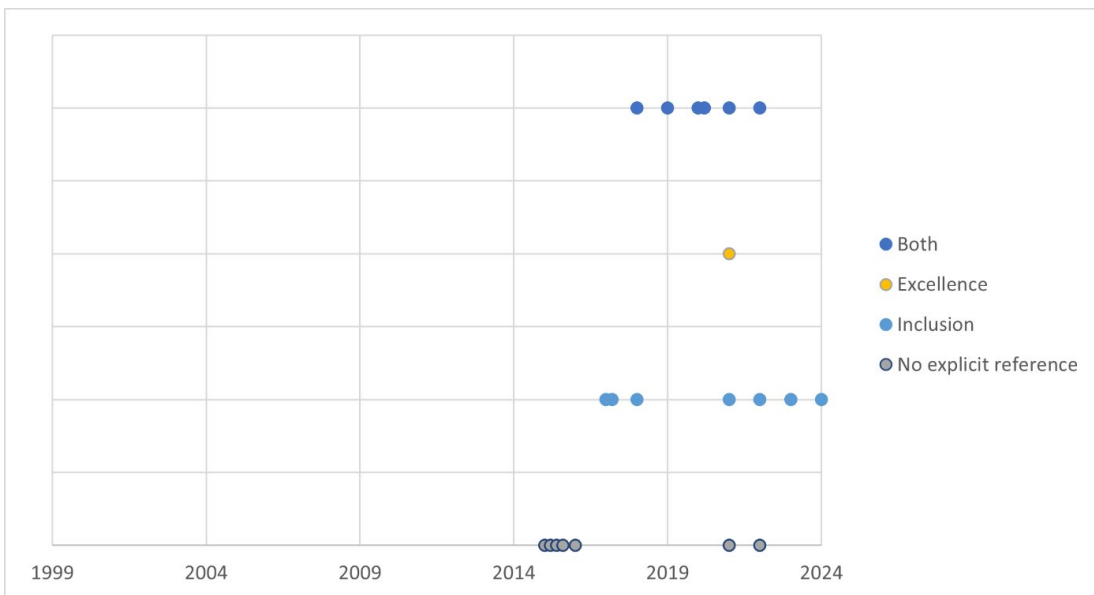
(a) Consistently balanced approach



(c) Strong focus on inclusion with notably or moderately increased focus on vocational excellence



(c) More recently observed balanced approach



Source: Authors, based on country research.

(d) Focus consistency more on inclusion

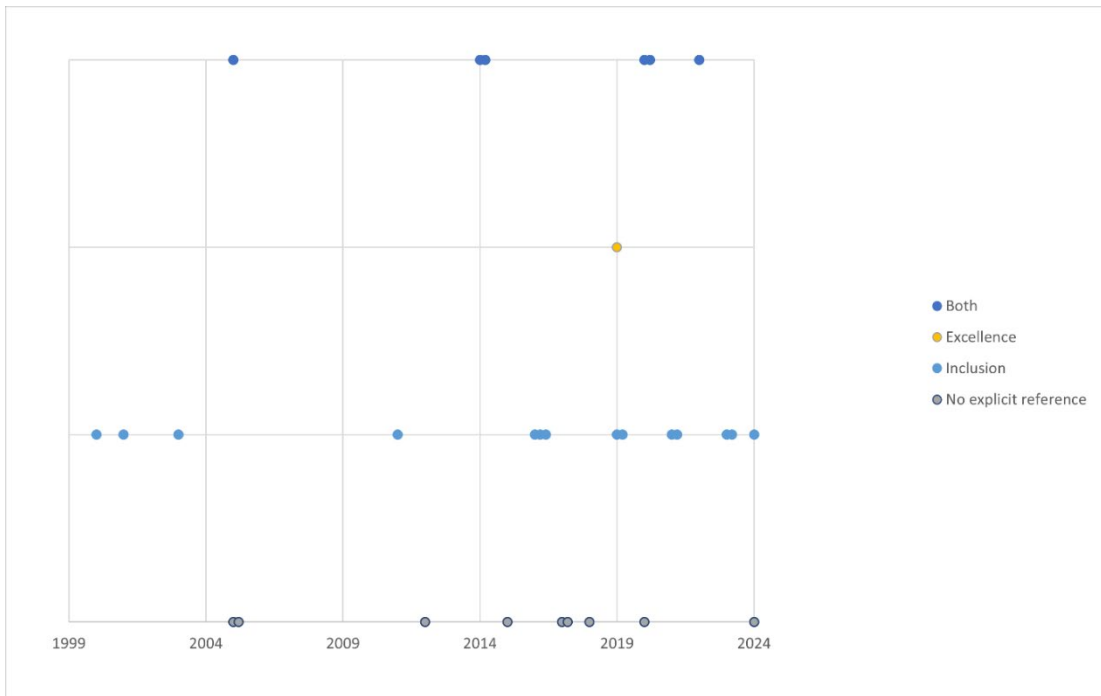


Table 24. **Overview of country characteristics**

Country	Region	Category with regard to changes in objective focus over time	Changes in vocational upper-secondary enrolment	Share of upper-secondary students in VET in 2022	Relevance to excellence in policies	Relevance to inclusion in policies
Austria	Western Europe	Focus consistently more on inclusion	Decrease	60–79.9 %	No high relevance to excellence	High relevance to inclusion over the study period
Belgium	Western Europe	Strong focus on inclusion with notably increased focus on vocational excellence	Decrease	40–59.9 %	High relevance to excellence from 2015 onwards	High relevance to inclusion from 2015 onwards
Bulgaria	Central and eastern Europe	More recent emphasis on both objectives	Stable	40–59.9 %	High relevance to excellence from 2015 onwards	High relevance to inclusion from 2015 onwards
Croatia	Central and eastern Europe	Strong focus on inclusion with notably increased focus on vocational excellence	Stable ^(a)	60–79.9 %	High relevance to excellence from 2015 onwards	High relevance to inclusion from 2015 onwards
Cyprus	Southern Europe	Strong focus on inclusion with notably increased focus on vocational excellence	Increase	< 40 %	High relevance to excellence over the study period	High relevance to inclusion over the study period
Czechia	Central and eastern Europe	Focus consistently more on inclusion	Decrease ^(a)	60–79.9 %	High relevance to excellence before 2015	High relevance to inclusion over the study period
Denmark	Northern Europe	Strong focus on inclusion with notably increased focus on vocational excellence	Decrease ^(a)	< 40 %	High relevance to excellence over the study period	High relevance to inclusion over the study period
Estonia	Central and eastern Europe	Consistently balanced approach	Increase	< 40 %	High relevance to excellence over the study period	High relevance to inclusion over the study period
Finland	Northern Europe	Focus consistently more on inclusion	Increase	60–79.9 %	High relevance to excellence from 2015 onwards	High relevance to inclusion from 2015 onwards

Country	Region	Category with regard to changes in objective focus over time	Changes in vocational upper-secondary enrolment	Share of upper-secondary students in VET in 2022	Relevance to excellence in policies	Relevance to inclusion in policies
France	Western Europe	Strong focus on inclusion with notably increased focus on vocational excellence	Stable	40–59.9 %	High relevance to excellence from 2015 onwards	High relevance to inclusion over the study period
Germany	Western Europe	Focus consistently more on inclusion	Decrease ^(a)	40–59.9 %	High relevance to excellence over the study period	High relevance to inclusion over the study period
Greece	Southern Europe	More recent emphasis on both objectives	Stable	< 40 %	High relevance to excellence from 2015 onwards	High relevance to inclusion from 2015 onwards
Hungary	Central and eastern Europe	Focus consistently more on inclusion	Increase	40–59.9 %	High relevance to excellence before 2015	High relevance to inclusion over the study period
Iceland	Northern Europe	Consistently balanced approach	Increase	< 40 %	High relevance to excellence from 2015 onwards	High relevance to inclusion over the study period
Ireland	Western Europe	Focus consistently more on inclusion	Increase	< 40 %	High relevance to excellence over the study period	High relevance to inclusion over the study period
Italy	Southern Europe	Strong focus on inclusion and moderately increased emphasis on vocational excellence	Decrease	40–59.9 %	High relevance to excellence from 2015 onwards	High relevance to inclusion from 2015 onwards
Latvia	Central and eastern Europe	Consistently balanced approach	Increase	40–59.9 %	High relevance to excellence over the study period	High relevance to inclusion over the study period
Lithuania	Central and eastern Europe	Consistently balanced approach	Stable ^(a)	< 40 %	High relevance to excellence over the study period	High relevance to inclusion over the study period

VET excellence and inclusion for 21st century
Mapping national VET objectives and priorities

Country	Region	Category with regard to changes in objective focus over time	Changes in vocational upper-secondary enrolment	Share of upper-secondary students in VET in 2022	Relevance to excellence in policies	Relevance to inclusion in policies
Luxembourg	Western Europe	Strong focus on inclusion with notably increased focus on vocational excellence	Stable ^(a)	40–59.9 %	High relevance to excellence over the study period	High relevance to inclusion from 2015 onwards
Malta	Southern Europe	Consistently balanced approach	Increase	< 40 %	High relevance to excellence from 2015 onwards	High relevance to inclusion from 2015 onwards
Netherlands	Western Europe	Strong focus on inclusion and moderately increased emphasis on vocational excellence	Stable ^(a)	60–79.9 %	High relevance to excellence from 2015 onwards	High relevance to inclusion over the study period
Norway	Northern Europe	Consistently balanced approach	Stable ^(a)	60–79.9 %	High relevance to excellence from 2015 onwards	High relevance to inclusion from 2015 onwards
Poland	Central and eastern Europe	More recent emphasis on both objectives	Increase	40–59.9 %	High relevance to excellence over the study period	High relevance to inclusion over the study period
Portugal	Southern Europe	Strong focus on inclusion and moderately increased emphasis on vocational excellence	Increase	< 40 %	High relevance to excellence over the study period	High relevance to inclusion over the study period
Romania	Central and eastern Europe	Strong focus on inclusion and moderately increased emphasis on vocational excellence	Decrease ^(a)	40–59.9 %	High relevance to excellence from 2015 onwards	High relevance to inclusion from 2015 onwards
Slovakia	Central and eastern Europe	More recent emphasis on both objectives	Decrease	60–79.9 %	High relevance to excellence from 2015 onwards	High relevance to inclusion from 2015 onwards

Country	Region	Category with regard to changes in objective focus over time	Changes in vocational upper-secondary enrolment	Share of upper-secondary students in VET in 2022	Relevance to excellence in policies	Relevance to inclusion in policies
Slovenia	Central and eastern Europe	Consistently balanced approach	Increase	60–79.9 %	High relevance to excellence from 2015 onwards	High relevance to inclusion over the study period
Spain	Southern Europe	Strong focus on inclusion with notably increased focus on vocational excellence	Stable	< 40 %	High relevance to excellence from 2015 onwards	High relevance to inclusion over the study period
Sweden	Northern Europe	Strong focus on inclusion and moderately increased emphasis on vocational excellence	Decrease	< 40 %	No high relevance to excellence	High relevance to inclusion from 2015 onwards
United Kingdom	Western Europe	Consistently balanced approach	Stable ^(a)	40–59.9 %	High relevance to excellence over the study period	High relevance to inclusion from 2015 onwards

^(a) No data for 2005 were available.

NB: For Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Greece, Iceland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Romania and the United Kingdom, the earliest data are from 2013; for Germany, the earliest data are from 2010.

Sources: Eurostat (educ_uoe_enrs04, 'Pupils enrolled in upper secondary education by programme orientation') and country research.



VET excellence and inclusion for the 21st century

Mapping national VET objectives and priorities

This publication deepens the understanding of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training with regard to how the objectives of excellence and inclusion interact in policies related to vocational education and training (VET). As the third strand in a long-term research project, the report aims to better understand the future of vocational education, training and learning in Europe. It provides a comprehensive historical overview of how policy documents across Europe have reflected and/or combined excellence and inclusion.

The study covers 30 countries: the 27 EU Member States, Iceland, Norway and the United Kingdom. Findings show a growing emphasis on both excellence and inclusion in national policies over the past 25 years, even if these exact terms are not always used. With the emerging concept of 'inclusive excellence' gaining traction in the EU and international education discourse, national policies – reflecting political, economic and social priorities and principles – must be implemented in ways that ensure all learners, regardless of ability, can thrive and succeed.



Europe 123, Thessaloniki (Pylaia), Greece
Postal: Cedefop service post, 57001 Themi, Greece
Tel. +30 2310490111, Fax +30 2310490020
Email: info@cedefop.europa.eu

www.cedefop.europa.eu



Publications Office
of the European Union

5615 EN - TI-01-25-098-EN-N - doi:10.2801/4202080

