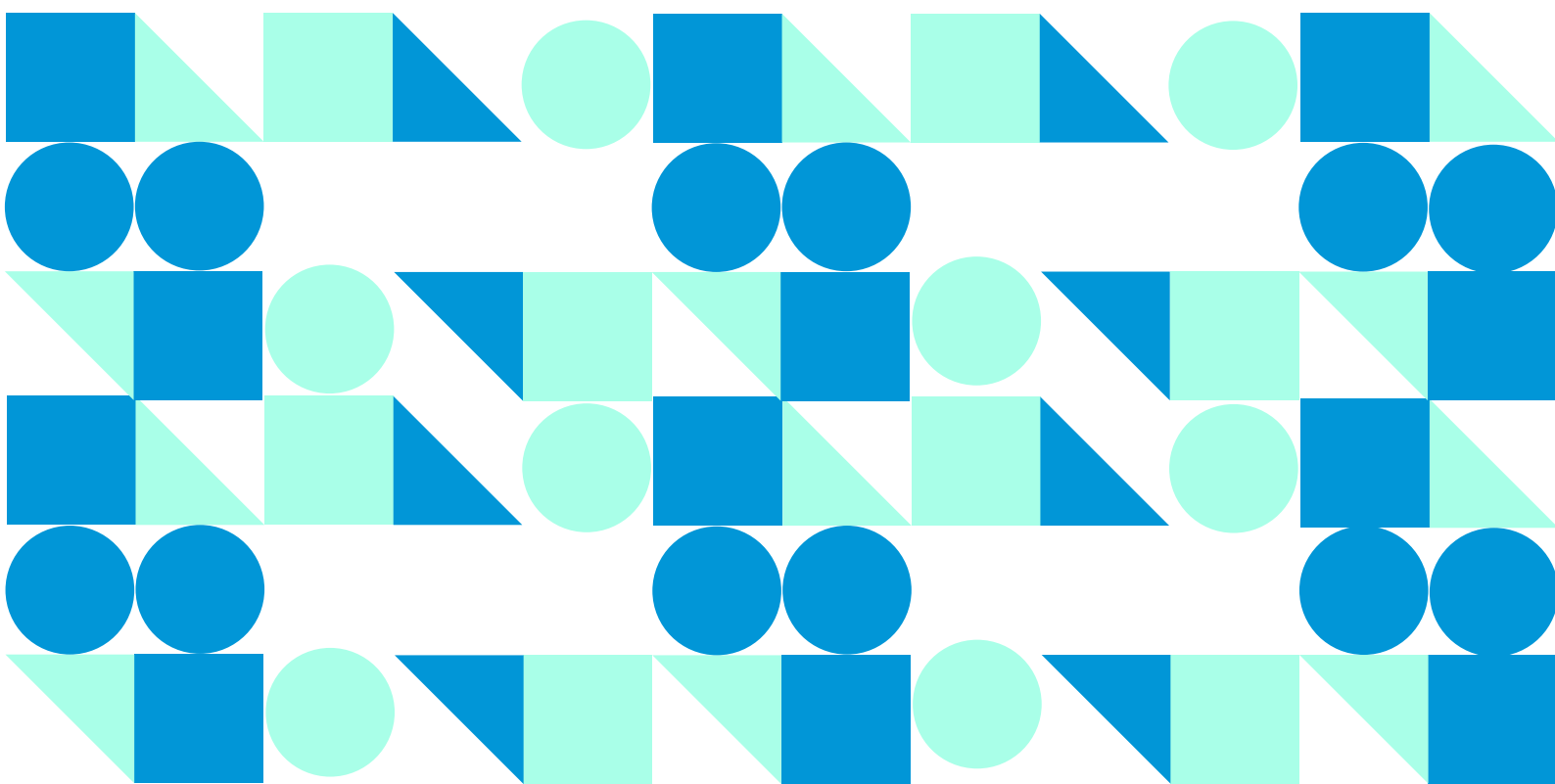




Research paper

Citizenship education in initial vocational education and training: enabling and hindering factors

Literature review





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Literature review

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Foreword

Democracy depends not only on institutions, laws and elections. It also depends on people who understand what democracy requires of them and what they may expect from it: people able to distinguish facts from manipulation, to listen and disagree without turning opponents into enemies, to recognise injustice, to take responsibility and to believe that their voice can matter.

These capacities do not emerge automatically. They are learned, practised and strengthened over time. Across Europe and beyond, democratic systems are under pressure. Public debate is often fragmented and polarised. Disinformation spreads quickly. Trust in institutions cannot be taken for granted. Some young people are uncertain whether democracy is always the best way to organise society; others may value democratic principles but have had few opportunities to understand how democratic life works in practice.

This is why citizenship education has become so important. Its recent recognition as a fifth basic skill, alongside literacy, mathematics, science and digital skills, sends a clear message: democratic participation is not an abstract ideal or a subject for specialists. It is a basic competence for everyday life. It is needed to take part in society, to engage with others, to work responsibly and to shape common futures.

This is particularly relevant for vocational education and training (VET). Initial VET is one of Europe's main education pathways, enrolling around half of all learners at the upper secondary level. For many young people, it is the bridge between school, work and adult life, and sometimes one of the last structured opportunities to develop the civic knowledge, confidence and habits that support democratic participation.

The task is not straightforward. VET curricula are often under pressure to prioritise occupation-related skills. Time for general and civic learning may be limited. Learners may arrive with very different prior experiences of political discussion, participation and trust in institutions. Many come from backgrounds where opportunities for civic learning outside school have been fewer. These realities make citizenship education in VET more challenging; they also make it more necessary.

The question, therefore, is not whether citizenship education belongs in VET. It does. The question is how to make it meaningful, credible and effective for VET learners, teachers, trainers, schools and companies offering VET. It cannot be reduced to a single lesson, a textbook chapter or a formal curriculum requirement. It needs to be lived through the culture of learning institutions and workplaces:

through open discussion, participation, respect, critical inquiry, cooperation and opportunities to act.

This literature review is offered as a starting point for reflection and action. It brings together what is currently known about citizenship education in initial VET, and it also shows how much remains to be understood. In particular, we need to know more about what happens in workplaces, how in-company trainers and employers see their role and which approaches make citizenship learning meaningful for learners in different VET systems.

For this reason, Cedefop's work will continue beyond this review. We will go further into the field, listening to policymakers, social partners, school leaders, teachers, trainers, company managers and the learners themselves. Their experiences will be essential for understanding how citizenship education can move from policy ambition to everyday practice.

We invite readers to approach this report not only as a review of literature, but as a contribution to a wider conversation about the future of VET and the future of democracy in Europe. We hope it will support the reflection, dialogue and action needed to strengthen citizenship education in vocational learning and working life.

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Executive summary

Citizenship education is becoming an increasingly important part of initial vocational education and training (IVET). As democratic societies face democratic backsliding, misinformation and declining trust in public institutions, IVET – comprising around half of all learners at the upper secondary level in the EU – is expected not only to prepare learners for work, but also to support them in becoming informed, active and responsible citizens. This literature review examines how citizenship education is integrated into school- and company-based IVET in Europe, what factors enable or hinder its implementation and what evidence exists on the development of citizenship competence among IVET learners.

The review supports a broader Cedefop study on citizenship education in IVET in eight European countries: Czechia, Germany, Estonia, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal and Romania. It draws mainly on literature from 2014 to 2025. More than 120 publications were analysed using a narrative synthesis approach. The evidence base includes academic articles, reports, policy papers and grey literature, but remains uneven as research is concentrated in a small number of countries, especially Germany, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden, and there is limited evidence from workplaces, employers and in-company trainers.

The review defines citizenship competence in IVET through four core dimensions: knowledge and application of democratic principles and political literacy; political and civic self-efficacy and civic engagement; critical thinking and media literacy; and knowledge of EU history and European common values.

Studies show that IVET learners tend to receive less comprehensive citizenship education, have fewer opportunities for democratic dialogue and are more often exposed to curricula and textbooks with lower expectations and less complex civic content. They also tend to report lower levels of political knowledge, political and civic self-efficacy and participation in formal democratic processes. These differences are linked to structural inequalities, early education tracking, socioeconomic background, peer environments and the lower status often assigned to vocational pathways.

At the same time, the review cautions against viewing IVET learners as civically disengaged. Evidence suggests that many vocational learners value inclusiveness, solidarity, social responsibility and practical engagement. They may participate less in formal politics, such as student councils, elections or party-related activity, but can show interest in informal and community-based forms of

participation, including volunteering, advocacy, protest and engagement with social or environmental issues. This suggests that citizenship education in IVET should build on learners' lived experiences, vocational identities and practical orientations rather than simply reproduce models designed for academic tracks.

The review identifies enablers of citizenship education across six levels: policies and frameworks, learning culture, education and training practice, curriculum and assessment, extracurricular activities and teacher and trainer preparation. Key enablers include the growing recognition of intercultural, global and democratic competences as important working-life skills, along with workplace demand for transversal skills. Flexible curricula, effective student participation channels, structured competence frameworks for teacher education and continuing professional development also support stronger citizenship education in IVET. Other enablers include learner diversity, experiential learning, participatory teaching methods, strong teacher commitment and partnerships with civil society and social partners.

The review also shows that barriers remain substantial and interconnected. At the system level, vague legislation can lead to inconsistent implementation, while financial constraints limit the scope and quality of provision. At the institutional and learner levels, barriers include limited prior knowledge among students, underdeveloped cooperation with local communities and civil society, weak coordination between schools and workplaces, socioeconomic disadvantage and limited previous experience of participation. In teaching and curricula, barriers include avoidance of controversial and political issues, limited teacher reflexivity in challenging stereotypes and supporting cultural diversity, assumptions that VET students are uninterested in civic issues, inconsistent implementation of democratic participation structures, limited time for citizenship education, labour-market-driven curricula that prioritise employability over citizenship, low expectations reflected in curricula and textbooks, low awareness of participation opportunities and insufficient initial and in-service training for teachers and in-company trainers.

Critical thinking and media literacy are identified as increasingly important areas of citizenship competence. Disinformation and political propaganda make it essential for IVET learners to evaluate sources, recognise misinformation, understand media environments and engage critically with social and political issues. Although these competences are gaining visibility in policy and curriculum frameworks, their implementation in IVET remains inconsistent. Evidence suggests that active, practice-based approaches are promising, especially when learners investigate issues connected to their occupations, communities or everyday lives, although long-term impacts on civic participation remain uncertain.

The review also finds that EU history and European common values are unevenly addressed in IVET. While democracy, human rights, equality, diversity, solidarity and sustainability are widely recognised as relevant, they are not always explicitly taught in vocational programmes. Teachers may find it difficult to make European citizenship meaningful for learners, particularly where curriculum time for general subjects is limited. The review points to the importance of addressing European values through concrete professional, social and ethical issues, including sustainability, workers' rights, equality, non-discrimination and democratic participation.

Building on the literature synthesis, the review proposes a set of markers of citizenship education in IVET to serve as a structured framework for identifying the specific policy, institutional and workplace conditions in which citizenship education may be supported.

IVET has strong potential to promote democratic participation, social inclusion, critical thinking and civic resilience, especially for learners who may have had fewer civic learning opportunities at home or in earlier schooling. However, this potential depends on stronger policy frameworks, curriculum design, teacher and trainer preparation, assessment practices and participatory pedagogy, along with learning environments that give vocational learners genuine opportunities to discuss, participate, question and act.

The review identifies important gaps for future research and policy development. More evidence is needed on workplace-based citizenship learning, employer and trainer perspectives, effective modes of delivery, pedagogical approaches, assessment practices, longitudinal evidence and comparative differences across European systems. Addressing these gaps is essential for moving citizenship education in IVET from policy aspiration to consistent, high-quality practice.

CHAPTER 1.

Introduction

Citizenship education is increasingly recognised as a key element in vocational education and training (VET), equipping learners with the competences needed to participate actively and responsibly in democratic societies (see Council of the European Union, 2025; European Commission, 2025a, 2025b; Ministers in charge of vocational education and training of the Member States, 2020; Rosvall & Nylund, 2022; Unesco, 2016).

This literature review forms the foundation of a broader Cedefop 2025–2027 study that examines how initial VET (IVET) systems in eight European countries ⁽¹⁾ integrate citizenship education and foster citizenship competence. The countries were selected for their varying approaches to VET and citizenship education, along with their geographical and socio-cultural diversity.

The review critically examines research literature and frameworks mainly from the past decade, with a view to identifying effective practices, persistent challenges and existing gaps in citizenship education within IVET.

It addresses the research question of how and to what extent citizenship education is integrated into school- and company-based IVET systems in Europe, including policy aims, pedagogical approaches, barriers and enablers, along with key dimensions of citizenship competence: knowledge and application of democratic principles, political literacy, political and civic self-efficacy, civic engagement, critical thinking and media literacy, the history of the European Union (EU) and European common values.

The report begins with the methodology and description of the literature sample (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 sets out the four core dimensions of citizenship competence used in the review. Chapter 4 examines the concept and rationale of citizenship education. Chapter 5 synthesises the literature on enablers and barriers to citizenship education in IVET. Chapter 6 concludes the review by bringing together the main conditions needed to support citizenship education in IVET.

⁽¹⁾ Czechia, Estonia, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal and Romania.

Box 1. Research questions addressed by the literature review

- To what extent and how is citizenship education integrated in school- and company-based initial VET in Europe?
- What aims guide citizenship education at the levels of policy and providers?
- What are the specific factors enabling and hindering the promotion of citizenship competences?
- How does initial VET equip learners with knowledge of democratic principles, political literacy, self-efficacy supporting civic engagement, critical thinking and (digital) media literacy?
- To what extent and how are history of the EU and common European values promoted in VET and what impact does it have on citizenship education in VET?
- Has there been a change in the past decade? What factors have an increasing influence on the change?
- How does the learning culture in VET schools enhance learners' opportunities for open debate, active participation and engagement in democratic processes?
- How does the business-oriented culture of enterprises providing VET foster the same opportunities as above?

NB: Some research questions cannot be fully addressed through the literature review alone. The forthcoming field research in several EU+ countries (EU, Iceland and Norway) may provide additional insights.

Source: Cedefop.

CHAPTER 2.

Methodology and literature sample

The primary literature search was conducted in English ⁽²⁾ using major databases ⁽³⁾ to ensure broad coverage of research in education, the social sciences and interdisciplinary fields relevant to citizenship education and IVET. Search strings combined terms relating to citizenship education and vocational education and training: ‘citizenship education’ or ‘civic education’ or ‘citizenship competence’ or ‘civic learning’ or ‘democratic education’ or ‘political education’ or ‘global citizenship’ or ‘civic participation’ or ‘democratic participation’ or ‘political participation’ or ‘civic engagement’ or ‘political engagement’ or ‘media literacy’ or ‘critical thinking’ or ‘democracy’ or ‘equality’ and ‘vocational’ or ‘apprenticeship’ or ‘professional education’.

To complement this, additional sources were identified through backward and forward snowballing and recommendations from research team and advisory group ⁽⁴⁾ experts, including publications in other languages. Where necessary, non-English texts were translated using machine translation tools or summaries provided by experts.

The inclusion criteria for the database search specified that publications had to be published between January 2014 and July 2025 and demonstrate a clear focus on the relationship between citizenship education and initial VET at the upper secondary level (EQF 3–4 / ISCED 3). Publications focusing only on general education, pre-vocational programmes or higher VET were excluded. Screening was conducted by reviewing titles, abstracts and, where necessary, sections of the full text. The sample encompasses a range of sources: academic journal articles, books, book chapters, reports and grey literature, for example, policy papers.

The search yielded more than 120 relevant publications ⁽⁵⁾, which were analysed using a narrative synthesis approach. To contextualise IVET-specific evidence, the review also draws on broader theoretical and empirical literature on citizenship education beyond vocational settings. The sample also includes several studies conducted outside Europe and studies published before 2014, to broaden the analytical lens.

⁽²⁾ Although the systematic literature search was conducted mainly in English, the review also includes literature published in other languages. While the research team possesses proficiency in several languages, in some cases they had to rely on machine translation and/or English-language abstracts.

⁽³⁾ [ERIC](#), [Web of Science](#) and [Google Scholar](#).

⁽⁴⁾ The advisory group, established by Cedefop in 2025, consists of approximately 25 experts in VET and citizenship competences and provides guidance and feedback throughout the study.

⁽⁵⁾ Including peer-reviewed journal articles, reports and book chapters.

Most publications (n = 96) focused on a single country. Sweden was the most frequently studied country between 2014 and 2025 (n = 23), followed by the Netherlands (n = 20), Germany (n = 15), Finland (n = 14) and the United Kingdom (n = 8). This makes it difficult to draw generalisations that would apply to IVET everywhere.

The high number of studies from Finland and Sweden is linked to research projects on civic education in IVET and strong Nordic collaboration among education ethnographers. The Netherlands also has a long tradition of research on citizenship education in IVET using both quantitative and qualitative methods, including longitudinal panel data and participatory action research, with recent policy reforms further stimulating research in the field.

More than 40 % of the publications used qualitative research methods, while 30 % used quantitative methods and 10 % employed mixed methods. The remaining publications were theoretical studies, literature reviews or other forms of desk research with limited case study evidence.

Overall, existing research on citizenship education in IVET is limited and often focuses on curriculum analysis or on general academic subjects (Rönnlund et al., 2019). Research in the Nordic countries is mainly qualitative, focusing on curriculum analysis or ethnographic studies such as student and teacher interviews and classroom ⁽⁶⁾ observations. German and British research traditions on this topic are rather quantitative.

The most common data source is teacher interviews / focus groups (n = 32), followed by student interviews / focus groups (n = 30) and student surveys (n = 29). Other frequently used empirical data sources include classroom observations (n = 13), policy documents (n = 12), school leader interviews / focus groups (n = 11), curricula (n = 10) and ethnographic studies (n = 9).

Longitudinal data are only used in seven studies, and large-scale international data, such as from ICCS (International civic and citizenship education study) or OECD PISA, in four studies. There is a notable lack of data collected in workplaces or from employers/employees' perspectives, with only one study reporting working life focus groups (employers and employees) and one study reporting workplace trainer interviews as their data source.

The literature provides ample evidence on the poorer civic outcomes for IVET learners when compared with learners in other education pathways. However, much less is known on the practical implementation of citizenship education in IVET, including effective modes of delivery, pedagogical approaches or assessment practices.

⁽⁶⁾ Throughout this review, when the concept 'classroom' is used, in the VET context it encompasses a broad range of learning environments, including workplace, online and VET provider workshops and laboratories.

The theoretical approaches include Dewey's experiential learning and the connection between democracy and education through learning by doing; Biesta's call to balance the aims of education (qualification, socialisation and subjectification); Bernstein's theories of pedagogical codes and rights to explore issues of power and control within citizenship education; Bandura's social cognitive theory in studies on political efficacy; and Bourdieu's social and cultural capital when addressing reproduction of inequalities in citizenship education. In Nordic research, feminist theories such as Nancy Fraser's theorisation of forms of injustice (economic, cultural, political) have also been used. One study (Gardin, 2016) focused on the history of citizenship education in VET.

CHAPTER 3.

Dimensions of citizenship competence

The concept of citizenship competence provides a framework for understanding what citizenship education seeks to achieve in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes, and thereby ensure coherence among curriculum design, pedagogical approaches and assessment practices.

Citizenship competence is defined by the EU key competences framework for lifelong learning as ‘the ability to act as responsible citizens and to fully participate in civic and social life, based on understanding of social, economic, legal and political concepts and structures, as well as global developments and sustainability’ (European Commission. Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2019).

According to the framework, civic knowledge refers to foundational concepts and phenomena, including European shared values, a critical understanding of key developments in national, European and global history, awareness of the aims and values of social and political movements and knowledge of climate and demographic change, along with cultural diversity and identities within Europe and beyond.

Skills include the ability to engage effectively with others in common interests, such as the sustainable development of society. Critical thinking, problem-solving and the ability to develop arguments and participate constructively in community activities and decision-making at all levels, from local to international, are included. Critical media literacy and understanding the role and functions of media in democracies also belong to citizenship competence.

Attitudes include respect for human rights, support for social and cultural diversity, gender equality, sustainable lifestyles, promotion of culture of peace and non-violence, respect for the privacy of others, taking responsibility for the environment, overcoming prejudices and ensuring social justice and fairness.

In addition, the 2025 EU Action plan on basic skills refers to citizenship skills (understood broadly as competence in the document) as ‘understanding and evaluation of civic and democratic concepts, institutions and processes, including democracy, media literacy, crisis preparedness and respect of others and freedom of speech’ (European Commission, 2025a, p. 2).

Other relevant frameworks for citizenship competence include the Council of Europe’s Reference framework for competences for democratic culture (RFCDC), the EU entrepreneurship competence framework, Unesco’s global citizenship

education, the OECD PISA Global competence framework, IEA's conceptualisation of civic and citizenship education in the ICCS study and selected parts of the EU's sustainability learning framework GreenComp (Bacigalupo et al., 2016; Bianchi et al., 2022; Council of Europe, 2024; OECD, 2018; Schulz, Fraillon, et al., 2024; Unesco, 2015).

There is substantial overlap in the components and content relating to the learning outcomes across these frameworks. For instance, several of the values articulated in the RFCDC, including human rights, democracy, the rule of law, equality and cultural diversity, are also recognised as common EU values and are considered foundational to citizenship competence within the EU Key competences framework, where they are reflected under both knowledge and attitudes. At the same time, certain elements may extend and complement the EU definition, including:

- (a) systems thinking: the ability to understand complex interdependencies within societies and across the planet, and to recognise global interconnectedness;
- (b) political and civic (citizenship) self-efficacy: individuals' confidence in their capacity to participate effectively in civic and political processes;
- (c) civic action and critical transformative agency: the capacity to identify structural inequalities, critically question dominant narratives, envision alternative futures and act in support of sustainability, climate justice and human rights.

Drawing on the analysis of the existing frameworks, the following dimensions of citizenship competence in IVET have been selected for the broader Cedefop study on citizenship education in IVET that this literature review supports:

- (a) knowledge and application of democratic principles and political literacy;
- (b) political and civic self-efficacy and civic engagement;
- (c) critical thinking and media literacy;
- (d) history of the EU and common European values.

While not exhaustive, these dimensions represent key elements of democratic citizenship and broadly align with leading international policy and research frameworks. Together, they operationalise competences widely recognised as essential for active, informed, responsible and critical participation in democratic societies.

The dimension 'history of the EU and common European values' is presented separately to reflect the particular importance of the EU context for the study, although conceptually it may overlap with and be integrated into the other dimensions.

While global citizenship and sustainability are acknowledged as cross-cutting themes, the selected dimensions prioritise citizenship education oriented towards

democratic participation within European societies. This distinguishes the approach from broader global citizenship education, which additionally addresses issues such as global inequalities, global governance and climate justice.

Although civic engagement is explicitly addressed in the second dimension, participatory practices are treated as cross-cutting across all four dimensions, emphasising not only knowledge acquisition but also the application of competences in practice.

3.1. Knowledge and application of democratic principles and political literacy

Table 1. **Key elements of the dimension knowledge and application of democratic principles and political literacy**

Key elements	Related frameworks
Liberal democratic principles: rights, responsibilities, institutions, rule of law, equity, freedom, sustainability, solidarity, transparency. Political literacy: understanding power structures, active engagement, problem-solving and perspective-taking through action-oriented learning such as debates, decision-making and participation in real-life democratic processes.	EU Key competences for lifelong learning: knowledge of basic concepts and phenomena relating to society, economy and culture; social and political movements, sustainable systems; respect for human rights. EU GreenComp: valuing sustainability, supporting fairness. ICCS 2022: civic knowledge: institutions and systems; civic principles. OECD Global competence: capacity to examine issues and situations of local, global and cultural significance. ESCO: exercise rights and responsibilities; promote the principles of democracy and rule of law. RFCDG: valuing human dignity and human rights; democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law. Unesco GCED: sharing values and responsibilities based on human rights; knowledge and understanding of local, national and global issues.

Source: Authors, based on Bianchi et al., 2022; Council of Europe, 2024; European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2019; OECD, 2018; Schulz, Friedman, et al., 2024; Unesco, 2015.

Engler et al. (2023) further specify core democratic mechanisms: electoral competition, participation (including direct democracy) and representation. These are supported by transparency, constraints on power and the rule of law, alongside fundamental civil liberties such as freedom of expression, assembly, religion and protections of integrity and property.

Democratic understanding combines knowledge and normative judgement. Evidence shows that stronger liberal-democratic understanding increases rejection of norm violations, while weaker understanding is linked to greater tolerance of them (Wunsch et al., 2025). Democratic resilience therefore depends on citizens' ability to interpret and evaluate principles in context, not only to participate.

Political literacy, a concept developed by Crick in the 1970s, refers to the knowledge and skills for civic engagement at all levels (Caffrey, 2025). It includes understanding institutions (e.g. governments, EU, United Nations), political processes (elections, policymaking) and civil society.

Crick (2004) identifies four key abilities for a politically literate citizen: understanding power structures, active engagement, problem-solving in policy contexts and perspective-taking. Political literacy is inherently social and action-based, grounded in real-life issues and collective experience. It develops through participation, dialogue and community-based learning, fostering social responsibility and orientation toward the common good.

It also requires critical engagement with democratic principles in real-world contexts (e.g. current events and public debate) and aligns with major competence frameworks such as the EU key competences, RFCDC, ICCS and ESCO (European skills, competences, qualifications and occupations).

3.2. Political and civic self-efficacy and civic engagement

Table 2. **Key elements of the dimension political and civic self-efficacy and civic engagement**

Key elements	Related frameworks
Political and civic self-efficacy: internal efficacy (confidence to act) and external efficacy (belief that institutions respond) are formed by socialisation, graded mastery and experiential learning. Collective efficacy is crucial for many civic challenges. Open classroom climates, deliberation and cooperative learning build political and civic self-efficacy; effects vary by gender and marginalised groups' experiences. Civic engagement: informed engagement with issues, discussion inside/outside school, participation in community/school activities, volunteering, advocacy and activism. Determined by access, opportunities and perceived impact; overlaps with some areas of sustainability competence (political agency, collective action, individual initiative).	EU Key competences for lifelong learning: engaging effectively with others: developing arguments and participating in community activities and decision-making at all levels. EU GreenComp: political agency, individual and collective action. ICCS 2022: civic participation, dispositions towards engagement (e.g. self-efficacy, interest in political and social issues). OECD Global competence: sense of agency/self-efficacy regarding global issues; taking responsible action for collective well-being and sustainable development; engaging in informed, reflective civic participation at the local, national and global levels. ESCO: participate actively in civic life. RFCDC: self-efficacy. Unesco GCED: developing motivation and willingness to take action; acting for sustainable development and collective well-being; ability to establish positive interactions with people of different backgrounds and genders.

Source: Authors, based on Bianchi et al., 2022; Council of Europe, 2024; European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2019; OECD, 2018; Schulz, Friedman, et al., 2024; Unesco, 2015.

According to Bandura (1997, 2006), people are more likely to undertake tasks voluntarily when they believe they can perform them. Research confirms that strong civic self-efficacy increases motivation and future participation (Eidhof & De Ruyter, 2022).

Political efficacy is typically divided into internal efficacy, how the individual sees their own capacity to undertake political activities, and into external efficacy, i.e. the belief that political institutions respond to citizens' actions (Campbell et al.,

1980; Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Lane, 1959, p. 149; Milbrath, 1965). This attitude is shaped by experiences, education and opportunities for meaningful participation and positive feedback. Hoskins and Carrasco (2025) identify key methods for developing political self-efficacy:

- (a) political socialisation with positive reinforcement from significant others (parents, teachers and peers) and exposure to relatable role models (e.g. gender role models) performing well at this activity (Hoskins & Carrasco, 2025);
- (b) graded mastery of knowledge or skills ⁽⁷⁾; in schools, a strong association has been found between subject-based self-efficacy and higher-level performance (Bandura, 1997; Robbins et al., 2004).

Alongside individual self-efficacy, Bandura (1995) stresses collective efficacy: the belief in group capacity to forge self-interests into a shared agenda, mobilise support/resources, devise strategies, execute them and withstand opposition. Many civic challenges require collective action, which may call for distinct education supports (Eidhof & De Ruyter, 2022).

Effective teaching for political efficacy involves giving students agency, connecting to their lifeworlds and using experiential methods like action-learning (e.g. identifying and researching local community issues), role play, simulations and cooperative learning (Kosberg, 2025). The literature frequently finds that an open classroom climate positively influences political efficacy by encouraging authentic discussion of controversial issues (Kosberg, 2025).

Citizenship education does not affect all students in the same way; its impact can differ for racial and ethnic minority groups compared with majority students. For some minority students, learning more about politics may heighten their awareness of discrimination and structural inequalities, which can sometimes reduce their confidence that they can influence politics effectively (Kosberg, 2025). It has also been found that classroom discussions may positively affect boys' political efficacy but have a negative effect on girls, possibly due to girls experiencing less positive feedback from peers and teachers when speaking (García-Albacete & Hoskins, 2025).

Civic self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to engage effectively in civic activities and influence their community through social and political actions like volunteering or advocacy (Eidhof & De Ruyter, 2022). ICCS 2022 measures 'citizenship self-efficacy' among learners in Grade 8 with seven items, such as arguing one's point of view about a controversial political or social issue, standing as a candidate in a school election, organising a group of students to achieve

(7) The step-by-step development of knowledge or skills through tasks of increasing difficulty, where successful experiences build self-efficacy.

changes at school, writing an opinion piece to a newspaper or assessing the credibility of information about political or social issues (Schulz et al., 2025).

However, non-compulsory political activities (student councils, debating clubs, mock elections) tend to attract privileged students, implying a need for mandatory, inclusive approaches to ensure equal access to these forms of citizenship education across different social groups (Hoskins et al., 2017).

Civic engagement involves applying citizenship competence in real-world contexts. In ICCS, civic engagement is defined as 'becoming informed about political, social and civic issues, as well as exchanging views about those issues inside and outside school'. It is measured by students' engagement with news (reading, watching, listening) and information about social and political issues, along with participation in community organisations and groups or in school civic activities (Schulz et al., 2025). Actions include volunteering, service learning, community projects and advocacy or activism to engage with decision-making bodies.

The EU's sustainability competence framework GreenComp includes three competences that align with civic engagement: political agency, collective action and individual initiative (Bianchi et al., 2022).

3.3. Critical thinking and media literacy

Table 3. Key elements of the dimension critical thinking and media literacy

Key elements	Related frameworks
Critical thinking involves cognitive skills (analysis, evaluation, reasoning) and dispositions (curiosity, open-mindedness, questioning assumptions). Media literacy is the ability to critically assess media content, detect misinformation and, increasingly, navigate digital media environments responsibly. Both are essential for citizenship competence, enabling informed decision-making, democratic participation and societal engagement.	EU Key competences for lifelong learning: critical thinking; ability to access, understand critically and interact with media. EU EntreComp: critical thinking, evaluating ideas/opportunities, informed decision-making. EU GreenComp: critical thinking. ICCS 2022: experiences of engagement (e.g. social media). OECD Global Competence: critical examination of local, global and intercultural issues; understanding and appreciating different perspectives; and evaluating information sources while reflecting on one's own assumptions and biases. ESCO: critical evaluation of information and its sources. RFCDG: analytical and critical thinking; knowledge and critical understanding of the self, language and communication and the world (including politics, law, human rights, cultures, religions, history, media, economies, environment and sustainability). Unesco GCED: critical thinking.

Source: Authors, based on Bacigalupo et al., 2016; Bianchi et al., 2022; Council of Europe, 2024; European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2019; OECD, 2018; Schulz, Friedman, et al., 2024; Unesco, 2015.

Critical thinking and media literacy are integral components of citizenship competence. Media literacy, as defined by the European Commission (2023), is the ability to make informed choices, understand the nature of content and services and use communication technologies effectively. A media-literate person is able to protect themselves from harmful or illegal content such as grooming ⁽⁸⁾, cyberbullying

⁽⁸⁾ Grooming refers to a deliberate process of building a relationship of trust with a child or young person, often online, in order to exploit or abuse them.

and stealing of personal data, critically assess sources of information and detect false content.

The relevance of digital literacy and media literacy has grown significantly as a form of societal resilience and preparedness (Laaninen, 2025). The European democracy action plan highlights media literacy, including critical thinking, as key for countering disinformation, navigating the news environment and having a critical understanding for making informed decisions (European Commission, 2020). The increasing use of digital media both as a news source and as a means of civic participation has further strengthened the link between critical thinking and media literacy (Römer et al., 2023). Critical thinking skills have become crucial for unmasking political propaganda, misinformation and disinformation spread through digital media (Piedade et al., 2020).

Critical thinking refers to the combination of cognitive skills such as analysis, assessment, interpretation and inference, alongside dispositional attitudes like curiosity, open-mindedness, truth-seeking and willingness to question assumptions (Facione, 1990; Piedade et al., 2020). Effective application of these skills requires a sufficient base of domain knowledge, as analysis, assessment and reasoning are most meaningful when grounded in relevant information and conceptual understanding (Kuhn, 1999; Willingham, 2007). In citizenship education, it involves reflecting on and critically assessing societal norms, power structures, information sources, stereotypes, misinformation, personal biases and social orders from multiple perspectives, often leading to informed action (Piedade et al., 2020; Rönnlund et al., 2019).

The integration of media literacy and critical thinking supports learners in becoming active, informed citizens. Critical thinking enables individuals to consider multiple perspectives, form independent and informed opinions and participate in democratic processes. Both media literacy and critical thinking are needed for learners to be able to challenge misinformation, engage in public discourse also in digital environments and understand their role within societal structures.

3.4. Knowledge of EU history and European common values

Table 4. **Key elements of the dimension EU history and European common values**

Key elements	Related frameworks
The dimension emphasises understanding EU history, integration and the shared values of democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for minorities, along with gender equality, environmental responsibility, peace and non-violence and global ethical responsibility. Questions on socioeconomic and multicultural aspects of European societies, and the contribution of national identities to a European identity, are also covered in this dimension.	EU Key competences for lifelong learning: knowledge of national, European and world history; European integration; European common values; diversity, gender equality and cultural identities; culture of peace and non-violence; responsibility for the environment. EU GreenComp: fairness, environmental responsibility. ICCS 2022: civic attitudes, roles and identities (e.g. sense of European citizenship). OECD Global competence: capacity to understand and appreciate different perspectives and world views. RFCDC: cultural diversity; openness to cultural otherness and other beliefs, world views and practices. ESCO: respect the diversity of cultural values and norms. Unesco GCED: sense of belonging to a common humanity; developing empathy, solidarity and respect for differences and diversity.

Source: Authors, based on Bianchi et al., 2022; Council of Europe, 2024; European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2019; OECD, 2018; Schulz, Friedman, et al., 2024; Unesco, 2015.

The 2018 EU key competences framework for lifelong learning (European Commission. Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2019) highlights the importance of understanding European common values. Article 2 of the [Treaty on European Union](#) states: ‘The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and

respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail’.

This dimension focuses specifically on EU history, respect for diversity and ethical responsibility, including an understanding of cultural identities and the socioeconomic and multicultural dimensions of European societies, along with the ways in which national identity contributes to a shared European identity.

CHAPTER 4.

Citizenship education

Depending on national contexts and research or curriculum traditions, citizenship education is referred to by a range of terms. These include civics, civic education, political education, social education, democracy and human rights education, social studies, life skills and social, personal and health education, along with interdisciplinary combinations such as history and civic education, anthropology and social studies, and religious and moral education and ethics (Council of Europe, 2004).

Citizenship education operates at the intersection of education sciences and citizenship theory. From an education sciences perspective, it involves curriculum design: learning objectives, learning content, pedagogical-didactic approaches and assessment frameworks. From a citizenship perspective, it requires defining the normative foundations of citizenship and determining which citizenship competence should guide education practice (Guérin, 2018).

Citizenship education is a constantly moving target which evolves based on the national context, global events and what is considered important in the contemporary society at the time (Damiani & Fraillon, 2025). The conceptualisation and field of citizenship education has evolved significantly in the past five decades, starting as an academic sub-discipline of political science, then studied within sociology of education, from critical pedagogy perspectives, and political psychology introducing cognitive and emotional aspects of young people's political development (Veugelers & De Groot, 2019).

In education sciences, curriculum content, classroom deliberation and teaching controversial issues have been central fields together with global citizenship education ⁽⁹⁾, multicultural education and human rights education.

These continuing extensions on the meaning of citizenship and its connections to different sub-fields of social and education sciences have made the concept of citizenship education complex (Veugelers & De Groot, 2019).

⁽⁹⁾ The terms 'global education' and 'global learning' are also used in this context. The term 'development education' is gradually being phased out in both research and practice. 'Global education' is particularly advocated by the Global Education Network Europe. Global citizenship education is more frequently used in research and by the UN, particularly since the adoption of UN sustainable development goals in 2015 (Pedraja-Rejas et al., 2023).

4.1. Pluralism, agency and democratic norms

A key debate within citizenship education concerns the type of citizen(ship) that education aims at and the way it is assessed (Guérin, 2018). Citizenship and democracy are essentially contested concepts, and citizenship education inevitably engages with questions about which forms of knowledge, skills and attitudes should be fostered (Guérin, 2018; Van Der Ploeg & Guérin, 2016; Van Rees, 2023).

However, in pluralist constitutional democracies, it is important to recognise that citizenship education should not seek to prescribe a single, fixed model for citizenship education. Rather than promoting a predetermined set of behaviours or dispositions, it should equip learners with the capacities to navigate disagreement, engage with diverse perspectives and participate meaningfully in democratic life (Biesta, 2011; Gutmann, 1999; Levinson, 2012).

This perspective implies embracing a plurality of interpretations of citizenship and recognising multiple civic identities. At the same time, such openness operates within clear normative boundaries and structure (framework), including respect for fundamental rights, commitment to democratic procedures and the rejection of racism, hate speech and violence (Banks, 2008; Council of Europe, 2018a). Citizenship education thus involves preparing students to engage with diversity and contestation in ways that are consistent with these shared democratic principles.

The 2022 ICCS adopts Conover's (1995) conceptualisation of citizenship, comprising three elements:

- (a) membership of a political community;
- (b) 'sense of citizenship' encompassing citizenship identity and understanding of citizenship;
- (c) citizenship practices such as political participation and civic engagement (Schulz et al., 2025).

Each of these dimensions presents distinct challenges for education (Hämäläinen & Nivala, 2023). For example, questions of membership may be complicated by students' diverse legal or migration statuses, while identity-oriented approaches may extend beyond national belonging to include European or global dimensions. The dimension of participation encompasses both civic virtues and agency, including critical reflection and engagement.

Different frameworks have sought to categorise forms of citizenship, illustrating the diversity of possible interpretations rather than prescribing a single ideal. For instance, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) distinguish between the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen and the justice-oriented

citizen. Similarly, Veugelers and De Groot (2019) identify adaptive, individualised and critical-democratic forms of citizenship. While such typologies are analytically useful, they also demonstrate that education aims, curricula and assessments inevitably reflect particular and often implicit normative assumptions about citizenship.

Large-scale assessments such as ICCS operationalise citizenship through specific measurable constructs. In ICCS 2022, these include conventional citizenship, social movement-related citizenship and globally oriented citizenship (Schulz, Fraillon, et al., 2024). These categories highlight different modes of engagement but do not exhaust the range of legitimate democratic participation.

Rather than fixing a single definition of the 'good citizen', Van Der Ploeg and Guérin (2016) argue for a pedagogical approach that foregrounds autonomy, pluralism and critical reflection. From this perspective, citizenship education should expose students to competing conceptions of citizenship, including their underlying ideologies and historical contexts, and support them in forming their own positions.

Finally, the concept of the 'good citizen' remains contested within citizenship education scholarship. As Hess and McAvoy (2014) argue, open political classroom discussions risk perceptions of bias but can build ethical democratic competence when guided by evidence and deliberation. Similarly, Hand (2017) underscores philosophical disagreements over whether moral education should prioritise direct instruction in citizenship virtues or nurture autonomous moral reasoning.

4.2. Inequalities and compensation effect of citizenship education

A second major debate in citizenship education research concerns the intergenerational transmission of political inequality and whether formal education can mitigate or compensate these disparities.

In the Netherlands, pre-vocational and academic track students differ in citizenship knowledge, voting intention, institutional trust and support for equal rights (Dijkstra et al., 2021). These gaps increased from 2009 to 2016, with vocational students' levels remaining stable while other tracks improved (Van Goethem et al., 2022).

Since disadvantaged young people have less political socialisation at home, they should theoretically benefit more from school-based opportunities (Hoskins et al., 2017). Hoskins and Janmaat (2024) describe how university educated parents foster their children's political interest through 'negotiation households' and discussions on social issues and middle-class activities such as involving children

in associations or clubs related to social or environmental causes, or taking children to cultural trips (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2024). The question is whether schools can compensate for absence of such parental resources and promote political mobility (Hoskins et al., 2017).

Evidence suggests that open classroom climate, formal citizenship curricula and extracurricular activities such as service-learning combined with reflection can promote citizenship competence (Nieuwelink, Dekker, et al., 2019). Open classroom climate experienced during adolescence positively influences political trust until early adulthood, with no significant link to citizenship education content and volume or participation in school political activities (Sun & Janmaat, 2025).

Findings on the compensatory effect of education are divided. Some studies show that cultural trips support civic values and skills, particularly benefiting disadvantaged students (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2024). However, the PISA 2018 Global competence report shows that Slovenian VET students report lower global competence despite more learning opportunities, challenging the school's compensatory role (Štremfel & Šterman Ivančič, 2024).

Civic learning benefits were greater for learners in Grade 8 of general track than those in pre-vocational programmes in Belgium and the Netherlands, potentially increasing knowledge gaps (Sampermans et al., 2021). Using 2016 ICCS data, Mennes, Munniksma et al. (2023) found that while democratic activities positively impact civic outcomes, the compensatory role was limited since students of higher socioeconomic status participated more. High-quality teaching and differentiated, inclusive approaches are needed, rather than simply offering equal opportunities (Mennes, Van De Werfhorst, et al., 2023; Sampermans et al., 2021).

Finally, De Groot et al. (2022) highlight measurement instrument limitations, questioning whether lower VET scores on civic knowledge reflect deficits or simply differences in types of civic knowledge assessed. They argue that VET students' perspectives should be included in the design of the instruments, as otherwise interpretation of results for students from marginalised backgrounds may neglect alternative or informal types of civic participation such as online activism or the spoken word. Hoskins and Janmaat (2024) similarly suggest that survey responses on political interest may be shaped by how the questions are formulated, reflecting social class perceptions: 'Working-class students may have interests in areas that could be understood as political, but these students would not classify these concerns in terms of having an interest in politics'.

To summarise, research shows persistent civic inequalities between vocational and academic students linked to unequal home socialisation, with schooling only partly able to compensate through factors like open classroom climates and participatory learning. However, evidence is mixed and suggests that

these gaps may also reflect differences in measurement and definitions of civic engagement, not just true deficits in disadvantaged students.

4.3. Psychological dispositions and democratic orientations

A complementary line of inquiry within citizenship education research concerns the psychological foundations of political orientations and their implications for democratic participation. While citizenship education has traditionally focused on knowledge, skills, attitudes and participation, political psychology and related behavioural research suggest that stable dispositional differences among citizens also shape how democratic life is perceived and engaged with (Dassonneville et al., 2012).

A key contribution in this field is Karen Stenner's work on the authoritarian dynamic. Stenner (2005) argues that a substantial minority of citizens in liberal democracies possess an authoritarian predisposition that is psychological rather than narrowly ideological, reflecting a preference for order, conformity and social sameness over diversity and pluralism. She distinguishes this underlying disposition from over-authoritarian attitudes, which are more likely to appear when people perceive normative threat, such as rapid social change, cultural diversification, value conflict or institutional instability.

A central implication of this argument is that democratic vulnerability cannot be fully explained only by external pressures such as misinformation, economic insecurity or low institutional trust. Democratic systems must also account for relatively stable differences in how citizens respond to diversity, ambiguity and change (Stenner, 2005). This shifts the analytical focus from episodic explanations of democratic stress toward more enduring psychological foundations of political behaviour.

Hibbing, Smith and Alford likewise emphasise stable psychological differences in political preferences and responses to threat (Hibbing et al., 2013). Their work suggests that individuals vary in sensitivity to threat, uncertainty and ambiguity, with some placing greater value on security, predictability and authority. In Hibbing's later framing, this orientation is described as the securitarian personality, which emphasises protection, cohesion and order, and interacts with environmental cues rather than mechanically determining political behaviour (Hibbing, 2020).

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that democratic tensions may partly reflect enduring differences in how citizens perceive and process social complexity. This has implications for citizenship education, which often assumes

that democratic dispositions can be developed primarily through curriculum and pedagogy (Dassonneville et al., 2012). Research also indicates that open classroom climates and participatory civic-learning environments can support civic knowledge, political trust and participation, suggesting that education still matters even where dispositional differences exist (Campbell, 2008; Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

From this perspective, citizenship education may also need to consider how learners respond to normative ambiguity, diversity and institutional complexity. Without reducing pluralism or prescribing uniform attitudes, education systems may benefit from clearly articulating shared constitutional principles, democratic safeguards and rule-of-law frameworks, so that pluralism is experienced within a coherent normative order rather than as unbounded relativism. At the same time, these findings reinforce the importance of designing citizenship education that is both inclusive and resilient, since dispositional variation does not imply determinism but highlights the role of institutional and pedagogical contexts in shaping democratic life (SOLIDAR Europe, 2024).

4.4. Global citizenship education and education for sustainable development

Over the past three decades, the scope of citizenship education has broadened to include global issues and challenges, with globalisation, international migration, global inequalities and environmental concerns emerging as key themes (Damiani & Fraillon, 2025). These issues are particularly tackled within global citizenship education (GCED) and education for sustainable development (ESD), two interrelated and intersecting fields that have strong associations with citizenship education and have strengthened their stand in academic research and policies (Bourn, 2020; Damiani & Fraillon, 2025; Tarozzi, 2021). Both GCED and ESD are referred to in target 4.7 of the UN sustainable development goals ⁽¹⁰⁾, consequently causing education systems to adopt their objectives around the world. The ICCS 2022 included both global citizenship and sustainability as focus areas (Damiani et al., 2025), and also the EU Council Conclusions support linking education for democratic citizenship with GCED and ESD (Council of the European Union, 2023).

⁽¹⁰⁾ By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

A recent Eurydice report on learning for sustainability connected sustainability and citizenship education by looking specifically at citizenship education across Europe, i.e. how ‘several sustainability competences, such as understanding sustainability values, political agency and individual and collective action, are closely linked to citizenship education’ (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2024). The ICCS 2022 further showed that there is an association between higher levels of civic knowledge and students’ sustainable attitudes and behaviours, including social, environmental and economic dimensions, such as support for gender equality or equal rights for immigrants and all ethnic groups (Damiani et al., 2025).

4.5. Social, moral and economic rationales

IVET takes place before entering working life, typically at the upper secondary level, and leads to a vocational qualification through classroom learning combined with practical training, including apprenticeships (Cedefop, 2026). While labour market responsiveness remains central to IVET, there is growing recognition of the need to prepare VET learners to be active and engaged citizens (Cedefop, 2020, 2023; Council of the European Union, 2020; Rosvall & Nylund, 2022).

In the EU, around half of all learners at the upper secondary level are enrolled in VET (Eurostat, 2025). Adolescence is considered a formative age for conceptualising one’s thoughts on democracy, collective action and the common good, and developing dispositions of trust, open-mindedness and tolerance of dissent that are essential for democratic engagement (Flanagan, 2013).

The integration of citizenship education and the development of citizenship competence in IVET rest on social, moral and economic rationales.

Figure 1. **Rationale for promoting citizenship competence in IVET**



Source: Authors.

The social rationale is linked to the goal of citizenship education to promote social cohesion and social responsibility: understanding and respect for diverse perspectives, dealing with conflicts and differences in democratic and multicultural societies, and participating actively in one's community (Geboers et al., 2013).

Limited access to citizenship education places IVET learners at a disadvantage relative to their peers in general education and risks entrenching socioeconomic inequalities in civic participation such as voting, community service or political advocacy. Moreover, VET provides an important platform for lifelong learning, especially for vulnerable populations, by strengthening their skills for democratic citizenship and participation in economic, social and civic life (Kersh & Huegler, 2018).

The moral rationale is about justice and equity: everyone, regardless of their education path or background, deserves access to citizenship education that supports social inclusion and belonging, but also democratic participation and personal development. Studies across different national contexts show that students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, many of whom study in VET, benefit more from formal citizenship education and participatory pedagogies than students from privileged families (Andersson, 2015; Hoskins et

al., 2017; Janmaat & Mons, 2023). This suggests that investing in high-quality citizenship education in VET may be effective in increasing equity in civic participation (Janmaat & Mons, 2023).

From an economic point of view, citizenship education in IVET is important because it strengthens the institutional foundations that support long-term economic performance. Modern growth theory and empirical evidence, such as the work of Daron Acemoglu and the World Bank (Acemoglu et al., 2014; World Bank, 2017), show that economies grow more sustainably when institutions are accountable, inclusive and trusted. Citizenship education contributes to this by equipping individuals with the knowledge and dispositions needed to understand, engage with and uphold democratic and economic institutions, thereby improving governance quality and policy effectiveness over time.

The economic rationale is also related to how citizenship competence transfers across social and professional contexts, including the importance of citizenship education from the employers' perspective (Bundesvereinigung der Deutschen Arbeitgeberverbände, 2025). Citizenship education and employability can be seen as complementary: citizenship education strengthens employability by fostering transversal skills such as ethical and critical thinking, collaboration or intercultural communication that enable individuals to navigate labour market transitions while actively participating in democratic and social life (Labrot & Pirker, 2024). These transversal skills connected to citizenship are increasingly valued in the labour market and improve VET graduates' job readiness.

For instance, 'new economy skills' conceptualised by the World Economic Forum (2021) include innovation and creativity, global citizenship and civic responsibility, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and digital skills – all closely aligned with the broader concept of citizenship education.

4.6. Growing importance and need for action

In recent years, citizenship education has gained prominence, particularly in response to the spread of political propaganda through social media and signs of democratic backsliding in many countries (Gora & de Wilde, 2022; Russell et al., 2022). This renewed attention is also linked to declining civic participation, widening inequalities in political engagement and diminishing trust in public institutions across OECD countries (Borhan, 2025).

For example, in France, 31 % of people under 35 consider that democracy is not necessarily the best system of governance and only half see voting as an effective way to express political dissatisfaction (Conseil économique & Ipsos, 2024). According to the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2025), 13.8 % of

respondents aged 18–24 and 10.7 % of those aged 25–34 in Spain consider that, in some circumstances, an authoritarian government may be preferable to democracy, while 76.3 % and 81.2 % respectively still express a preference for democracy; the same survey also reports that 54.9 % of the Spanish population is dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy.

In Europe, young people not only vote less than older age groups, but also engage less in institutional politics than previous generations (European Parliament, 2023). Citizenship education is increasingly seen as a countermeasure to these trends (Council of the European Union, 2023). It has become increasingly important that individuals are informed about civic and political affairs and are equipped to participate democratically, thereby supporting social cohesion and shared European values.

This focus can be attributed to several factors. First, citizenship education safeguards democratic culture. Second, democratic processes are stronger when informed citizens participate. Third, and of particular relevance for VET, legislators have been found less responsive to the needs of people with a VET background, partly due to their lower political engagement (Eidhof & De Ruyter, 2022). Systematic underrepresentation of such groups in political decision-making risks undermining the legitimacy of democracy (Eidhof & De Ruyter, 2022).

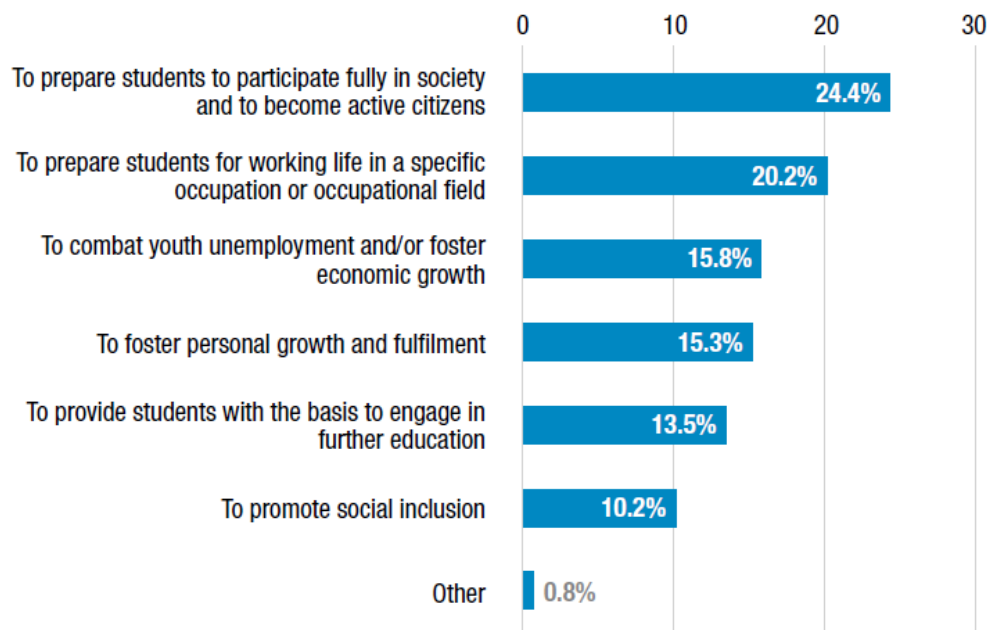
There are also signs of citizenship education being politicised and misused by political actors to advance their ideological agendas, for instance relating to migration, religion, human rights or history, which risks undermining the role of citizenship education understood as fostering autonomous, critical democratic citizens (European Parliament, 2023; Zamecki & Załęski, 2023).

The 'Learning about the EU' report by the European Commission warns about the possible politicisation of the concept of 'European citizenship' in the context of rising populism across countries, and suggests differentiating between 'becoming European' (identity), 'being a European citizen' (democracy and participation in democratic institutions), 'what Europe does for me' (policies) and 'my European role' (intercultural collaboration across boundaries) (European Commission. Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2021).

In 2018, a Cedefop survey of 1 500 European stakeholders, including policymakers, officials in ministries and government agencies, school administrators, social partners and practitioners such as training and human resource managers, highlighted the importance of VET in preparing active, critical and democratic citizens (Cedefop, 2020).

Figure 2. **Desired characteristics of VET for 2035**

If you could have three wishes, which of the following would you like to see as the main characteristics of VET in 2035?



Source: Cedefop, 2020.

Preparation for citizenship was the most frequently selected desired characteristic for VET in 2035, surpassing even preparation for a specific occupation. This was explained either as recognition that personal development and active citizenship are integral to all kind of education, or as a sign of the growing social value of VET as a mainstream pathway with broader education purposes (Cedefop, 2020). In line with these findings, Cedefop's synthesis report on the future of VET in Europe (Cedefop, 2023) showed the need for analysis of citizenship education in VET across Europe – an aim to which this research responds.

CHAPTER 5.

Influencing factors and implementation of citizenship education in IVET

Enablers and barriers to effective, high-quality citizenship education are widely recognised as spanning both general education and VET. This chapter focuses specifically on IVET, examining the key enablers and barriers that influence the development of citizenship competence in this sector. While many of the barriers identified in the literature are well-established, fewer studies explicitly examine the enablers – conditions and mechanisms within IVET that facilitate effective citizenship education.

Most identified enablers are derived indirectly from policy documents or practice-oriented recommendations rather than from robust empirical evaluation, with only a small number of studies offering more direct insight (e.g. Moons & Duchateau, 2024).

Table 5. Summary of enablers and barriers to citizenship education in IVET

Level	Enablers	Barriers
Policies and frameworks	• Increased explicit focus on citizenship education in policy frameworks. • Growing emphasis on intercultural, global and democratic competences as working-life skills. • Workplace demand for transversal skills.	• Vague legislation leading to inconsistent implementation of citizenship education. • Financial constraints limiting citizenship education.

Level	Enablers	Barriers
Learning culture	• Learner interest in civic and social issues. • Diversity among VET learners as an opportunity for pluralistic perspectives.	• Limited prior knowledge among students to develop citizenship competences. • Underdeveloped cooperation structures with local communities and civil society. • Weak coordination of citizenship education between schools and workplaces in VET. • Socioeconomic disadvantage and limited experiences of participation constraining learners' political and civic self-efficacy. • Academic bias framing vocational tracks as less capable of fostering citizenship competences.
Education and training practice	• Experiential and practice-based learning in workplaces. • Deliberative and participatory teaching methods. • Teachers' sense of responsibility as civic educators. • Whole-school approaches to citizenship education. • More personalised teacher–student relationships. • Partnerships with civil society organisations and social partners supporting experiential learning.	• Avoidance of controversial and political issues. • Limited teacher reflexivity in challenging stereotypes and supporting cultural diversity in VET. • Stereotypical assumptions that VET students are uninterested in civic issues. • Inconsistent implementation of democratic participation structures. • Limited time allocated to citizenship education.
Curriculum and assessment	• Flexible curricula allowing teachers to integrate civic themes.	• Labour-market-driven curricula prioritising employability over citizenship. • Low expectations of VET students reflected in curricula and textbooks. • Limited involvement of political scientists and democracy scholars in citizenship education and curriculum design.
Extracurricular activities	• Effective participation channels for students.	• Low levels of engagement and limited awareness of participation opportunities. • Structural and perceived barriers to meaningful participation.

Level	Enablers	Barriers
Training of teachers and in-company trainers	• Structured frameworks and emerging competence requirements for citizenship education in teacher training. • Availability of CPD support through multiple actors and institutional support structures.	• Insufficient actual initial and in-service teacher training on citizenship competences.

Source: Authors, based on the literature review.

The enablers and barriers operate across interconnected levels: vague or non-existent policy frameworks and the absence of systematic monitoring contribute to fragmented curricula, while inadequate training of VET teachers in citizenship education is reflected in the quality of educational practice. Among the enablers, participatory approaches, such as student-led curriculum negotiation in citizenship education, have been shown to strengthen other enabling factors, including teacher–student collaboration and students’ motivation to participate (Geurts et al., 2023, 2025). However, the literature is not always consistent, and findings may diverge depending on the target group of the study.

For example, teachers in several studies report a lack of student motivation or interest in civic issues as a barrier, whereas studies focusing on students highlight substantial interest in social, global and civic issues as an enabler. One interpretation is that students are, in principle, interested in engaging with societal issues, but that current forms of citizenship education don’t align with their expectations of learning as practical, relevant to their lives and participatory. Another explanation for these apparent contradictions is the heterogeneity of IVET contexts across fields and occupations, countries and system types (e.g. apprenticeship or company-based versus school-based provision).

The distinction between barriers and enablers is not always fixed. The same factor may operate differently depending on context, timing, institutional conditions or learners’ experiences. For example, flexible curricula can enable teachers to integrate civic themes in ways that respond to learners’ interests and local contexts; however, where citizenship education lacks clear status or support, the same flexibility may contribute to inconsistent implementation or leave civic learning dependent on individual teachers. Similarly, diversity among VET learners can create opportunities for pluralistic perspectives and intercultural learning, but may also require strong pedagogical support if socioeconomic disadvantage, limited prior civic knowledge or unequal experiences of participation constrain learners’ political and civic self-efficacy. We therefore use the barriers/enablers distinction as an analytical framework rather than as a rigid classification. This approach helps organise the literature and identify recurring patterns across policy,

learning culture, practice, curriculum, participation and teacher training, while still allowing for overlap, ambiguity and movement between the two categories.

5.1. Policies and frameworks

EU policy strongly supports citizenship education through multiple interconnected initiatives. Since 2006, and reaffirmed in the 2018 Council recommendation, citizenship competence has been included among the EU key competences for lifelong learning and framed as essential for personal fulfilment, employability, active citizenship and social inclusion (Council of the European Union, 2018). This commitment is reflected across a range of policy initiatives, including the 2015 Paris Declaration, which promotes common values, democratic participation, media literacy and critical thinking; the 2018 Council recommendation on promoting common values, inclusive education and the European dimension; the 2020 European democracy action plan, which strengthens democratic participation and counters disinformation; and the 2023 Council Conclusions on strengthening education for democracy and European values. Most recently, the EU Action plan on basic skills identifies citizenship as a core ‘basic skill’ necessary for civic participation, democratic understanding, media literacy and respect for others (Council of the European Union, 2015, 2023; European Commission, 2020, 2025a; Council of the European Union, 2018).

EU policy documents also increasingly frame citizenship as relevant to VET. The 2015 Riga Conclusions explicitly stated that VET should further strengthen key competences in VET curriculum and provide more effective opportunities to acquire or develop skills for personal development and active citizenship. The 2020 Osnabrück declaration builds on the Riga cycle (2015–2020) and identifies, among its priorities, resilience and excellence through quality, inclusive and flexible VET. The 2025 Herning declaration continues this trajectory, emphasising attractive and inclusive VET and explicitly naming basic and transversal skills, including citizenship, as part of learners’ lifelong adaptability and personal growth. Taken together with the 2020 Council recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, these documents show that the EU treats citizenship education as a legitimate and increasingly explicit objective within VET policy, alongside labour-market relevance and social inclusion (Council of the European Union, 2020, 2025; Ministers in charge of vocational education and training of the Member States, 2015; 2020).

Cedefop’s ongoing study on citizenship education, which this literature contributes to, focuses on eight countries (Czechia, Estonia, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal and Romania). In the literature review phase, the

following brief policy updates were provided by the national researchers, confirming positive examples of deliberate policy developments in several countries to strengthen the citizenship education in IVET.

- (a) **Czechia.** The [Education Strategy 2030+](#), adopted in 2020, explicitly prioritises citizenship education and promotes closer integration between VET and democratic citizenship preparation. Citizenship education in IVET is offered mainly through dedicated subjects such as civic studies and civic and social science foundations. Expected outcomes related to 'Civic Competencies and Cultural Awareness' in Czech IVET curricula include acting responsibly in one's own interest and in the public interest, respecting laws and the rights of others, opposing intolerance, xenophobia and discrimination, recognising and appreciating national, European and global cultural values, and acting in accordance with principles of sustainable development.
- (b) **Estonia.** In 2025, a more flexible and learner-centred curriculum integrating practical skills with general education subjects started to be introduced. One aim of this reform is to ensure that all IVET programmes include an introductory component in the first semester that enables learners to develop competences and skills necessary for lifelong learning and social participation, thereby embedding citizenship competence more intentionally within IVET.
- (c) **Germany.** [Amendments to the Vocational Education and Training Act](#) (BBiG) in 2020 and 2025 emphasise character development within training companies, implicitly reinforcing the integration of citizenship education. In 2018, the Conference of German Education Ministers recognised citizenship education as a general goal of IVET. VET standards were updated in 2021 to emphasise democracy education as a shared responsibility of schools and companies. Democratic values are embedded in areas such as organisational knowledge and rights, health and safety, sustainability, digital literacy and diversity (Busse et al., 2024; Hackel, 2024). Across all education levels, students are expected to develop as democratically responsible citizens, with specific objectives defined in the constitutions and educational legislation of the 16 federal states. Increasingly, training companies are viewed as spaces for democratic life and civic engagement, offering formal and informal opportunities for democratic participation among IVET learners.
- (d) **Italy.** In IVET, priority has traditionally been given to technical and professional training objectives, with the promotion of citizenship considered an indirect education task. In 2019, [Law 92/2019](#) introduced compulsory teaching of 'Civic and environmental education' in all schools, including IVET. Civic education is delivered through a cross-curricular and transdisciplinary approach, with a

minimum of 33 hours annually, while schools and teachers retain responsibility for implementation planning.

- (e) **Netherlands.** Citizenship education in VET was strengthened through the [*Burgerschapsagenda mbo 2017–2021*](#) ⁽¹¹⁾ introduced by the Ministry of Education and the VET Council (MBO Raad), following research highlighting the need to substantially strengthen citizenship education in IVET. Qualification requirements were revised in 2016 and 2019 to include critical thinking and respect for ethnic, religious, sexual and gender diversity. New qualification requirements are currently under parliamentary review and aim to reinforce provisions relating to teacher training and institutional assessment. In addition, a new regulation on citizenship in VET has been implemented since 2024.
- (f) **Norway.** In 2020, citizenship education was reinforced through a school reform, which established three interdisciplinary topics: democracy and citizenship, sustainability and health and life skills. In IVET, democracy and citizenship are addressed through common core subjects (e.g. social science, mathematics and the Norwegian language) and specific VET courses. However, inclusion of these interdisciplinary topics is not mandatory, and only 7 out of 10 VET programmes include democracy and citizenship in their first-year curriculum. For example, in the building and construction programme, democracy and citizenship encompass knowledge of cultural heritage and building traditions, alongside skills related to cooperation, understanding democratic processes in the workplace and developing a professional identity. Social science is taught in the second year of IVET and aims to enhance students' critical awareness of society and their capacity to influence it, covering topics such as human rights and international agreements.
- (g) **Portugal.** The [*National strategy for citizenship education*](#) (ENEC), introduced in 2017, emphasises the integration of citizenship education across the educational system. In VET, citizenship education is not taught as a separate subject but is integrated across all subjects.
- (h) **Romania.** In 2018, the national curriculum for technological high schools and vocational schools was revised to emphasise transversal competences, particularly civic responsibility, democratic participation and respect for diversity. These elements are now more explicitly embedded in subject-specific modules such as social education, legal studies and courses focused on personal and professional development. However, implementation remains uneven across institutions and, in company-based training, citizenship

(11) National policy agenda (2017–2021) focused on strengthening citizenship education in the Dutch VET system.

education is often limited to topics relating to ethics or regulatory compliance, with broader themes of democratic engagement and community participation receiving less attention. [Law no. 198/2023](#) on pre-university education further reinforces the State's commitment to fostering active citizenship by outlining a vision of education grounded in democratic values, human rights and sustainability, and by positioning citizenship education as a shared objective across all levels of education.

There is a growing emphasis on intercultural, global and democratic competences as working-life skills. Increasing demographic diversity in many countries has made intercultural competence in VET essential for social cohesion and democratic participation (Itkonen et al., 2015). Employers and international organisations are increasingly seeing global/intercultural competence as key for equipping students with transversal skills including digital, entrepreneurial and soft skills that support graduates' global labour participation (Chinengundu & Hondonga, 2022; Unesco, 2022).

Employers increasingly value transversal/soft skills such as teamwork, problem-solving skills and ethical reasoning, along with sustainability and agency-oriented competences that are developed through citizenship education (OECD, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2021).

However, legislation often leads to inconsistent implementation of citizenship education. Minimal or vague legislative requirements lead to superficial and/or inconsistent implementation between education providers (De Groot et al., 2022; Ekström, 2024). Civic education often exists 'on paper' but lacks space in curricula and monitoring, and it is undervalued and marginalised within IVET when compared with vocational courses (Ekström, 2024; Farah et al., 2025; Kärnebro et al., 2025). This places too much responsibility on individual teachers' initiative rather than systemic support to citizenship education (Duch, 2025; Duch & Kidde Skov, 2023; Farah et al., 2025; Rasse, 2024). In countries where central examination requirements for IVET do not include citizenship competence, this may lead to insufficient emphasis on civic issues in vocational programmes (Šalaj, 2024).

There are also financial constraints limiting citizenship education. Financial constraints hinder the implementation of student-centred pedagogies that are essential for effective citizenship education. Funding based on performance and effectiveness place pressure on teachers to have students graduate faster. Budget limitations often result in larger class sizes, especially for general education teachers, which make it challenging to adopt active learning methods or build open classroom climate and meaningful relationships with students (Kärnebro et al., 2025; Suhonen et al., 2024). Teachers lack the necessary resources (time,

support, materials) to deliver high-quality citizenship education, or to implement extracurricular activities or form connections with external actors such as the civil society sector (Ekström, 2024; Farah et al., 2025).

5.2. Learning culture in schools and workplaces

A whole-school (or whole-institution) approach entails embedding democratic and human rights values and principles in all aspects of the learning environment: decision-making structures, curricula, teaching methods, physical environment, staff and student behaviours and relationships, extracurricular activities and community partnerships (Council of Europe, 2018b, 2025; Damiani & Fraillon, 2025).

The diverse aspects of the whole-school approach to citizenship education may also be formalised in strategic documents of VET providers, in mission statements or other planning documents where an education provider formulates a vision for the citizenship education they offer, and how learning outcomes will be obtained (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017). The whole-school approach can be implemented for instance through:

- (a) introducing an open classroom climate where learners can raise issues of concern to them, discuss controversial issues, express their opinions and listen to each other, and explore diverse perspectives in a safe, open, participative, respectful and inclusive learning space;
- (b) introducing a rights-respecting ethos where policies and practices based on human rights principles are at the core of the school's activities and education approaches;
- (c) requiring learners to undertake service learning or action projects in their communities, including a critical reflection on their experience;
- (d) developing partnerships with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or other schools locally or internationally;
- (e) providing opportunities for learners to participate in formal decision-making at the school and in the local community, for example through students councils or representation in different bodies (Council of Europe, 2018b).

In workplaces, the whole-school approach could entail structures that enable workers' participation in decision-making processes. A spillover effect has been found between democratic experiences at work and employees' broader civic, pro-democracy attitudes and participation in democratic processes outside work, such as voting or community involvement (Timming & Summers, 2020). Practicing

democratic norms at work can thus complement formal citizenship education and strengthen democratic culture in society.

Empirical studies on learning cultures of citizenship education in IVET are limited. A Dutch study (Coopmans et al., 2020) showed that the emphasis on citizenship in school policies, and attention to citizenship in staff meetings, correlated with positive student citizenship outcomes. Another Dutch study (Geurts et al., 2025) stressed the importance of involving both students and staff in collaborative development of citizenship education curricula, and the crucial role of leadership to facilitate this kind of process. An ethnographic study in Chile found that a vocational school with greater awareness of their students' marginality situation provided more active citizenship training to their student when compared with a school with lower awareness of marginality (Rasse & Sevilla, 2023).

Workplace learning offers potential for citizenship education, both in school-based and company-based IVET, but empirical evidence on democratic learning in workplaces is scarce (Brodsky et al., 2023; Höhns, 2025; Rönnlund & Rosvall, 2021; Rosvall & Nylund, 2022). A German scoping review indicates that larger companies with structured participation mechanisms tend to foster greater political interest and intended participation among apprentices, and that informal learning, such as conflict negotiation and role modelling, can positively influence learners' democratic attitudes (Brodsky et al., 2023). In a study on commercial apprentices, informal learning such as discussing political topics with trainers was rare, but trainees rated respectful interaction in the training company as high (Busse et al., 2024).

In Denmark, workplace trainers in social care and healthcare emphasised the importance of democratic participation in workplaces (Duch, 2023). On the one hand, students were expected to conform to professional principles and procedures, but they were also encouraged to express their opinions and influence decisions, for instance in staff meetings. Workplace training connects experience and reflection to action opportunities, but this does not seem to be exploited as a possibility for citizenship education to connect what happens in the school with what happens in the company/workplace (Duch, 2023; Rönnlund & Rosvall, 2021).

Differences of learning cultures across VET fields become more evident when considering citizenship education beyond those subjects where it is typically at the focus (i.e. social studies, civics, history, etc.), such as in vocational subjects in school, or in work-based learning in companies. This kind of research comparing different fields and their learning cultures has been conducted in Sweden. VET programmes, such as male-dominated production-oriented technology fields, tend to include less ethics and civic discussions, while programmes such as female-dominated healthcare involving a range of disciplines with concepts from

psychology, sociology and social science are historically understood to include moral questions in the profession, both in curricula and pedagogical practices (Nylund et al., 2018). Students in male-dominated production VET programmes also report less positive attitudes towards citizenship education and environmental or social justice actions (Knekta et al., 2025). Despite these differences, VET teachers in all fields can identify ways to integrate citizenship education in their core content, for instance by taking up civic or democratic issues already intertwined in work and working life (Rosvall & Nylund, 2022).

Contrary to stereotypes, many vocational students show a genuine interest in more general topics and societal issues, especially when taught in meaningful, contextual and participatory ways (Coopmans et al., 2024; Hjelmér & Rosvall, 2017; Knekta et al., 2025; Ledman, 2015b; Nylund & Rosvall, 2016; Panican & Paul, 2019; Piedade et al., 2023; Rönnlund & Rosvall, 2021; Rosvall et al., 2018; Rosvall & Öhrn, 2014; Vaessen et al., 2022). This result spans across countries and VET systems. Flemish 12th grade students in VET were significantly most likely to be 'globally and socially engaged citizens' compared with students in the general tracks (Vandenbroeck et al., 2024). Students in Swedish VET programmes expressed their desire to talk about power relations, gender and ethnicity related questions in their workplace training (Rönnlund & Rosvall, 2021), and identified the importance of both academic (including social sciences) and vocational subjects for their future (Nylund & Rosvall, 2016). Young Dutch students wished for more opportunities to discuss democratic issues at school (Vaessen et al., 2022), and students in Germany, Croatia and Romania showed strong demand for practical topics relating to citizenship, such as labour rights, financial literacy, workplace ethics, sustainability, anti-discrimination and media literacy (Farah et al., 2025).

The growing diversity in VET classrooms, particularly in terms of migrant-background students, offers opportunities to integrate intercultural education and democratic values within VET (Moons & Duchateau, 2024; Rosvall et al., 2018; Suhonen et al., 2024). While this diversity of backgrounds can facilitate pluralistic perspectives in citizenship education, diversity in itself is not sufficient for ensuring that discussions remain open and respectful. An open classroom climate is necessary for varied perspectives to be discussed in a safe and inclusive manner (Moons & Duchateau, 2024; Suhonen et al., 2024).

However, students often possess limited prior civic knowledge, which constrains the development of citizenship competences. When teachers are asked, they often see some students' limited interest in civic issues as a barrier for developing citizenship competence (Duch & Kidde Skov, 2023; Kärnebro et al., 2025; Suhonen et al., 2024). Particularly abstract topics (e.g. relating to the EU) that are more distanced from students' everyday lives are seen as challenging

topics to teach (Ali & Colasanto, 2025; Lappalainen, 2017). History teachers in Sweden noted challenges due to students' limited historical background knowledge and motivation for academic subjects, requiring highly structured tasks with strong guidance (Ledman, 2015a).

There are also underdeveloped cooperation structures with local communities and civil society. Civil society representatives, trade unions and youth workers see that citizenship competence is an essential part of VET and are willing to work together, but cooperation structures and resources are often missing (Farah et al., 2025; Moons & Duchateau, 2024; Šalaj, 2024). Vocational schools experience financial constraints to organise extracurricular activities and partnerships (Farah et al., 2025).

The development of learners' political and civic self-efficacy is closely linked to socioeconomic background and prior opportunities for participation. Particularly in early tracking systems ⁽¹²⁾, learners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are often concentrated in IVET pathways, entering with lower self-efficacy, political trust, self-esteem and confidence, and may experience difficulties to express their voice and engage in civic life (De Groot & Opdenakker, 2025; Debowski et al., 2025; Geurts et al., 2023). Students from marginalised backgrounds may have had limited prior positive experiences or access to civic learning opportunities, both in and outside school, for example at home, in volunteering or in hobbies (Bruin et al., 2025; Debowski et al., 2025; Janmaat et al., 2022). These gaps emerge early, correlating with parental education level, home discussion climate and peer socialisation, and persist even if the curriculum is identical across tracks. However, inequalities in civic engagement are likely to increase even more in education systems where differences in citizenship education are larger between academic and vocational tracks (Janmaat et al., 2022; Janmaat & Mons, 2023; Kestilä-Kekkonen et al., 2025; Witschge et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2025).

Although they exist in many countries, learner participation structures are inconsistently implemented and sometimes tokenistic, with limited decision-making or influencing power (Achour & Wagner, 2021; Debowski et al., 2025; Farah et al., 2025). Swedish studies show that students' workplace experiences are rarely used for civic learning despite their potential for democratic education in practical work situations, such as learning about trade unions or how to act when something is wrong, while students also report having little say during workplace practice because of hierarchical norms and limited opportunities for student voices (Nylund et al., 2020; Rönnlund & Rosvall, 2021; Rosvall & Nylund, 2022).

(¹²) Early tracking systems refer to education and training systems where students are separated into different academic or vocational tracks at a relatively young age.

Academic bias can frame vocational tracks as less capable of fostering citizenship competences. Persistent beliefs in the superiority of general or academic education may reinforce social inequality, as vocational tracks are often associated with lower expectations from parents, educators and policymakers (Nylund et al., 2018; Olofsson & Panican, 2017).

5.3. Education and training practice

Similarly to the national-level policies, there are few existing studies or mapping done on the modes of delivery for citizenship education in IVET. The 2017 Eurydice report provides information on whether the approach to citizenship education in the national curriculum for school-based IVET is similar or different when compared with general education. It also examines whether citizenship education is being provided as integrated content in compulsory subjects, as a compulsory separate subject or as a cross-curricular theme.

The report found that in a third of the education systems analysed, curriculum approaches to citizenship education used in general education are either not used in IVET or are used to a lesser extent. This includes, for example, fewer compulsory or optional subjects integrating citizenship education, less time allocated to compulsory subjects focusing on citizenship education, or fewer or no cross-curricular themes relevant to citizenship education in IVET (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017).

Research is particularly lacking on citizenship education in company-based IVET, which can serve as an empowering training ground for practicing critical thinking and influencing the world of work, thus strengthening learners' political skills (Höhns, 2025).

A scoping review of the workplace as a learning site for citizenship education in the German dual system identifies different types of learning opportunities in workplaces: firstly, formal, curriculum-based goals which emphasise democratic competences and societal engagement; secondly, non-formal opportunities for apprentices to participate in institutional structures like youth and trainee representation and work councils; and thirdly, informal everyday interactions with supervisors and colleagues, workplace conflict resolution and exposure to democratic or undemocratic organisational cultures (Brodsky et al., 2023).

In school-based IVET, workplace learning periods may even be seen as a hindrance to citizenship education. In a recent Swedish study, teachers did not consider workplace learning to be relevant for citizenship education, and were not able to form connections with vocational teachers and workplace staff (Kärnebro et al., 2025). Similarly, Finnish VET teachers stressed the importance of school-

based learning for 'life skills for example, what you like really need in life', as those skills were not seen to be sufficiently emphasised in work-based learning periods (Suhonen et al., 2024).

In a Swedish study, 74 students were interviewed on their experiences of power relations in workplace learning periods (Rönnlund & Rosvall, 2021). The study highlights a significant gap between the potential and practice of integrating citizenship education within workplace learning. Positive experiences of individual development, increased skills and social inclusion were mainly related to trade-specific competences, while students had limited exposure to political participation or civic discussions. Rönnlund and Rosvall (2021) attribute this to a lack of curricular emphasis on reflection, analysis and critical approach to practices. As a result, students have few opportunities to engage with complex societal issues such as racism in the workplace through structured reflection or discussion.

VET has the unique possibility to integrate civic knowledge into practice through its strong ties to workplaces. Practicing and building citizenship competence in real-life contexts, community projects and simulations is an opportunity to engage in democratic processes and decision-making in schools, workplaces and communities. It also supports the formation of autonomous, reflective professionals who can question norms and address ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas may concern, for example, equality, non-discrimination or questions of ecological sustainability (Rönnlund & Rosvall, 2021; Zuurmond et al., 2023). A Spanish study found both work experience and volunteering to be positively associated with higher critical thinking skills, suggesting that real-world contexts may encourage problem-solving and critical reflection (Parra-González et al., 2023).

Regarding pedagogical approaches, research has highlighted the importance of experiential, interdisciplinary, deliberative and place-based pedagogical methods for citizenship education, alongside whole-institution approaches and community partnerships (OECD, 2025). An open classroom climate and non-hierarchical learning structures foster dialogue and supportive atmosphere for cooperation (Ranieri & Fabbro, 2016; Römer et al., 2023). Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds might not be familiar with debating in school, and thus sufficient practice and time will be needed to create a safer space to discuss potentially controversial issues (Ranieri & Fabbro, 2016).

However, few studies systematically address pedagogical approaches on citizenship education in IVET. It has been noted how teachers play a pivotal role in creating inclusive spaces, encouraging participation and supporting reluctant students (Duch & Kidde Skov, 2023). Experiences with democracy in Danish social and healthcare programmes indicate the need for improved didactic approaches,

and the importance of teachers' role to also include the more reluctant students who hesitate to express their opinions and see school as an authority rather than a democratic space (Duch & Kidde Skov, 2023). An international study on youth at risk of social exclusion in VET argues for student-centred pedagogies that foster dialogue and democratic education, and for the crucial role of teachers and workplace instructors in creating secure, inclusive and democratic learning environments (Bruin et al., 2025). When learners' voices are listened to and their participation in decision-making, such as in student councils, is facilitated by teachers, students develop confidence, a sense of agency and understanding of their civic rights and responsibilities (Bruin et al., 2025).

Teachers' understanding on the aims of their teaching also impact their choices to enact the curriculum. An Israeli study comprising civics teachers from both vocational and general education schools found that civics teachers' personal conceptions of citizenship significantly shaped their classroom practices and interpretations of the official curriculum (Cohen, 2016). When students expressed different conceptions of citizenship, teachers often took a silencing, authoritative approach instead of pursuing democratic discourse in the classroom, and thus missed the pedagogical potential by failing to address the students' views.

Evidence from Sweden on teaching of citizenship education shows that vocational programmes emphasise personal responsibility, while academic tracks focus on analytical skills (Möllenborg, 2023). Yet, although policy discourses often frame IVET primarily in terms of employability and economic instrumentality, teachers may see their roles more broadly. Research in Finland and Sweden (Ekström, 2024; Persson & Berg, 2022; Suhonen et al., 2024) indicates that teachers in VET, regardless of subject area, see that they are preparing students to become broadminded and tolerant, even global citizens.

Moreover, teachers do not perceive this preparation for citizenship to be in opposition, but as complementary to developing students' vocational skills and employability (Persson & Berg, 2022; Rosvall & Nylund, 2022). Finnish teachers in VET have been found resisting the neoliberal discourse of ideal labour market citizenship in the curriculum, for instance by introducing critical questions or global-citizenship-related topics into their teaching despite the lack of these in the curriculum (Lappalainen, 2017; Suhonen et al., 2024).

Effective, student-centred pedagogical approaches include student choice of lesson topics, extracurricular activities, role play, structured argumentation training and more consensus-based discussion formats (Coopmans et al., 2020; Sobernheim, 2020). For VET students with potentially lower motivation and weaker background knowledge in academic subjects, Swedish history teachers proposed concrete, interest-based tasks and linking historical content to contemporary

issues instead of lecturing, written reports or extensive project work (Ledman, 2015a).

Teachers often rely on spontaneous discussions rather than planned approaches, leading to depoliticised civic education focused on legal frameworks rather than active participation (Šalaj, 2024). In Italy, teachers were seen to mainly focus on promoting the principles and values of the national constitution through classroom debate and dialogue, often arising spontaneously from students, and enabling different points of view on political, social and cultural issues (Brescianini, 2023).

Similar findings arise among Finnish vocational teachers for whom citizenship is not in the core of their teaching: they seldom have structured, planned pedagogical approaches to engage with controversial global issues, but rather react to the questions and issues raised by the students (Suhonen et al., 2024). Further research should explore whether participatory practices in school, and students' heightened sense of believing that they should be heard, translate to workplaces (Grevle, 2025).

Creative, hands-on, collaborative teaching methods such as project-based learning or roleplays where students are allowed to choose lesson topics have been shown to improve VET students' political self-efficacy, knowledge and skills (Coopmans et al., 2020; Geers et al., 2020). While not unique to VET, this kind of engaged teaching (having a committed and encouraging teacher) and deliberation (discussing politics and social issues in the classroom) has been found to be particularly impactful for VET students' political efficacy (Sohl & Arensmeier, 2015). Studies show that VET teachers demonstrate openness for spontaneous, student-initiated debates during lessons (Brescianini, 2023; Moons & Duchateau, 2024; Suhonen et al., 2024).

Both school leaders and teachers recognise the value of citizenship education, along with the fact that many students come from disadvantaged educational backgrounds and may require additional support (Brescianini, 2023; Ekström, 2024; Kärnebro et al., 2025). Teachers subscribing to values of equality and justice see the importance of students gaining holistic education, including personal, social and citizenship education, even beyond formal curriculum requirements (Brescianini, 2023; Ekström, 2024; Itkonen et al., 2015; Suhonen et al., 2024). Teachers report being committed to increasing broadmindedness among their students, and they aim to help students see issues from multiple perspectives and accept diversity of views by creating space for critical thinking and even resistance to neoliberal discourses (Lappalainen, 2017; Persson & Berg, 2022; Suhonen et al., 2023, 2024).

Whole-school approaches can strengthen citizenship education in IVET settings. Explicit attention to citizenship themes in school policies and staff meetings has been found to correlate positively with teaching practices and student outcomes (Coopmans et al., 2020). Effective implementation also depends on leadership that provides institutional backing and allocates sufficient resources for this work (Geurts et al., 2025).

Strong relationships, trust and rapport between vocational teachers and/or workplace trainers and students can foster informal citizenship education, creating a supportive environment for open classroom climate and civic engagement (Bruin et al., 2025; Suhonen et al., 2024). Supportive learning environments, where students receive personalised guidance and build relationships of mutual recognition and acceptance among peers, teachers and trainers, foster participation, belonging and an open classroom climate (Bruin et al., 2025). VET has been found to be a supportive environment for young people from diverse backgrounds, also supporting their feeling of inclusion in society (Bruin et al., 2025).

Initiatives such as community projects, visits and workshops by NGOs and youth organisations, or experiential and innovative learning methods such as 'living library' ⁽¹³⁾, are seen as effective ways to complement formal education (Achour & Wagner, 2021; Farah et al., 2025; Moons & Duchateau, 2024; Šalaj, 2024). Social partners such as trade unions are already active in some countries promoting citizenship competence through workplace dialogue and learner representation, but their efforts remain fragmented and less visible at the European level (Council of Europe, 2025).

Including controversial issues in citizenship education is seen as important for developing critical thinking, respectful deliberation skills and participation in democratic processes (Stitzlein, 2025). Similarly to other education settings, teachers in VET have been found to avoid controversial issues, partly due to fear of losing control of discussions (Cohen, 2016; Farah et al., 2025; Rönnlund & Rosvall, 2021; Šalaj, 2024; Suhonen et al., 2024). They may steer away from topics such as racism or gender inequality because they find it difficult to manage the discussion, and this again limits students' opportunities to critically engage with such societal issues through respectful deliberation (Rönnlund & Rosvall, 2021). In addition to the lack of teacher training to handle controversial and political issues in teaching, external pressures by political actors may also create uncertainty among teachers and school leaders to engage with such issues with students (Achour & Wagner, 2021; Šalaj, 2024).

⁽¹³⁾ A living library is an experiential learning method in which participants engage in structured, time-limited conversations with 'human books' – individuals who represent particular lived experiences, identities or social roles, rather than reading traditional printed texts (Smith-Merry et al., 2021).

Teacher understanding and practices connected to diversity have found to be related to their perceptions of students, the student composition and education track (Sincer et al., 2019). Teachers need to be increasingly reflexive regarding their own cultural biases, institutional ideologies and positionality to avoid reinforcing stereotypes, essentialist understanding of culture or 'us' versus 'them' dynamics when working with diverse students (Itkonen et al., 2015). Negative trainer attitudes towards cultural diversity risk undermining the efforts to promote equality and social cohesion in VET (Fine-Davis & Faas, 2020). Not acknowledging diversity (e.g. gender, ethnicity, ability) and seeing VET students as a homogeneous group can thus also form a barrier to citizenship education (Isopahkala-Bouret et al., 2014).

VET students are often perceived as less interested in theoretical or general subjects, including political and broader societal issues (Kärnebro et al., 2025; Pietilä & Lappalainen, 2023). Such stereotypes may hinder the development of citizenship competences, as teachers' expectations shape student-teacher relationships and pedagogical choices in citizenship-related learning (Geurts et al., 2023; Kärnebro et al., 2025; Sampermans et al., 2021; Vandenbroeck et al., 2024). Swedish studies show that general-education teachers often categorise students by track, adopting a deficit perspective of VET students as less motivated and less knowledgeable than students in academic tracks (Hjelmér & Rosvall, 2017; Ledman, 2015a; Panican & Paul, 2019).

VET curricula often prioritise technical skills and employability over citizenship education, resulting in less time allocated for civic topics compared with general education (Šalaj, 2024). This instrumental focus can extend to literacy, which is valued mainly for its work-relevant usefulness and is often limited to work-related contexts and topics (Pietilä & Lappalainen, 2023). VET providers also struggle with curriculum overload and the need to incorporate new content linked to digitalisation and other rapid changes in the world of work, leaving even less space for citizenship-related topics (Council of Europe, 2025). For instance in Sweden, the resources for teaching history differ between academic and VET students: although the curriculum is almost the same, VET students receive only half of the instructional hours compared with academic-track students (Ekström, 2024; Ledman, 2015a). Similarly, in Germany vocational tracks offer significantly less mandatory learning time for citizenship education in terms of hours and content when compared with academic tracks (Achour & Wagner, 2021; Gökbudat, 2021). This disparity in learning time reinforces political inequality, as students with lower social and cultural capital (fewer books at home, parents without higher education; see barriers on structural inequalities above) have less access to citizenship education than their more privileged peers (Achour & Wagner, 2021).

Often, opportunities to learn about democracy and citizenship issues, such as non-discrimination, equality or workers' rights, are not sufficiently used in workplace contexts (Rönnlund & Rosvall, 2021). Employers may prioritise technical skills and short-term business needs over broader citizenship competence (Debowski et al., 2025). Teachers of general subjects, including those who teach subjects relating to citizenship education, often teach students only for short periods of time, may be structurally apart from vocational teachers and have limited involvement in vocational learning in schools or workplaces (Duch, 2025; Kärnebro et al., 2025; Rönnlund & Rosvall, 2021; Suhonen et al., 2024).

5.4. Curriculum and assessment

Citizenship education in IVET is less frequently established as a core subject or explicitly integrated across subjects with clear standards, curricula and assessment frameworks. The number of subjects that could potentially incorporate elements of citizenship education is often more limited in IVET, and optional subjects with such content are less frequently offered, or absent altogether, for IVET students in several EU Member States. Where citizenship education is taught as a separate subject, its scope and requirements tend to be more limited in IVET compared with general education, or the subject remains optional. A similar pattern is observed when citizenship education is included as a cross-curricular theme. For example, in Czechia, five cross-curricular themes in general upper secondary education are relevant to citizenship education: 'personal and social education', 'thinking within European and global context', 'multicultural education', 'environmental education' and 'media education'. In IVET, however, only two such themes are identified: 'democratic citizenship' and 'environmental education' (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017).

Country curriculum differences are large. Preliminary data on the number of dedicated hours are available for some countries in a recent review on civic education in VET based on literature, policies and expert interviews (Šalaj, 2024). A few examples of this review are summarised below.

- (a) **Germany.** Citizenship education (*politische Bildung*) is a cross-curricular theme but mainly delivered through a separate compulsory subject 'Social Studies'. This subject is taught for 40 hours per year for three years. The topics covered include democracy, globalisation, international relations and the EU, peace, new technologies and social interactions.
- (b) **Italy.** Civic education is taught for at least 33 hours per year as a compulsory cross-curricular subject. Three main content areas include the Italian constitution, sustainable development and digital citizenship.

- (c) **Norway.** ‘Social Studies’ is taught as a compulsory subject over two school years for a total of 84 hours, focusing on democracy, developing critical thinking, analysing power relations in Norwegian society and becoming aware of active participation in political processes.
- (d) **Romania.** Civic education is not mandatory for IVET students but can be chosen as an option by students if the school includes this in their education offer. If available, the subject is often called ‘Man and Society’, for one hour per week, and covers democracy, politics and civil society.

Flexible curricula can enable teachers to integrate civic themes. In systems without national examinations for VET, study programmes may give teachers greater scope to address civic issues through discussions of current social and political topics. This flexibility can create opportunities for citizenship education that may be less available in academic tracks, where curricula are often more rigid and shaped by examination pressures (Lappalainen, 2017; Piedade et al., 2020).

Research on the intended, enacted and taught curricula relating to citizenship in VET curricula have been published particularly in the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden. Curriculum research from Finland and Sweden has demonstrated that while the earlier aim was to promote equality also among VET students by including active citizenship and broader knowledge in the education system, curriculum reforms since the 1990s have shifted to prioritising vocational skills and immediate job readiness, thus potentially excluding VET students from essential civic knowledge and engagement opportunities (Ledman, 2014b; Nylund & Virolainen, 2019; Panican & Paul, 2019). For instance, linguistic and intercultural competences are defined in terms of labour market relevance – i.e. what is useful for the job market – rather than broader communication skills necessary for participation in societal discussions, from a citizenship education perspective (Ledman et al., 2018; Nylund & Rosvall, 2016; Pietilä & Lappalainen, 2023). In particular, male-dominated VET programmes have been noted to include few attempts in the curriculum to see beyond the empirical ‘how things are’⁽¹⁴⁾ by relating knowledge to societal, historical, political or other contexts (Ledman et al., 2018).

The inclusion of history as a compulsory subject in Swedish VET since the 2011 education reform has, however, been explained as a citizenship-related aim to promote democracy, foster critical thinking and identity formation (Ledman, 2014a). Yet, history courses in VET are shorter, lack abstract learning goals and emphasise contemporary history with direct relevance to contemporary society,

⁽¹⁴⁾ Rather than reflecting on why things are the way they are, and how they relate to broader societal, historical, political or ethical contexts.

reflecting an instrumental approach to history ⁽¹⁵⁾ (Ledman, 2014a). Thus, it is not only the extent, but also the content and discourses of citizenship education that differ between IVET and general education. Words used in curricula turn VET learners towards ‘the direction of conformity with existing norms and structures, rather than being guided towards independent, critical thinking’ (Council of Europe, 2024).

Few studies have focused on the assessment of citizenship education. The only peer-reviewed study that aims at developing a tool for formative assessment of citizenship competence in IVET in Italy notes that adequate assessment strategies for the newly introduced citizenship competence have not been developed, and that assessing the competence remains a problem (Brescianini, 2023). The three other publications discussing assessment in the IVET context are the Eurydice report and the Council of Europe publications (Council of Europe, 2024, 2025; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017).

The first Eurydice report on citizenship education in 2005 already identified the challenge of developing assessment methods that go beyond measuring the acquisition of theoretical knowledge (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017). The 2024 Council of Europe’s guidance document reiterates the challenge of assessing values and attitudes, particularly in the context of VET where courses of citizenship education are often reduced under pressure from technical and vocational curriculum elements, and limited time for citizenship education makes assessing values and attitudes even more difficult than in the general education tracks, which have more time dedicated to the topic. Thus, demonstrating progress on complex sets of values and attitudes during a very limited duration of a course is not only difficult, but might raise ethical concerns (Council of Europe, 2024).

The view presented is that a short course ‘can at best raise awareness and provide a foundation for further development’, and only ‘concrete knowledge’, for example on social dialogue in the labour market, can be tested objectively. Ethical questions are also related to the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation), as values and political attitudes are sensitive data that should not be stored (Council of Europe, 2024). Formative assessment has been seen to be the more suitable approach for citizenship education, as summative assessment can be competitive and judgmental, risking to label some students as ‘failed citizens’ (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017).

Limited knowledge is available in the literature of internal assessment practices taking place within VET providers. Daas et al. (2016) suggest using a

⁽¹⁵⁾ Oriented toward utility and conformity (‘how to act within existing structures’) rather than toward critical, reflective distance (‘why these structures exist and whether they should be changed’).

range of instruments to assess students' citizenship competence such as tests and questionnaires, portfolios, game-based assessments or vignettes.

Eurydice (2017) reported a lack of central-level regulations or recommendations regarding appropriate methods for assessing citizenship education in over a third of the education systems reviewed. These methods included multiple-choice questionnaires, written compositions or essays, oral assignments, teacher observation, project-based assessment and self- or peer-assessment.

It remains unclear to what extent some of these assessment methods, or the more 'authentic' tasks recommended in the research literature, such as group projects, portfolio evaluations, situational judgement tests, self-assessment, peer assessment, micro-credentials or holistic grading systems, are used in practice in IVET (Council of Europe, 2025).

One of the most frequently cited barriers to citizenship competence in the literature review is VET curricula being dominated by the aim of employability over democratic participation. It is seen that citizenship education in VET is operationalised as labour market adaptability and an entrepreneurial mindset, emphasising self-regulation, obedience and responsibilities as a consumer or as an employee, rather than as a democratic, participatory, autonomous citizen who is aware of their rights (De Groot et al., 2022; Isopahkala-Bouret et al., 2014; Lappalainen, 2017; Lappalainen et al., 2019; Lappalainen & Lahelma, 2016; Nylund et al., 2018, 2020; Olofsson & Panican, 2017; Rasse, 2024; Rönnlund & Rosvall, 2021; Rosvall & Nylund, 2022; van de Werfhorst, 2017; Zuurmond et al., 2023). The emphasis on workplace relevance narrows VET content to specific occupational tasks. It treats knowledge mainly as a tool for employability rather than as a value in itself. This reduces opportunities for students to acquire general knowledge and practise civic engagement (Nylund et al., 2018; Nylund & Rosvall, 2016; Pietilä & Lappalainen, 2023). Teachers similarly argue that prioritising practical skills over theoretical knowledge limits their ability to teach citizenship effectively and narrows the democratic objectives of education (Kärnebro et al., 2025).

VET curricula rarely engage with questioning power relations or considering different ways of organising society and power that challenge the status quo (Korotaj & Buchberger, 2025; Nylund et al., 2020; Nylund & Rosvall, 2016; Piedade et al., 2020, 2023, 2025; Rönnlund et al., 2019; Rönnlund & Rosvall, 2021; Sartori et al., 2022; Zuurmond et al., 2023). Adaptation-oriented teaching is described as aiming at compliance and obedience, focusing on 'how it is' and 'how to do' rather than 'why' questions, i.e. with behavioural regulation dominating over knowledge development (Nylund et al., 2020). This curriculum focus with less content

encouraging theoretical reasoning risks reproducing social class inequalities in political participation, as VET students often have limited access to the kind of knowledge that enables imagining alternative social orders or participating democratically (Nylund & Rosvall, 2016). Studies show how financial literacy focuses predominantly on individual financial skills and aspects of daily life, and mainly on political and social aspects such as the relationship between household finances and the financial systems, including monetary policy, tax systems or social security systems (Björklund, 2020; Leumann, 2017).

Studies show that vocational-track learning materials such as textbooks lack analytical depth and reproduce, for example, gender stereotypes (Arensmeier, 2018; Pille & Schmees, 2022; Su-Chiu, 2018). Vocational-track textbooks are less demanding conceptually and focus heavily on opinion-based exercises ('What do you think?') instead of being based on academic knowledge or theoretical concepts, which limits students' opportunities to develop analytical and critical thinking skills (Arensmeier, 2018). This reproduction of low expectations towards VET students as having limited interest or capacity to engage with civic issues reinforces the inequalities that already exist when VET students start their studies.

5.5. Extracurricular activities

Research suggests that extracurricular citizenship education in IVET is less common than in general education (Achour & Wagner, 2021; Farah et al., 2025; Šalaj, 2024). Eurydice (2017) reports lower student council engagement in IVET (30 systems) compared with general upper secondary education (38 systems). Possibilities for apprentice participation differ between countries. Models of strong representation exist in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and Finland (e.g. youth councils, apprentice unions), where apprentices are involved in shaping qualifications and practices, and in some countries (e.g. the Netherlands and Finland) the representative bodies also consult apprentices through regular student surveys (European Commission. Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion & ICF, 2019). The Council of Europe notes that in some countries, such as Denmark, student councils hold voting rights on VET school boards. However, participation can be challenging for apprentices due to work-based learning schedules or perceptions of limited impact (Council of Europe, 2024).

A Finnish evaluation shows disparities between VET and general upper secondary education in how they support students' growth into active and critical citizens (Hakamäki-Stylman et al., 2021). Vocational students were less aware and less engaged in student council activities compared with general upper secondary

students: only 27 % of responding VET students had participated in student council events (versus 72 % in general education), and 13 % had voted in student council elections (versus 49 % in general education). Insufficient information about student council activities was commonly named as a barrier for participation. Vocational students reported being most involved in organising events and theme days, mainly social events for students, but had limited influence on broader institutional decision-making on rules, plans or curriculum-related matters (Hakamäki-Stylman et al., 2021).

Existing EU-related initiatives include 'European Parliament Ambassador Schools', 'Model European Parliament', EU-themed weeks and events, inviting representatives from EU institutions or local authorities to speak with students about the EU, engaging with NGOs or national competitions focused on EU knowledge, and forming European clubs and school partnerships, including through Erasmus+ (European Commission. Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture., 2021). External actors, such as NGOs, youth organisations, student and trade unions or political representatives, may participate in such events (Council of Europe, 2024). However, empirical evidence on the scale and impact of these activities in IVET remains limited.

Structured participation platforms such as student councils, apprenticeship committees or student unions exist in many countries, providing formal channels for students' voice and representation, and experiential citizenship learning opportunities (Debowski et al., 2025; European Commission. Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. & ICF, 2019; Farah et al., 2025). For instance, service-learning projects with local communities and civil society may promote students' civic engagement and citizenship competence (Achour & Wagner, 2021). However, the effectiveness of such channels has yet to be studied empirically, and this is also seen as a barrier (see below).

VET students are often less engaged in student councils and related democratic activities compared with peers in general upper secondary education, with insufficient information about participation opportunities frequently identified as a key barrier (Hakamäki-Stylman et al., 2021). This reduced awareness contributes to lower participation rates in representative structures.

Apprentice participation is often constrained by work-based learning schedules and competing demands, which limit access to participation channels. In addition, students may perceive that their involvement has limited impact on institutional decision-making, particularly regarding rules, planning or curriculum-related matters, reducing motivation to engage (Council of Europe, 2024; Hakamäki-Stylman et al., 2021).

5.6. Training of teachers and in-company trainers

The training and preparedness of teachers and in-company trainers, both in initial teacher education and continuous professional development (CPD), to deliver citizenship education is a critical issue (Council of Europe, 2025). The comparative study by Šalaj (2024) highlights a significant gap in CPD for VET teachers in citizenship education, particularly regarding controversial issues, such as sensitive political topics that may divide opinions and evoke strong emotions within student groups. In this context, the principles of the Beutelsbach Consensus provide an important pedagogical reference point, emphasising the prohibition of indoctrination, the requirement to present controversial issues as such and the need to empower learners to form their own political judgments (Christensen & Grammes, 2020). Integrating citizenship education into vocational teacher education therefore entails reflecting on the ‘political in the vocational’, while ensuring that teaching approaches remain balanced, pluralistic and oriented towards learners’ critical engagement. It also requires linking general and vocational subjects through interdisciplinary approaches (Council of Europe, 2025).

The Eurydice report (2017) discusses teachers’ competences, preparedness and training for citizenship education. However, it often lacks clarity on whether the information provided also applies to teachers in IVET. Despite some progress, nearly half of the countries lack formal regulations or recommendations for developing citizenship education competences in initial teacher education. Only nine education systems in the EU have established common competences for citizenship education across all primary and secondary teachers. These competence frameworks typically emphasise subject knowledge, lesson planning and social skills, but less frequently address competences relating to reflective practice or a deeper understanding of core citizenship values such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law and equality (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017). Danish and Finnish studies further note that teachers and trainers often have an unclear conceptual understanding of concepts such as democracy or human rights in the context of VET (Duch, 2025; Gretscher & Särkiluoto, 2025).

The perspectives of teachers of vocational subjects and in-company trainers have been studied less extensively than those of teachers in general subjects in IVET. A Cedefop (2022) synthesis report on teachers and trainers in VET underscores the lack of data, particularly in company-based VET. This gap extends to both initial teacher education and continuous professional development, which vary considerably between countries in terms of duration, modality (e.g. in-person, blended, online), entry requirements (e.g. professional experience) and the institutions providing the education. For example, in Germany, in-company trainers

are required to obtain a specific qualification to train apprentices and students, which may include citizenship education components (Council of Europe, 2024).

A recent paper on civic education by the OECD recommends that governments consider mandatory CPD in civic education for all teachers, and conduct more research on effective teacher training for civic education (Borhan, 2025). The Eurydice report (2017) indicates that CPD for teachers is organised or supported by top-level ⁽¹⁶⁾ education authorities for citizenship education in most countries, but these opportunities are usually optional and similar opportunities for school leaders remain limited. Not only authorities, but also teacher associations, NGOs and other civil society organisations provide support and training for teachers in citizenship education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017). CPD is also a matter of institutional implementation and how well VET providers facilitate teachers' and trainers' development to deliver citizenship education.

Some education systems have developed or are developing formal competence frameworks for citizenship education in initial teacher education and CPD, which help structure teachers' and trainers' preparedness. These frameworks typically include subject knowledge, lesson planning and social and interpersonal skills, and in some cases explicitly integrate citizenship-related content across all teachers (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017). In addition, certain systems (e.g. Germany) require formal qualifications for in-company trainers, which can include citizenship-related components (Council of Europe, 2024).

CPD opportunities for citizenship education are increasingly available in many countries and may be provided or supported by education authorities, teacher associations, NGOs and civil society organisations (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017). This multi-actor support structure, alongside institutional commitment within VET providers, can strengthen teachers' and trainers' capacity to integrate citizenship education into both school-based and workplace-based learning contexts.

VET teachers and trainers do not receive sufficient training on citizenship education, which can lead to a superficial treatment of civic issues and not using the most suitable pedagogical approaches or assessment instruments (Achour & Wagner, 2021; Farah et al., 2025; Gökbudat, 2021; Šalaj, 2024). Topics relating to the EU are particularly underexplored in teacher training (Ali & Colasanto, 2025).

⁽¹⁶⁾ The Eurydice report defines top-level authority in the following manner: 'The highest level of authority with responsibility for education in a given country, usually located at national (State) level. However, for Belgium, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom, the Communautés, Länder, Comunidades Autónomas and the devolved administrations respectively are either wholly responsible or share responsibilities with the State level for all or most areas relating to education. Therefore, these administrations are considered as the top level authority for the areas where they hold the responsibility, while for those areas for which they share the responsibility with the national (State) level, both are considered to be top level authorities' (European Commission/EACEA/ Eurydice, 2017).

Teachers and trainers may also lack guidance and training on how to nurture inclusive participation overall in schools or workplaces (Bruin et al., 2025).

5.7. Addressing the dimensions of citizenship competence in IVET

This section examines how specific dimensions of citizenship competence are addressed in IVET. It focuses on four dimensions discussed in Chapter 3: democratic principles and political literacy; political and civic self-efficacy and civic engagement; critical thinking and media literacy; and knowledge of EU history and European common values.

Box 2. **IVET addressing knowledge and application of democratic principles and political literacy**

- (a) VET learners seem to receive less comprehensive citizenship education, especially on controversial topics; vocational students tend to score lower in political knowledge and show more non-democratic attitudes.
- (b) Classroom opportunities for democratic dialogue are limited; learners express a desire for more discussion.
- (c) Teachers and trainers may refer to democracy implicitly (e.g. through 'reflection') rather than explicitly.
- (d) Curricula and textbooks in vocational tracks show lower expectations and less complex civic content.

Source: Authors, based on the literature review.

Achour and Wagner (2019, 2021) show that political education is unevenly distributed across education tracks in Germany, with vocational and other non-academic tracks having less access and displaying less favourable outcomes in political competence, self-efficacy and related attitudes than academic upper secondary students. A Dutch study challenges the assumption that higher education automatically leads to stronger citizenship values, showing that adolescents in vocational tracks value inclusivity, consensus and social responsibility, while those in academic tracks focus more on formal political engagement and procedures of decision-making (Nieuwelink, Ten Dam, et al., 2019).

In the Netherlands, employer and union representatives, politicians, teachers, school leaders, students and parents identified and prioritised the civic knowledge expected of secondary education graduates. Stakeholders differentiated civic knowledge needs by track: vocational (VMBO) students were seen as needing practical, locally oriented knowledge, while general education students were

expected to know more about national political and societal issues. Teachers and school leaders criticised this distinction, arguing that all students, especially those in vocational tracks, deserve comprehensive civic knowledge (Van Goethem et al., 2022).

Another study on Dutch VET students indicates limited school opportunities to voice views on democratic issues and a desire for more classroom discussions (Vaessen et al., 2022). Similarly, a Danish study of social and healthcare programmes found that teachers and workplace trainers value democracy but address it implicitly, via concepts like ‘reflection,’ rather than explicitly (Duch, 2023).

A few studies have compared curricula and textbooks for social studies in vocational and academic tracks. In Sweden, both tracks placed limited attention to democratic values and civic engagement beyond voting, but textbooks in the vocational track offered less content and complexity, showing lower expectations and more limited opportunities for vocational students’ civic development (Arensmeier, 2018).

Based on three survey waves of Croatian final-year secondary students, Šalaj et al. (2024) found that vocational students had lower political knowledge and higher levels of non-democratic attitudes. Political knowledge was negatively associated with exclusive nationalism and authoritarianism, and positively associated with democratic activism.

Box 3. IVET promoting political and civic self-efficacy and civic engagement

- (a) VET learners generally report lower political and civic self-efficacy and participate less in formal democratic processes than peers in general education, linked to early tracking, prior attainment, peer environments and weaker or less participatory citizenship education.
- (b) Citizenship education can partly compensate for weaker political socialisation at home through civic learning experiences, open classroom climates and active student participation, although this effect is often stronger in academic tracks where citizenship education is more interactive and better resourced.
- (c) Some studies show that VET learners engage more in informal civic practices, such as volunteering, grassroots activism, protests or social- and global-issue advocacy.
- (d) Partnerships with NGOs and participatory, action-oriented projects can strengthen civic engagement and collective efficacy in IVET, but such collaborations remain less frequent and less structured than in general education.
- (e) Evidence on how IVET environments support political and civic self-efficacy remains uneven and sensitive to how concepts are operationalised; inclusive, participatory and mandatory citizenship education is recommended to reduce political inequality and widen civic engagement opportunities.

Source: Authors, based on the literature review.

VET learners generally report lower political and civic self-efficacy than students in general education, and they participate less in formal democratic processes such as school elections or student councils (Council of Europe, 2024; De Groot et al., 2022; De Groot & Opdenakker, 2025; Hoskins et al., 2016; Janmaat, 2018; Kestilä-Kekkonen et al., 2025; Matthieu & Junius, 2024; Savage et al., 2021; Sohl & Arensmeier, 2015; Witschge et al., 2019). They also often show lower interest in politics, lower generalised trust and lower intention to vote, especially where tracking begins early and is strongly linked to socioeconomic background (Han et al., 2014; Janmaat et al., 2014; Janmaat, 2018; Mennes, Van De Werfhorst, et al., 2023; Witschge & Van De Werfhorst, 2020).

This picture is nevertheless nuanced. Some studies find no major differences in intention to vote, institutional trust or tolerance between VET and academic tracks, while others show that VET learners may be equally or more engaged in non-institutional forms of participation, such as volunteering, protests or social and global-issue advocacy (Kim & Yu, 2024; Nieuwelink et al., 2016; Vandenbroeck et al., 2024; Witschge et al., 2019). VET learners may also express a desire to engage with democratic decision-making, even if they struggle to articulate their views in traditional political terms (Nieuwelink et al., 2016).

Lower political and civic self-efficacy among many VET learners is linked to both structural inequalities and educational design. Family political and cultural capital, including political discussion at home, parental education and books at home, along with differences in the amount and quality of citizenship education across tracks, all play a role (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017; Kestilä-Kekkonen et al., 2025; Matthieu & Junius, 2024). Early tracking, prior negative school experiences, teacher biases and unequal treatment across tracks may further reinforce unequal civic learning opportunities (Hoskins et al., 2016; Janmaat, 2018a; Matthieu & Junius, 2024).

In tracked systems, school-based citizenship education can partly compensate for weaker political socialisation at home, but this effect is often strongest in academic tracks, where citizenship education tends to be more participatory and better resourced; vocational tracks more often receive limited, transmission-based provision (Kestilä-Kekkonen et al., 2025; Matthieu, 2023; Matthieu & Junius, 2024). In Sweden, however, a positive deliberative school environment and engaged teaching were found to have a particularly strong effect on political efficacy among vocational students (Sohl & Arensmeier, 2015).

VET learners are not a homogeneous group. Some subgroups, including Dutch students primarily speaking a non-Dutch language at home, have shown higher individual political and collective civic efficacy, along with higher academic

self-efficacy, after participatory interventions (De Groot & Opdenakker, 2025). Peer environments and voluntary associations also strongly shape civic outcomes, sometimes outweighing the influence of parents and schools (Barsegyan et al., 2024; Janmaat & Mons, 2023; Quintelier, 2015).

Existing limited evidence on how IVET environments support political and civic self-efficacy suggests that participatory and action-oriented approaches can strengthen civic engagement, especially when students choose issues themselves, work collaboratively and take part in group activities (Geers et al., 2020; Römer et al., 2023).

Partnerships with NGOs can extend VET learners' engagement beyond school and into wider communities, but such collaborations are less frequent in VET than in general education (Moons & Duchateau, 2024; Šalaj, 2024). When present, structured and co-creative participation in citizenship or global citizenship education projects, including involvement in planning and decision-making, can foster civic engagement, though such practices remain under-developed (Geers et al., 2020; Moons & Duchateau, 2024; Römer et al., 2023).

Overall, VET learners often show lower political and civic self-efficacy and formal participation than peers in other education settings, but they can also demonstrate strong interest and capacity for civic engagement, especially in non-institutional forms. The evidence remains uneven and sensitive to how political interest, self-efficacy and engagement are operationalised (De Groot et al., 2022; Eidhof & De Ruyter, 2022; Hoskins & Janmaat, 2024).

Box 4. **IVET promoting critical thinking and media literacy**

- (a) Theoretical studies stress adapting critical thinking to VET's practical nature, for instance through a holistic *Bildung* approach to VET, integrating reflection on justice, democracy and ethics to the learning of profession.
- (b) Ethnographic studies suggest limited classroom engagement with critically questioning society and social norms, though some programmes (e.g. health and social care) promote critical thinking and social awareness.

Source: Authors, based on the literature review.

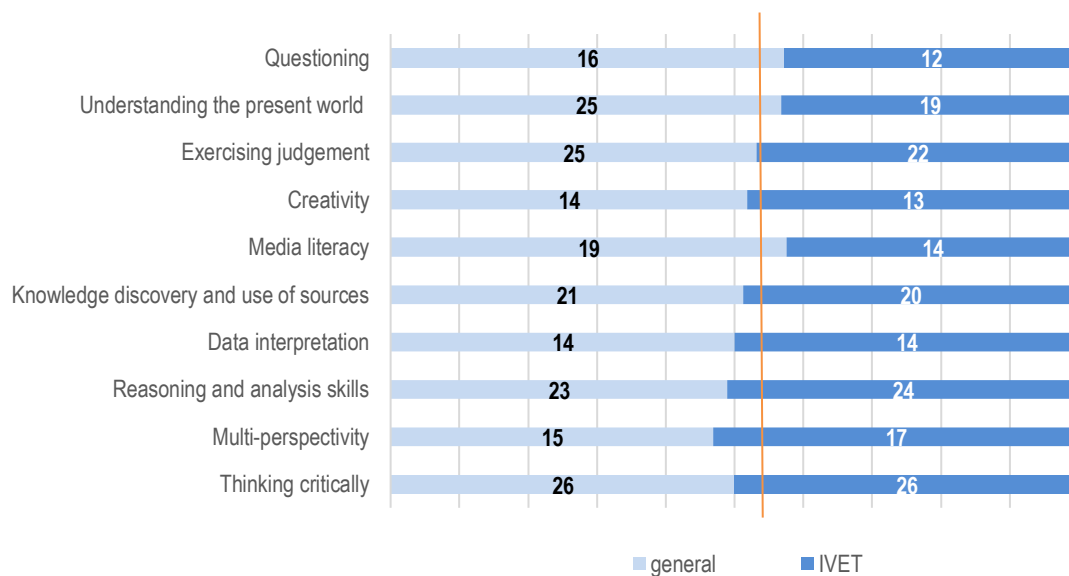
Critical thinking is one of the most studied dimensions of citizenship competence in IVET, especially in the Netherlands and Sweden (Ledman, 2015a; Rönnlund et al., 2019; Zuurmond et al., 2023). While there are increasing mentions of critical thinking and media literacy at the policy and curriculum levels, actual IVET teaching and learning practices vary by VET level. A Spanish study that includes VET and baccalaureate students found that higher educational tiers within

the secondary system, work experience and volunteering are associated with higher critical thinking abilities (Parra-González et al., 2023).

Theoretical work emphasises tailoring critical thinking to the practical, occupation-related nature of VET, enabling learners to engage with real-world issues and the societal impact of their future work (Korotaj & Buchberger, 2025; Sanderse, 2024; Zuurmond et al., 2023). While some studies treat critical thinking as a transversal competence, many align it explicitly with citizenship education. Korotaj and Buchberger (2025) propose the following dimensions for teaching critical thinking in VET: learning outcomes oriented towards critical thinking development, a critical approach to teaching content, active teaching methods, active assessment methods, opportunities for critical action and a democratic classroom atmosphere.

The curriculum analysis in the Eurydice report (2017) includes the competence area of ‘thinking critically’ (Figure 3). The analysis indicates similar frequencies of critical thinking competence in general upper secondary education and school-based VET, with a slight predominance in general education. However, the Eurydice data do not assess the quality or depth of implementation, such as the number of lessons devoted to these competences.

Figure 3. **Frequency of competences in national curricula for citizenship education in general secondary education and school-based IVET in 2016/2017**



Source: Eurydice, 2017.

Ethnographic studies in Sweden show that VET classroom practices often emphasise self-reflection but rarely address power structures (unequal relations of

authority, status and control at work and in society) or social inequalities (differences in opportunities and outcomes linked to class, gender, ethnicity or disability), and they rarely include reflection on or questioning of work practices themselves (Nylund et al., 2020; Rönnlund et al., 2019). Exceptions exist, particularly in health and social care programmes where students were occasionally encouraged to think critically at the individual, group and societal levels, and question and debate in the classroom as future professionals in their field (Rönnlund et al., 2019). Similarly, Finnish VET research found that teachers in the citizenship-related subject 'Social, Business and Labour Market' resisted neoliberal, individualistic values and promoted instead critical thinking and social awareness among their health and social care students (Lappalainen, 2017).

Sanderse (2024) and Zuurmond et al. (2023) advocate for integrating *Bildung* (understood as broad, value-oriented development of the person, including moral, civic and critical-thinking capacities) in VET, not in opposition to the labour-market objectives of vocational training, but from a perspective that combines employability with students' critical thinking and autonomy. This means encouraging students to reflect on, question and analyse how their occupation relates to broader societal issues such as justice and democracy. Zuurmond et al. (2023) suggest three education principles for citizenship education in vocational contexts:

- (a) researching the societal functions of one's profession and workplaces;
- (b) discovering how political decision-making, or cultural, social and technological changes, impact their profession;
- (c) dealing with professional ethics and moral dilemmas (e.g. discrimination, greenwashing of sustainability in workplaces).

As an example, they describe how vehicle mechanics students explored the politics and ethics of electric cars, including environmental, health and economic dimensions (Zuurmond et al., 2023).

Recent studies also explore media literacy in IVET, often linked to new literacy (information and digital literacy) and to critical thinking (Römer et al., 2023; Sartori et al., 2022; Tommasi, Ceschi, Bollarino, et al., 2023; Tommasi, Ceschi, Sartori, et al., 2023; Yasdin et al., 2021).

Suggested teaching practices to develop media literacy and critical thinking include using narratives and social messages (Tommasi, Ceschi, Sartori, et al., 2023). Active learning-by-doing methods have shown potential in enhancing VET students' media literacy (Geers et al., 2020; Römer et al., 2023). However, while short-term gains in media literacy were observed, long-term impacts on civic participation remain uncertain.

The importance of critical thinking and media literacy have grown both in EU-level policy initiatives and research during the past decade, including theoretical and empirical research from different countries (Czechia, Indonesia, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden). Some of these studies do not connect critical thinking explicitly or exclusively to citizenship but discuss it more as a general transversal competence. VET students seem to be provided with fewer opportunities to engage in critical thinking, especially in male-dominated technical fields. However, more research covering different countries is needed to validate these findings.

Box 5. IVET promoting knowledge of EU history and European common values

- (a) While at least some European common values are expected to be present in IVET across countries, a lack of comparative data make it impossible to evaluate how this competence dimension is currently implemented.
- (b) Teachers report challenges in teaching EU topics due to students' limited prior knowledge, low motivation and the abstract nature of European citizenship compared with national identity.

Source: Authors, based on the literature review.

There are no comprehensive comparative data on how EU history and European common values are taught in IVET across countries. The report 'Learning about the EU' by the European Commission (2021) notes that particular attention should be paid to embedding EU-related content in IVET curricula, as approaches differ significantly between countries, ranging from no explicit reference to more explicit inclusion of EU-related topics.

For example, in Finland, EU-related content was previously explicitly included in VET curricula. This has changed over the past decade and currently the EU is no longer mentioned as a distinct area in the core requirements for initial vocational qualifications. EU-related content may still be addressed in the so-called common units, for example in the unit on social and labour market competence.

When EU-related themes were still explicitly required in the Finnish IVET curriculum, an ethnographic study observed teachers' efforts to engage students in critical discussions about the EU and its implications for their lives. However, teachers reported that it was more difficult to construct collective narratives around European citizenship than around national citizenship, and that the EU was generally perceived as a challenging theme in teaching practice (Lappalainen, 2017).

In Sweden, history was added as a compulsory subject in upper-secondary VET in the 2011 curriculum reform to address concerns about youth ignorance of the Holocaust and to strengthen citizenship education and critical thinking (Ledman, 2015a). However, this addition coincided with an overall reduction in time allocated to general subjects, based on the assumption that VET students prefer practical over theoretical learning (Kärnebro et al., 2025). Teachers in the study viewed history as essential for citizenship, critical thinking and strengthening tolerance, to counter xenophobic attitudes among some students. However, they also saw VET students as often lacking sufficient historical background knowledge and motivation for academic subjects, requiring highly structured tasks with strong guidance. Ledman (2015a) concludes that while history education has the potential to contribute to citizenship, critical thinking and student autonomy, its impact may be limited by reduced instructional time, varying student backgrounds, motivation and prior knowledge.

A 2017 European Parliament report noted that subjects relating to European common values were less prevalent in vocational tracks in several countries including Malta, Netherlands and Poland (European Parliament. Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union, 2017). However, studies have looked at similar values as those in the EU common values. In the United Kingdom, Janmaat (2018b) found that students in VET exhibit significantly lower support for fundamental British values compared with those with academic qualifications, and that education pathways had a stronger effect than family background or ethnicity, for example.

Issues of diversity, equality and social justice from gender, socioeconomic, sexuality and racial/ethnic perspectives in VET have received some attention in research. Curriculum research in Finland and Sweden indicates a shift from addressing economic inequality at the societal level in the 1970s to focusing on identity-based issues of gender, sexuality and ethnicity, and the individualised concept of employability from the 1990s onwards (Lappalainen et al., 2019; Lappalainen & Lahelma, 2016). Teachers in Finnish IVET, including both general subject and vocational teachers, report integrating themes like human rights, gender equality, cultural diversity and ethical reflection in their teaching to some extent (Suhonen et al., 2023).

In Germany, civic education textbooks used in VET were found to promote stereotypical portrayals of masculinity and femininity (Pille & Schmees, 2022). A cross-European study in six countries found that VET learners were more open to cultural diversity than their trainers, possibly due to greater exposure to foreign-born peers, highlighting the need for trainers to pay attention to their own understanding of cultural diversity (Fine-Davis & Faas, 2020).

In Sweden, limited integration of ethnicity and immigration topics in VET were found despite increasing student diversity and a simultaneous rise of nationalist, xenophobic sentiments in the society (Rosvall et al., 2018). Although classes with more migrant students included more of both spontaneous and planned discussions on migration, pedagogic practices would benefit from greater intercultural understanding to support migrant students' democratic rights (Rosvall et al., 2018). Students have expressed a desire to discuss ethnicity and racism in ways that connect to their lived experiences rather than treating them in a theoretical or decontextualised manner (Piedade et al., 2023; Rosvall et al., 2018). In particular, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and from vocational tracks were more likely to empathise with the economic motivations of the fictional refugee character presented in a Portuguese study, demonstrating how personal experiences shape their ethical reflection (Piedade et al., 2025).

Sustainable lifestyles and attitudes relating to environmental responsibility are also under-researched in IVET. A Finnish study shows that VET students' concern on climate change decreased over their two years of studying in VET, while their peers in general track maintained the concern at the same level (Vadén et al., 2025). This may reflect limited education content and participatory teaching methods on climate change in VET, along with peer effect and lack of social support to engage with climate action in VET (Vadén et al., 2025). Teachers in Finnish VET report integrating issues relating to ecological sustainability, such as responsible consumption and production, climate change and circular economy, in their teaching to some extent but, for example, pedagogical approaches used in relation to these issues have not been systematically studied (Suhonen et al., 2023). Research on peace education and nonviolence in IVET is similarly limited. One study from Indonesia found gender differences in interpersonal and world nonviolence, with males scoring higher than females, suggesting the need for culturally sensitive, gender-responsive peace education interventions that encourage female leadership (Eliasa et al., 2025).

5.8. Developing citizenship education markers

The preceding sections have shown that citizenship education in IVET is shaped by interrelated policy, curricular, pedagogical, institutional and workplace conditions. It appears more likely to be meaningfully embedded when these conditions reinforce one another: for example, when explicit policy frameworks are accompanied by curriculum space, appropriate assessment practices, prepared teachers and trainers, supportive leadership and opportunities for democratic and reflective learning in both schools and workplaces.

The review also identifies recurring barriers that may limit or fragment provision. These include vague or uneven policy requirements, limited curriculum time, weak assessment guidance, insufficient teacher and trainer preparation, underdeveloped links with workplaces and civil society, and assumptions that vocational learners are less interested in civic, political or societal issues.

Building on this synthesis, a set of markers has been derived to capture the main areas in which citizenship education may be visible, supported or constrained in IVET. Together, they reflect the premise that citizenship education in IVET is not confined to a single subject or learning site, but may be embedded across school-based instruction, vocational subjects, institutional practices, learner participation and workplace experiences.

These markers should be read as a conceptual synthesis of the literature reviewed in this chapter, not as a definitive assessment tool. They point to possible signs of meaningful integration, but their presence alone should not be taken as evidence of effective citizenship education. Their relevance depends on how they are interpreted and implemented in specific institutional, occupational and national contexts.

Given the uneven and still limited empirical evidence, especially on company-based training, the markers should be treated as provisional. At this stage, their main value is to provide a structured framework for further discussion, empirical testing and possible future operationalisation. Further research would be needed to assess their relevance across different IVET systems, their ability to capture differences between school-based and workplace-based learning, and their usefulness for monitoring or comparison without oversimplifying the diversity of IVET provision. Table 6 presents the proposed markers as a starting point for this further work.

Table 6. **Markers of citizenship education in IVET**

Domain	Markers of citizenship education in IVET
Policies and frameworks	• Policy frameworks that mandate citizenship education as a compulsory element of IVET.
Teacher training	• Pre-service and in-service teacher training on citizenship education, including training for workplace trainers. • Use of active and deliberative pedagogical methods. • Teachers' ability to address controversial issues.
Curriculum	• Explicit references to democratic values, human rights, sustainability and EU-related topics in the curriculum. • Cross-curricular integration of civic themes into vocational subjects beyond general education.
Assessment	• Use of formative assessment methods, such as portfolios, group projects, peer assessment and self-assessment. • Summative assessment approaches. • Inclusion of citizenship competences in qualification standards.
Pedagogy	• Open classroom climate that enables discussion of controversial issues. • Deliberative methods. • Project-based and experiential learning linked to real-life contexts, such as workplace ethics and sustainability dilemmas.
Extra-curricular activities	• Student councils. • Participation in local, national and EU-related events. • Involvement in projects that foster intercultural and citizenship competences.
Stakeholder cooperation	• Partnerships with civil society organisations, trade unions, local communities, political representatives and employers.
School democratic culture	• Participation of students in decision-making, including school governance. • Whole-school approach. • Visible commitment to citizenship education in school strategies.
Workplace democratic culture	• Opportunities for democratic participation, such as apprentice committees. • Informal learning through exposure to workers' rights, equality and non-discrimination. • Ethical reflection on sustainability issues.

Source: Authors, based on the literature review.

CHAPTER 6.

Conclusions

The literature review confirms that citizenship education in IVET needs to be supported through a combination of policies, curriculum design, teacher preparation, assessment practices and participatory pedagogy. Effective systems include policy frameworks that make citizenship education a compulsory component of IVET and provide pre-service and in-service training for teachers and workplace trainers. Curricula explicitly integrate democratic values, human rights, sustainability and EU-related topics, while also embedding civic themes across vocational subjects. Assessment approaches combine formative methods, such as portfolios, peer assessment and group projects, with summative evaluation and the inclusion of citizenship competences in qualification standards. Teaching practices further reinforce these aims through open classroom climates, deliberative discussions and project-based learning linked to real-world ethical and sustainability challenges.

Citizenship education in IVET is also strengthened through democratic participation and collaboration within and beyond educational institutions. Extracurricular activities, such as student councils, intercultural projects and participation in local, national and EU-related initiatives, help students develop active citizenship competences. Cooperation with civil society organisations, trade unions, employers, political representatives and local communities broadens learning opportunities and connects education to societal realities. At the institutional level, democratic school culture is reflected in student involvement in decision-making, whole-school approaches and visible commitments to citizenship education in school strategies. Similarly, workplace democratic culture supports informal learning through exposure to workers' rights, equality, non-discrimination and opportunities for democratic participation, such as apprentice committees and ethical reflection on sustainability issues.

The imperative for quality citizenship education in IVET is heightened by the alarming rise of democratic backsliding, the spread of misinformation and declining trust in public institutions, which threaten the very foundations of democratic societies. However, the literature review reveals a persistent discrepancy between this recognised importance and the actual integration and implementation of citizenship education within IVET systems. Although citizenship education in IVET is increasingly recognised as fundamental for preparing young people to be active, engaged and responsible citizens, the reality is far from this.

IVET teachers have noted insufficient initial and in-service training on citizenship education, particularly regarding their preparedness to handle controversial social and political issues. This lack of teacher capacity directly limits the quality and depth of citizenship education accessible to IVET students, reinforcing existing inequalities. In addition, IVET curriculum that mostly prioritises technical and employability skills, leads to limited instructional time and scope for citizenship education. Together, this forms systemic barriers that collectively diminish the capacity of IVET to act as a countermeasure against democratic erosion.

In contrast, academic tracks tend to offer more civic learning opportunities, thus disproportionately impacting IVET learners, many of whom come from less-privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. This systemic disadvantage in acquiring citizenship competence perpetuates social inequalities and leaves a significant segment of future citizens less equipped to participate meaningfully in democratic processes, thereby contributing to broader trends of democratic backsliding and undermining the legitimacy of democracy.

While critical thinking and media literacy are increasingly considered as vital dimensions of citizenship competence, IVET students often receive fewer opportunities to develop these skills comprehensively. This renders them more vulnerable to political propaganda and misinformation, which are particularly prevalent in digital media. Without adequate training in these areas, IVET learners may struggle to critically assess information, distinguish fact from fiction and navigate complex political landscapes, thereby hindering informed decision-making and potentially fuelling societal polarisation.

A contributing factor is IVET's strong emphasis on developing an 'active, entrepreneurial labour market contributor' or 'worker-citizen' ideal, which can prioritise workplace conformity and economic roles over critical, democratic citizenship.

Employability and economic objectives remain central to IVET, and they are not inherently incompatible with citizenship objectives. There are positive economic effects from citizenship education. However, the dominance of labour market adaptability can constrain democratic learning and critical thinking. A holistic approach to VET should therefore integrate economic and democratic aims, preparing learners as skilled workers as well as active, reflective and critical citizens.

A critical aspect for all domains of citizenship education including IVET is tackling the rise in misogyny, challenging stereotypes and improving attitudes towards women and intersectional minorities. Citizenship education in IVET has yet to explicitly address issues of gender equality and to challenge entrenched

stereotypical portrayals of masculinity and femininity reoccurring, for instance in textbooks (Pille & Schmees, 2022) and teachers lacking the reflexivity to challenge social stereotypes. By cultivating respect for pluralism and diversity, and showcasing positive role models and countering misogynistic viewpoints, IVET has the potential to contribute significantly to preparing all learners to value diverse leadership and contribute to truly inclusive democratic societies.

The literature highlights that current pedagogical approaches used within IVET often fail to fully engage less-advantaged learners. To effectively empower all students, especially those from diverse backgrounds, there is a critical need for inclusive citizenship education methods. These should embrace participatory forms of learning; incorporate strategies such as counter-narratives to challenge existing biases; facilitate small group work for collaborative problem-solving and diverse perspective-taking; and, crucially, situate knowledge within the interests and lived experiences of the learner. Such approaches can foster a sense of relevance and self-efficacy, making citizenship education more accessible and meaningful for all, but especially for learners from marginalised backgrounds.

The political discourse around lowering the voting age to 16 years, where implemented or under consideration, presents a powerful policy lever to draw national attention to increasing citizenship education in IVET. If young people in IVET pathways are to be entrusted with the right to vote, there is a compelling imperative for national policies to ensure they receive good-quality and equitable citizenship education.

There is an important opportunity to focus on and highlight IVET's inherent strengths for citizenship education, such as its practice-oriented nature and diverse learner cohort, rather than solely focusing on areas where it may be perceived as lacking compared with general education.

The findings highlight specific areas that demand deeper empirical investigation at the national level, beyond the scope of this literature review. There is a need to critically assess how the identified conceptualisations and dimensions of citizenship competence are understood and integrated within diverse national IVET policies and curricula.

There is also a need to further explore the extent to which pedagogical practices in each country genuinely adopt inclusive citizenship education methods and leverage workplace learning opportunities to mitigate the Matthew effect, whereby IVET learners from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds may stand to benefit most from citizenship education but often benefit less than peers with more advantaged starting positions. This is particularly important in countering rising threats to democracy and social cohesion, including misinformation.

Finally, there is a need to assess how EU-level initiatives and potential policy levers are influencing national policy attention and practical implementation, and in identifying effective models and persistent barriers in diverse national contexts. This includes investigating the perspectives of IVET policymakers. It also requires documenting and building on existing 'working examples' and IVET's inherent strengths for civic learning. This would help shift from a deficit-based to an asset-based approach to citizenship education in vocational contexts.

List of abbreviations

AI	artificial intelligence
CPD	continuous professional development
EACEA	European Education and Culture Executive Agency
ENEC	<i>Estratégia Nacional de Educação para a Cidadania</i> [National strategy for citizenship education]
EQF	European qualifications framework
ERIC	Education Resources Information Centre
ESCO	European skills, competences, qualifications and occupations
ESD	education for sustainable development
EU	European Union
GCED	global citizenship education
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
ICCS	International civic and citizenship education study
IEA	International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
IVET	initial vocational education and training
NGO/NGOs	non-governmental organisation(s)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
RFCDG	Reference framework for competences for democratic culture
TVET	technical and vocational education and training
UN	United Nations
Unesco	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VET	vocational education and training
VETNET	European research network on vocational education and training
VMBO	<i>voorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs</i> [Pre-vocational secondary education in the Netherlands]

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Citizenship education in initial vocational education and training: enabling and hindering factors

Literature review

This literature review examines how citizenship education is integrated into initial vocational education and training (IVET) across Europe and the factors enabling or limiting its implementation. Drawing on over 120 publications from 2014–2025, the review identifies four key dimensions of citizenship competence: knowledge and application of democratic principles and political literacy; political and civic self-efficacy and civic engagement; critical thinking and media literacy; and knowledge of EU history and common European values.

Findings show that IVET learners often have fewer opportunities for civic learning than those in general education but should not be viewed as disengaged. Many demonstrate strong commitment to inclusion, solidarity and practical forms of participation. Effective citizenship education requires supportive policies, participatory pedagogy, teacher and trainer preparation, workplace engagement and stronger links between civic learning and vocational contexts. Further research is needed on workplace-based learning, assessment and long-term impacts.

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