



Vocational education and training

Policy briefs 2023

CROATIA



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1. Introduction

This VET policy brief produced by Cedefop presents a snapshot of vocational education and training policy developments in Croatia between 2020 and the beginning of 2023. It presents the context and the challenges the country faces, a selection of the latest VET-related statistics, as well as the national priorities until 2030 identified in [Croatia's national implementation plan](#). This VET policy brief provides information from Cedefop monitoring and analysis on the implementation of the [Council Recommendation on VET](#) and [Osnabrück Declaration](#). It offers stakeholders a regular source of information on VET policy developments that could be used for future policy making.

2. National VET context and challenges

2.1 National VET context

Croatia has a strong tradition of VET, with one of the highest shares of learners at upper secondary VET level in Europe (69.3% in 2020). Vocational schools in Croatia primarily offer IVET for students aged 14 to 18 years. Around two-thirds of VET learners are in 4-year school-based programmes, with under one-third in 3-year programmes. Vocational schools can offer vocational education for adults (CVET), which means that they must follow the Law on education, the Law on VET and the Law on adult education (Cedefop, 2020).

The Ministry of Science and Education is responsible for overall VET policy. The Agency for VET and Adult Education (ASOO) is an executive body in charge of the overall development and organisation of the VET system. The Ministry of Labour and Pension System is responsible for monitoring labour market needs. The role of the Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Crafts and the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts is focused on apprenticeship programmes and the experimental programme in dual education launched in the 2018/19 school year. Other VET stakeholders also contribute to VET developments, such as the curriculum development through the work of sector skills councils and the VET Council (Cedefop, 2020).

The Croatian education system is successful in preventing early leaving from education and training, keeping it at a low rate of 2.3% in 2022; this is significantly lower than the EU-27 average of 9.8%. However, the share of the adult population engaging in lifelong learning currently ranks among the lowest in the EU (Cedefop, 2022b).

The Croatian VET system is transforming from being input oriented to becoming learning outcome oriented. Many elements of the reformed system are currently in development and were introduced in the [2018 amendments to the VET Act](#). These include sectoral curricula, occupational standards, qualification standards and outcome-based VET curricula (Cedefop, 2020).

2.2 Challenges

The main challenges Croatia has faced in 2022 have revolved around the relevance, the quality and the attractiveness of VET (Croatia, 2022).

Croatia faces issues stemming from outdated VET programmes that have been in place for more than two decades. These programmes require substantial modernisation to align with labour market needs. Absence of crucial data on the needs of the labour market and on the employment outcomes of recent VET graduates hinders effective adaptation. Personnel capacities at the school level have resulted in duplication of programmes within the same regional areas: schools primarily based their programme offerings on the specialisations of their VET teachers rather than aligning them with labour market demands. Additionally, there are significant disparities in the quality and availability of adult education programmes across different sectors.

The VET system does not have a comprehensive quality assurance system with a self-evaluation process and external evaluation. It is also not aligned with other evaluation processes such as accreditation, supervision, and the State Matura exam. Challenges exist in the system for evaluating and strengthening teacher competences and motivation, and in the support provided to mentors in companies who accept students for work-based learning. All these factors have a direct impact on the quality of vocational education and training. These challenges are particularly pronounced in adult education within VET; addressing them requires special attention.

Croatia continues to face challenges regarding the attractiveness of VET, although the overall share of learners in vocational education and training is high. Demographic shifts are reducing the number of learners, especially in 3-year IVET programmes with a sharp fall of 29.4% in total enrolment between 2013 and 2019. Apprenticeships, once the most popular choice among 3-year programmes, with over 50% of learners in 2013, have fallen by half during the same period. As a result, there is a shortage in certain professions that require 3-year education, leading to a misalignment between VET offers and labour market demand. Croatia's participation in adult learning is low, although there are tax incentives available for entrepreneurs to cover education and training costs. The low level of participation in lifelong learning accelerates skill obsolescence, by limiting skill updates and acquisitions. This contributes to the low level of participation in the labour market and the low level of productivity.

3. National VET policy priorities

As a response to the 2020 Council Recommendation on VET and the Osnabrück Declaration, Croatia prepared a National implementation plan for VET, selecting the following priorities to address the above challenges. These include:

- a) strengthening the relevance of VET, to adapt to the rapid economic changes and innovations and better align with labour market needs and skills demand;
- b) improving the quality of VET, by setting up a more coherent system of VET quality assurance to enable evidence-based decision-making;

- c) raising the attractiveness and internationalisation of VET, to improve VET's image and address the perception of VET as a secondary choice not valued as highly as gymnasium education.

4. Main policy developments and progress 2020-23

4.1 Strengthening the relevance of VET

Croatia's efforts during 2020-23 to strengthen the relevance of VET included the development of occupational and qualification standards, the enactment of the Adult Education Act, the promotion of work-based learning through incentives and the implementation of the dual education pilot programme, and significant investments in modernising the infrastructure and technology of the appointed regional centres of competences in key priority sectors.

[Occupational standards](#) for priority VET occupations have been in development since 2020; this continues. Development is based on the new methodology adopted by the labour ministry in 2019. These standards serve as a foundation for aligning learning outcomes and qualifications to the requirements of the labour market. As of February 2023, a total of 456 occupational standards with 3777 corresponding sets of competences were developed. Based on the new occupational standards, 164 qualification standards have been registered encompassing 6008 units of learning outcomes within the CROQF register. The last amendment of the CROQF act in 2021 aimed to simplify and speed up the procedures for including occupational and qualification standards in the CROQF register and to improve their applicability and quality. These developments are complemented by the finalisation of sectoral and VET curricula as part of the VET system's continuing development (Cedefop, 2023).

The relevance of adult education programmes has been increased with the [enactment of the Adult Education Act in 2021](#). The adult education system has been aligned to the national qualification framework and occupational standards. The law paves the way for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. This is a crucial step toward recognising and valuing skills and knowledge acquired outside of formal education settings, aligning with the national priority's goals. The law also introduced microcredentials, which are units of learning outcomes designed to help individuals acquire specific sets of skills. This supports the development of skills in demand in the labour market.

Croatia has continued the efforts of previous years to increase participation in work-based learning by providing [incentives for SMEs and learners to undertake apprenticeships](#). ESF funds were used to allocate grants to SMEs offering apprenticeships and scholarships to students in craft and shortage occupations. Additionally, Croatia provided incentives for lifelong learning to both individuals and SMEs, facilitating the acquisition of craft skills, certificates and licences needed for employment or self-employment. Grants provided to SMEs covered 80% of apprentice awards, as well as mentor fees. In 2020, the grants to SMEs offering apprenticeships amounted to EUR 5.46 million, covering 571 grants, while scholarships for students in craft occupations were granted with a total budget of EUR 10.8 million supporting 4 561 learners. Grants for lifelong learning in crafts were allocated with a total budget of EUR 247 986 to assist 749 beneficiaries. In 2021-22 no funding was awarded

due to preparations for the next programming period under the new ESF project framework. However, in 2022, an exception was made to continue lifelong learning grants.

Croatia has continued piloting its [Dual education experimental programme](#). This introduces a work-based learning model across all forms and types of VET, with a varying WBL rate depending on the specific VET qualification. In this piloted model, VET schools work with businesses in planning and implementing work-based learning. They provide continuous professional development for VET teachers and in-company mentors. They also facilitate the exchange of new technologies and know-how, monitor and assess student progress in work-based learning activities and organise final exams. During the first year of the pilot in 2018/19, 159 students were enrolled in dual education programmes across 11 VET schools. By the fifth year of implementation, during the 2022/23 school year, over 500 employers participated in the programme and the number of students enrolled in dual education programmes increased significantly to 1 556 students across 26 VET schools.

Since 2020, over EUR 130 million has been invested in modernising infrastructure and technology in [regional centres of competences](#) in five priority sectors: tourism, mechanical engineering, electrical engineering/ICT, healthcare, and agriculture. Established in 2018, these centres offer VET programmes, career guidance, and lifelong learning opportunities, and promote innovative learning models while engaging various stakeholders. After 5 years, the Ministry of Science and Education will decide on the reaccreditation of the regional centres. Funding is provided from the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

4.2 Improving the quality of VET

Croatia implemented several actions during 2020-23 to improve the quality of VET. These actions included the establishment of a quality assurance system in adult education, efforts to improve the self-assessment system in IVET and the continued development of the VET graduate tracking system to enable evidence-based decision-making.

Between 2020 and 2023, the project [Development of a quality assurance system in adult education](#), funded under the ESF operational programme, has focused on creating a comprehensive quality assurance model. This model includes manuals for self-assessment and external evaluation of adult education providers. In 2021-22, 25 providers participated in piloting self-assessment and external evaluation. Based on pilot experience, ASOO published the 'Handbook for internal quality assurance in adult education' in 2022; this provides guidelines, outlines quality areas and offers self-assessment tools. The project also involves Croatia's participation in the Programme for the international assessment of adult competences (PIAAC), measuring adult proficiency in key skills.

In 2022, Croatia engaged in EQAVET system-level peer reviews in accordance with the 2020 Council Recommendation on VET. ASOO hosted a [review of the national self-assessment model in IVET](#) in December 2022, with peer reviewers from Spain, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia and Finland. Since 2012, self-assessment had been compulsory for all IVET providers in Croatia, based on the EQAVET quality assurance cycle. The review, conducted after a decade of practice, focused on the self-assessment system's efficiency,

support for VET providers, and its connection to external evaluation. Peer reviewers noted the capacity of VET providers in self-assessment and recommended complementing it with external evaluation to strengthen Croatia's quality assurance system.

Between 2020 and 2023, the [VET graduate tracking](#) pilot allowed for the fine-tuning of the tracking instruments. In 2021, the results of the graduate tracking survey, involving 7 VET providers, were presented at an online conference on quality assurance in VET. The conference attracted 350 representatives from 205 VET providers across Croatia, many of which expressed interest in participating in the graduate tracking programme. In 2022, a VET graduate tracking software application was procured and its development takes place in 2023.

4.3 Raising the attractiveness and internationalisation of VET

Croatia has raised the attractiveness and internationalisation of VET through initiatives such as the reformed World Skills Croatia competitions and by promoting lifelong learning through strategic planning and awareness campaigns.

Croatia organised World Skills Croatia, a [reformed model of skills competitions](#), in an effort to increase the attractiveness and excellence of VET. The new competition model aligns with international competitions like WorldSkills and EuroSkills and emphasises practical skills, teamwork, and relevance to vocational curricula. WorldSkills Croatia competitions, held in recent years, have gained strong support from VET schools, companies, and government entities. The 2021 competition successfully adapted to virtual measures and coped with pandemic challenges. The 2022 event attracted over 6,000 visitors from across the world, reflecting the growing success and prominence of these initiatives in promoting VET excellence and attractiveness.

Croatia has also made progress in [promoting lifelong learning](#) and adult education through strategic planning, awareness campaigns, and capacity building. The continued organization of events like Lifelong learning week and the International Andragogy Symposium, have contributed to improving the attractiveness of adult education in Croatia.

5. Statistical information in relation to EU targets

Croatia presents a mixed picture with regards to the achievement of EU targets related to VET. The Council Recommendation on VET sets out a target employment rate for recent IVET graduates (20 to 34-year-olds) at 82% by 2025. Croatia currently (2022) stands at 75.9%, slightly below the EU average of 79.7%. It falls short in work-based learning: in 2022, 40% of recent IVET graduates (20 to 34-year-olds) have experienced work-based learning as part of their vocational education and training. This is significantly below the EU target set by the Council Recommendation on VET, which aims for 60% by 2025. Croatia is below the EU average in the contribution of VET in developing a lifelong learning culture. In 2022, 23.3 % of adults (aged 25-64) have had a learning experience in the last 12 months, compared to the EU average of 39.5 % and the 47% target set by 2025 in the Council Resolution on the European Education Area.

Table 1. **European vocational education and training policy dashboard: Croatia**

Type of indicator ⁽¹⁾	Indicator	Last available year	HR	EU-27	Policy Document	EU target (year)
VET for developing a lifelong learning culture						
Progress	Adults (25 to 64 year-olds) with a learning experience in the last 12 months (%)*	2022	23.3	39.5	Skills Agenda	50% (2025)
					Council Resolution on EEA	47% (2025)
					ESPR Action Plan	60% (2030)
Progress	Low-qualified adults with a learning experience in the last 12 months (%)	2022	:	18.4	Skills Agenda	30% (2025)
Progress	Unemployed adults with a learning experience in the last 4 weeks (%)	2022	5 ^u	13.2	Skills Agenda	20% (2025)
Context	Employment rate for 20 to 64 year-olds (%)	2022	69.7	74.6	ESPR Action Plan	78% (2030)
Context	Early leavers from education and training (%)	2022	2.3 ^u	9.6	Council Resolution on EEA	<9% (2030)
Context	NEET rate for 15 to 29 year-olds (%)	2022	13.3	11.7	ESPR Action Plan	9% (2030)
VET for Resilience, transitions, sustainability and excellence						
Progress	Adults (16 to 74 year-olds) with at least basic digital skills (%)	2021	63.4	53.9	Skills Agenda	70% (2025)
					ESPR Action Plan	80% (2030)
Progress	Employment rate for recent IVET graduates (20 to 34 year-olds) (%)	2022	75.9	79.7	Council Rec on VET	82% (2025)
Progress	Recent IVET graduates (20 to 34 year-olds) with a work-based learning experience as part of their vocational education and training (%)	2022	40	60.1	Council Rec on VET Council Resolution on EEA	60% (2025)
Context	25 to 34 year-olds with tertiary attainment (%)	2022	35.5	42	Council Resolution on EEA	45% (2025)
Context	Gender employment gap (%)	2022	9.5	10.7	ESPR Action Plan	To be halved (2030)
Context	People at risk of poverty or social exclusion (1000s)	2022	752	95 284	ESPR Action Plan	15 million decrease (2030)
Context	Employed ICT specialists (1000s)	2022	63.4 ^e	9 370.2 ^e	2030 Digital Compass	20 million, with convergence between men and women (2030)
VET for the European Education Area						
Progress	Learners in IVET who benefitted from a learning mobility abroad (%) **	2021	3.4 ^z	2.1 ^{dV}	Council Rec on VET Skills Agenda	8% (2025)
Context	Average number of foreign languages learned in IVET	2021	1.3	1.2		

Available flags: d – definition differs, e – estimated, u – low reliability, z – not applicable, V – Cedefop estimate. Special value: - not available

* Eurostat data (Adult Education Survey, special calculation excluding guided on-the-job training)

** Provisional estimates affected by the Covid19 pandemic

Source: Cedefop. [European VET policy dashboard](#)

(1) [Definitions](#) on the type of indicators are available.

6. Conclusion

Croatia has pursued three national priorities in line with the EU priorities for VET, each marked by significant developments and progress between 2020 and 2023. These priorities are strengthening the relevance of VET, improving the quality of VET, and increasing the attractiveness and internationalisation of VET. The predominant focus of VET reforms and initiatives is to align programmes with labour market requirements.

Croatia made significant progress in developing occupational standards aligned with labour market needs and modernising VET curricula, focusing on learning outcomes and introducing transversal competences. The curricular reform adopted a modular approach, with an increased focus on work-based learning, ensuring graduates are well-prepared for the job market. The Dual education experimental programme has developed VET school capacities and partnerships with businesses. The enactment of the 2021 Law on Adult Education introduced micro-credentials, and the validation of non-formal and informal learning. This development extended the incorporation of the modular approach into adult education and should contribute to increasing participation in lifelong learning. Substantial investments have been made in regional centres of competences to bridge the gap between education and the labour market. Strengthening the organisational and operational capacities of RCCs, particularly in supporting the digital and green transition, would contribute to further reinforcing the relevance of VET.

Croatia has worked on improving quality in VET by developing a quality assurance system for adult education, and reviewing self-assessment of training providers in IVET through participation in EQAVET peer reviews. The country expanded the scope of the pilot tracking of VET graduates and initiated measures to apply it at national level. Continuing efforts in this direction should contribute to improving the quality of VET and aligning it more closely to labour market needs. Actions related to strengthening the capacity of VET teachers and trainers in the following years, as described in the country's national implementation plan for VET, should further contribute to strengthening the quality of VET provision.

Croatia has increased the attractiveness of VET and organised national competitions in 2021 and 2022, aligning them to international competitions like WorldSkills and EuroSkills. These competitions have increased cooperation between VET providers and companies, provided employment opportunities for competitors and contributed to increasing enrolment in VET programmes. Increasing the mobility of VET teachers and students in line with EU targets, and setting up a VET internationalisation strategy to integrate the international dimension into teaching and learning at various levels, should further improve the attractiveness and internationalization of VET.

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