



Background document

Excellence and inclusion at the crossroads 24 October 2024

Introduction

How are the concepts of ‘excellence’ and ‘inclusion’ understood at national level? How have they been addressed in national policy documents over the past 25 years? These are some of the questions the virtual workshop seeks to answer.

Since 2015 Cedefop has run a broad research programme on two topics: [The changing nature and role of VET in Europe](#) (2015-18) and [The future of vocational education and training \(VET\)](#) (2019-22). This research aimed to draw a bigger picture of European VET developments, to identify strengths and weaknesses, and to provide a better basis for future decisions. Our current research project, [VET excellence and inclusion for the 21st century](#), seeks to deepen Cedefop’s understanding of the interaction between the broad objectives of excellence and inclusion. These multi-layered topics have been a key part of the European policy context for VET.

Cedefop’s current research attempts to compare how countries relate the broad VET policy objectives of excellence and inclusion to each other, and explore whether these seemingly opposing priorities complement or contradict each other. As there are no absolute definitions, these concepts could be viewed from different perspectives. Although the concepts of vocational excellence and inclusion may not necessarily be in conflict, balancing them in VET policies is crucial to ensure that all individuals have access to quality education and training opportunities, regardless of their background or abilities. This requires designing policies and programmes that promote high-quality training outcomes, while also addressing issues of equity and accessibility.

An important focus of this research is unpacking national VET objectives and priorities and examining how these are reflected in national policy documents and standards. To do this, we are examining the variety of national approaches and how these have evolved over time. Each country has its own particular trajectory, reflecting its individual mix of economic, social, demographic and environmental factors, and its distinctive constellation of structures, institutions and processes for VET delivery.

Our current project is also based on Cedefop’s [analytical research framework \(2015-22\)](#). Looking back to the period 1995-2015, the most significant change observed is a growing importance of VET at higher levels. Both inside and outside traditional universities in different European countries, we see an increased focus on employability as well as on the role of practice and work-based learning.



Aims and structure

The virtual workshop provides an opportunity for policy-makers, stakeholders, experts and researchers to discuss the challenges and choices European VET faces today. It links directly to the ongoing political discussion on the future of European VET described in the [2020 Council Recommendation on vocational education and training \(VET\)](#).

The overall aim of the workshop is to instigate a discussion and gather insights from participants on how European countries address the objectives of excellence and inclusion, and how policies and practices have evolved over time. This will deepen Cedefop's understanding of the challenges European VET will face in the coming decades.

The European Commission will present its initiatives for supporting the development of vocational excellence through the establishment of CoVEs. Participants will also be informed about the EU priorities and the policy monitoring exercise on national developments. A keynote speech on Cedefop's current research will focus on the initial findings and mapping exercise of how excellence and inclusion in VET have been promoted across Europe in the past 25 years.

Presentations and discussions (with targeted polls) during the workshop will allow active participant engagement, as well as a reflection on how the concepts of inclusion and excellence interact with and influence national VET reforms. Initial insights into VET at higher levels and how these developments could influence excellence and inclusion in Europe, will also be addressed.

The virtual workshop is an opportunity to explore the methodologies, findings, and implications of Cedefop's research in this area. Participants will compare approaches and exchange experiences, as part of a continuous European effort to connect practitioners and improve practices. They will also hear examples of national case studies and exchange insights in three breakout sessions.

Breakout session 1 will address the way objectives on excellence and inclusion have been addressed at macro level (policies/reforms) over the past 25 years.

Discussions in the breakout session will focus on how European countries address the objectives of excellence and inclusion and how policies and practices have evolved over time. Countries organise the interaction between their education and training and labour markets in different ways, with policy documents often focusing on different priorities and target groups. The excellence and inclusion-related VET policy objectives and priorities in Europe are reflected in national policy documents and standards in different ways and degrees. These need to be unpacked and analysed so we can shed light on how they reflect and combine excellence and inclusion.

Guiding questions:

1. To what extent have priorities and objectives linked to excellence and inclusion triggered and influenced reforms and practical policies?
2. Have they influenced learning outcome expectations (in standards and curricula)?

Breakout session 2 will focus on how the concepts of excellence and inclusion are implemented at national level.

Departing from a socioeconomic, epistemological and education system perspective ⁽¹⁾, Cedefop's research aims to make an in-depth comparison of the concepts of excellence and inclusion, as well as a systematic elaboration of how these are translated into practical policies. For each perspective, dimensions are described allowing a comparative insight into VET developments. The balance between the concepts of excellence and inclusion (at national level) needs to be unpacked using these three perspectives. During this session, a pilot national case study will be presented, illustrating how these concepts can be understood at national level and the instruments used to promote them.

Guiding questions:

1. How are the concepts of excellence and inclusion understood in your country?
2. Which instruments are used to promote excellence and inclusion at national level:
 - institutional initiatives and reform;
 - stakeholder involvement and coordination (inside and outside the VET system).

Breakout session 3 will discuss the expansion of VET at higher levels and the implications for excellence and inclusion.

The topic 'VET at a higher levels' has been reflected in European policies over the past years. Previous Cedefop studies ⁽²⁾ illustrate the expansion of VET to higher levels (beyond upper and post-secondary levels) and point to an increasing development of vocationally oriented education and training at higher education levels. This is often justified by a need to secure the supply of highly skilled labour, innovation and economic growth, as well as individual and social progression. Yet, the way the concepts of vocational excellence and inclusion in VET at higher levels are actually understood, designed and implemented depends on the respective national contexts and policy objectives. This session will present how Cedefop aims to collect insights on the characteristics of VET at higher levels, examining how they could underpin excellence, and how they can deal with inclusion and address broader groups of learners and students.

Guiding questions:

1. How are the concepts of excellence and inclusion understood and operationalised in VET at higher levels?
 - What types of learners are targeted?
 - What pedagogies are used?
2. How does VET at higher levels differ across Europe, in relation to excellence and inclusion?

⁽¹⁾ Cedefop's study uses as a basis its [analytical research framework \(2015-22\)](#) which elaborates on conceptions of VET across countries and their changes over time.

⁽²⁾ Cedefop (2019). [The changing nature and role of vocational education and training in Europe: Volume 6: vocationally oriented education and training at higher education level expansion and diversification in European countries](#). Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper, No 70.

At the end of the workshop, international experts will be invited to share their views focusing on the global dimension of excellence and inclusion. Globalisation and international cooperation in VET can contribute to different interpretations of vocational excellence and inclusion. Cross-national initiatives, benchmarking exercises, skills competitions, and exchange programmes can introduce new perspectives and practices, leading to variations in how these concepts are understood and pursued. Although countries around the globe have different priorities, international synergies may also be needed to promote inclusive excellence in VET.

Working methods

The workshop will take place online (Zoom platform). Participants will attend presentations and will be able to participate through chat comments. Both plenary and breakout sessions will be included. During registration, participants can choose a topic and theme of interest to them. The approximate number of participants is 300.

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