

Skills for democracy

How vocational education and training shapes active citizenship

19th Cedefop Brussels seminar organised in cooperation with the Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union

CONCEPT NOTE

General information

Organiser	Cedefop
In cooperation with	The Danish Presidency of the Council of the EU
Format	Physical
Participant profile	Stakeholders from the Permanent Representations of Member States to the EU, representatives from the European Commission and the European Parliament, European social partners for education, Brussels-based stakeholders working on active citizenship
Working language	English

EVENT AIM

Cedefop, in collaboration with the Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, is organising the 19th Cedefop Brussels seminar. These research-driven seminars, held in cooperation with the rotating EU Council Presidencies, build on Cedefop's research and address issues relevant to European debates on education, training, and employment.

This edition focuses on active citizenship and the role that vocational education and training (VET) plays in supporting it. The seminar will present the first findings from Cedefop's 2025-2027 study on citizenship education in initial VET, alongside contributions from policymakers, social partners, experts and civil society representatives.

The seminar will explore the growing importance of citizenship education within the European Union's agenda. In the context of the *Union of Skills* and the *Action plan on basic skills*, the event will examine the main barriers and opportunities for strengthening citizenship education in VET. Discussions will address both policy and practice, as well as the role and engagement of key stakeholders at EU, national, and local levels. The seminar will also provide a platform for networking, peer learning, and the exchange of ideas across countries and institutions.

RESEARCH AND POLICY CONTEXT

AT A GLANCE

- IVET reaches 43% of learners aged 15-19 and could offer a key opportunity to nurture democratic participation and social inclusion, as this is a crucial age for developing citizenship competences.
- Citizenship competence is increasingly recognised as an important component of high-quality IVET, yet its implementation remains uneven across Europe.
- Cedefop's preliminary research shows that IVET training offers few opportunities for high-quality citizenship education.
- IVET's practice-based nature and strong workplace links have potential for innovative forms of civic learning.

CEDEFOP STUDY ON CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN IVET

In May 2025, Cedefop launched a study on citizenship education in IVET as part of its [work on promoting key and transversal competences](#). The study supports the implementation of the 2025 [Union of Skills](#) initiative and its [Action plan on basic skills](#), which highlights citizenship as 'the fifth basic skill' for all. In September 2025, the *Herning Declaration on attractive and inclusive VET for increased competitiveness and quality jobs 2026-2030* was adopted. It calls for fostering an appropriate level of basic and transversal skills in IVET, including citizenship.

In this study, citizenship competence is understood 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' ([EU key competences framework](#)) ⁽¹⁾. It encompasses knowledge of democratic principles, EU values and history, social and political movements, sustainability, diversity and cultural identities; skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, problem-solving, media literacy, and civic participation; and attitudes such as political and civic self-efficacy, respect for human rights, pluralism, social justice, and responsibility for the environment.

The dimensions selected in the study (see 'Dimensions of citizenship competence in IVET' below) reflect and operationalise this understanding, while acknowledging that not all dimensions are covered. They link to citizenship education, preparing learners for responsible participation in democratic society, and to civic learning, which refers to the pedagogical approaches, democratic processes, and learning experiences through which such competences are developed.

(1) The term 'citizenship competence' used in the singular throughout the text also encompasses the plural 'citizenship competences'.

INSIGHTS FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

In the first phase of the Cedefop study, an initial literature review was conducted ⁽²⁾. It examines conceptual frameworks used in citizenship education research in general, as well as pedagogical approaches, policy contexts, and the development of citizenship competence particularly in upper secondary IVET. The findings indicate that citizenship education in IVET has gained increasing importance in Europe over the past decade, driven by EU policy priorities and broader societal concerns about declining civic participation and democratic resilience. However, it remains less developed than in general education. While the role of IVET in fostering citizenship competence is increasingly recognised, significant gaps persist in policy frameworks, pedagogical approaches, and assessment practices (see ‘Enablers, barriers and gaps’ below).

Why citizenship education in IVET matters

Across the EU, 43% of learners aged 15-19 are enrolled in upper secondary IVET, a key stage for shaping political identities, trust, and civic dispositions. Citizenship education in IVET is vital for democracy, equity, and employability. It fosters social cohesion, resilience to disinformation, and civic responsibility, while providing disadvantaged learners, who are often overrepresented in IVET, with opportunities for social inclusion.

It also develops teamwork, critical and ethical thinking, intercultural communication, and problem-solving – skills increasingly demanded in the labour market and recognised as essential for the future workforce. The [World Economic Forum](#) identifies global citizenship and civic responsibility as ‘new economy skills’, while the OECD highlights systems thinking and collective action as transversal competences central to citizenship education and to preparing adaptable, resilient workers for the evolving labour market.

In addition, IVET’s combination of school- and work-based learning, including in-company training, immerses learners in real workplace cultures. This provides practical opportunities to apply civic and interpersonal competences and underscores IVET’s unique role in fostering citizenship competence.

Dimensions of citizenship competence in IVET

The literature review identified the relevance of the following selected dimensions of citizenship competence that prepare learners for responsible participation in democratic society and for civic learning, and examines how they are addressed in IVET. These dimensions are illustrative and do not represent the full breadth of citizenship competence.

- **Knowledge and application of democratic principles and political literacy**
Studies show vocational curricula tend to focus on compliance, rules, and workplace responsibilities rather than encouraging deeper democratic engagement or critical reflection on institutions. Textbooks and curricula in VET are often simplified and omit controversial issues, limiting learners’ opportunities to acquire complex civic knowledge.

⁽²⁾ The review covers research and policy developments from 2014 to 2025 and draws on 115 publications (see [Bibliography](#) for details, including methodological sources), including peer-reviewed research, policy documents, and grey literature.

- **Political and civic self-efficacy and civic engagement**
VET learners report lower political self-efficacy and voting intentions compared to peers in general education. However, there is some evidence that IVET learners are more inclined towards non-institutional civic practices such as volunteering, activism, or community engagement. These alternative forms of participation are often undervalued in measurement frameworks, suggesting a need to broaden understandings of what counts as 'civic participation'.
- **Critical thinking and media literacy**
The literature indicates that VET classrooms generally provide fewer opportunities for critical thinking than general education. At the same time, evidence shows that when IVET learners are engaged in active, practice-oriented approaches, such as participatory media and digital media literacy projects, they respond positively, particularly when analysing disinformation or producing media content themselves. Recent studies emphasise that media literacy has become increasingly central to citizenship education due to young people's reliance on digital media for news and civic participation.
- **EU history and common values**
Evidence points to limited and uneven inclusion of EU themes in IVET curricula. Where EU themes are addressed, they often receive little instructional time and are rarely accompanied by opportunities for critical debate. Teachers report challenges in engaging learners with abstract or supranational concepts unless these are connected to practical or vocational contexts. Limited evidence suggests that VET learners can be more open to cultural diversity than their trainers.

Enablers, barriers and gaps

The literature highlights a range of factors that enable or hinder the development of citizenship competence in IVET. Among the most consistent **enablers** are practice-oriented learning environments, flexible curricula, and strong teacher-student relationships that make active civic learning possible. Diverse student backgrounds can foster pluralistic perspectives, while many learners themselves express interest in social and global issues. In addition, workplace demand for transversal skills, such as communication, teamwork, and ethical reasoning, provides further impetus for embedding citizenship competence in VET.

Barriers to citizenship education in IVET are better documented in the literature than enablers. VET curricula often prioritise technical skills and employability, leaving limited time for citizenship-related topics such as democratic principles, civic engagement or critical reflection on social issues. Teachers lack adequate preparation, and large class sizes due to resource constraints hinder participatory pedagogies and open classroom climates. Structural issues also persist: cooperation between general subject teachers, vocational teachers and in-company trainers is often weak; links with local communities and civil society are often underdeveloped. Moreover, opportunities to connect citizenship education with workplace experiences, such as equality or labour rights, are rarely exploited. Socioeconomic inequalities compound these challenges, limiting the potential of IVET to strengthen political efficacy and democratic participation.

There is **little systematic evidence** on how citizenship competence is taught and acquired in IVET, particularly in company-based training. In Germany, for example, larger companies tend to have more structured participation mechanisms for apprentices, and informal learning such as conflict negotiation and role modelling can positively influence learners' democratic attitudes. In Denmark, workplace trainers in social and health care emphasised democratic participation, positioning learners as both compliant employees and active contributors to decision-making.

Large-scale comparative surveys such as ICCS or PISA typically exclude upper secondary VET, leaving the sector under-researched. Existing national studies are fragmented, often concentrated in only a few countries, notably the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, and Germany, and their findings are seldom comparable.

CONCLUSION

The literature highlights the paradox of IVET: although it serves a large share of European youth, including many from disadvantaged backgrounds who need more support, it offers fewer opportunities for high-quality citizenship education than other education pathways. At the same time, IVET practice-based nature and strong workplace links have potential for innovative forms of civic learning, for example, through participatory teaching or workplace-based democratic practices in company-based training or apprenticeships. In these contexts, learners can experience and practise elements of democracy and civic participation, such as engaging with work councils or observing how rights and responsibilities are managed in the workplace. This dual role presents both a policy challenge and an opportunity to ensure that VET learners, who are often among those most at risk of disengagement, can participate fully in democratic life.

However, evidence on how to achieve this remains limited. Research on teaching and acquiring citizenship competence in IVET, especially in company-based training, is scarce. These gaps highlight the need for more systematic data and analysis to guide future policy and practice in this field.