



CEDEFOP

European Centre for the Development
of Vocational Training



Digital gap during COVID-19 for VET learners at risk in Europe

Synthesis report

*based on preliminary information on seven countries provided by
Cedefop's Network of Ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET*



4 June 2020



Foreword

In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, Cedefop has invited its network of [Ambassadors tackling early leaving from vocational education and training \(VET\)](#)¹ to share their views about the major challenges VET school closure imposes on their country, region or institution for VET learners at risk and VET teachers and trainers when it is to ensure equal access to distance education. Ambassadors shared both their concerns about the impact of schools' closure on learners at risk as well as examples of initiatives ensuring equal access to digital learning for all learners and for supporting VET teachers and trainers to respond to this challenge.

This network was established in 2017 to support the sustainability and dissemination of Cedefop's [VET toolkit for tackling early leaving](#). **Ambassadors do not represent their countries, institutions or Cedefop in any circumstances, and their personal perspectives derive from their roles as policy makers, learning providers and experts involved in tackling early leaving from VET at national, regional or local level in Europe.** The opportunity to become an ambassador is open to individuals from all EU Member States, European Economic Area (EEA) and candidate countries².

The report draws from preliminary information collected on seven countries: **Germany, Greece, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Turkey**³ and the **United Kingdom** based on ambassadors' inputs collected from 17 April 2020 to 8 May 2020 as a response to Cedefop's questionnaire.

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These preliminary findings will be complemented by more comprehensive country-based information being collected by Cedefop's formal network ReferNet reporting on VET systems and policies.

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Front page visualisation: a word cloud view of the most frequently occurring words in the ambassadors' inputs received. The word cloud was created with the use of [voyant-tools.org](#)

¹ You may find the list of ambassadors [here](#).

² Find out more about the role of ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET [here](#).

³ The information provided on Turkey is a joint work with the European Training Foundation.

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Key messages

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unique challenges to all types and levels of learning including vocational education and training (VET). An entire generation of VET learners have seen their education and training being interrupted. This population could suffer severe disruption of their learning if continuity of distance learning is not ensured.

Among VET learners, for those being already at risk, COVID-19 is not the only threat they face. These students are often found out of school. With schools being shut down, they risk falling even further behind while at the same time they are also at increased risk of violence, abuse and neglect, as families and households are locked down.

This report, based on preliminary information collected from Cedefop's ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET, calls for a COVID-19 response that puts the needs of each VET student at risk front and centre. Students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, migrants and from ethnic minorities, learners with disabilities and special educational needs, have an equal right to health, education and protection during the global recovery of COVID-19.

Ambassadors from seven European countries (**Germany, Greece, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Turkey⁴** and the **United Kingdom**) have helped us:

- understand the challenges faced by learners at risk and their teachers and trainers during school closures; and
- acquire new knowledge on the measures adopted to support VET learners at risk and VET teachers and trainers to respond to the COVID-19 challenge.

Some of these examples of initiatives arise from the national context, while others focus on a VET institution, as valuable examples of how VET institutions are addressing this enormous challenge that equally affects learners, teachers and trainers Europe-wide and all over the world.

All mentioned countries are aiming, to a different extent, to ensure learning continuity for all VET learners and apprentices by:

- facilitating access to digital devices; internet connection; translating guidelines into different languages spoken by ethnic minorities and refugees, as well as hearing impaired students; providing individualised support and distance mentoring; developing learners' digital skills;
- supporting VET teachers and trainers through online training modules on digital skills and e-learning pedagogies and by providing them with free digital devices.

Despite these and other initiatives presented in this report, Cedefop's ambassadors call for further support to address the needs of learners at risk ensuring their equal access to quality distance learning.

The current crisis has shown that **there is no digital inclusion without social inclusion**. Marginalised and vulnerable learners are less likely to be involved in distance learning procedures; disconnecting for a longer period may lead them to drop out from their VET programme. Prior to the pandemic,

⁴The information provided on Turkey is a joint work with the European Training Foundation. For more information on this country see ETF report: *Coping with Covid-19. Mapping education and training responses to the health crisis in ETF partner countries*. Available here: https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-05/mapping_covid_180520.pdf



European countries had made an impressive progress in lowering the rates of early leaving from education and training. This progress should be sustained in the post COVID-19 era.

Cedefop's [VET toolkit for tackling early leaving](#) has never been so important in supporting policy makers and VET practitioners to prevent this from happening. The toolkit provides intervention approaches helping VET schools to develop inclusive learning environments and effective pedagogies, including through technology that meets the needs of learners at risk, as well as investing in counselling and support for learners at risk and their families⁵.

Cedefop will continue work in this field to support the European Commission, Member States and social partners to implement the newly adopted Council Conclusions on *European teachers and trainers for the future* (European Council, 25 May 2020) recognising teachers and trainers as an indispensable driving force of education and training and acknowledging their commitment during the present COVID-19 crisis.

These preliminary conclusions raise awareness on the need to develop further the digital competences of teachers and trainers, promoting their participation in continuous professional development, facilitating their mobility, involving them in future policy design and fostering their wellbeing. Cedefop's forthcoming survey on VET principals, teachers, trainers and learners will bring more insights in all these areas to support evidence-based policy making in Europe.

⁵ The toolkit suggests 17 intervention approaches. These can be found here:
<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/toolkits/vet-toolkit-tackling-early-leaving/intervention-approaches>

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unique challenges to all types and levels of learning, including VET. An entire generation of VET learners has seen their education and training being interrupted in an unprecedented way due to lockdown and social distancing measures implemented across Europe and around the globe. VET institutions have been called to organise quickly digital education and training, while at the same time they had to mobilise teachers and trainers to maintain services to learners. All of this aimed to ensure “learning and training anywhere, anytime”, an idea central to the concept of lifelong learning, but often quite distant from traditional VET practices that are strongly rooted on the physical presence of the learner in a specific VET establishment.

It has been more than two months since schools closed in more than 190 countries, affecting 1.57 billion children and youth - 90% of the world’s student population, according to UNESCO estimates. As UNICEF reports, 99% of the learning population under 18 worldwide (2.34 billion) live in one of these countries with some form of movement restrictions and are thus affected by the school closures due to COVID-19⁶.

The socio-economic impact of COVID-19 though is felt hardest by the most vulnerable learners across Europe. For many of them, living in poverty with no digital devices and/or web access at home, or located in remote areas with lack of learning materials or school supplies, the consequences of COVID-19 response measures of school closure risk plunging them further into hardship. Additionally, many are the challenges that VET teachers and trainers are facing in their efforts to respond to the current crisis. The consequences might be similar irrespective of the level of the education, but seem harder for the VET sector, having an important work-based component that has been interrupted as businesses offering apprenticeships have temporarily closed in many European countries.

The aim of this paper is to offer a synthesis of preliminary findings coming from a small-scale survey based on the responses of Cedefop’s ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET. The next section briefly presents the survey’s questions and the limitations of this exercise. The following sections synthesise the main messages that come across from the ambassadors’ responses. The conclusions highlight the key messages and propose avenues for further research.

1.1. Cedefop’s questionnaire

The questionnaire is developed across the following two topics for which Cedefop’s team *VET for lifelong learning* has asked the contribution of the ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET. Two sets of questions were asked regarding how the schools’ closure as part of the governments’ responses to COVID-19 has impacted on learners at risk (Box 1).

⁶ UNICEF (2020), Protecting the most vulnerable children from the impact of coronavirus: An agenda for action, available here: <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/agenda-for-action> (accessed 23.05.2020)



Box 1. Questions on school closure impact on learners at risk.

1 How is schools' closure, as part of your government's response to COVID-19, impacting on learners at risk?

- 1.1 Are there any supportive measures taken in your country or region to support learners at risk?
- 1.2 Are you aware of good practices for ensuring equal access to e-learning for all VET learners? (including socio-economic disadvantaged or disabled students)

The second set of questions referred to how VET teachers and trainers were supported to teach in the new e-learning environments (Box 2).

Box 2. Questions on VET teachers and trainers.

2 How are VET teachers and trainers responding to this challenge?

- 2.1 Do VET teachers and trainers have the necessary technical and pedagogical skills to integrate digital devices in instruction?
- 2.2 Have they been supported with distance learning professional training during the pandemic?
- 2.3 Are there other effective professional resources to learn how to use the digital devices that are available to VET teachers and trainers?

1.2. Scope

The current report includes preliminary information received from fourteen ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET from seven European countries; five EU members (**Germany, Greece, Portugal, Romania** and **Spain**) and two non-EU members (**Turkey** and the **United Kingdom**). The information was collected from the 17 April 2020 to 8 May 2020, when all seven countries had implemented measures to assure learning continuity in response to education and training disruptions caused by the COVID-19 crisis and the schools' closures.

The collected information refers to examples of initiatives taken at different policy levels, some of them at national level, while others at regional, local or institutional level. This reflects the different backgrounds and profiles of the ambassadors, showing the actual needs and challenges that must be addressed but also the different responses given by different VET systems and actors.

The effort undertaken to collect this preliminary information had by no means the purpose of being exhaustive as to the measures, policies or practices that have been designed, developed or



implemented in the examined countries. As the ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET do not represent their countries or their institutions or Cedefop in any context, the information that they have submitted does not aim to be comprehensive. On the contrary, the aim is to collect empirical information and insights from the field, grow understanding on how the crisis has been managed at any given level of analysis and therefore provide food for thought for the needs and challenges for learners at risk and VET teachers and trainers.

2. Counteracting the negative impact for learners at risk

Cedefop's ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET provided examples of initiatives promoted by the different governments and certain institutions to support VET learners at risk, including students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, migrants and from ethnic minorities, learners with disabilities and special educational needs. Some of these activities consider the following aims presented in Box 3.

Box 3. Initiatives to support learners at risk.

What activities are carried out to support learners at risk?



Ensuring access to distance education with the free provision of the necessary equipment and free unlimited internet connection



Translating material into different languages spoken by ethnic minorities and refugees, including sign language for hearing impaired students



Offering training opportunities to learners on digital skills and competences



Monitoring learners' engagement in online classes



Providing individualised distance support to learners at risk and their parents, in both academic and mental health aspects

Source: *Cedefop*.



2.1. Ensuring equal access to distance learning for all VET learners

The ambassadors were asked to inform on initiatives carried out to ensure equal access to distance learning for all VET learners. Equal access to distance learning is important for all VET learners, but especially for those most vulnerable that either belong to socioeconomic disadvantaged groups or are students with disabilities.

All countries examined have made efforts to provide access to internet connection and the necessary equipment for distance education. The **Hellenic** government has reached agreement with the three big telecommunication companies in **Greece** to provide unlimited free access to the online platforms developed by the [Ministry of Education](#) to offer e-learning to all VET learners. Arrangements have been made for those VET students who have no access to digital devices at home through donations from private companies. Funds and equipment have been donated to the Ministry of Education in order to enrich the public VET schools with the necessary digital equipment (laptops and tablets), which will be used by students on a lending basis. The website [We learn at home](#) is an information hub for all learning services that are provided by the educational structures. Additionally, the [Ministry of Digital Governance](#) has collected in one access point a number of learning resources open to the general public in the [Digital Academy of Citizens](#), creating an innovative platform for community learning where learning providers are invited to contribute.

In **Portugal**, the same arrangements have been made with private companies, providing free access to further educational resources.

The **Romanian** [Ministry of Education](#) has developed a digital platform on the project [Relevant Curriculum, Open Education for All - CRED](#), offering several types of digital resources to support teachers and students to continue learning at home without any cost. Additionally, the ministerial initiative named [Reaction for education](#) has succeeded in identifying some of the digital resources needed by students and teachers to continue the online classes. Further, NGOs and other associations have sponsored students or schools of rural areas who have appropriate devices or internet to access the online classes with tablets; however, the lack or low strength of internet networks remains a persistent challenge.

Similarly, the **Spanish** [Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, along with some technological companies](#), provided tablets and internet access for learners at risk; this came a month after having secured the same support to non-at risk students. As most of the learners at risk are not enrolled in the formal education system and attend third sector institutions, some of them grouped under the [Spanish Association of Second Chance Schools](#) and were granted access to online training and accompaniment; they were equipped with laptops and internet access, and supported financially and emotionally. Further, the Ministry has released a note to make clear its support to special education schools and counteract fake news on closing these schools.

NGOs and other international organisations have also played a role in supporting learners at risk during this time of crisis in the candidate countries. Our ambassador from **Turkey** explains how vocational high schools affiliated to universities are carrying out their lessons via virtual classrooms, through online education systems provided by each university. In this case, learners at risk, as Syrian refugees, can have access to these online systems to keep their learning on track. Regarding lifelong learning related to VET, there are several local and international NGOs who are involved in topics related to Syrian learners. They have provided online VET courses to Syrian and Turkish citizens who

get daily allowances for each attendance day helping them sustain their life expenses. There are several good practices and opportunities presented by these NGOs⁷ and by the government itself⁸, providing equal access to digital learning for all VET learners. Actions are being implemented to address practice-based training, including producing dedicated video and digital materials to ensure continuity of this important component of curricula. Like other countries, mobile service providers are providing free connectivity to facilitate access to online platforms for students and teachers.

2.2. Breaking language barriers

For learners at risk and especially for ethnic minorities and those with disabilities, guidelines on how to protect themselves and how to access distance education are often not in a language that they can understand (such as sign language for hearing impaired or easy read and Braille for blind students).

The **Hellenic Ministry of Education** has taken measures to ensure that learners at risk may have equal access to distance education similarly to their peers who do not face the same difficulties. Distance learning courses are provided with subtitles and in sign language for hearing impaired students and, in collaboration with UNICEF, guidelines for distance learning have been translated into eleven different languages spoken by refugees and migrants living in **Greece**.

In **Portugal**, an online school on TV called #StudyAtHome – The School on Television ([#EstudoEmCasa – A Escola na Televisão](#)) was launched to ensure that all students have equal access to education and learning. The programme gives equal opportunity to socioeconomic disadvantaged students whose background does not allow full access to digital tools, and it is provided also in sign language for hearing impaired students. Additionally, online assistance and telephone support for remote services is offered, as well as a set of guidelines in different languages, considering migrants and the diversity of learners.

2.3. Developing digital skills and competences

Unfortunately, not all students have equal skills, resources or opportunities to participate in distance and e-learning.

Among the measures adopted by the **Portuguese Ministry of Education** to ensure access to distance education for all students, including those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and students with special educational needs, is the [Programme for Digital Literacy Inclusion](#). This programme was initially locally provided in libraries, parishes and municipality facilities, and is now offered to all individuals who want to acquire a wide range of digital skills and competences, to reach groups at risk of exclusion. A wide range of training opportunities are accessible to migrants, refugees

⁷ Such as: ILO, supporting NGOs that provide VET courses; UNDP, supporting NGOs that provide “reaching-out to vulnerable” and subsistence support; FAO; UN Women; 3RP Coordinators; UNFPA; Basic Needs Working Group (UNHCR); South-East Turkey Inter-Sector Working Group (UNHCR); İŞKUR Employment Agency.

⁸ As of mid- April, over 650,000 live lessons were conducted on the Turkish [EBA TV](#). For more information see ETF report: *Coping with Covid-19. Mapping education and training responses to the health crisis in ETF partner countries*. Available here: https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-05/mapping_covid_180520.pdf

and ethnic minorities. Additionally, a new platform with specific VET resources has been created to enable teachers and learners to maintain regular contact, to consolidate the already acquired knowledge, and to develop new skills and further build up their knowledge.

2.4. Providing individual support to learners at risk

This global crisis has amplified and reinforced the digital, social, emotional, cultural and economic inequalities that many VET students and their families were already facing. The provision of individualised and psychological support may prevent students' disengagement from learning.

In **Romania**, within the partnership between the [Ministry of Education](#) and the Proacta EDU Association, the first line of psychological counselling on COVID-19 was launched, free of charge, for teachers, parents and students; it is the so-called [Ambassador for Community](#).

Mentoring work stands out also in **Spain**, within the second chance schools⁹, especially with the youngest students (16 to 21 years old), through individualised follow-ups carried out by telephone, in which academic, health and personal doubts are resolved. The communication and coordination with the social worker and among teachers take place on a daily basis. Social networks already established and used regularly since the beginning of the course, play an important role with the youngest public, allowing them to remain in contact and to energise the content. Coordination and follow-up with other professionals are also required, both from inside the institution and from external partners, such as educators of minors from other entities.

Similar support measures took place in **Portugal**, where schools have received guidelines for the implementation of distance education to students with special education needs, which include measures to support parents and students, promoting learning and wellbeing.

In **England and Wales**, where some institutions have been asked to remain open and to adopt suitable measures for providing education to the children whose parents are critical workers and to vulnerable children and young people, i.e. those supported by the social care system and those otherwise identified as vulnerable by educational providers and local authorities. Irrespective of whether education providers remain open, the guidance for providers is to maintain regular communication with social workers, vulnerable individuals and their families and to follow-up non-attendance. Arrangements for encouraging attendance are made at local level between authorities, local schools/head teachers and regional schools commissioners. The needs of vulnerable individuals are assessed on a case-by-case basis and expectations on attendance are negotiated with, and reviewed by, social workers who encourage learners to attend provision, unless there are identifiable risks (e.g. underlying health condition). For vulnerable individuals who do not have access to a social worker, [Families First](#), the national early intervention programme in **Wales**, aims to improve outcomes for children and young people (including effective participation in education and training) by emphasising prevention and by supporting whole families rather than individuals.

Educational settings often detail the measures adopted and interventions implemented in their quality improvement/inclusion and diversity plans, and this aspect of provision is subject to monitoring by the respective inspectorates: [OFSTED](#) in **England** and [ESTYN](#) in **Wales**.

⁹ Example is drawn from the case of the second chance school of the [Fundación Federico Ozanam](#).



The case of the [University of Central Lancashire](#) in **England** serves as an example of support measures implemented at institutional level. [Creativity Works Preston \(CWP\)](#) supports the 'not in education, employment or training' students of the university, and they are allowing to reopen their premises with a small workforce to teach and support some of the harder to reach and disengaged student members. The institution has waived the student accommodation fees for any student living on campus, since there are international students still on campus and hence the university is providing for their needs. Extra student mental health support has been put in place for anybody feeling vulnerable or needing to talk.

In **Germany**, the so-called “transition coaching” supports students at school in acquiring general secondary education or to complete (assisted) VET or another form of upper-secondary education. At general secondary schools, the transition coaches (mostly social pedagogues) hold regular meetings and appointments with final class students at risk of dropout or having difficulties managing the transition. In cooperation with the individual student, the coach prepares a transition plan. To ensure continuity of tailored support during this crisis, the transition coaches have adjusted their services, steering young people as much as possible towards individual guidance services by phone¹⁰.

In **Turkey**, with the prolonged closure of education and training providers, greater attention is also being given to practice-based training, career guidance and emotional support. Turkey released three booklets to target the specific needs of young people, adults and parents, and put in place several initiatives to address special education, career guidance and psychological support¹¹.

2.5. Supporting apprentices at risk

A major challenge addressed by all ambassadors is the continuation of the work-based component of the VET programmes during lockdown and businesses' closures. While theory can usually be taught and learned online, practical aspects cannot be effectively delivered, e.g. due to lack of access to tools, materials and equipment.

As stated by our ambassador from **Romania**, an extremely important issue is how VET students can continue their internships, since some students have contracts with companies that do no longer work, at least for a while. VET students have seen their classes or traineeships interrupted, disrupting their training itineraries. For apprentices enrolled in paid work-based learning, they have to follow the rules applying to the rest of the employees of the hosting companies, hence the majority of the VET students are completing their work-based learning online through platforms that can help the trainers to report the student's progress¹².

The same situation is described for **Greece**: as most private companies remained temporarily shut down while the public sector works in rotation, a decision to pause attendance in companies was taken for all apprentices. For post-secondary level apprentices, a special COVID-19 related grant is

¹⁰ Cedefop has published a dedicated report on guidance and counselling during COVID-19 entitled: [Note on lifelong guidance and the COVID-19 pandemic: Responses from Cedefop's CareersNet](#).

¹¹ For more information see [ETF report](#) and the recent note from Cedefop on the lifelong guidance response in the crisis which provides useful references and examples of good practice.

¹² As explained for the case of [Escola Profissional de Aveiro](#) in Portugal.

being considered for the period for which in company learning and payment are suspended. For upper secondary apprentices, regulations are also being prepared to ensure the continuation of their remuneration.

In **Germany**, a programme managed by [PES Germany](#) and co-funded by the European Social Fund offers a special form of support for disadvantaged young people to reduce early school leaving from VET, given this disruption on the apprenticeships of VET learners¹³.

In all seven countries from which preliminary information has been collected, VET and apprenticeship providers are incorporating online platforms to facilitate learning and assessments; many already moved to online on-the-job delivery, while others are making plans for assessment using virtual platforms. Others are exploring options for innovative, digital pedagogical approaches, such as simulators, augmented/virtual reality, or artificial intelligence to train the specific practical sectoral skills. Online learning solutions are being utilised in apprenticeships, such as engineering, IT, finance and insurance.

Apprentices who still go to companies are occasionally allowed – in cooperation with schools – to make up for parts of learning meant to be delivered in schools. Several apps and websites which connect students and teachers/trainers at the workplace have been employed to ensure learning continuity. Learning can be also switched from work-based learning (WBL) to school-based learning, provided that the training content is suitable for a school-based pathway and the switch is documented. Teleworking is possible, especially for IT apprenticeships. WBL experience is promoted through simulated enterprises, while platforms facilitate communication with dual training partners¹⁴.

3. Supporting VET teachers and trainers to perform new roles

With the current global crisis caused by COVID-19 and the school closure, learning continuity may only be ensured thanks to teachers and trainers' digital skills, flexibility and creativity to develop and use creative solutions with online resources.

In a profession exercised predominantly in its traditional format, where personal interactivity and proximity are essential, social distancing certainly poses new roles and challenges for VET teachers and trainers. The online learning environments require them to demonstrate high quality digital delivery skills and confidence in using web conferencing solutions. They also need to be vigilant for increased cyberbullying and protect their students from disconnecting from the “real world” paying attention to their time spent online. VET trainers also need to engage with employers and social partners to share their material online or to produce new digital learning tools.

¹³ CareersNet expert Germany in [Note on lifelong guidance and the COVID-19 pandemic: Responses from Cedefop's CareersNet](#).

¹⁴ Cedefop has published a dedicated paper on [How are European countries managing apprenticeships to respond to the COVID-19 crisis?](#) This is a synthesis report based on information provided by Cedefop's community of apprenticeship experts.








But unfortunately, not all teachers and trainers were equally prepared. As OECD¹⁵ reports, the recent TALIS 2018¹⁶ survey has shown that the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) for teaching was the second highest area of professional development that teachers (18%) report a high need for. However, only 56% of teachers across the OECD countries had participated in training in the use of ICT for teaching as part of their initial education or training, and only 43% of teachers felt well or very well prepared for this element when they began teaching.

TALIS findings may explain to a certain extent why VET teachers and trainers are facing important challenges while converting physical classrooms into digital learning environments overnight. Some of the most cited challenges by Cedefop's ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET are the following presented in Box 4.

Box 4. Challenges faced by VET teachers and trainers.

What challenges are VET teachers and trainers facing?

-  Absence of access to equipment and internet connection required to offer distance learning
-  Lack of digital skills and competences to make efficient use of the platforms
-  Poor experience in creating digital teaching content
-  Lack of experience on e-learning and other distance learning effective pedagogies in VET, especially for teaching practical components
-  Concerns over privacy issues, copyright and data protection

Source: *Cedefop*.


¹⁵ http://www.oecd.org/education/talis/TALIS2018_insights_and_interpretations.pdf (see p.23).

¹⁶ TALIS: The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey covers about 260,000 teachers in 15,000 schools across 48 countries and economies.

From the perspective of Cedefop's ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET, some initiatives aiming to tackle these obstacles are the following presented in Box 5.

Box 5. Initiatives to support VET teachers and trainers.

What activities are carried out to support VET teachers and trainers?

-  Online training modules on digital skills and e-learning pedagogies
-  Equipping VET schools with the necessary digital devices
-  Caring for VET teachers and trainers' wellbeing.

Source: Cedefop.

3.1. Equipping VET teachers and trainers with digital skills and devices

During the pandemic, digital delivery, which allows offering professional learning opportunities online for teachers and trainers, has become the norm. Although this approach offers flexibility in terms of time and place, and during the health crisis it has been the only possibility, it is still a novelty with unknown effects. In the current circumstances, online modules for equipping VET teachers and trainers with digital skills are necessary. Some countries are training teachers, trainers, coaches and mentors to develop teaching and training material; to acquire knowledge on effective e-learning methodologies; and to carry out virtual evaluation. Some platforms offer demonstrations and online training to users. Information and guidance about organising distance learning is made available for teachers, trainers, learners, enterprises and parents in many EU countries including how to support learners at risk.

In **Germany**¹⁷, a [national teacher survey](#) regarding the experience with distance learning has indicated that most schools were technically poorly prepared for this situation of school closure, and that it was not only due to lack of equipment, but also due to lack of experience in creating digital teaching content. The results show that the most used task format in distance learning has been the worksheet and that the contact between teachers and students is often irregular.

¹⁷ Cedefop's ambassador tackling early leaving from VET explains that during the school lockdown, the companies made agreements with the trainees based on local conditions. The design of distance learning was a responsibility of every school, hence the level of achievement of this challenge is based on each level of experience.



Our ambassador tackling early leaving from **Romania** points that VET trainers, like the majority of teachers, need now more than ever to develop technical and pedagogical skills. They need to be supported with resources, distance learning and professional training to increase the efficiency of practical lessons. Even if the digital devices are available to VET teachers and trainers, there are still domains in which they cannot directly apply online learning. A case given is the one of post-secondary health schools, whose students are now not allowed to access hospitals, clinics or medical offices, due to COVID-19. The [Ministry of Education](#) is considering organising the much-needed trainings for teachers and trainers for efficient use of online platforms. At the same time, there is a need to consider data security issues, make available antivirus programs and advice on streamlining distance education.

In **Portugal**, teachers have also received professional training on distance teaching and digital learning courses on various online platforms.

In **Greece**, the political leadership sees an opportunity during the pandemic to grant educators more autonomy, promote public-private partnerships and teach them not only the necessary technical and pedagogical skills to integrate digital devices in instruction but also soft skills, such as flexibility, adaptability, social empathy and responsibility.

3.2. Caring for VET teachers and trainers' wellbeing

According to WHO, teaching is one of the most stressful professions, issue that was raised decades ago by research on the phenomenon called "burnout" of teachers, understood as a negative and permanent effect on them due to the psychological and social conditions that they face when teaching. This has varied consequences, such as absenteeism from work, abandonment of the profession, diseases, emotional exhaustion and anxiety. While COVID-19 is pressuring our society to change, creating new challenges and roles for VET teachers and trainers pressures their wellbeing, which is crucial as an outcome itself and to other vital outcomes, such as students' learning and wellbeing.

Given the changes required to slow the spread of COVID-19, the new working conditions for teaching professionals may increase the teacher discomfort, as working hours and complexity in teaching are significantly increased. Teachers and trainers were called to change their working environment overnight and move into their virtual classrooms and workplaces. They had to come up fast with effective teaching methods online. Familiarise themselves in no time with new e-learning material. Overcome data privacy abuses. They also need to be vigilant for increased cyberbullying and protect their students from disconnecting from the "real world" spending too much time online.

Teachers and trainers are struggling to meet the new demands imposed on them and to overcome the new challenges that they now must face, and they need more than ever empathy, support, and greater investment on their area.

VET leaders - both school leaders and immediate supervisors - may have an important role to play caring for VET teachers and trainers' wellbeing. Countries that have given greater autonomy to VET

institutions and their leaders to arrange the distance learning, see great benefits¹⁸. Autonomy-supportive leadership in VET schools during COVID-19 may include:

- understand teachers and trainers' needs for the effective provision of distance learning and address the problems that arise;
- include teachers and trainers' input in the decision-making processes at school-level;
- retain an open dialogue with teachers on the various tasks may still be important to be done remotely.

Research has shown that when teachers perceive their school leaders to be more autonomy-supportive, they then report more positive relationships with students and colleagues and greater adaptability, greater work-related wellbeing and lower emotional exhaustion. As a result, leadership behaviours that support autonomy are an important way to assist teachers' experiences of social support and adaptability. Recent studies found that when teachers perceive their school leaders to be more autonomy-supportive, they report greater workplace buoyancy, meaning the capacity to effectively navigate common challenges at work; this is particularly important in navigating the challenges brought on by COVID-19¹⁹.

Conclusions

The pandemic has forced all European VET institutions to function in ways that were not always foreseen, planned or expected. Thus, they have been called to organise quickly digital or distance education and training schemes, while at the same time they had to mobilise teachers, trainers and of course students in order to safeguard the continuation of the learning processes. It is true that the extraordinary experience of this pandemic has placed a lot of stress not only on the health system but also on the educational system itself, thus, forcing it to put forward on-the-spot solutions that often took both teachers and learners outside of their comfort zone.

The crisis and the response with the school closures seem to have worked as a catalyst for the digitisation of schools and the transition to distance learning. The novel and innovative distance learning procedures that ensure "learning and training anywhere, anytime" are, for many, new and quite distant compared to the traditional and widely adopted VET learning practices that are developed based on the physical presence of the learner, in a specific VET establishment, during specific hours and days.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, VET institutions, both public and private, had to address issues that were previously intractable. But as these responses had to come overnight, they were not always fitting the purpose. The necessary - and not always available - equipment had to be found while new online tools, curricula and online resources had to be developed and provided for use to the trainers.

¹⁸ Insights from online meeting of Directors General for Vocational Education and Training: *Paving the way for a better future VET – Towards 2030* which was held on 26 May 2020.

¹⁹ Collie R.J., Bostwick K.C. & Martin A.J. (2019). Perceived autonomy support, relatedness with students, and workplace outcomes: an investigation of differences by teacher gender. *Educational Psychology. An International Journal of Experimental Educational Psychology*, 40 (3), 253-272.



However, even if the digital devices are available to VET teachers and trainers, there are still domains in which they cannot apply their use effectively in an online learning environment.

Besides the issue of accessibility, the issue of quality is of equal importance. VET trainers, like many teachers, need now more than ever to further develop their technical and pedagogical skills in the distance and e-learning environments. They need to be supported though with the necessary resources and further professional training to increase the efficiency of the provision of the online classes and the e-learning experience overall.

During this COVID-19 time, the role of teachers and trainers, and of the cooperation at school-company level, became even more critical in ensuring training continuity. The question that will need to be answered soon, while many European countries return to “normality”, is on whether the changes introduced during the COVID-19 era are here to stay or not. Will this return to “new normal” also suggest a return to the traditional way of formal learning? Or are we entering a new era where distance and digital supported learning will be equally recognised and accepted as the traditional format?

In many countries, school closures seem to have worked as a catalyst for the digitisation of the schools and the educational sector in general, including the administrative procedures. This crisis evidences that digital learning formats do have their limits and thus cannot replace or bring the same social benefits as the physical space of schools and workplaces.

Countries now have an opportunity to use the most effective crisis-recovery strategies as the basis for long-term improvements in areas like assessment, pedagogy, technology, financing and parental involvement. Good quality standards for online learning in compliance with data protection and clear ownership of the data generated by the online platforms are essential. This crisis can provide an opportunity to focus on efforts to maintain and build a highly qualified workforce of VET teachers and trainers. Some governments see an opportunity to grant educators more autonomy, promote public-private partnerships and teach them not only the necessary technical and pedagogical skills to integrate digital devices in instruction, but also soft skills, such as flexibility, adaptability, social empathy and responsibility.

Finally, the current crisis has shown once again that learners coming from disadvantaged groups are less likely to be involved in the distance learning procedures and thus an increased number of dropouts should be expected. Again, the most vulnerable have additional risks of being further affected by this crisis. Further research should keep the inquiry on the responses of the VET sector to the COVID-19 crisis open. In the coming period, and as the countries will make an effort to return to normality, it will be possible to evaluate how school closures as part of the governments’ responses to COVID-19 have impacted on learners at risk and on increasing early leaving rates, and how VET teachers and trainers responded to this challenge.

Cedefop’s team *VET for lifelong learning* will continue collecting, analysing and further disseminating the experiences collected from its ambassadors’ network, aiming to help prevent this health crisis from becoming a learning crisis for the least advantaged students in VET.



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