

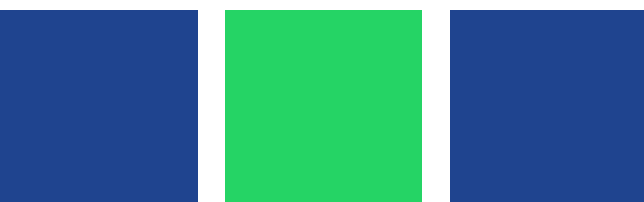
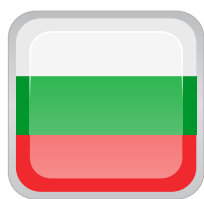
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# IMPLEMENTING EUROPEAN PRIORITIES IN VET

Making national VET agile,  
flexible, innovative, attractive,  
inclusive and quality assured

## BULGARIA

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# **Implementing European priorities in VET**

Making national VET agile, flexible, innovative, attractive,  
inclusive and quality-assured:  
Bulgaria

[Thematic perspectives](#) provide national overviews of specific themes in a common format and offer comparative dimension across the EU Member States, Iceland and Norway.

This thematic perspectives series complements the general information on vocational education and training (VET) policies and systems provided in [VET in Europe database](#) and the [Timeline of VET policies in Europe](#). The themes presented in the series feature high on the European agenda.

This thematic perspective was prepared based on data/information from 2023.

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[ReferNet](#) is a network of institutions across Europe representing the 27 Member States, plus Iceland and Norway. The network provides Cedefop with information and analysis on national vocational education and training (VET). ReferNet also disseminates information on European VET and Cedefop's work to stakeholders in the EU Member States, Iceland and Norway.

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## CHAPTER 1. Introduction

Bulgaria's national implementation plan was developed in accordance with the Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (herein after the [VET Recommendation](#)) and the [Osnabruck Declaration](#), taking into consideration the main national priorities, outlined in the [Strategic framework for the development of education, training and learning in the Republic of Bulgaria \(2021–30\)](#) and Education 2021 – 27 a programme, co-financed by the European Social Fund+ (ESF+). One of the main projects contained in this programme is the Modernisation of vocational education and training (hereinafter the Modernisation of VET) project.

The VET system faces challenges, including low student retention rates and citizens' preference for general secondary education. Individual differences in progress and achievement are evident, particularly for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Collecting and using appropriate data for evidence-based policies is essential to address vulnerabilities. Improvement in the integration of labour market information and streamlining of the curriculum development process is needed.

VET remains predominantly school-based, with limited enterprise involvement, and the aging teaching workforce poses further challenges exacerbated by the low appeal of the profession to young professionals. Additionally, public spending on education including VET in Bulgaria is still relatively low compared to other EU countries.

## CHAPTER 2. Main policy developments in 2023

### 2.1 Agile and resilient VET, adaptive to labour market needs

In 2023, the project Modernisation of VET was launched as part of the Education 2021-27 (a programme, co-financed by the European Social Fund+ (ESF+)). The project is crucial for further VET developments and aims to adapt VET to the evolving labour market needs. It relies on active collaboration between schools, businesses, universities and other stakeholders to ensure that the VET system remains responsive to industry needs. By the end of 2023, 20 sector skills councils (SSC), and not 10 as initially planned, have been established covering all sectors, showcasing the readiness of all stakeholders to participate in the VET reform.

Another important and strategic project announced in the Bulgarian NIP (Government of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2022) namely the OECD skills strategy project was completed in 2023. It was launched with senior representatives from the Ministry of Education and Science (MES), the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), the Ministry of Innovation and Growth (MIG), the Ministry of Economy and Industry (MEI), the Ministry of Finance, the Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association (BICA), the Bulgarian Industrial Association (BIA), the Union for Private Economic Enterprise, and the Education Bulgaria 2030 Association (non-governmental organisation). The project report was published in 2023 and highlighted the need for a comprehensive, labour market-oriented skills policy to make VET more agile,

resilient and adaptive to labour market needs and to address megatrends like demographic change, digitalisation, and globalisation (OECD, 2023).

With the adoption of a [National employment action plan](#) for 2023 (aimed at reducing unemployment levels among disadvantaged groups, increasing labour supply, and enhancing workforce quality) (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2023), a limited concept for individual learning accounts (ILAs) as a new tool for nationwide financing of adult training courses was initiated. ILAs with their flexible funding mechanisms, enable continuous skill development and upskilling, ensuring that the workforce adapts to changing labour market needs. Various targeted approaches, including the allocation of funds under [National employment action plans](#) for 2022 and 2023 which had to do with the involvement of Roma and youth mediators, case management, and employment mediators <sup>(1)</sup>, were implemented to motivate and support inactive persons, especially young people. These initiatives enhance the adaptability of VET in addressing specific needs and barriers faced by disadvantaged groups.

The [Employment Agency published results from a survey of employers' labour market needs](#), focusing on short-term and long-term demands. [A total of 4 252 employers were interviewed](#) on their short-term needs (i.e. for the following 12 months) of workforce with certain qualification(s), as well as information on the sought-after specialists with secondary and higher education in the next 3-5 years (Employment Agency, 2023).

A [Strategic vision for the development of dual vocational education and training \(DVET\) until 2030](#) was elaborated (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023b), focusing on the integration of [DVET into the education system, incentives for employers, social and regional reach, and institutional strengthening](#). Funding of BGN 86.7 million (EUR 44.3 million) under the programme Education 2021-27, was allocated to enhance the dual VET system, supporting additional vocational training, teacher and mentor training, internships, and adult literacy. In the academic year 2022-23, DVET was conducted in 182 educational institutions, including vocational high schools, profiled high schools, and secondary schools, with 11 609 students enrolled in DVET programmes.

## 2.2 Flexible VET, providing progression and lifelong learning opportunities

In 2023, in terms of flexibility in VET, [Proposals for changes to the vocational education and training Act \(VETA\)](#) reached their final phase, were agreed on by stakeholders, and are waiting

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<sup>(1)</sup>Youth mediators act as mediators between young people (up to 29 years old) and the various institutions that provide social, health, education and other public services. For this purpose, they work together with other experts to offer a package of services that maximally satisfy the individual needs of the respective unemployed person, plan and coordinate the process of their provision.

Youth mediators perform their activities under the National programme Activation of inactive persons which enables the recruitment of young people with higher education (up to 35 years old) to work with young people, as the same age group predisposes that they have common language and similar interests. At the same time, Youth mediators work in municipal administrations and thus have information on establishing contact with inactive youth, on organising informal events, etc. In addition, Youth mediators work closely with the local Labour Office Directorates, where a variety of employment services are offered, and with local non-governmental organizations working with youth.

The Roma mediators at the Labour Office directorates are registered unemployed persons, self-determined as Roma and having completed at least secondary education. Selected candidates under the Activation of inactive persons programme are appointed as labour mediators and are called Roma mediators for the purposes of the Programme.

to be adopted officially. Accumulation and transfer of units of learning outcomes in vocational education and training has been introduced as an alternative to [ECVET](#).

Expanding options for employers and distance learning for learners above 16 years old were introduced with the [amendments of the VET Act](#). If there are geographical or any other kind of limitation, distance learning could be organised in an electronic environment in theoretical vocational training. The legislative changes also optimised the activities of the vocational education and training centres and the operations of the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET) as a public body with monitoring functions. VET centres are no longer required when apply for license to submit documents such as copies of diplomas and other qualification evidence for teaching staff, provided these documents are in other registers.

In line with the [OECD skills strategy](#), Bulgaria embraces the goal of developing a highly qualified teaching workforce and increasing the flexibility of adult education (OECD, 2023). The new, draft [vocational education and training Act \(VETA\)](#) contains changes that improve the validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside formal education, emphasising on the publication of information on validation procedures.

In 2023, Bulgaria explored the introduction of individual learning accounts and [micro-credentials](#) (as mentioned in the Education 2021-27 programme and also in an unpublished concept note from one of the employer's organisations). Stakeholder discussions were also launched on the issue of microcredentials as a way to address low adult participation in lifelong learning. The introduction of pilot models is part of these discussions as potential testing funded through the operational programme for human resources development.

Various initiatives include [the participation of experts in seminars organised by the Human Resources Development Centre](#) (the National Agency for the Management of Erasmus+ Programme), methodological support for organisations and enterprises in the field of vocational education and training. In the focus of the initiatives are possibilities for improving the flexibility of VET, as well as promoting opportunities for developing vocational qualifications for students and adult learners and funding options.

## 2.3 Innovative and excellent VET

The focus on innovative and excellent vocational education and training in Bulgaria is evident from the findings and recommendations of the OECD skills strategy, providing public bodies with international perspective on skills performance and supporting strategic planning. The report highlights the need to increase the quality and relevance of education and training in line with the overarching goal of achieving excellence.

There are many measures identified include improving the skills of the teaching workforce to promote innovation in the VET sector. More precisely, in 2022, Bulgaria adopted the [Motivated teachers and qualifications](#) national programme, aligned with the [Strategic framework for the development of education, training and learning in the Republic of Bulgaria \(2021–30\)](#). The initiative aims to enhance the quality and effectiveness of education by [improving the civic competencies of learners across all educational levels](#). The implementation of the Modernisation of VET project and of the programme Education 2021-27 outlines the

main expectations for the coming years. This includes integrating VET into economic, industrial and innovation strategies, expanding training offers to promote the acquisition of entrepreneurial, digital and environmental skills.

In addition, in all 28 regions in Bulgaria, a total of 28 centres of vocational excellence (CoVEs) were established by the education ministry on 20 January 2023 with the aim to benefit from the support from the European Social Fund+ (ESF+) under the Education 2021-27 programme. The Modernisation of VET project as part of the Education 2021-27 programme envisages that the CoVEs will provide modern and innovative education and training for professions and skills needed in the local/regional labour market and offer opportunities for a shift transition period from school to work. They are expected to act as catalysts for local business investment, supporting recovery, green and digital transitions and providing innovative services such as business incubators and reskilling options.

The [State educational standards have been comprehensively updated](#) as a tool with an emphasis on competences related to environmental protection and information technology (with reference to GreenComp and DigiComp).

## 2.4 Attractive VET, based on modern and digitalised provision

Developments related to the provision of attractive VET in Bulgaria are limited, as indicated by the [OECD skills strategy project](#). The specific findings and recommendations from an international perspective, coordinated with the stakeholders at national level, highlight the need for flexible and accessible education and training, in line with the goal of creating an attractive VET system (OECD, 2023).

The [Development of a digital skills initiative](#) is one of the developments towards digitalised VET provision. In 2022, a total of 99 unified sectoral qualification frameworks for digital skills and 15 tools for testing the digital skills of employees were developed. Also in 2022, 240 sectoral curricula/study programmes were developed with emphasis on the digital skills needed for each respective economic activity.

Key to developing attractive VET, based on modern and digitalised provision is the adoption of a [National employment action plan for 2023 aimed at reducing unemployment levels among vulnerable groups, increasing labour supply, and enhancing workforce quality](#) (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2023). Priorities included in the plan are related to promoting economic activity, especially among youth and disadvantaged groups, and focusing on acquiring digital skills. E-voucher training was launched, starting with digital skills training courses, under the Human resources development 2021-27 programme, co-financed by the European Social Fund+ (ESF+). Employed, unemployed, and inactive persons have the right to digital skills training. Digital skills training courses can be implemented online or in-person. Opportunities are provided also to directly sit for an exam and obtain a certificate for digital skills acquired through informal and/or non-formal learning. Testing and certification of digital skills are carried out online by the Unified Certification Centre for Digital Competences under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy).

In 2023, a [mentor-training programme in DVET](#) started operating on a regular basis. [The Strategic vision for the development of dual VET in Bulgaria until 2030](#) outlines measures

that include the training of mentors and increasing the financial incentives for companies (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023b). These measures aim to strengthen the capacity of local partners, especially in low-developed regions, to effectively implement dual VET. Despite the limited activities in this direction, the focus remains on increasing the attractiveness and responsiveness of the VET system.

A [national programme](#) was developed in line with educational innovation and digital transformation priorities, aiming to increase the number of students acquiring vocational qualifications in the field of ‘computer science’.

[Various competitions, including the 26<sup>th</sup> Fest of training firms and 25 VET competitions](#), took place, engaging VET and university students in different categories under the domains young entrepreneur and STEM.

## 2.5 Inclusive VET promoting equal opportunities

Through the terms of the [Employment Promotion Act](#), the conditions for the inclusion of persons in training programmes for the lowest degree of professional qualification(s) have been changed in 2022. The regulatory adjustments aimed to improve employability and labour market integration, especially for unemployed persons belonging to disadvantaged groups. With the Employment Promotion Act, the list of activities that are eligible for funding under [active employment policies](#) and for validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences has been expanded. In 2022, these changes allowed an increase of the number of people -belonging in disadvantaged groups- that benefited from participation in the VET system.

[Procedures for validating knowledge, skills, and competences](#) acquired informally continue to be implemented, leading to the acquisition of a document for qualifications at levels 2 to 5 of the EQF.

## 2.6 VET underpinned by quality assurance

In 2023, after a series of consultations in a wide public format and expert meetings across institutions, the [Draft Law on amending and supplementing the VET Act](#), was agreed, submitted, and approved and it is in the process to be published in [the State Gazette](#). The new text predominantly addresses areas identified for improvement in 2022 and is aligned with the objectives of the Modernisation of VET project, implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science and NAVET. The key focus is on enhancing quality assurance in VET provision and aims to promote a culture of quality assurance among all VET stakeholders. A clear definition of VET quality assurance is given, which includes all stages in the context of EQAVET – planning, implementation of activities, assessment and follow-up activities. The possibilities for validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences are specified by regulating that the process of validation includes at least one unit of learning outcomes.

Additionally, since 2017, all Centres for Vocational Training (CVTs) and Centres for Information and Vocational Guidance (CIVGs) have been submitting [annual self-assessment](#)

reports to the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET), using criteria that are regularly updated.

## CHAPTER 3. Involvement of VET stakeholders in the implementation of policy developments related to NIP

In 2018, the Ministry of Education and Science established a national [Consultative council for VET](#) with representation from all major stakeholders in the field of VET (ministries, agencies, organisations of employers and trade unions, branch structures, civil society representatives and other). The Council aims to support the minister of education and science in developing and reforming IVET in Bulgaria, including the ‘evolution’ of DVET. The [Council](#) guarantees the inclusion of all main stakeholders in the implementation of policy developments related to the Bulgarian NIP. In 2023, the Council took part in the following key developments aiming to reform the Bulgarian VET system: the [Draft Law on amending and supplementing the VET Act](#), the [Strategic vision for the development of DVET in Bulgaria until 2030](#) (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023b) which provides for changes of the regulatory framework for DVET, and the large-scale strategic project Modernisation of VET.

The newly formed 20 sectoral skills councils (SSC) representing all economic sectors (under the Modernisation of VET project) signify an important step towards establishing strong partnerships and ensure a continuous dialogue between the different stakeholders. They operate in terms of systematising information on the main skills and needs in the respective sectors, modernising qualifications, and developing training programmes, national examination programmes and State Educational Standards in a new format.

The [development of the dual VET\(DVET\)](#) and the consequent strategic vision until 2023 also implies a stronger involvement of educational institutions, regional educational structures, learners and companies and is therefore compatible with making VET agile and resilient. The development is co-financed by the ESF+ programme Education 2021-27.

## CHAPTER 4. Achievements of implementation

From 2020 to 2023, Bulgaria has demonstrated significant work and commitment to development of the VET system, aligning with key EU priorities. Progress focused on agility and resilience in VET, flexibility and lifelong learning opportunities, and creating an attractive VET system with modern and digitalised provisions.

Efforts to modernise VET standards and [curricula](#) through the years were evident. [Initiatives](#) have been undertaken to ensure the alignment of VET provision with the labour market needs. The national programme Education 2021-27 co-financed by ESF+ plays a crucial role in the enhancement of VET relevance with the labour market.

[Flexibility and lifelong learning opportunities](#) were prioritised with the amendments to the Employment Promotion Act in 2022, allowing individuals without formal education to engage in VET training courses for lower EQF levels. This legislative shift aims to enhance literacy

competence and create pathways for the inclusion of disadvantaged individuals in the labour market.

The [Development of digital skills initiative](#) aimed at improving digital competencies in the workforce, aligned with the DigiComp framework.

Bulgaria has worked towards making VET an attractive choice through various initiatives. The [training programme for mentors in the dual training system](#), launched in 2020 focused on improving pedagogical and methodological skills of company mentors. [State standards for the teaching qualification](#) have been adopted, with increased learning hours and new training modules via the national programme Motivated teachers and qualifications which was launched in 2022 including 4 modules aiming to enhance civic and in general key competences of pedagogical staff. [Competitions for STEM and language competences](#) have seen a notable increase, increasing the attractiveness of VET.

Inclusive measures supported promoting equal opportunities in VET, with the most important of them being the legislative changes supporting the validation of prior learning. [2022 Amendments to the Employment Promotion Act](#) have further enhanced conditions for individuals over 16 years-old without formal education, aiming at increasing the employability and labour market integration for disadvantaged groups.

While there have not been significant developments in quality assurance in VET system, there are expectations for future progress under the Modernisation of VET project.

## CHAPTER 5. Challenges of implementation

The two areas, in which the most limited progress is registered are Innovative and excellent VET and VET underpinned by quality assurance.

Fostering innovation and excellence in VET in Bulgaria comes with its own set of challenges. outdated curricula, combined with the issue with finding skilled VET teachers affects the quality of the training provision. Also, the lack of engagement of the industry in the VET system leads to mismatch between skills and labour market needs. Minorities, disadvantaged groups and those in rural areas experience difficulties in access to high-quality VET programmes (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, 2022). Many VET providers reported that they don't possess efficient resources that would allow for the integration of digital technologies and green skills into VET curricula.

Implementing VET underpinned by quality assurance in Bulgaria also faces several challenges. The level of understanding the quality assurance concept and the development of 'quality culture' in secondary VET providers is still limited. Lastly, there are limitations in the capacity and available resources for monitoring quality assurance in VET.

A comprehensive approach involving collaboration between public bodies, educational institutions, social partners, and other stakeholders is required to address these challenges (OECD, 2023). The implementation of the Modernisation of VET project as part of the programme Education 2021-27, co-financed by ESF+ is expected to cover the main stakeholder needs for the coming years. The establishment of the sector skills councils is a significant step in enhancing collaboration between the different stakeholders to identify the crucial skills and needs in the respective economic sectors.

The enrolments in DVET, although rising, still represent a challenge as they only make up 10% of the total VET enrolments.

## CHAPTER 6. Conclusions

While Bulgaria faces significant challenges in implementing agile, flexible, innovative, attractive, inclusive, and quality-assured VET programs, there have been notable advancements. Efforts to [modernise curriculum](#), [enhance teacher training](#), and [engage industry stakeholders](#) have laid the groundwork for more effective VET provision.

Addressing the challenges facing VET in Bulgaria requires a [multifaceted approach](#). Investing in infrastructure and resources, such as [modernising facilities and providing up-to-date equipment](#), can improve the quality of training. Strengthening partnerships between VET institutions and industry to ensure [relevance and alignment with labour market needs](#) is critical. Furthermore, enhancing the status and recognition of VET [through targeted awareness campaigns and promotional activities](#) can help attract more students and improve inclusivity. Looking ahead, in 2024-25 Bulgaria should continue its efforts to advance VET by implementing targeted initiatives and policies. By prioritising these measures and fostering a culture of continuous improvement and innovation, Bulgaria can make significant progress towards creating a more agile, flexible, innovative, attractive, inclusive, and quality-assured VET system that meets the evolving needs of learners, employers, and society as a whole.

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