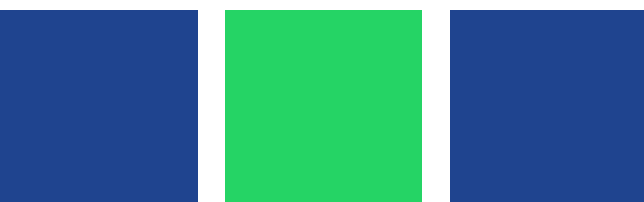

IMPLEMENTING EUROPEAN PRIORITIES IN VET

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

CROATIA



Implementing European priorities in VET

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

[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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CHAPTER 1. Introduction

The [National Implementation Plan \(NIP\) for Croatia](#) sets three main priorities for VET until 2027 focusing in relevance, quality and attractiveness. These priorities align with the National Development Strategy for Croatia until 2030, the National Education System Development Plan 2022-2027 and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2026. They also reflect the key objectives of the [Council Recommendation on VET](#) and the [Osnabrück Declaration](#).

NIP priorities address the key challenges affecting the relevance of VET in Croatia, such as the employability of VET graduates, skills mismatch and gaps, attributed to the outdated curricula and insufficient data on labour market indicators, specifically the employment outcomes of VET graduates. Insufficient training in the world of work also affects skills development due to low investment in infrastructure for work-based learning (WBL), inadequate support to trainers and an insufficient number of places for WBL at companies. Furthermore, the fragmented structure of the quality assurance (QA) system in IVET limits its effectiveness, while an inconsistent quality of CVET entails skills gaps and low participation in lifelong learning and employment. Moreover, limited effectiveness and availability of training result in skills obsolescence for both IVET and CVET teachers who lag behind the industry standards. Finally, low public opinion reduces VET attractiveness and enrollment in certain VET pathways, resulting in workforce shortages.

In response, NIP priority for strengthening the relevance of VET specifically addresses the agility, flexibility, and innovation in adapting to labour market challenges, in line with the Council Recommendation on VET and the Osnabrück Declaration. The related NIP objectives focus on curricula development in line with labour market needs, skills development for the green and digital transition, teacher training, and introducing EQF level 5 VET qualifications and micro-credentials in CVET. The autonomy of VET providers in tailoring VET provision to labour market and learner needs is strongly encouraged. Further objectives involve increasing the impact of regional centres of competence providing IVET and CVET, specifically on teacher training, WBL, digital and green transition, curricula development and networking at the international level. Improving WBL requires enhanced teaching methodology and resources for IVET trainers, as well as expanding the network of companies that offer WBL opportunities.

In terms of QA, the NIP proposes linking the national QA framework to EQAVET, developing national quality indicators, streamlining QA mechanisms and implementing provider-level graduate tracking. Further objectives involve introducing external evaluation in adult education (including CVET), teacher training based on the new model of in-service training and a model of hybrid teachers and trainers.

Finally, the common EU priorities concerning VET attractiveness and internationalization are reflected in the organisation of the national skills competitions, promotional campaigns and participation in WorldSkills and EuroSkills competitions. NIP measures also support the mobility of teachers and learners, an internationalisation strategy for VET and the further uptake of the EU transparency tools.

CHAPTER 2. Main policy developments in 2023

2.1 Agile and resilient VET, adaptive to labour market needs

The central initiative for strengthening the relevance of VET, the initial phase of the VET curricula reform, was completed in 2023. This involved modernizing VET curricula in line with labour market needs, resulting in the creation of 14 sector and 132 VET curricula, based on over 200 occupational standards and 142 qualification standards. The most comprehensive update of VET curricula in over two decades in Croatia began in 2018 with the adoption of the National Curriculum for VET and continued within the framework of the project Modernization of the VET System, supported by EUR 17.7 million from the European Social Fund (ESF).

The reform introduced two key innovations in curriculum development. First, it shifted from subject-based towards modular curricula based on qualification standards. In the first year of education, new curricula include common modules at the (sub)sector level, with opportunities for specialisation in the subsequent years. Secondly, the reform introduced the VET provider curriculum promoting autonomy, innovation and flexibility for VET providers. This allows for considerable customization through optional modules, considering the local context and individual learner needs. To support key competence development, 31 general education subject curricula, modules, and units of learning outcomes were developed for IVET qualifications at EQF levels 3 and 4.

Teaching and learning resources were also developed to facilitate the implementation of new curricula for VET providers, including 13 teacher's manuals and 2 525 other educational materials. Intensive training activities prepare VET teachers and directors for the forthcoming reform rollout. In 2023, ASOO organized 50 workshops and 41 regional conferences across the country, presenting the final versions of the curricula, the VET provider curriculum and the new modular concept. Notably, ASOO also organised [VET Teacher Days](#) in March 2023 attended by 430 VET teachers and nearly two-thirds of all IVET provider directors in Croatia. At the conference, VET providers welcomed the long-awaited updates to curricula. Discussions specifically addressed harmonising vocational and general education components within modules.

Regarding the labour market outcomes of VET, Croatia is piloting [graduate tracking](#) at the provider level based on indicators 5 and 6 of the EQAVET framework. The tracking survey specifically measures graduates' destinations, employment rate and skills match. So far, over 20 VET providers have participated in graduate tracking by testing and providing feedback for improving the methodological framework and tools. In 2023, the third piloting cycle was completed and an online-based application for data collection, processing, and reporting was developed to facilitate the process for VET providers in the forthcoming period. In 2023, ASOO discussed the tracking methodology and best practices with VET providers in training events, which generated considerable interest in joining the initiative.

2.2 Flexible VET, providing progression and lifelong learning opportunities

New outcome-based and modular curricula support the flexibility and effectiveness of teaching and learning. The modular structure presumes closer integration of the general and vocational components and an increased share of WBL to reinforce practical skills attainment for learners. The success of the reform, therefore, hinges upon enhancing collaboration in planning joint modules between teachers and trainers of the general education, vocational, and WBL parts of the curricula, both at schools and companies.

To encourage participation in lifelong learning, micro-credentials (“micro-qualifications” according to national terminology) and vouchers for upskilling and reskilling were introduced, based on the 2021 Adult Education Act. ASOO drafted the methodology for developing micro- and partial qualifications, awarded for the completion of professional development programmes (EQF 4), short training programmes (EQF 2, 3, and 4), and VET specialist development programmes (EQF 5), delivered by adult education providers in line with the Adult Education Act. The workload for partial qualifications is at least 10 CSVET ⁽¹⁾ and up to 9 CSVET credits for micro-qualifications; this is adjusted to the complexity of learning outcomes. Skills mismatch and gaps are major drivers of labour market imbalances in Croatia. In response, vouchers for the unemployed and employed were awarded for the second year in 2023. The availability of EU funding drives significant interest in upskilling and reskilling, bolstered by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2026, which allocated almost EUR 40 million to vouchers for green and digital upskilling up to 2026. There is a focus on vulnerable groups, who are supported through guidance, skills assessment, and active labour market policies (ALMP). The voucher scheme aims to engage 30 000 individuals in upskilling, including at least 12 000 long-term unemployed, inactive, and **NEETs**. Vouchers are exclusively awarded for adult education programmes (frequently micro-credentials) based on the [new occupational and qualification standards](#) and skills mapping, aligning the upskilling policy with labour market needs. Skills mapping contributed to the [Catalogue of digital and green skills](#), which has been integrated into the [voucher](#) application system. This catalogue includes 3 427 digital skills and 948 green skills linked to upskilling programmes that qualify for financing.

2.3 Innovative and excellent VET

The [e-Schools](#), a system-level initiative to improve digital infrastructure in all publicly financed schools at the pre-tertiary level (including VET), was finalized in 2023, supported by over EUR 170 million from the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF). The initiative upgraded digital infrastructure, supported teacher training, and produced digital teaching and learning resources, methodology, and research relevant to the digital transformation of education.

Envisaged as the centres of excellence in VET, 25 [regional centres of competence](#)

⁽¹⁾ In line with the Croatian Qualifications Framework Act, CSVET represents the Croatian credit system for VET. CSVET credits are awarded at EQF levels 2-5. Each credit corresponds to 15 to 25 hours of study work, duration of 60 minutes.

were appointed in 2018 for a period of 5 years and supported by EUR 260 million from the ESIF. In July 2023, the Ministry of Science and Education [reaffirmed the appointment of the regional centres of competence](#) for another 5 years in five priority (sub)sectors: tourism and hospitality, mechanical engineering, electrical engineering and ICT, agriculture, and healthcare, with the mission to ensure innovative and excellent teaching and learning, top-quality infrastructure and cooperation with companies in WBL. These centres cater to IVET and CVET learners, provide training for teachers and trainers, and serve the employed, the unemployed, and learners with disabilities. The funded projects were carried out in partnership with other VET providers in Croatia, amplifying the impact of investment. This funding supported the purchase of equipment and the (re)construction of facilities, accommodation units and authentic work environments for WBL. Additionally, the investments supported teacher training, quality assurance, guidance, curriculum development, WBL, international cooperation and mobility, as well as support for learners with disabilities.

2.4 Attractive VET, based on modern and digitalised provision

The flagship initiative for promoting the attractiveness of VET involves the [WorldSkills Croatia competitions](#), organized for the fourth time in 2023 to mark the [European Year of Skills](#). As the largest skills showcase in the country, the event involved over 400 VET teachers and trainers, 405 IVET competitors and 46 skills competitions. Two-thirds of all IVET providers in Croatia participated in the competition, with 28 schools hosting skills competitions. Try-your-skill and guidance activities allowed visitors to explore the diversity of VET pathways, including traditional VET occupations such as patisserie and high-tech competitions such as robotics. A nationwide campaign to promote VET accompanied the competition. As a result, more than 5 000 people attended the event, including 1 100 primary school pupils from across the country.

The competitions also serve as an effective platform for engaging stakeholders and strengthening partnerships in VET, specifically between VET schools and companies, by encouraging investment in skills training and the companies' accountability for learning outcomes in VET. In 2023, over 40 companies supported the event through in-kind donations and hosting skills competitions, contributing to sustainability.

Inspired by EuroSkills and WorldSkills experiences, in 2018-19, the national model of competitions was restructured to enhance relevance, transparency, assessment, company involvement, guidance, graduate employability, and the overall visibility of VET skills and occupations. The streamlined competition framework promotes practical skills by integrating employer input on the latest industry standards in the technical descriptions of tasks. Finally, the country regularly participates in WorldSkills and EuroSkills competitions: in the EuroSkills Gdansk competition in 2023, the Croatian team won a bronze medal in fashion design and technology and a medal of excellence in hotel reception.

Expanding VET programmes beyond EQF level 4 for the first time, the [National curriculum for VET](#) introduced EQF level 5 qualifications in 2018; 84 EQF level 5 qualifications have since been developed within the VET reform initiative. Adult education (CVET) providers offer VET specialist development programmes (EQF 5) at the post-secondary level in the form of micro-credentials, partial and full qualifications, awarding CVET specialist development and training

certificates. Typically, programmes leading to full qualifications last 1-2 years. This specialization pathway is labour-market-oriented, with a recommended WBL share of at least 50% in schools or companies. Entry requirements involve the completion of VET programmes at the upper-secondary level (EQF 4).

Finally, regarding teacher training, ASOO delivers continuing professional development based on the new [CPD framework for VET teachers](#), which was redesigned in 2019 to better address training needs. The topics covered include teaching pedagogy, learner assessment, digital teaching and learning resources, cybersecurity, project management in education, service learning, and new curricula, among others.

2.5 Inclusive VET promoting equal opportunities

The VET curricula reform addressed the aspect of inclusion and promoting equal opportunities. The new methodology for curricula development outlined the progression pathways and assessment of learners with special needs. All curricula for qualifications at EQF level 4 suggest adjustments to assessment for learners with special needs, involving the assessment tasks, criteria, and recommendations for teachers. Moreover, 11 new curricula for assisting occupations were developed at EQF level 3, tailored to learners with disabilities. Finally, ASOO continuously organizes CPD to support teaching disadvantaged learners: over 400 teachers benefited from such training in 2023.

2.6 VET underpinned by quality assurance

Foreseen by the [2021 Adult Education Act](#), the development of a comprehensive model of QA in adult education, encompassing CVET, was finalised in 2023, including the methodology and tools for self-assessment and external evaluation of adult education providers and learning outcomes. Guidelines and protocols for external evaluation were also published in 2023, alongside a manual for internal QA and external evaluation. Workshops were organised to support providers with new QA procedures. E-tools were upgraded for the external evaluation of learning outcomes. From 2020 to 2023, the initiative was supported by EUR 2.4 million from the ESF. Self-assessment of adult education providers started in 2021, involving 25 providers in piloting. External evaluation of VET providers followed in 2023, upon the adoption of a regulation ⁽²⁾ specifying external evaluation procedures. Based on the self-assessment and external evaluation, providers received insight into their strengths and weaknesses, supporting plans for quality improvements.

In 2022-23, Croatia joined the second cycle of the [Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competences \(PIAAC\)](#) for the first time, completing all the activities linked to the main survey implementation in 2023.

In terms of linking the national QA mechanisms to the EQAVET framework, the country received a [peer review report](#) with recommendations for the QA model in IVET, based on a system-level peer review from December 2022. Following the 2020 Council Recommendation on VET and the EQAVET methodology, the peer review focused on the effectiveness of the

⁽²⁾ Regulation on the procedure of external evaluation of adult education providers and units of learning outcomes and the operation and appointment of the complaints committee on external evaluation reports.

self-assessment model, support for VET providers, and integrating self-assessment with external evaluation. The peer review highlighted advantages such as VET providers' capacity for self-assessment and the available tools. The main conclusion was that complementing self-assessment with external evaluation would enhance the overall effectiveness of QA.

Within the framework of the EQAVET national reference point (NRP), a mapping of quality indicators in VET was also finalized in 2023 as the initial step towards defining national quality indicators linked to EQAVET. The mapping exercise relied on provider input and the analysis of the self-assessment model, resulting in key performance indicators benchmarked to EQAVET indicators. The EQAVET NRP also produced guidelines for internal QA of VET providers with best practices based on provider input. The concept was presented at the 2nd national QA conference in VET in May 2023 which gathered one-third of all IVET providers in Croatia.

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

The overall responsibility for VET lies with the Ministry of Science and Education which develops the strategic and regulatory framework and adopts curricula. The ministry also appoints the regional centres of competence. ASOO is responsible for developing VET curricula, CPD of VET teachers, skills competitions and QA. Since 2018, ASOO has run several system-level initiatives developing a new model of CPD for VET teachers, skills competitions, VET curricula and QA in adult education. ASOO performs the role of the EQAVET NRP, developing new QA mechanisms. The ministry in charge of labour governs the voucher scheme at the policy level, while the Croatian Employment Service awards vouchers to end-users. Furthermore, the ministry in charge of labour develops, adopts and provides skills intelligence for the development of occupational standards. The Croatian Academic and Research Network (CARNET) coordinated the e-Schools programme, managing investments in infrastructure and digital resources. As e-Schools partner, ASOO was specifically responsible for related teacher training in VET.

Both the Ministry of Science and Education and ASOO coordinate stakeholders in VET at the national and regional levels. In fact, effective stakeholder coordination was key to the success of system-level initiatives such as the curricula reform, which fostered a bottom-up approach, mobilizing a wide network of stakeholders. In total, 195 working groups with 805 participants contributed to the development of occupational and qualification standards and curricula. Working groups members represented VET teachers, school directors and labour stakeholders. Namely, the occupational standards survey was conducted with over 660 employers and 740 employees from 900 business entities.

In the forthcoming period, stakeholder coordination in the development of occupational and qualification standards needs to be enhanced from both methodological and operational perspectives. Stronger involvement of employers in skills intelligence, occupational standards development and WBL provision is important to improve the relevance of practical skills development. Moreover, VET provider endorsement of the reform is pivotal to achieving the

intended impact on teaching and learning. Finally, the regional centres of competence are expected to step up efforts to build strong partnerships and become knowledge hubs in their respective regions and sectors.

CHAPTER 4. Achievements of implementation

Croatia has made notable progress in strengthening VET relevance, particularly through system-level initiatives such as the curricula reform. The regional centres of competence are another cornerstone of VET excellence. In terms of QA, Croatia introduced provider-level graduate tracking in IVET and self-assessment and external evaluation in adult education.

Restructuring the skills competitions based on the WorldSkills and EuroSkills approach contributed to raising VET attractiveness. The e-Schools made system-level upgrades to digital infrastructure and teaching resources. EU funding drove large-scale initiatives such as curricula reform, e-Schools, regional centres of competence, QA and skills competitions.

Legislative changes were prerequisites to launch the reform initiatives, as well as determined commitment at the policymaking level and the endorsement from key stakeholders. Specifically, the bottom-up approach of the curricula reform ensured relevance based on stakeholder input and generated support for the reform from the target groups. Targeted promotion also fostered strong public support for the reform.

CHAPTER 5. Challenges of implementation

Given the scope and ambition of the VET curricula reform, VET provider engagement is critical for its successful rollout in the forthcoming period. Most teachers are currently unfamiliar with the content of the new curricula and the modular approach to teaching and learning, thus requiring intensive teacher training to support effective implementation of the curricula. Despite the expanded autonomy introduced by the VET provider curriculum, VET providers demonstrate an uneven agility in responding to the needs of learners and the labour market and need further encouragement to take ambitious interventions in tailoring programmes. Skills development for the green and digital transition remains an area that has been lagging behind economic developments and needs continued support.

The pool of companies offering WBL is restricted, and trainers in the world of work have inadequate teaching competences and resources, which affects the availability and quality of WBL.

Furthermore, QA mechanisms are uncoordinated in IVET, and national quality indicators are not defined, limiting the impact of QA on improving VET provision and learning outcomes. Adult education providers have little practical experience with the new QA procedures and need continued support from the system level. Graduate tracking currently involves only a small number of IVET providers, and mainstreaming the initiative to encompass all IVET providers calls for commitment at the system level.

A model of hybrid teachers and trainers and an internationalization strategy for VET, as well as further exploitation of European transparency tools, have not been defined to date, reducing the potential impact of the existing internationalization mechanisms, such as the mobility of teachers and learners.

CHAPTER 6. Conclusions

The outcomes of the VET curricula reform, regional centres of competence, QA arrangements in adult education and restructured skills competitions made the strongest contribution towards achieving the common EU objectives. The prerequisites for introducing curricula to VET providers involve public consultation and adoption by the Ministry. A funding proposal was approved in early 2024, with EUR 17 million from the ESF+ allocated for an intensive preparatory cycle of the reform rollout, to end by 2029. Alongside teacher training, the standards and curricula will undergo revision in line with the Croatian Qualifications Framework Act, which requires revisions to standards in 5-year cycles to ensure the relevance of qualifications. To reach the intended impact by 2029, regional centres of competence will also receive funding for teacher training, cooperation with local companies and VET schools in their sectors, WBL, green and digital transition and networking with the European platform of centres of excellence in VET. Finally, the WorldSkills Croatia competitions will continue to promote VET attractiveness, supported by EUR 13.5 million from the ESF+.

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