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The report was drafted by [Ines Sancha](#), Cedefop expert, under the guidance of VET policies and systems team coordinator [George Kostakis](#).

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1. Introduction

This VET policy brief produced by Cedefop presents a snapshot of vocational education and training policy developments in Portugal between 2020 and the beginning of 2023. It presents the context and the challenges the country faces, a selection of the latest VET-related statistics, as well as the national priorities until 2025 identified in Portugal's national implementation plan. This VET policy brief provides information from Cedefop monitoring and analysis on the implementation of the [Council Recommendation on VET](#) and [Osnabrück Declaration](#). It offers stakeholders a regular source of information on VET policy developments that could be used for future policy making.

2. National VET context and challenges

2.1 National VET context

The central government has overall responsibility for VET. The education ministry is responsible for school-based programmes, the higher education ministry for tertiary education, and the labour ministry for apprenticeship programmes, continuing vocational training and the implementation of active labour market measures (Cedefop; ReferNet Portugal, 2022).

The Portuguese VET system is based on the 1986 Basic Law of the Education System. This underwent a major reform in 2007, reorganising VET into a single system (*Sistema Nacional de Qualificações, SNQ*). The legal framework regulating the modalities of VET for young people and adults was revised in several respects between 2017 and 2022, with the aim of attracting more young people to secondary education through a modernised, inclusive and high-quality offer. The underlying ambition of all these reforms was to contribute to the universality of secondary education as the minimum qualification of the population.

The Portuguese VET system offers a wide range of programmes accessible to young people and adults, based on the link between VET provision and labour market needs. Its flexibility in the type and duration of courses for adults, between different VET programmes and between general education and VET programmes, is one of its main features, together with the double certification (educational and professional) that all VET programmes grant. The VET system also attaches great importance to the process of recognition, validation and certification of competences (RVCC) as a way of accessing qualifications (Cedefop, 2021).

Social partners are active in VET and participate in advisory and social coordination bodies (tripartite composition). They have a seat on administrations, general councils and monitoring committees of the official bodies responsible for implementing, monitoring and funding VET (Cedefop, 2021).

2.2 Challenges

The main challenges that Portugal has faced during 2020-23 include the low level of qualification of the population, new skills demands created by the green and digital transitions, and the new dynamics emerging after the COVID-19 pandemic and Industry 4.0.

Portugal traditionally has a lower level of education than the EU average (Cedefop; ReferNet Portugal, 2022), resulting in a significant skills deficit. In 2022 31.7% of the population aged 25 to 64 had intermediate qualifications (ISCED 3-4), compared to 44.9% in the EU-27; 39.6% of the Portuguese active population had low levels of qualification (ISCED 0-2), compared to 24.9% at European level. In the [European Skills Index](#), Portugal ranked 24th in 2022.

The green transition is creating new job opportunities that demand new skills and competences, even for existing professions. This is leading to an increased need for upskilling and reskilling programmes. The low skill levels of the population and the low participation of adults in lifelong learning (33.4%) compared to the EU target of 47% are limiting Portugal's ability to respond to the opportunities offered by the green transition.

Portugal faces significant digital challenges, particularly in developing basic and advanced digital skills, crucial for ensuring equal access to quality education and training, as well as for increasing the competitiveness of enterprises. This is particularly relevant in Portugal, where the economy is characterised by micro-enterprises concentrated in traditional sectors.

The emergence of a new industrial era has increased the challenge of raising the skills level of the population. This is because it affects mainly routine and less creative jobs, generally associated with low skills. It is estimated that 700 000 workers will need to change jobs or acquire new skills by 2030 (Nova SBE; CIP, 2019).

3. National VET policy priorities

The Portugal 2030 Strategy has been the national strategic reference framework since 2020. It sets the basis for the national recovery and resilience plan and the National implementation plan (NIP) the country prepared in response to the [2020 Council Recommendation on VET](#) and the [Osnabrück Declaration](#); both have a time frame until 2025. The following priorities from the NIP can be highlighted:

- a) raising the qualification levels of the population;
- b) increasing the quality, transparency, coherence and internationalisation of the VET system;
- c) making VET more flexible and responsive to labour market needs, focusing on ecological, climate and digital transitions;
- d) promoting equal opportunities and social inclusion.

4. Main policy developments and progress 2020-23

4.1 Raising the qualification levels of the population

Portugal has been putting in place several measures to reinforce the qualification levels of young people and adults. This is to improve their employability and promote further learning particularly at the higher level.

[Local Projects for the promotion of Level B1/B2/B3 qualifications](#) were launched in 2022 in collaboration with local and regional bodies. They aim to improve literacy and digital skills and encourage lifelong learning, because low-skilled adult participation and completion rates remained low despite the efforts made with the [Qualifica programme](#) since 2016. Projects are designed to provide training tailored to the needs of adults, motivate low-skilled adults to gain a qualification and support them through the process to optimise certification rates.

There were 316 *Qualifica* centres in 2022, with 156 584 enrolled learners. From those, 34 317 adults initiating a [recognition, validation and certification of competences process \(RVCC\)](#) and 15 600 certificates were issued (including partial). The RVCC process received new impetus in 2022 with the Qualifica Accelerator. This is a financial incentive to help adults in a RVCC process to achieve a complete qualification or upgrade their school or professional qualification. This measure now allows participants in RVCC processes to receive financial support; this was previously only available to those who were in training. The objective is to achieve 100 000 RVCC certifications between 2021 and 2025.

In 2022, the [training voucher](#) was introduced to help individuals obtain a qualification. This measure is intended to increase the demand for training, promote lifelong learning and make employers and employees jointly responsible for professional improvement; it also addresses unemployed people. Regardless of their work situation, each beneficiary can receive support for 2 years. The training is to be based on short-term training units provided by a certified training institution. In its first year, 2022, 18 300 employed people were covered.

In 2022, seventy-five higher education institutions participated in the [Adults impulse programme](#), launched in 2021. This programme aims to strengthen and diversify the participation of adults in upskilling and reskilling processes through training projects delivered by higher education institutions in partnership with other public or private bodies or employers. Such partnerships can take the form of 'schools', 'alliances' and/or 'programmes'. They offer opportunities for postgraduate training, short courses, micro-certificates and micro-credentials.

In 2021, new [apprenticeship programmes](#) called Aprendizagem and Aprendizagem + were launched with the aim of improving citizens' qualification levels and consolidating quality apprenticeships. These programmes are designed for young people and adults under the age of 30, and provide the opportunity to obtain a post-secondary non-higher education qualification up to NQF level 5. They also offer innovative features such as distance learning and a stronger emphasis on the role of companies.

The [Agreement for professional training and qualification](#), signed by the government and social partners in the same year, facilitated the creation of these apprenticeship programmes. This Agreement established regulations and governance for the vocational training system, particularly for continuing training, to meet the growing demand for skills.

[Professional programmes](#) (*cursos profissionais*) were put in place in 2022 as part of the measures to increase the participation of the population in initial and continuing training. These are IVET upper secondary education programmes targeting graduates of basic education aged between 15 and 18. They include NEETs and learners at risk of early leaving. They provide a practical programme linked to the labour market, allowing learners to continue their studies in post-secondary or higher education. 1700 groups began in the school year 2022/23.

4.2 VET system quality, transparency, and coherence

In 2021, Portugal embarked on a process of [modernising its vocational training centres](#) and facilities with the support of the Recovery and resilience fund. The aim is to improve the quality of existing training and make vocational training more attractive. At the same time, current and emerging needs in high technological intensity are to be met linked to the green and digital transitions or Industry 4.0. This has allowed the rehabilitation or creation of 6 781 training workshops in 47 vocational training centres in 2022.

In 2022, the Institute of Financial Management of Education (IGeFE) approved applications for the establishment of 104 [specialised technological centres](#). The target is to create 365 such centres between 2022 and 2025 to improve the technological infrastructure of vocational schools and institutions and to help align vocational courses with sectors showing strong economic growth. These centres will also contribute to the development of innovative qualifications and skills for industrial renewal and improve vertical articulation between different education and vocational training levels.

The National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education and Training, ANQEP, began a comprehensive update of the national qualifications to design a catalogue more focused on competences and [learning outcomes](#) in 2022. This work involves the development of diagnostic studies of competence and qualification needs, of sectoral scope, as well as the design of competence standards, training standards and assessment instruments. These support the professional recognition, validation and certification of competences. This work has started in 21 sectors, including energy and environment; informatics, electronics and telecommunications; culture and heritage; handicrafts and gold smithery; food industries; sea economy; and tourism and leisure.

4.3 VET flexible and responsive to labour market needs

The national digital competences initiative (*Portugal INCoDe.2030*) and the action plan for the digital transition set out the priorities and measures to be developed to tackle the digital transition, also reflected in the national and resilience plan.

Portugal's INCoDe.2030 initiative and action plan outline the priorities and measures to address the digital transition. Under this umbrella, the [UPskill - digital skills and jobs programme](#) offers unemployed secondary or higher education graduates intensive training (6 months of blended learning) in specific ICT fields, followed by 3 months of on-the-job training. The programme has already trained 2 000 individuals since its launch in 2020.

[More digital employment 2025](#) is a training scheme approved in 2022 to offer free digital training to workers, managers and directors of companies, entities of the social economy and trainers. The training scheme includes an initial and final diagnosis of digital skills with the support of the Portugal Digital Academy platform. It consists of four measures: for employees from enterprises in strategic sectors or from industries particularly affected by digital transformation processes (*Emprego Formação + Digital*); for managers and directors of companies, business associations and social economy entities (*Lider + Digital*); to provide financial support for training courses for those wishing to improve their skills and qualifications in the digital field (*Cheque Formação + Digital*); and to foster the training of trainers with specialised skills in digital technologies applied to the training context (*Formador + Digital*).

The [Programme Green Skills & Jobs](#), approved in 2022, offers short and medium-duration online and face-to-face training opportunities to unemployed individuals and employees of companies affected by the increase in energy costs. Courses focus on green hydrogen technologies and renewable energies such as solar thermal, photovoltaic and wind power. These courses align with the National energy and climate plan 2030 (PNEC 2030) and are integrated into the national qualifications catalogue.

The [Youth + Digital programme](#), launched in 2020, offers short-term training units (350 hours maximum) to unemployed young people (aged 18 to 35) with upper secondary or tertiary education or who have not completed the last year of secondary education or who are participating in a recognition of prior learning process at the secondary level. The programme provides qualifications in cyber-security, data analysis, programming languages, and social network management, at EQF levels 4 or 5. During 2021-22, over 17 000 young people attended these courses.

The [Portugal Digital Academy](#) was launched in March 2022 with the aim of improving the digital skills of citizens of all ages. It is a free course aggregator platform that offers multiple options to test, improve and certify digital levels. This tool can also be valuable for business, allowing them to assess their employees' digital skills and identify priorities for continuous training, recruitment and investment.

4.4 Equal opportunities and social inclusion

Various measures were implemented to ensure equal opportunities for young people and adults in vocational education and training. These measures also aim to promote academic and training success while catering to the diverse needs and potential of every learner.

The [21|23 Escola+ plan](#) is designed to help school students, including those in vocational programmes, recover from learning loss resulting from the suspension of

classroom activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The plan, approved in 2021 and extended for the 2022/23 school year, aims to provide schools with tools and strategies for flexible curriculum development, to strengthen response capacity for inclusive learning, and to assess measures taken at all levels.

[Adult education and training courses \(EFA\)](#), starting in 2022, are a form of training with dual certification, adapted to the needs of adults with low and very low qualifications. It helps them develop the skills needed to carry out a professional activity and, at the same time, to obtain a basic education certificate or an upper secondary education certificate. The curriculum has three components: basic training, which covers key competences; technical training, which develops knowledge, skills and attitudes for a particular occupation; and on-the-job training, which applies and consolidates knowledge and skills.

[Modular training courses](#), approved in 2022, are designed for adults, either employed or unemployed, who lack the necessary qualifications to enter or progress in the job market, particularly those who have not completed basic or upper secondary education. This type of training offers flexible learning paths through the completion and certification of competence units (UC) and/or short-term training units (UFCD), that can be accumulated towards one or more qualifications, levels 1 to 5, integrated into the CNQ.

The [Valorizar social programme](#) is a tailor-made training programme to improve management and digital skills in the social sector, approved in 2021. It strengthens residential structures and home support services for older adults, host services for people with disabilities and incapacity, children, and young people at risk, as part of the [Agreement for professional training and qualification](#). Its goal is to strengthen the quality of the response of social institutions to citizens in the medium and long term through the empowerment and qualification of their human resources. Its short training units (maximum of 350 hours) are included in the national qualifications catalogue.

A new regulation was introduced in 2020 to make it easier for upper secondary VET graduates to access higher education. In 2022, new legislation reserved 15% of study cycle places in higher education for holders of secondary double certification and specialised artistic courses. This measure was taken to increase flexibility, equal opportunities in accessing higher education, and the number of VET graduates in higher education.

5. Statistical information in relation to EU targets

Portugal's efforts to improve the educational attainment of its population are most effectively illustrated by the evolution in the early school leaving rate. Over the last 10 years, Portugal has reduced this figure, from 20.5% to 6% in 2022, well below the EU target of 9% and the largest drop in the EU-27 (-14.5 percentage points).

Table 1. **European vocational education and training policy dashboard: Portugal**

Type of indicator ⁽¹⁾	Indicator	Last available year	PT	EU-27	Policy Document	EU target (year)
VET for developing a lifelong learning culture						
Progress	Adults (25 to 64 year-olds) with a learning experience in the last 12 months (%)*	2022	33.4	39.5	Skills Agenda	50% (2025)
					Council Resolution on EEA	47% (2025)
					ESPR Action Plan	60% (2030)
Progress	Low-qualified adults with a learning experience in the last 12 months (%)	2022	17.0	18.4	Skills Agenda	30% (2025)
Progress	Unemployed adults with a learning experience in the last 4 weeks (%)	2022	19.1	13.2	Skills Agenda	20% (2025)
Context	Employment rate for 20 to 64 year-olds (%)	2022	77.5	74.6	ESPR Action Plan	78% (2030)
Context	Early leavers from education and training (%)	2022	6	9.6	Council Resolution on EEA	<9% (2030)
Context	NEET rate for 15 to 29 year-olds (%)	2022	8.4	11.7	ESPR Action Plan	9% (2030)
VET for Resilience, transitions, sustainability and excellence						
Progress	Adults (16 to 74 year-olds) with at least basic digital skills (%)	2021	55.3	53.9	Skills Agenda	70% (2025)
					ESPR Action Plan	80% (2030)
Progress	Employment rate for recent IVET graduates (20 to 34 year-olds) (%)	2022	83	79.7	Council Rec on VET	82% (2025)
Progress	Recent IVET graduates (20 to 34 year-olds) with a work-based learning experience as part of their vocational education and training (%)	2022	74.3	60.1	Council Rec on VET	60% (2025)
					Council Resolution on EEA	
Context	25 to 34 year-olds with tertiary attainment (%)	2022	44.4	42	Council Resolution on EEA	45% (2025)
Context	Gender employment gap (%)	2022	5.6	10.7	ESPR Action Plan	To be halved (2030)
Context	People at risk of poverty or social exclusion (1000s)	2022	2 084	95 284	ESPR Action Plan	15 million decrease (2030)
Context	Employed ICT specialists (1000s)	2022	219.7	9 370.2 ^e	2030 Digital Compass	20 million, with convergence between men and women (2030)
VET for the European Education Area						
Progress	Learners in IVET who benefitted from a learning mobility abroad (%)**	2021	3.6	2.1 ^{dV}	Council Rec on VET	8% (2025)
					Skills Agenda	
Context	Average number of foreign languages learned in IVET	2021	0.9	1.2		

Available flags: d - definition differs, e – estimated, V - Cedefop estimate.

* Eurostat data (Adult Education Survey, special calculation excluding guided on-the-job training)

** Provisional estimates affected by the Covid19 pandemic

Source: Cedefop. [European VET policy dashboard](#)

(1) [Definitions](#) on the type of indicators are available.

The future prospects for IVET graduates in Portugal are promising. The employment rate of recent IVET graduates (aged 20-34) was 83.0% in 2022, ranking tenth in the EU-27; this is 3.3 percentage points above the EU-27 average and just one point over the target set by the Council Recommendation on VET.

However, the percentage of recent IVET graduates (aged 20-34) with work-based learning experience as part of their vocational education and training fell 4 percentage points from 2021 to 2022, standing last year at 74.3%; this is still well above EU-27 average (60.1%).

There has been a decline in interest in vocational education and training among the young Portuguese population. In 2021, only 38.8% of upper secondary students were enrolled in VET, showing a decrease of seven percentage points since 2013. Despite this, the rate of learners in IVET who benefitted from learning mobility abroad stands at 3.6%, which is higher than the EU-27 average of 2.1% in 2021. Portugal ranks 10th in the EU on this indicator, but still falls short of the 8% target set in the Council Recommendation on VET.

The percentage of adults engaged in a learning experience in the past 12 months fell to 33.4% in 2022, a decrease of 4.6 points since 2016. This rate is 6.1 points lower than the European average at 39.5% and far below the target towards achieving the European Education Area (47%).

6. Conclusion

Portugal is making great efforts to increase the skill levels of the population, and to develop a VET system of greater quality, transparency and coherence. It is making VET provision more flexible and responsive to labour market needs with the support of employers, and promoting equal opportunities and inclusion.

Learning from past experiences, more ad-hoc measures, with the support of local partners, are addressing (low-skilled) adults to help them achieve a certification or develop their digital skills, i.e., the adult impulse programme, or the professional programmes. Different kinds of financial incentives are also being tried to motivate this share of the population to pursue studies, such as the *Qualifica* accelerator or the training voucher. The *Qualifica* programme, the main flagship initiative to address the persistent challenges in adult learning, has contributed to closing the skills gap in the adult population since 2016.

Modernisation of the VET infrastructure and revision of the National catalogue of qualifications aim to improve the quality of VET provision and make it more attractive to the younger generations, who have recently been opting for higher education rather than intermediate-level VET. The creation of specialised technology centres to develop new courses related to green and digital transitions, and legal measures to facilitate the access of VET graduates to higher education, will help meet current and future industry needs.

With the support of the Recovery and resilience plan, Portugal aims to improve the general level of skills of the population, including digital skills for various population groups,

such as adults (Upskill, digital skills and jobs programme), young people (Youth + Digital programme) or workers, managers and directors of companies and trainers through the More digital employment 2025 programme. Taking a broader approach, the Portugal Digital Academy provides access to citizens of all types, testing and improving their digital literacy. All these initiatives, aimed at different target groups, can increase the population's low levels of digital skills (currently at 55.3%) to reach the EU target of 70% by 2025 set by the Skills Agenda.

The energy transition is specifically addressed by the Green skills & jobs programme. As stated in the Council's country specific recommendation for Portugal in 2022 (European Commission, 2022a), appropriate financing schemes, awareness-raising campaigns and the development of green skills would significantly increase the effectiveness of investment efforts in energy efficiency, especially in buildings. Green skills shortages, in particular in the construction and manufacturing sectors, would benefit from a stronger policy of upskilling and reskilling related to the green transition. Portugal needs to step up policy efforts aimed at the provision and acquisition of skills and competences needed for the green transition (European Commission, 2023).

The transition to a sustainable and digital economy requires adaptation to new ways of working, such as teleworking or work developed on digital platforms, as well as the adoption of new VET methods and practices (Portugal, 2022). These can help to achieve sustainable production and consumption patterns and improve the energy literacy of individuals and businesses alike.

Measures to promote equal opportunities and social inclusion in Portugal focus on young people and adults with low qualifications, frequently out of work. They offer flexible training, allowing them to gain credits that can be accumulated towards a full qualification in the national qualifications framework. They help beneficiaries to join the labour market and further develop their skills. However, these measures need to overcome the dropout rate that is usually high within these groups. The *Valorizar* programme for human resources in the social sector will improve awareness and skills in a field that provides services and solutions to vulnerable groups.

Acronyms

ANQEP	National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education and Training
DESI	digital economy and society index
EFA	adult education and training courses
ESI	European skills index
ICT	information and communications technology
IGeFE	Institute of Financial Management of Education

NIP	national implementation plan
PNEC	national energy and climate plan 2030
RVCC	recognition, validation and certification of competences
SNQ	national qualifications system [<i>Sistema Nacional de Qualificações</i>]
UFCD	short-term training units
VET	vocational education and training

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