

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## For a Comprehensive and Inclusive Engagement of VET Learners

**WP5, Del. 5.3**

### Authors

Knowledge Innovation Centre (KIC)  
Organizing Bureau of European School Student  
Unions (OBESSU)

### Contributors

Daniele Sabato, Nik Heerens, Panagiotis  
Chatzmichail

### Editors

Daniele Sabato, Nik Heerens

### Layout

Nuša Karo

# Abstract

Based on the results of the InclusiVET project, these Policy Recommendations define a path for decision-makers at the European, national, and local levels to foster a comprehensive and inclusive engagement of learners in Vocational Education and Training (VET). This path revolves around five main topics:



**Flexible and Recognisable Participation Opportunities:** supporting flexible participation opportunities that accommodate diverse student needs and schedules – such as short-term projects, practice exchanges, and events – while also ensuring these efforts are formally recognised through curriculum integration, academic credit for transversal skills, and engagement-related awards or incentives.



**Increasing Visibility of Diversity:** actively increasing the visibility of student representative bodies in all their diversity, including by featuring non-traditional students in communications, promoting diverse leadership, and organising activities that celebrate a range of perspectives and experiences.



**Strengthening Support Systems:** Enhance financial aid and scholarships, counselling services, academic support structures, and mentorship and engagement programmes – particularly those tailored to VET student unions and underrepresented students



**Training Staff:** Training and empowering teaching and student support staff in VET to understand and respond to the specific challenges faced by learners from diverse backgrounds, promoting inclusivity in and outside the classroom and combating discrimination



**Collaboration among Stakeholders:** Creating spaces and opportunities for collaborations and partnerships among VET students, teachers, student support staff, policymakers, and employers to develop and implement strategies to increase underrepresented students' participation within and beyond the classroom

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1 The InclusiVET Project</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 Background	4
1.2 The Path to the Policy Recommendations	5
<b>2 Inclusive Engagement of VET Learners across the European Union</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1 Needs & Challenges	6
2.2 Policy Gaps	7
<b>3 The InclusiVET Policy Recommendations</b>	<b>9</b>

# 1 The InclusiVET Project

## 1.1 Background

To achieve a truly inclusive education for its diverse student body, VET institutions must go beyond teaching and learning and foster inclusivity across all areas of learners' lives. Activism, involvement in decision-making bodies, and participation in student organisations are an essential part of learners' personal, educational, and civic development. However, VET learners from non-traditional backgrounds and underrepresented groups often face challenges accessing these extracurricular engagement opportunities. The InclusiVET project aims to enhance the engagement of VET learners from diverse backgrounds within their institutions by improving policies and practices that promote inclusive participation in all aspects of the educational experience, including teaching, learning, quality assurance, and institutional decision-making.

### THE MAIN OBJECTIVES OF INCLUSIVET



**Increase understanding of inclusive engagement practices at VET institutions**



**Identify effective and innovative methods for enhancing learner engagement**



**Promote greater participation of non-traditional and underrepresented groups in both formal and informal learner engagement systems**



**Develop strategies and tools to cultivate an inclusive culture of learner engagement within VET institutions**

## 1.2 The Path to the Policy Recommendations

This document outlines the key policy recommendations based on the evidence drawn from the project's deliverables, which are summarised in the below table:

### **Mapping Report**

Outlining challenges and obstacles for underrepresented learners in engagement opportunities

### **Benchmarking Framework & Self-evaluation Tool**

Offering VET institutions, a comprehensive overview of different areas of learner engagement and comparative levels of inclusion, and supporting them in reflecting on their own practices, policies, and strategies around learner engagement and the extent to which they are inclusive

### **Methodology & Training Manual for learner-led Institutional Review**

A comprehensive, step-by-step manual for implementing a learner-led review process within VET institutions, engaging learners as reviewers with the aim to foster a more inclusive environment where every voice is heard.

### **Guidelines for Inclusive Engagement Action Plans**

A set of pathways to be followed by a VET institution that aims to launch a new inclusive learner engagement strategy for the first time or test/improve its already existing inclusive learner engagement strategy and practice.

### **Online Course for Student-Support Staff**

Online self-paced course modules designed for student-support staff, covering essential principles and practices of inclusive learner engagement, practical skills for creating inclusive environments, facilitating student-led initiatives, and understanding the roles of VET institutional governance, student unions, and assessment processes in promoting institutional inclusivity.

This policy document complements and contributes to the project's achievements by defining a path for policymakers and other stakeholders in the VET sector to ensure their sustainability and further foster inclusive learner engagement at local, national, and European levels.

## 2 Inclusive Engagement of VET Learners across the European Union

Despite the European Union's renewed prioritisation of VET, only a limited number of European countries have (effective) learner representation structures in place, while learners in many other parts of Europe still lack any form of representation. At the same time, for many VET learners, existing engagement opportunities remain largely inaccessible. Personal, financial, and logistical challenges limit their participation in student life, prevent their talents from flourishing, and leave their voices underrepresented in institutional decision-making processes.



### Underrepresentation

If a group or category of learners is not **adequately or proportionately** represented within a specific context, opportunities and resources can be **unfairly** produced and distributed



### Inclusion

**Diversity** is not sufficient for meaningful inclusion, which goes **beyond mere integration**. It also encompasses values diversity, meeting everyone's needs, rejecting stigma against vulnerable groups, and prioritising everyone's rights and inclusion



### Learner Engagement

The holistic and structured **involvement of all learners in all aspects** of their educational experience – both inside and outside the classroom – supports personal growth, real-world skill development, and quality of learning, assessment, and institutional processes.

### 2.1 Needs & Challenges

Zooming in on the common barriers that prevent diverse learners from fully benefiting from the opportunities that learner engagement in all its forms can offer, the InclusionVET project has identified five key challenges:

#### 1. Time and Finance:

Many disadvantaged learners are prevented from engaging in extracurricular activities, due to the need to work to support their studies, balance competing responsibilities such as apprenticeships or family care, and navigate rigid study schedules. Limited financial support and a lack of flexible arrangements further restrict their possibilities for participation.

#### 2. Visibility:

Awareness among learners about opportunities for learner engagement and their impact is often low. Learners may be unclear about what is available, uncertain about whether engagement is accessible and effective, and discouraged by insufficient support from teachers and a lack of success stories.

### 3. Identification:

Underrepresented learners may struggle to relate to existing engagement opportunities, which often do not align with their interests, identity, or perceived skill levels. Stereotypical representations in school materials, unwelcoming formal meetings, and a lack of sensitivity or support from staff, can all contribute to feelings of exclusion and deter active participation.

### 4. Image:

Learner engagement roles such as class representative are often perceived as popularity contests, with intimidating selection processes, or relevant only for younger learners. This perception can discourage participation from less extroverted, older, or underrepresented learners, especially when combined with the pressure to succeed academically.

### 5. Accessibility:

Mobility challenges, language difficulties, and infrastructure limitations disproportionately affect international learners, refugees, learners with disabilities, and those living remotely. Complex jargon and lack of accessible resources further hinder meaningful participation for many disadvantaged groups.

## 2.2 Policy Gaps

Positioned at the intersection of education and the job market, the VET field has increasingly taken the spotlight within the European Union's policy debates. This is why:

⇒ The 2009 European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships ([EFQEA](#)), including the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET), framework outline indicators and criteria to ensure high-quality and effective VET and apprenticeship systems across the EU;

⇒ The 2020 Council Conclusions on a Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training ([ET 2020](#)) was adopted to guide EU member states in shaping education and training policies;

⇒ The [Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training \(VET\) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness, and resilience](#) outlines a strategic vision to modernise VET systems across the EU. It emphasises equipping individuals with the skills needed for the green and digital transitions, enhancing social inclusion, and ensuring adaptability to labour market changes.

Yet, **when it comes to inclusion, learner engagement, and their mutually reinforcing relationship, the European VET policy framework remains underdeveloped.**

When we talk about diversity and inclusion in VET, the emphasis tends to lie on “core” learning and teaching – such as making curricula and classroom practices more accessible and inclusive. While these measures are essential, they capture only part of the picture. Meaningful inclusion requires a whole-institution approach that embeds learner participation and representation at every level of the student experience.

In many VET settings, however, the **engagement of learners in VET governance, quality assurance and broader school life remains sporadic, indirect, and largely unrepresentative**. A 2019 [Report on the representation of apprentices in VET](#) commissioned by the European Commission already stressed this lack of systemic consultation and the limited understanding of the barriers to learner participation in decision-making. Moreover, where systems of learner representation and engagement exist in VET, they still appear to be primarily geared towards ‘mainstream’ learners who are typically white, middle-class, able bodied, and studying full-time, despite the rich diversity found within the VET learner population compared to other sectors of education.

All these gaps are reflected in the 2023 [Vocational Education and Training \(VET\) Policy Briefs](#) by CEDEFOP, which highlight how national efforts to make VET systems more agile, resilient, and attractive often outpace efforts to make them also flexible, inclusive, and quality assured. Moreover, the Policy Briefs also point to a trend where VET curricula and programmes are increasingly aligned with industry and labour market needs, without necessarily responding to the diverse experiences and requirements of all VET learners.



### 3 The InclusiVET Policy Recommendations

InclusiVET's policy recommendations address the above gaps, focusing on the largely overlooked dimension of inclusive learner engagement within VET. By recognising engagement as integral to both the learner experience and institutional inclusion strategies, these recommendations aim to support all stakeholders in Europe to embed inclusivity throughout every aspect of VET provision. In doing so, they seek to enrich the overall education experience for all VET learners:

#### 1. Flexible and Recognisable Participation Opportunities:

Provide a variety of engagement options, such as short-term projects, exchanges of practices, along with events and initiatives that can accommodate the diverse needs and schedules of all VET learners, while offering formal recognition for them, through the integration of student engagement activities into curricula, the offer of academic credits for key transversal skills students obtain, relevant (engagement- and activism-centred) awards or financial incentives promoting learner engagement.



##### **European Policymakers & Regional Stakeholders**

- ⇒ Strengthen existing and future policy frameworks<sup>1</sup> that tackle equity and inclusion in VET, with specific indicators linked to learners' engagement, accessibility and inclusiveness of the learning environment. Part of those indicators should also target underrepresented learners.
- ⇒ Advance ongoing efforts tackling active and democratic citizenship education in VET, building on work like the Council of Europe's [Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture](#)<sup>2</sup>.



##### **National Authorities, Social, and Civic Stakeholders**

- ⇒ In consultation with learners from underrepresented groups, review and adapt [National Implementation Plans](#) (NIPs) with clear, measurable targets, timelines, and allocated resources to support national learner engagement initiatives and proactively remove barriers to access and participation for all VET learners;
- ⇒ Integrate learner engagement and inclusion indicators and monitoring mechanisms into national quality assurance tools, potentially leveraging the EQAVET framework.



##### **VET Institutions and Local Actors**

- ⇒ Local stakeholders should actively support the creation of learner representative bodies and empower existing ones, by equipping them with the necessary autonomy, access to structured channels, and resources like the InclusiVET learner-led review to

<sup>1</sup> Examples include the expected VET Strategy (2026), the Council Recommendation on VET (2020), the Osnabrück Declaration (2020), the EQAVET Framework

<sup>2</sup> RFCDC in Vocational Education and Training (VET)

ensure the diversity of their membership and to meaningfully contribute to institutional decision-making.

⇒ VET institutions should be proactive, offering a variety of flexible and recognisable participation opportunities beyond traditional forms of engagement - offering formal recognition through actions like integration into curricula, academic credits for transversal skills gained, or financial incentives linked to student engagement.

## 2. Increasing Visibility of Diversity:

Supporting the visibility and raising awareness of the role and actions of the student representative bodies in all their diversity to foster a culture of inclusion and engagement. Good practices include the addition of non-traditional students in publications and promotional materials, providing opportunities and fostering diverse representation across leadership roles, and providing activities that celebrate diverse perspectives.



### ***European Policymakers & Regional Stakeholders***

⇒ Support Member States and VET systems in their efforts to foster visibility of diversity and to raise awareness on inclusive learner engagement, by catering for these elements within relevant existing policy frameworks.



### ***National Authorities, Social, and Civic Stakeholders***

⇒ Develop national guidelines for inclusive student council structures, supporting VET learner representative bodies in their efforts to promote diversity and foster inclusive representation.

⇒ Invest in public outreach, including awareness campaigns that challenge stereotypes about VET and the learners within it, actively showcasing the diversity of VET students and promoting VET as a valuable pathway for individuals from all backgrounds.



### ***VET Institutions and Local Actors***

⇒ Ensure all materials (publications, websites, social media) reflect the diversity of learners, while fostering their engagement across different leadership roles (i.e. committees).

⇒ Create or adapt existing inclusion strategies that include long- and short-term actions, including assignment of Diversity Officers, quotas aiming at boosting representation of underrepresented groups, organising regular events and workshops that celebrate cultural and social diversity, etc.

### 3. Strengthening Support Systems:

Enhance financial aid and scholarships, counselling services, academic support structures, and mentorship and engagement programmes – particularly those tailored to VET student unions and underrepresented learners.



#### ***European Policymakers & Regional Stakeholders***

- ⇒ Strengthen targeted funding for INGOs and regional organisations advocating for underrepresented learners, like the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the Youth Empowerment Fund, to cover initiatives addressing inclusion and learner engagement in VET systems.
- ⇒ Leverage existing platforms to facilitate dialogue, exchange, and peer learning among Member States, VET providers, student representatives (including from underrepresented groups), researchers, social partners, and INGOs to share best practices, challenges, and innovative solutions related to inclusion and engagement of underrepresented learners in VET.



#### ***National Authorities, Social, and Civic Stakeholders***

- ⇒ Strengthen investments in the professional development of VET educators and student support staff, focusing on inclusive pedagogies, fostering learners' engagement and civic development, and outreach to underrepresented communities.
- ⇒ Review and adapt national legislative and regulatory frameworks to mandate the provision of adequate support systems in VET institutions, including legal guarantees for non-discrimination, reasonable accommodations for learners with disabilities and other specific needs, guidelines for the structure and support of diverse learner representative bodies, and legal underpinning for student councils.



#### ***VET Institutions and Local Actors***

- ⇒ Support community-based initiatives that connect VET institutions with vital support services for disadvantaged learners and student-led projects aimed at improving the school environment and support systems.
- ⇒ Involve learners, especially from underrepresented groups, in evaluating and improving VET institutional policies support systems, while providing recognition of learners' engagement, particularly for those facing additional barriers (e.g., through compensation, awards, or formal recognition).

### 4. Training Staff:

Training and empowering teaching and student support staff in VET to understand and respond to the specific challenges faced by learners from diverse backgrounds, promoting inclusivity in and outside the classroom and combating discrimination.



#### ***European Policymakers & Regional Stakeholders***

- ⇒ Support the formulation of a European Competence Framework for VET learner support staff, defining knowledge, skills, and attitudes for this role, emphasising support for inclusion of diverse learners.

⇒ Promote the acquisition of competences related to common European values and democratic citizenship in the initial training, induction, and continuous professional development of leaders, educators, student support staff, and trainers at all VET levels, while ensuring the development and availability of such training modules.



#### ***National Authorities, Social, and Civic Stakeholders***

⇒ Strengthen existing programmes of initial and continuous professional development of VET educators and student support staff to systematically address learners' diversity, inclusion, and engagement gaps in their institutions, while ensuring such training paths remain regular and accessible.



#### ***VET Institutions and Local Actors***

⇒ Ensure all staff receive training on inclusive pedagogy, digital tools, and individualised learning approaches, while ensuring that they receive support and necessary resources prior, during and after the training.

⇒ Actively involve all learners, particularly those from underrepresented groups, in monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of training programmes of VET educators and staff, as well as in shaping their learning environment and institutional practices.

## **5. Collaboration among Stakeholders:**

Creating spaces and opportunities for collaborations and partnerships among VET learners, educators, student support staff, policymakers, and employers to develop and implement strategies to increase underrepresented students' participation within and beyond the classroom



#### ***European Policymakers & Regional Stakeholders***

⇒ Leverage existing fora and platforms like the EQAVET network and the European Education Area Working Group on Equality and Values in Education and Training to foster international exchanges of practices, dialogues, peer learning, and cooperations on inclusivity and engagement of learners among VET providers, learner representatives, INGOs, and employers.

⇒ Ensure that European processes on VET are aligned with other key strategies connected to inclusion and diversity, while ensuring the engagement of policymakers, institutions, and departments working on similar initiatives like anti-discrimination, social inclusion, youth engagement etc.



#### ***National Authorities, Social, and Civic Stakeholders***

⇒ Foster partnerships among VET learner representatives, providers, social partners, and civil society organisations for developing and implementing effective equity and inclusion policies.

⇒ Collaborate with employers to ensure VET programs align with both labour market needs and learners' needs, providing pathways to quality apprenticeships and work-based learning for all.



### ***VET Institutions and Local Actors***

- ⇒ Implement a whole-institution approach through synergies between formal, non-formal, and informal education and training sectors, by working closely and actively involving all learners, trainers, educators, parents and carers in participatory bodies, whether formal or informal.
- ⇒ Enhance and promote democratisation of VET institutions, by fostering learners' engagement within organisational and management processes. While ensuring ongoing evaluation and reforms towards inclusive learner engagement, it is important to ensure learners' engagement across the different stages - beginning to end.