



InclusiVET Mapping Report

**Characteristics, challenges & opportunities of
inclusive learner engagement in VET**



InclusiVET

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Abbreviations

CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
EU	European Union
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Queer, Intersexual, Asexual
SEN	Special Educational Needs
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VET	Vocational education and training

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1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the Mapping Report

This Mapping Report provides insights into underrepresented groups of learners enrolled in Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Europe and the extent to which opportunities for learner engagement are inclusive to all learners. The report was produced as part of the *Inclusive Engagement of Underrepresented Learners in Vocational Education & Training - InclusiVET* project of the Erasmus+ programme as a comparative analysis of learner engagement in VET institutions. This report aims to **increase awareness, knowledge and understanding of the barriers, challenges and opportunities in the inclusive engagement of VET learners at European, national and institutional levels**. The Mapping Report was developed as a collaboration of all project partners, namely:

- KNOWLEDGE INNOVATION CENTRE (KIC) from Malta
- OIC POLAND FOUNDATION (OIC) from Poland
- SOCIETE D'ENSEIGNEMENT PROFESSIONNEL DU RHONE (SEPR) from France
- ORGANIZING BUREAU OF EUROPEAN SCHOOL STUDENT UNIONS (OBESSU) from Belgium
- VISJIH STROKOVNIH SOL REPUBLIKE SLOVENIJE (SKUPNOST) from Slovenia
- MAGYAR DIGITÁLIS OKTATÁSÉRT EGYESÜLET (MDOE) from Hungary

1.2 Content and methodology

The first section of the Mapping Report explains the key terms used throughout the report. The key terms that are used in this report - underrepresented learners, inclusion, diversity and learner engagement - are further explained and contextualised. Following sections describe vocational education institutions from a European perspective and from the specific perspective of selected project partner countries (France, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia) . The report then describes in detail different categories of underrepresented learners and possible opportunities for engaging them more broadly in the life of the school. The report concludes with a description of challenges and barriers facing the inclusion of underrepresented learners and areas for improvement. Finally, the report presents examples of good practice from which to draw inspiration.

Experts from the project partner organisations carried out **national and European research (mapping)** - a needs assessment of the involvement of underrepresented learners in VET, according to a structured approach. The central objective was to harmonise the combined capabilities of the diverse partners engaged in the InclusiVET project, making optimal use of their individual networks and resources.

They undertook research on legislation and practices in VET schools in the selected countries. The objectives of the desk research in each country were:

- identifying underrepresented target groups
- identifying actual and potential levels of involvement and representation
- identifying problems, challenges, barriers to inclusive engagement
- identifying unique features of VET research (e.g. prevalence of compulsory internships, shorter courses, dual pathways, differentiated age profile)
- identifying innovative elements for engaging underrepresented learners.

Desk research

Desk research was undertaken by the project partners primarily presented the situation in VET institutions in Slovenia, Hungary, Poland and France. It started with a **general characterisation of learners in VET schools**. A description of the structure of education in each country, of vocational training opportunities for young people and adults, was the starting point for a detailed description of how to include all learners in the life of the school. The representatives then characterised the **different groups of underrepresented learners** that are identified in VET schools in their countries. Desk research described the ways in which these learners are involved in the life of the school and what are the possibilities of further improvement. It also includes a description of the barriers to including underrepresented learners, success factors and good practices in each country.

In addition to the in-depth situation in the project partner countries, the Mapping Report also presents a broader, European perspective, which was mainly based on research undertaken by the international project partners OBESSU and KIC, integrating insights from diverse resources, incorporating perspectives from the broader literature on vocational education and training (VET), inclusive learner engagement, and non-traditional learners.

Focus Groups

The following step in the development of the Mapping Report was to conduct **focus groups** in Slovenia, Hungary, Poland, France and on the European level. Two groups were 'interviewed' during the focus groups, namely, **VET learners and VET staff**. To facilitate a more effective comparison of results, participants were furnished with a semi-structured focus group guideline. This guideline included a variety of questions addressing each of the specified topic areas, while also tackling research gaps that had emerged during the initial phase of the desk research. During the focus groups, VET staff and learners were able to give their point of view on engaging underrepresented learners. They described the groups of learners that they consider to be underrepresented, identified opportunities and barriers related to involving all groups of learners and discussed factors that positively influence learner engagement, motivation and potential for their institutions.

# Participants	Position	Country
Focus Group 1 (SEPR)		
11	Learners (hairdressing, SEPR)	France
Focus Group 2 (SEPR)		
6	Learners (French Foreign Language, SEPR)	France
Focus Group 3 (SKUPNOST)		
6	Learners (BIC Ljubljana, IC Piramida Maribor, EŠ Celje, Academia, ŠC Ptuj, VSŠ)	Slovenia
Focus Group 4 (SKUPNOST)		
7	Learners (VSGT Maribor , BIC LJ , ŠC PET, IC Piramida)	Slovenia
Focus Group 5 (OIC)		
6	Teachers	Poland
2	Learner support staff	Poland
Focus Group 6 (OIC)		
5	Learners (Technical secondary school)	Poland
3	Learners (Branch school of 1 degree)	Poland
Focus Group 7 (MDOE)		
8	Teachers	Hungary
Focus Group 8 (MDOE)		
13	Learners	Hungary

#Participants	Position	Country
International Focus Group 1 (OBESSU)		
1	Board member national school student union, VET learner	Romania
1	Board member VET school union	Denmark
International Focus Group 2 (OBESSU)		
1	OBESSU intern, VET learner	Spain
1	Learner	Italy
1	VET expert, LifeLong Learning Platform	Belgium

Table 1: Overview of Focus Groups

Data analysis

The partners of the InclusiVET project have actively participated in this qualitative research endeavour, enhancing our understanding of the challenges and barriers faced by underrepresented learners in VET schools. Their contributions have significantly advanced our comprehension of inclusive learner engagement within this context.

The research process has been structured to facilitate continual improvement, with each step building upon the insights and information gleaned from preceding stages. This iterative approach has allowed us to accumulate a rich and nuanced dataset, specifically tailored to the inclusive engagement of underrepresented learners in VET settings. The resulting report reflects the culmination of this research journey, drawing upon a diverse array of resources including data from each phase of the research and pertinent literature within the VET sector, inclusive learner engagement, and underrepresented learner studies.

2 Key Terms

2.1 Underrepresented learners

Within the context of the InclusiVET project, the reference to **underrepresented learners** is closely connected to the concept of diversity of the entire population of learners in a VET school and how this is reflected in learner engagement opportunities. In the field of vocational education and training (VET), diversity encompasses amongst others **differences in age, ethnicity, gender, national origin, physical and mental abilities, emotional capacity, religion, native language, sexual orientation, socio-economic background, living circumstances, etc.**

Consequently, the definition of an underrepresented learner is context-dependent and can carry varying connotations depending on the country, educational institution, and/or field of study. Moreover, the boundaries between 'mainstream' and 'underrepresented' learners are blurred, allowing for the possibility that a learner can display mainstream attributes in certain aspects while possessing underrepresented characteristics in others simultaneously.

2.2 Inclusion

Inclusion is an organisational approach that **values and recognises diversity, rejects the stigmatisation of certain groups, and prioritises the rights and inclusion of vulnerable populations.** Diversity forms the foundation for providing access to education for various groups. However, it is important to note that diversity alone does not automatically guarantee the inclusion of these groups in the everyday lives of VET learners.

The UNESCO Commission defines inclusive education as the ability of all individuals to participate in quality education and realise their full potential. This understanding highlights that inclusion is both a cultural and systemic matter. Achieving inclusive education and equal opportunities requires systemic changes. People have different learning styles and educational needs, and educational systems must be adaptable and flexible enough to accommodate this diversity, rather than being rigid and inflexible. It is the responsibility of the education system to consider and adapt to the needs of all learners, rather than expecting learners to conform to an existing system. Consequently, the concept of inclusion goes beyond mere integration (UNESCO, 2020).

2.3 Learner engagement

The presence of a diverse population of learners poses a challenge for VET schools to actively involve all learners in the structural and cultural development of the institution, ensuring their voices are represented and their opinions and needs are taken into account.

In the InclusiVET project, we distinguish between **four domains of learner engagement**. Firstly, the '**Governance and Management**' domain recognises learner engagement through committee participation, where learners can influence the development, implementation, and evaluation of policies. The second domain, '**Teaching and Learning**,' emphasises learner engagement in their own learning process and the collaborative enhancement of their educational experience. The third domain, '**Quality Assurance and Enhancement**,' involves learner participation in all processes related to maintaining and improving educational quality. Lastly, the '**Learner Representation and Organisation in school life**' domain provides learners with opportunities to form self-organised groups, participate in democratic processes, elect representatives, and actively initiate discussions on learner-centred changes within VET schools (cf. National Student Engagement Programme, 2020).

By prioritising these areas, the InclusiVET project seeks to foster an inclusive environment where learners are empowered to contribute to the development and improvement of their vocational education and training experiences.

3 Characteristics of Vocational Education and Training in Europe

3.1 VET institutional characteristics

Vocational education and training (VET) plays a significant role in the education systems of nearly all European countries. VET programmes typically focus on hands-on training, combining theoretical learning with practical application to develop job-specific competencies, serving as a gateway to various career paths. It is widely acknowledged that VET is a crucial tool in addressing (youth) unemployment by equipping learners with the practical skills that employers actively seek.

Variability in VET systems

It's important to note that the specifics of VET systems and policies can vary considerably from one European country to another and VET programmes may be tailored to address specific regional or national demands. Moreover, VET programmes tend to be designed to be flexible, catering to a wide range of individuals with varying backgrounds and aspirations.

Entry points to VET

In most European countries, learners completing primary education face a choice between continuing with general education or pursuing vocational education. Typically, vocational education and training at the lowest level lasts for approximately three years, as observed in countries such as Poland, Slovenia, and Hungary, concluding with the acquisition of a specific profession. In France, pupils have the option to receive vocational training within schools or through apprenticeships, a model similar to the training of young workers in Poland. Some VET programmes are also specifically tailored to support disadvantaged youth who may have discontinued their traditional education, providing opportunities for individuals to gain practical skills irrespective of their prior educational achievements.

Practical emphasis

A notable characteristic of VET programmes is their **practical orientation**, enabling learners to directly apply their knowledge to industry-specific tasks. These programmes often entail partnerships with industry stakeholders to maintain a curriculum aligned with contemporary industry standards and practices.

Apprenticeships tend to play a pivotal role in VET across many European countries. Apprentices typically work for companies while simultaneously undergoing structured, on-the-job training and classroom instruction. Several European nations, including Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, have a system of **dual learning**, in which learners divide their time between

vocational schools and on-the-job training with employers, offering a comprehensive educational experience.

Extended VET cycle

Some European countries offer a more extended vocational education and training cycle within technical secondary schools, exemplified by Slovenia's **upper secondary schools**. In these institutions, a combination of general and vocational education culminates with the opportunity to take the school-leaving examination and attain a specific profession. France utilises the term "**vocational exam**," representing an alternative version of the school-leaving examination for technical school graduates.

Diverse pathways

Learners in Poland and Hungary encounter five-year educational cycles, with the possibility of undertaking both the **school-leaving examination** and a **vocational exam** upon completion. Subsequently, these graduates can choose between pursuing higher education or entering the workforce. Technical secondary schools in Hungary offer options for learners to prepare solely for the school-leaving examination or to acquire the groundwork for a specific profession, particularly for those with a school-leaving certificate. Vocational schools in Hungary, distinct from technical secondary schools, equip learners with the skills required to obtain a profession, combining elements of general and vocational education and culminating in a vocational exam, mirroring the system of Poland's **first-degree branch (vocational) schools**.

Furthermore, there are pathways for further education, such as progressing to a **vocational upper secondary school** or a **technical secondary school** (e.g., in Poland) for those who complete the fundamental level of vocational education. Alternatively, individuals may choose **university education** upon successful completion of schools culminating with the school-leaving examination. Some countries also permit graduates who have passed the school-leaving examination to supplement their vocational education, a practice observed in Poland and Hungary. Conversely, individuals may supplement their general education if they have already acquired a profession.

European Qualifications Framework and its influence

Across Europe, there exists a degree of standardisation in the regulations governing education within technical secondary schools, partly encouraged by the **European Qualifications Framework (EQF)**. Countries in Scandinavia, for example, display explicit reference to qualifications frameworks. In countries where this reference is less conspicuous, graduates might not use qualification level labels on their certificates when seeking employment. Poland's scenario illustrates this trend.

*More specific characteristics of VET in the InclusiVET partner countries can be found in **Annex 1**. Furthermore, a detailed description of European VET systems is available on the CEDEFOP's website at: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/>*

3.2 Learners in VET

Learners in vocational education and training (VET) in Europe encompass a diverse group pursuing practical, industry-specific skills and knowledge to prepare for employment in various fields. These learners have varying educational backgrounds, career aspirations, and life circumstances. While some learners may have completed secondary education, others may have left school early or have non-traditional educational experiences. The characteristics of learners in VET can vary depending on the country, region, and specific VET programmes offered. These factors influence the demographics, motivations, and goals of learners in vocational education and training.

Notwithstanding the wide variety, some characteristics can be identified which are in particular specific to VET, especially in comparison with higher education.

Diverse Age Range

VET programmes attract learners of different age groups. This primarily includes **young people entering VET right after compulsory (primary or secondary) education, typically around the age of 15 or 16.**

However, VET extends its reach beyond young learners to embrace a broader demographic. Vocational training is a popular choice for adults, including those seeking career changes or further specialisation, to participate in VET programmes. All European countries provide opportunities for upskilling and reskilling and individuals who need to gain new qualifications or re-skill often choose adult vocational education.. They may attend **evening classes, part-time courses, or short-term training programmes** to acquire new skills or enhance existing ones.

Career-Oriented Focus

Learners in VET typically have a strong inclination towards gaining **specific job-related skills.** Learners opting for VET are often motivated by the desire to swiftly transition into the workforce, securing gainful employment at an accelerated pace compared to traditional academic routes. VET programmes often align closely with industry needs, offering learners the chance to develop practical skills in demand by employers. Moreover, As VET is increasingly recognised as a **lifelong learning tool**, professionals already in the workforce may enrol in VET courses or programmes to update their skills and remain competitive in their careers.

Social Backgrounds

At the European Union policy level, there is a clear and notable inclination towards **reassessing vocational education and training (VET), positioning it as a viable and equivalent alternative to higher education.** This shift in perspective is evident through initiatives such as the **European Skills Agenda**, the establishment of **Centres of Vocational Excellence**, and the designation of **the European Year of Skills**, among others.

However, a discernible trend can be observed in many countries, whereby **vocational schools are favoured by individuals from less affluent social backgrounds**. As a result, the learner population in most of Europe is still predominantly composed of individuals from **disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, a migration background** (OECD, 2019) and other characteristics of disadvantage. Moreover those hailing from rural areas often opt for vocational schools due to the logistical challenges of commuting. This trend is particularly pronounced in regions situated outside major urban centres. There is also clear correlation with **the educational background of the parents of VET learners who tend to have a lower level of education than the parents of learners in higher education** (IFO, 2017).

In the following chapter, we will delve deeper into various categories of disadvantaged and underrepresented learners concerning the main focus of the InclusiVET project, namely the participation of these learners in learner engagement activities.

4 Types of underrepresented learners

4.1 Diversity and intersectionality

In EU countries, all learners are legally guaranteed equal access to free vocational education and training. Formal (legally regulated) programmes to eliminate barriers and obstacles for persons with various needs have been adopted in many European countries.

Based on the desk research and focus groups, a wide range of underrepresented learners can be distinguished, including:

- Learners with physical disabilities
- Learners with intellectual and/or learning disabilities
- Learners with mental disorders
- Learners with integration and/or behavioural difficulties
- Learners in a disadvantaged living situation
- Gifted learners
- LGBTQIA+ learners
- Mature learners/adult learners
- Learners with caretaking responsibilities
- Learners with a migrant background
- Refugees
- International learners
- Black and minority ethnic learners
- First generation VET learners
- Learners from rural and/or remote areas
- Learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds
- Learners in a disadvantaged living situation
- Learners suffering from violence or abuse

The division, based on research of available data in each project partner country, is accepted for the project purposes. However, instead of considering in detail all the different kinds of (potential) disadvantage learners may experience, the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps clusters barriers which may prevent people with fewer opportunities, including underrepresented learners, from participating in different programmes. These barriers revolve around:

- **disabilities** (physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments)
- **health problems** (severe illnesses, chronic diseases, or any other physical or mental health-related situation, etc.)
- **cultural differences** (people with a migrant or refugee background, people belonging to a national or ethnic minority, sign language users, people with linguistic adaptation and cultural inclusion difficulties, etc.)
- **social barriers** (limited social competences, anti-social or high-risk behaviours, offenders, drug or alcohol abusers, or social marginalisation, etc.)

- **economic barriers** (low standard of living, low income, learners who need to work to support themselves, dependence on the social welfare system, in long-term unemployment, precarious situations or poverty, being homeless, in debt or with financial problems, etc.)
- **barriers linked to discrimination** (discriminations linked to gender (gender identity, gender expression, etc.), age, ethnicity, religion, beliefs, sexual orientation, disability, or intersectional factors, etc.)
- **geographical barriers** (living in remote or rural areas, on small islands or in peripheral/outermost regions, in urban suburbs, in less serviced areas or less developed areas in third countries, etc.).¹

In many European countries, belonging to a specific group of underrepresented learners is recognised by VET schools and can be a factor for additional support provided. However, this is not always the case for all the different categories listed above and can also involve the presentation of appropriate documentation to the school, most often in the form of **medical certificates**. For example, in Poland, learners from certain underrepresented groups may have an educational psychology assessment or a disability certificate issued by a specially appointed institution. In other cases, support is also provided to learners who do not have the above-mentioned documents but whose teachers have noticed teaching or educational problems and/or other personal difficulties, e.g. related to their living conditions.

When addressing diversity and disadvantage, it is also important to take into account the issue of **intersectionality**. Understanding intersectionality is pivotal in addressing the complex challenges faced by individuals with multiple marginalised identities.

Intersectionality recognizes that individuals may simultaneously belong to several disadvantaged or minority groups, such as a deaf learner with a migrant background or an adult learner who's also a single mother.

By comprehending the intersecting forms of discrimination and disadvantage, schools and teachers can also better understand the unique experiences and needs of learners with complex identities and thereby better support these learners.

Moreover, the boundaries between '**mainstream**' and '**underrepresented**' learners are blurred, allowing for the possibility that a learner can display traditional attributes in certain aspects while possessing underrepresented characteristics in others simultaneously (e.g. a young white male living in an abusive home environment). Moreover, being 'vulnerable' or 'underrepresented' might be a temporary situation for certain learners that could change over time (e.g. when a learner's family situation changes during their studies due to the loss of a parent, pregnancy, etc.)

¹ These definitions come from a European Commission document *Implementation guidelines Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Inclusion and Diversity Strategy*, Version 1 – 29/04/2021. Available at: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-09/implementation-inclusion-diversity_apr21_en.pdf

4.2 Diverse learners, diverse needs

We will now highlight some of the issues that came up in the focus group discussions held in the InclusiVET partner organisations, considering the underrepresented groups of learners that were most prominent in their local and/or national context.

There are many learners **from disadvantaged groups** in European VET schools. Countries such as Poland, Hungary and France distinguish **learners from low-income, disadvantaged backgrounds**. This situation refers, for example, to learners growing up in families with lower incomes (e.g. in France) but also to refugees who fled armed conflicts (e.g. Ukrainian refugees in Poland). These learners are generally covered by a special assistance programme and can apply for maintenance grants (e.g. In Poland).

Learners with a migration background, black and ethnic minority learners and/or a **different religion** than the majority can suffer from prejudice and discrimination as well as lack of identification with fellow learners and staff.

In VET schools, **adult learners** tend to face different challenges than younger learners. They often have more responsibilities, such as a job, taking care of their family, etc. For this reason, they tend to be less involved in school life and are more oriented towards the goal is to get a specific education. Among adult learners there are many learners with caring responsibilities although of course there are also young **learners with caring responsibilities**. For such learners, it is worth implementing an appropriate education programme that allows them to combine education with their caring responsibilities. In most European countries, there is no legal obligation to provide special care to learners with caring responsibilities. Activities result from the school's own initiative and the engagement of teachers (this is the case in, for example, some schools in Poland).

Although **LGBTQIA+ groups** are present in every VET school, amongst staff and learners, their status is not always fully recognised and protected by law in every country (e.g. Poland). Moreover, several European countries legally only differentiate between female and male gender whereas in other countries (e.g. France) additional separate gender(s) are recognised such as **learners in gender transition**.

When distinguishing underrepresented groups, learners with disabilities are often considered as a specific group and in most EU countries, **learners with disabilities** fall under the category of **Special Educational Needs (SEN)** and are included in dedicated special education programmes.

At the same time, most countries (e.g. Poland, Slovenia, France) distinguish between **learners with intellectual and physical disabilities** in VET schools. In these countries, learners with intellectual disabilities are a separate group **from learners with learning disabilities**. Hungary classifies yet another group: **learners on the autism spectrum**. In this country, **learners with multiple disabilities** are also distinguished. Another group of underrepresented learners is **learners with mental health issues**. Slovenia, for example, distinguishes this group.

Physical disabilities relate in particular to learners who are **visually impaired, hearing impaired** or have a **walking disability**. In Slovenia, for example, this group of learners also includes those with **chronic illnesses**. For these learners, the school can appoint an assistant to help them with daily activities, mobility, reading or writing. Schools who have enrolled learners with physical disabilities also need to pay great attention to the organisation of the classrooms and other learning spaces. The maximum classroom size for SEN learners varies from country to country. For instance, Poland reduces the number of learners to 15 in integrated classes. Special needs schools, primarily catering to learners on the autism spectrum, limit class sizes to five learners. Furthermore, in Poland and Hungary, examination conditions and formats are adapted to accommodate the abilities of learners, and teacher support is provided as needed during exams.

Learners with physical disabilities often have access to rehabilitation at school (or at units with which the school cooperates). This is the case, for example, in Slovenia. In Poland, free rehabilitation is insufficient and most learners use paid rehabilitation.

Learners with intellectual disabilities can, after completing their primary education, generally continue their education in a mainstream school or a special needs school. Such a system exists, for example, in Poland and Slovenia. In Hungary, SEN refers to irregular development caused by disorders related to intellect, vision, hearing, physical (locomotor) and speech organs or other disorders of mental development (severe and permanent disorders of cognitive functions or behavioural development). The learner's specific characteristics differ from the average to such an extent that their developmental potential can only be achieved with specific (special) measures, methods and teaching aids. Depending on their specific condition, they are generally provided with early support both at school and at home. In Slovenia, for example, various family support programmes are in place.

A separate but related group are **learners with learning difficulties**. Learning difficulties are usually recognised by schools and it often depends on the initiative of teachers (e.g. in Poland) that the school provides support. In Poland and Hungary, for example, in addition to adapting educational requirements and the way they are assessed, learners with learning difficulties are treated from a pedagogical point of view. They are offered **teaching-compensatory classes and individual work with a pedagogue**.

In most European countries there is increased recognition for **learners with mental health issues**. These learners tend to be referred to a specialist for diagnosis and once examined, they can be included in a programme at school that adapts the learning process to their abilities.

In most European countries, **learners with disabilities** are provided with **additional career counselling**. The counselling process focuses on determining the educational and vocational pathway, taking into account the individual abilities of each learner.

Depending on the country, in mainstream classes attended by SEN learners, the number of learners per class is reduced. For example, in Poland, there are 15 learners in an integrated class. The number of learners in a class is not reduced if the learners do not have disability certificates. Classes in special needs schools have a maximum of 5 learners. This situation mainly applies to learners on the autism spectrum.

In Poland and Hungary, the education system for learners with SEN, disabilities and behavioural difficulties also determines the way in which professional examinations are conducted. The school may adapt the form and conditions of the examination to the learner's abilities. The school can also appoint a teacher to support the learner's work in exams.

Emotional and behavioural difficulties affect learners at different educational levels and from different backgrounds. In Slovenia, a special law is in force, which primarily aims to establish a single systemic solution for the integrated treatment of children and adolescents with **emotional and behavioural disorders** in educational institutions. In comparison, in Poland, the way of working with such learners is determined by individual school principals.

Gifted learners are sometimes identified as a distinct group of learners for whom special educational programmes are applied. Gifted learners are those who show high above-average thinking skills or extraordinary achievements in different areas of science, art or sport. In upper secondary schools in Slovenia, gifted learners have a **special status**. Schools have to adjust the implementation and duration of the educational programme to them. In Poland, for instance, every learner who has special talents undergoes a **psychological and pedagogical examination** and obtains an opinion from a counselling centre. Teachers adapt their teaching methods and work with gifted learners in such a way as to develop their gifts.

Another underrepresented group pointed out in the focus groups refers to **learners with integration and behavioural difficulties**. In Slovenia, some learners are socially excluded due to a lack of certain interests, e.g. playing football or playing online games. Equally, the focus group in France identified this group of underrepresented learners, made up of **learners who are socially excluded because of their interests**. Where specific support for these learners exists, it is at the school's own initiative.

In relation to this, there are **learners with adaptation difficulties**. These could be recent arrivals to the country (e.g. international learners or learners with a migrant background) who start their education in a new country or come back to their native education system after living abroad. In some cases, these learners receive special support, for example Ukrainian refugees in Poland for whom additional language lessons are organised.

5 Learner engagement

5.1 Traditional forms of learner engagement

A diverse learner body presents a challenge for VET schools, as it necessitates the creation of **inclusive opportunities for all learners in both the structural and cultural aspects of the school**. This includes ensuring that their opinions and needs are represented and considered in the school's governance, quality assurance and study programme design processes. Strengthening this involvement requires providing inclusive access to engagement opportunities, thus fostering a perspective-rich collaboration between VET schools and their learners.

Learner Engagement can be defined as a collaborative process between VET schools and learners to shape decision-making, structures, and cultures in vocational education and training.

It is often referred to as 'hearing the learner voice' and 'learners as partners.' This underscores the importance of learners being actively engaged in the development and optimisation of processes and structures that are relevant to them.

Within the InclusiVET project, we identify four domains of learner engagement.

The first domain relates to '**Governance and Management,**' where learner engagement involves participation in committees that influence policy development, implementation, and evaluation.

The second domain relates to '**Teaching and Learning,**' which encompasses learners' engagement in their own learning and enhancing their learning experience.

The third domain relates to '**Quality Assurance and Enhancement,**' involving participation of learners in all processes related to quality assurance and improvement.

The final domain, '**Learner Representation and Self-Organisation,**' provides learners with opportunities to come together in self-organised groups, engage in democratic processes, elect representatives, and initiate discussions about improvements in relation to their learning experience.

Learner engagement can operate at various levels with different objectives. **At the international level, organisations like the Organising Bureau of European School Learners (OBESSU) aim to represent and advocate for learners' interests at the European level.** Member organisations and other learner representative groups can also exist at national or regional levels.

On an **institutional level**, learners can actively participate in committee discussions, policy-making, and school-wide issues.

Programme or class level engagement typically focuses on enhancing the learning experience and solving specific programme-related problems with the involvement of class representatives.

Finally, **individual level engagement** pertains to learners actively engaging in their own learning processes.

Although in theory there is this wide range of learner engagement opportunities, we should also acknowledge that in practice these are not always available in every country and VET school. Even in VET systems where there is a systematic possibility for learner participation, there is not always the strategic intention to meaningfully involve learners within the different decision-making processes. Moreover, often the engagement of learners can be viewed as tokenistic and non-participatory.

Learning engagement often takes place primarily through **learner organisations that are led by learners themselves**.

Learner-led organisations offer learners opportunities to enhance self-awareness and develop leadership skills. Facilitating the engagement of underrepresented learners in such organisations is crucial as it helps prepare them for success in their future careers..

Through these organisations, **learner engagement can take different forms**, including:

a. **Study-related Organisations**: VET schools may have learner-led committees representing learners in matters related to their learning experiences. Additionally, study programmes can have learner-led organisations that organise a variety of social, political, cultural, and sports activities to foster a sense of community among learners both inside and outside the classroom.

b. **Identity- or Interest-related Organisations**: learners with common interests, shared identities or hobbies can form their own organisations (e.g., film or book clubs, LGBTQIA+ groups, regional groups, sports clubs, etc.).

5.2 Alternative forms of learner engagement

One of the most significant potentials identified through internal research, focus groups and discussions within the project consortium, was the prospect of offering diverse participation opportunities to learners. **Alternative learner engagement opportunities could address concerns related to time constraints, identification issues, and accessibility challenges that are often raised by learners**. Many learner engagement activities demand a substantial time commitment, and the apprehension of being tied to long-term engagements poses a

genuine obstacle for learners, particularly in VET – we will further elaborate on the main challenges for learner engagement in section 6.2.

In addition to the more conventional forms of learner engagement outlined previously, which typically is long-term, comprehensive, and non-specific, for many learners it is more interesting and realistic to take part in short-term engagements with a thematic focus. **Short-term engagement can for example be done in the form of project-based participation or the organisation of specific events and this can be undertaken in a specific thematic area of interest to certain learners** (e.g. projects related to environmental issues, to LGBTQIA+ issues or linked to learners' specific study field).

Particularly concerning underrepresented learners, short term and thematic engagement has been viewed as an effective way to introduce and involve learners in engagement opportunities that are possible within their school. VET schools as well as learner-led organisations can proactively invite learners to join specific thematic 'projects' in addition to the more traditional forms of learner participation and representation.

6 Challenges and obstacles for underrepresented learners

6.1 Participation challenges in the life of the school

In most European countries, barriers to learner participation in school life are related to their **individual predispositions**. It concerns for example **learners with disabilities, poor language skills (e.g. international learners), and low social skills**. For them it is much more difficult to get involved in the social activities of the school. This also applies to VET school learners.

On an individual level, underrepresented learners may encounter various general problems and barriers that can impede their sense of feeling genuinely welcomed, included, and integrated into the institution.

Social barriers may sometimes hinder the development of friendships between learners from different backgrounds. For mature entrants and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as those from an ethnic minority, finding common ground with learners from more dominant social groups can be challenging.

A more structural factor in the VET sector that strongly influences the level of inclusion of learners in the life of the school is **the organisation of education**. In branch technical secondary schools (in the case of, e.g. Poland and France), learners are typically at school for two days a week and on the other days they learn on a practical placement outside school. It means that they do not have the opportunity to participate in all activities organised at the school.

Another factor in the inclusion of underrepresented learners is their **place of residence**. Often, the smaller the town or village, the greater the problems with commuting to school or even to have reliable access to the Internet. Mobility difficulties have an impact on the choice of educational pathway and workplace (e.g. in Slovenia). **The financial situation** of the learner and their family has a direct impact on young people's access to learning.

One may find yet another barrier to the inclusion of underrepresented learners in the life of the school. France, for example, points out the **low self-esteem** of many of these learners. Learners may have different disabilities, come from different backgrounds, they are ethnic or sexual minorities, they may have learning difficulties, etc., all of which can affect how they function at school and how they are perceived by other learners, which in turn can have significant impact on lowering their self-esteem.

It is often emphasised that social exclusion is also significantly influenced by contemporary social processes such as **individualisation and globalisation**. For some learners, this can mean a loss of social security and a diminished connection with their family and classical institutions. Learners are encouraged to take more responsibility for themselves, but at the

same time they have to develop new social ties, adapt quickly to new demands in all areas of life and may feel less secure and more exposed to various risks. It is important for the individual to have access to information, e.g. about education or employment opportunities on the local labour market.

6.2 Challenges for learner engagement

Broadly, the main challenges and barriers to inclusive learner engagement can be categorised into five main areas: issues related to **time**, challenges concerning **visibility**, problems with **identification**, concerns surrounding **image**, and obstacles to **accessibility**. While some of these categories are rooted in cultural aspects (such as image and identification), others are more structural in nature (time, visibility, accessibility). Additionally, these challenges manifest at various levels, including the course level, school level, and national level.

Time and finance challenges

Time and financial challenges are intricately connected and can be delineated across various dimensions. Learners often find themselves in a position where they must work to finance their studies, consequently reducing the time available for engaging in other school activities outside the classroom. Additionally, learners may hesitate to commit to long-term engagement due to competing demands such as their **apprenticeships, family responsibilities or other interests**. Furthermore, the **substantial workload** associated with their studies can make learner engagement appear conflicting with their study goals and objectives. In this context, participation and engagement are closely tied to both **financial constraints and time constraints**. Other potential barriers related to financial problems include **the lack of specific financial support for engagement** – or, if available, lack of clarity on how to access this.

Moreover, the rigidity of most **VET study programmes offers little flexibility for learners** to take time off to invest in learner engagement activities. Furthermore, many underrepresented learners are enrolled in **part-time study programmes** or spend less time at the school, which can result in **reduced awareness** of available engagement opportunities. More time-related challenges can be associated with short-term study programmes, extended apprenticeships, and work obligations.

Visibility challenges

Visibility challenges arise from the lack of clear evidence demonstrating the outcomes of learner engagement and participation. This relates to the decisions and changes resulting from learner involvement, which substantiate its ability to have a meaningful and positive impact on the learning experience. Additionally, learners must be made aware of the actual opportunities that are available for engagement and they must have the sense that those opportunities are accessible to all learners. When these opportunities remain unclear, participation can become more challenging and exclusive.

Often, motivation for engagement is sparked by specific instances of dissatisfaction and a concrete desire for change. However, for learners with less clearly defined concerns, it may be more challenging to discern why they should engage at all. For example, they may not be aware of any success stories or concrete results arising from learner engagement and participation. This issue can be attributed to insufficient information regarding the roles of learner representatives and a related fear of lacking the necessary skills. Consequently, learner engagement can run the risk of being perceived as an endeavour that yields little real change.

Furthermore, learner engagement can either be facilitated or hindered by teachers. Sometimes learners feel discouraged by teachers from taking part in learner engagement when the overall impression is given that time devoted to engagement detracts from study time, potentially jeopardising their chances of successfully completing their studies.

Identification challenges

Identification challenges can manifest in various dimensions and present complex challenges. Learners may find it difficult to connect with learner-led organisations or other forms of organised learner engagement if these groups do not align with their interests, identity, daily life, and unique challenges. Additionally, learners may feel apprehensive when they believe they lack the necessary skills to join an organisation or put themselves forward for engagement opportunities, leading to feelings of insecurity about whether they would be welcomed. Identification issues can also arise from the way learners are depicted in course materials and promotional materials. If these materials present a stereotypical image of the school's learner population that does not reflect its diversity, it can further compound identification problems.

But also when they are taking part in learner engagement, the experience can be hampered by a lack of identification. For example, when learners engage in formal meetings with staff, the atmosphere is not always particularly inviting or conducive to open discussions. This means that learners may not feel encouraged or supported to actively participate. There can also be social barriers or a (perceived) lack of sensitivity from the side of teachers towards learners from a specific underrepresented background that make them feel unwelcome in the meetings where they are expected to participate.

Image challenges

Closely linked to identification issues, learner engagement opportunities may encounter **image challenges** that dissuade certain learners from putting themselves forward. For example, becoming a class representative may be seen as first and foremost a contest of popularity, causing some learners to feel like they don't belong or lack the confidence to engage. Specific roles and positions are typically assigned through a selection and election process, which can appear intimidating to less extroverted learners.

Another reason some learners may hesitate to get involved is the **fear of assuming certain responsibilities or making long-term commitments**. It is often easier for learners with prior engagement experience in other organisations or roles to take the leap. Additionally, there may be a perception that learner-led organisations and school activities primarily cater to younger

learners, which can make older learners, learners with children or those who are working less inclined to engage. Moreover, the pressure on underrepresented learners to succeed can be overwhelming, leading them to focus solely on their studies.

Accessibility challenges

Accessibility challenges can pose difficulties for certain learners when it comes to engaging and participating across various levels. These challenges may encompass **language barriers, particularly affecting international learners, recent arrivals in the country (e.g. refugees) and learners with hearing impairments. Additionally, mobility issues can impact learners with limited mobility or those living remotely from the VET school, which may be related to their family or work responsibilities.** Infrastructure-related accessibility issues in the school can further limit participation opportunities for learners with physical disabilities.

In the context of language barriers, there may be issues to learner engagement such as the unavailability of documents, policies, or support in other languages or more accessible formats (e.g. for visual or hearing impaired learners). Furthermore, learner participation often involves its own language or 'jargon,' which can be a unique barrier for international learners, learners with a migrant background, and first-generation learners.

7 Success factors for inclusive learner engagement

In order to open up and enable opportunities for engagement to all learners, all learner engagement mechanisms must take into account the diversity of the population of VET schools and their learning specificities. On the basis of the desk research, focus groups and examples of good practice the InclusiVET consortium has identified a number of **success factors for inclusive learner engagement which could serve as inspiration for other VET schools.**

7.1 Different participation opportunities

Addressing both **identification and time-related issues** that are in particular prevalent for underrepresented learners, short-term and thematic engagement opportunities have emerged as effective solutions. Some schools have successfully experimented with and transitioned to these **shorter-term and thematic engagement options** and it represent a substantial departure from a sole focus on traditional, longer-term, broad-spectrum work of learner representatives in formal governance structures, necessitating a systematic and cultural shift within both schools and learner-led organisations

Thematic engagement is particularly beneficial for introducing underrepresented learners to participation within schools, as it allows them to **express their specific needs and interests.**

For instance, **projects related to refugee topics** can be initiated to address these unique requirements. Schools and learner-led organisations can proactively invite learners to join these **thematic 'projects'** in addition to more conventional avenues of learner participation and representation.

Moreover, **online or blended forms of engagement** can extend participation opportunities even further to a more diverse range of learners who may face **accessibility limitations for physical activities**. Online meetings facilitate smoother communication and collaboration, so for example organising focus groups with learners as part of their active involvement in the school's quality assurance becomes more feasible, reducing issues related to transportation and time constraints.

Embracing **flexible engagement approaches** can help ensure equitable access to learner engagement opportunities across all types of learners. This implies that, instead of solely providing engagement opportunities requiring a more extended commitment from learners, such as volunteering to participate in a course committee, schools should consider options where learners can engage once or twice without a longer-term commitment. Regarding quality assurance activities, this could, for example, take the form of focus groups, and in volunteering opportunities, it could mean participating in specific activities rather than committing to a volunteering group itself.

7.2 Visibility of diversity without stigmatisation

Self-identification as an underrepresented learner can already act as a hurdle for many learners due to the negative connotations associated with the term.

The term 'underrepresented learner' primarily signifies that the learner differs from the typical learner based on various diversity characteristics and should by no means be immediately regarded as a disadvantage. Consequently, one of the primary objectives of this project is to normalise diversity within VET by integrating underrepresented learners into the policymaking processes.

However, achieving this objective requires enhancing the visibility of underrepresented learners as integral members of the VET community. This effort begins with adapting **promotional materials for both the school and learner-led organisations to appeal to a more diverse range of learners beyond the stereotypical image**. Additionally, the establishment of special positions or quotas can play a crucial role in bolstering the representation of individuals with diverse characteristics on boards and committees. Some learner-led organisations in schools across Europe already introduced specific roles within their own structures - such as a Diversity Officers in some UK further education learner associations - to increase the visibility of underrepresented learners as essential members of the school population.

Typically, measures like quotas are temporary and serve as a catalyst for change until the new, more diverse compositions are perceived as the norm.

7.3 Support system for underrepresented learners

To enhance the engagement of underrepresented learners, it is imperative to adopt a comprehensive strategy that provides robust support for learners grappling with specific challenges throughout their studies. This support system should encompass both financial assistance as well as counselling services. To achieve this goal, it is essential to establish permanent counselling services in every school to ensure easy access for learners. **Learner support services and learner support staff** play a crucial role in providing underrepresented learners with the necessary space, information, and resources to help them navigate their studies successfully. The existence of these dedicated services and support staff acknowledges the additional hurdles faced by these learner groups in accessing and participating in education, but also in learner engagement in all its forms.

Furthermore, **coaching and mentoring programmes** should be proactively offered to all learners on a regular basis to prevent the stigmatisation of underrepresented learners. Counselling should be regarded as the standard practice rather than the exception, aiming to identify and address learners' challenges early in their studies and to implement suitable interventions. These coaching and mentoring initiatives should extend beyond traditional study-oriented formats to include specific support for learner engagement activities, as they represent one of the most effective ways to promote learner engagement in general.

Another vital support option, especially in VET schools characterised by fixed theory and practice phases, is the flexibility to take some specified time off, extend the duration of studies, or postpone examinations. These measures offer learners greater adaptability and the ability to respond to sudden changes in their circumstances without sacrificing their study success.

7.4 Professionalise teachers for different learner needs

Teachers as the most direct contact person with learners are very crucial for the inclusion of underrepresented learners in VET schools. Often, **teachers also act as intermediaries between learners and the respective school support structures**. In order to be able to respond to the special needs of the learners, **teachers should, if possible, be made aware of learners' needs prior to their first classes**. To ensure that this initial process of getting to know each other is not perceived as a hurdle by the learners because they fear stigmatisation from the teaching side, it is important to inform and train the teachers specifically to handle these complex situations. The aim should be to create **a welcoming (class) community** despite the different profiles. Because of the important role of apprenticeships in VET, the **industry partners/apprenticeship mentors** should also be regularly informed by the VET

school about the inclusion of underrepresented learners, as in these systems often only half of the contact with the learners is established through the school and the other half through the work placement partners.

7.5 Guidelines and policies for and from underrepresented learners

An often used and effective way of the involvement of underrepresented learners is the creation and implementation of **specific policies and guidelines for and from underrepresented learners**. This process can also include dedicated committees with representatives from different underrepresented learner groups that discuss issues of particular concern with the school's leadership and assess new initiatives for inclusivity before they are implemented.

7.6 Reward learner engagement

Some schools have introduced a range of incentives for learners involved in **learner engagement activities**, such as **financial compensation** for dedicated time, **free lunches** as part of committee meetings, **discounts on study materials**, etc which might make it more attractive for learners to dedicate their limited time to learner engagement roles.

Another means of enhancing learner engagement among underrepresented learners and assisting them in managing their studies alongside other commitments is to **incorporate learner engagement options as part of the curriculum**, either as an elective choice (if available) or a compulsory element. This option could for example enable class representatives to allocate some study hours towards dedicated training to hone their skills and share their experiences with fellow class participants.

Annexes

Annex 1 - Characteristics of VET institutions/studies in partner countries:

Poland:

- ❖ Secondary school: technical secondary school – secondary school leaving examination (Matura) and vocational exam, 5 years of study
- ❖ Vocational school – vocational exam, 3 years of study
- ❖ VET for adults, possibility of further training in courses, post-secondary school, duration 1 to 2 years
- ❖ Obtaining a profession is possible in all vocational schools
- ❖ Pupils aged 14 and more go to vocational schools
- ❖ Vocational schools are more often chosen by pupils from poorer backgrounds or from the countryside (they do not have the opportunity to study due to their family's financial resources or the possibility of commuting or accommodation)
- ❖ About half of vocational school graduates choose VET schools

France:

- ❖ High school learners, students/learners, work-study learners, adults
- ❖ Training courses at the national level
- ❖ Vocational diplomas
- ❖ Access to vocational training at any time of life, after finishing primary education
- ❖ Possibility of professional retraining, in particular through the continuous training system.
- ❖ Vocational exam
- ❖ VET school learners are diversified in terms of social background, culture, level of knowledge and skills, disabilities
- ❖ Diversity of social background is visible
- ❖ People from poorer backgrounds choose professions in which they can do specific work (manual trades and execution), people from higher social categories choose education in artistic and social areas
- ❖ There are problems with travel and accommodation for learners
- ❖ There are less and less learners choosing vocational schools

Hungary:

- ❖ Vocational training takes place in upper secondary vocational grammar schools
- ❖ It is 5 years of study: general education and VET are provided in four grades/years, vocational education and training is only in the fifth year
- ❖ Technicums (technical secondary school) provide general education, preparing learner both for the Matura examination (secondary school leaving examination) and the vocational examination, and enables learners to continue their studies in a higher education institution or to start working
- ❖ There is a possibility of supplementing education with vocational training at a technical school for persons with Matura certificate
- ❖ Technicum may organise a programme to help learners obtain the Matura certificate
- ❖ The Register of Vocational Occupations determines the number of levels to be acquired in order to obtain an occupation.
- ❖ Vocational schools organise general and vocational training necessary to acquire a profession (preparation for the vocational exam only).

Slovenia:

- ❖ Vocational training begins after grade 9 (compulsory basic education, integrating primary and lower secondary education) age: 15 - 16 years
- ❖ Referring to European qualifications framework (EQF)
- ❖ Two levels of secondary education
- ❖ In upper secondary education, the vast majority are vocational learners (over 90%)
- ❖ VET learners are mostly adults
- ❖ VET education offers a variety of vocational training pathways and the possibility to change profession during the course of study
- ❖ Diverse training programmes, usually 2-3 years, regulated programmes
- ❖ The longest - 4-year technical and professional education is the most common choice
- ❖ According to field of vocational education a strongly predominant field is Engineering, manufacturing and construction with 38% followed by Services with 15% and Business, administration and law with 12% of VET learners
- ❖ Vocational education is more often chosen by men than by women
- ❖ Primary school graduates very often choose upper secondary schools, education in other types of schools is considered of worse quality
- ❖ Vocational schools are chosen by people from lower social backgrounds.

Annex 2 - Good practise examples

Various strategies and programmes have been implemented in European countries and different initiatives have been taken up to include underrepresented learners in school life and to prevent social exclusion. Examples within the project partnership include:

1. *In Slovenia*, in the Prekmurje region, much attention is focused on the inclusion of Romani, who are the minority in the area. There is an ***Institutional Inclusion Strategy (Institutional Inclusion Strategy ŠC Celje)*** developed and learners are supported through participation in international Erasmus+ projects that focus on promoting multicultural integration.
2. *In Poland*, in the School Complex in Zdzeszowice (Technical Secondary School and Branch School of I Degree) the involvement of learners in school life is mainly ***through psychological and pedagogical support***. This support is coordinated by the school pedagogue and implemented by all teachers. The school pedagogue develops a psychological and pedagogical assistance project for each school year. It takes into account the current legislation, the basic directions of the state's educational policy, opinions and decisions of the psychological-educational counselling centre (didactic-educational classes, corrective-compensatory classes, revalidation classes) and conclusions from the previous school year. All actions taken at school serve the broadly understood development of the learner. The psychological and pedagogical assistance provided is modified during the school year, depending on the needs of the learners.
3. At the SEPR school *in Lyon, France*, so called ***'Engagement Forums'*** are organised at the beginning of the school year, where all opportunities for learners to get involved are presented. Associations and projects in which learners can get involved are discussed, detailing their mainstream interests, themes and specific activities. These projects include:
 - setting up a solidarity shop where food is collected for the benefit of poorer communities;
 - peer tutoring: identifying young people to become a tutor, whereby tutors meet one or more learners who have difficulties (methodological, in a particular discipline, etc.) and accompany them to help them,
 - organisation by learners of a blood donation day.

Some interesting and innovative examples from other countries include:

4. VET learner engagement in Finland. [This article](#) explores how learner engagement evolves during vocational education and training. A qualitative longitudinal study was carried out with 12 learners interviewed once a year during their three-year education.

5. [This article](#) describes and analyses the social dialogue and policy steps that brought about an improved environment for VET learners in Spain. [This one](#) does it for the Basque Country specifically.

6. [This case study](#) from the Netherlands argues that citizenship education is a good kick-starter of engagement in VET curricula.

7. [This case study](#) examines the interventions aimed at indigenous learners in VET across the world and their efficacy.

8. [This case study](#) examines critically the concept of learner engagement in VET starting from the experience of ESL in VET in Denmark

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InclusiVET

About the InclusiveVET Project

For a VET institution to genuinely embrace diversity among its students, it must extend its focus beyond teaching and curricula, and broaden its approach to encompass a wider range of student engagement areas. This includes promoting student activism, encouraging participation in decision-making bodies and supporting student organisations.

Unfortunately, extracurricular activities can often be less diverse than the wider student body, which can create barriers for students from non-traditional backgrounds and underrepresented groups.



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