Vocational Education and Training systems in practice: Country Case Studies (Deliverable 7.2)

Skills2Capabilities Report

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Dr Sally-Anne Barnes and Dr Chandrima Roy, University of Leicester, UK
Professor Jaana Kettunen and Hanna Pullinen, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

ABSTRACT

This working paper explores national practices supporting vocational education and training (VET) systems across seven European countries. It builds on prior analysis of national contexts and skills formation systems, focusing on the integration of career guidance and counselling. The report presents seven case studies: Bulgaria's dual education model; Germany's Youth Employment Agencies and Vocational Training Ambassadors; Estonia's compulsory education reform; Norway's regional collaboration between career centres and the labour and welfare administration; Austria's Vienna Weeks outreach initiative; Finland's One-Stop Guidance Centres; and England's Skills Bootcamps. These cases illustrate diverse approaches to enhancing VET accessibility, relevance, and effectiveness through national reforms, regional partnerships, and employer engagement. They also highlight the role of lifelong guidance in supporting transitions into and through VET pathways. The findings underscore the importance of coordinated, context-sensitive strategies to address labour market needs and promote inclusive, future-ready VET systems.

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Skills2Capabilities, a Horizon Europe study, is about understanding how skills systems need to develop if they are to assist people to make labour market transitions – i.e. between jobs, employers or sectors – and thereby reduce the level of skill mismatch which might otherwise arise.

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1. Introduction to work package 7 – The role of policy, services and stakeholders in supporting VET systems: innovative practice

1.1. Introduction

Work package 7 is one of two work packages researching the policy dimension, which links individuals to VET and adult learning provision. Work package 7 is specifically focused on career guidance and counselling policy and practice in VET systems. Contemporary labour markets are dynamic and complex, impacted by shocks such as the pandemic, war, political and societal changes, technology and economic changes. Career guidance and counselling span different policy areas with growing evidence of the benefits of guidance at the individual, economic and societal levels (see for example Cedefop, ETF, European Commission, ILO, OECD & UNESCO, 2021; Mayston, 2002; Percy, & Dodd, 2021; Whiston, Mitts, & Li, 2019). As a policy, career guidance or lifelong guidance is seen as one instrument which countries can use to variously enhance education outcomes, reduce school dropout rates, improve individual transitions from education to the labour market, address social inclusion and equity, and reduce unemployment levels (see for example Hooley, Sultana, & Thomsen, 2018; OECD, 2004; Robertson, & Borbély-Pecze, 2021; Herdman et al., 2024; Watts & Sultana, 2004).

Across Europe and internationally, nations have been working towards more developed systems of lifelong guidance (Barnes et al., 2020; Herdman et al., 2024; Kadletz et al., 2021). At a European level, developments in lifelong guidance have been driven by the 2004 Council of the European Union resolution on lifelong guidance and its 2008 resolution on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies. The establishment of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) (2015) guidelines for policies and systems development for lifelong guidance provided a reference toolkit in which policymakers and developers can systematise national guidance services and programmes. Recent research reported that career development experts have aspirations for a more systemic and holistic system of lifelong guidance (Kettunen et al., 2023), with several countries evidencing progress towards a developed system (Barnes et al., 2020). Alongside aspirations for more comprehensive lifelong guidance systems, there is recognition that supporting individual engagement with learning and skills development throughout their life course meets the needs of a changing labour market (OECD, 2021). However, a range of mechanisms need to be in place to support individual skills development, including legislation, strategy, funding, labour market information and key stakeholders.

Work package 7 addresses recent advances in lifelong guidance with a focus on what constitutes effective systems which convert resources into capabilities. This work package is designed to explore, using qualitative scientific methods, the role of policy, different stakeholders (such as career guidance and counselling practitioners, educators, trainers, employers, etc.) and services in VET systems to understand the relationships between policy and practice at national and regional level in seven case study countries. This will enable an understanding of how national VET systems are supported or overlooked by those delivering support programmes and services. It will assess how these services could develop and evolve now and, in the future, to resolve skills demands and mismatches. Lifelong guidance can be seen as a building block in VET systems by supporting the delivery of services, but also supporting those undertaking a VET transition with guidance and labour market information, including industrial insights and data on skills demands. It is, therefore, important to understand how systems

are established, evolve and develop in response to changing labour markets, skills supply and skills demand.

1.2. Work package 7 objectives

- To understand the role of policy, service and stakeholders in supporting VET systems to better understand how services and support programmes are operating in the current environment with the aim of building better VET transitions.
- To examine lifelong learning and lifelong guidance (or career guidance and counselling) legislation and strategies at the national and EU level with a particular focus on support for VET systems and transitions.
- To explore the impacts of different national contexts and skills formation systems on fostering positive transitions in the VET system and the extent to which different regulatory constraints in countries under study result in distinct strategies with regard to addressing skills mismatch.
- To explore the impact of current structures and dynamics in the economic and social environmental impact on national VET systems and what the implications of recent changes in these environments (for example COVID pandemic, economic and fiscal crises, industry trends, socio-demographic trends) entail for addressing skills mismatches at the local, regional and national level.
- To explore what areas of policy and delivery would benefit from greater intervention at a national and/or EU level.

2. Approach to the study: practice case study

Deliverable 7.2 is a series of case studies that were undertaken to better understand how career guidance and counselling services and support are delivered in VET ecosystems, variously as part of national provision of guidance support or as embedded within VET programmes. These services are provided through a variety of mechanisms—either as part of national guidance frameworks or integrated directly into VET programmes. The aim of these case studies was to identify and analyse innovative and effective practices that support individuals who are considering, participating in, or transitioning from VET pathways.

The case studies focused on seven European countries—Bulgaria, Germany, Estonia, Norway, Austria, Finland, and the UK—each offering distinct approaches and institutional contexts. These countries were selected to reflect a diversity of VET systems and guidance traditions, enabling a comparative perspective on how career support is conceptualised and operationalised across different settings.

This work builds on the desk-based research undertaken for Deliverable 7.1, which provided a foundational mapping of career guidance and counselling provision in VET. That initial research also highlighted several gaps in our understanding, particularly regarding the practical implementation of career guidance and counselling services, the roles of different actors, and how services are tailored to meet the needs of diverse learner populations. These gaps informed the development of a set of cross-cutting themes (see Table 2.1) that guided the selection and design of the case studies.

Table 2.1: Overview of case study themes by country

Theme/country	Bulgaria	Germany	Estonia	Norway	Austria	Finland	UK
Organisation and management of career guidance and counselling in VET	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
Resourcing of career guidance provision in VET			✓		✓		✓
Delivery of career guidance and support for VET	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The application of labour market information and data to support those delivering career guidance services			✓				
Cooperation and collaborations in practice between stakeholders and actors in VET	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Digitalisation of the provision of career guidance and counselling in VET systems.				✓		✓	

Each case study explores one or more of these themes in depth, offering insights into the structures, processes, delivery and stakeholder collaborations associated with career guidance and counselling in VET.

By examining these themes across diverse national contexts, the case studies aim to surface promising practices, identify common challenges, and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how career guidance and counselling services can effectively support VET learners throughout their educational and career journeys.

Country case studies were undertaken using interviews and documentary analysis.

Based on the analytical framework developed for work package 7 (see deliverable 7.1), an interview guide was developed that could be adapted by country partners to fit their case study themes (see appendix 1). An informed consent form (appendix 2), participant information sheet (appendix 3) and privacy notice (appendix 4) were also developed and translated into Austrian, Bulgarian, Estonian, Finnish, German and Norwegian. These research instruments formed part of the ethics application submitted to the University of Leicester Ethics Committee. Approval for the research from the Committee was gained.

All case studies undertook desk research as part of their case. For the Bulgarian, Estonian and Austrian cases, desk research served as the primary method of data collection. The extensive information already available provided a comprehensive understanding of the cases, allowing for an in-depth analysis without the need for additional primary data collection. These case studies variously used academic sources, official websites, regulatory documents, policy documents (draft law with explanatory memorandum, opinions of different stakeholders), evaluation reports, debates in the parliament, and adopted amendments to the law, as well as media publications. All documentary sources used have been listed in the reference section for each case study.

Across the five case studies (Bulgaria, Germany, Norway, Finland, and the UK), interviews were undertaken alongside the desk research. Interviews were undertaken with key stakeholders in VET systems, including policy makers, guidance service providers, educational leaders, teachers and employers. For the interviews, the research team drew upon their professional networks to undertake the research. All participants who were invited to take part in the research were provided with an informed consent form, a participant information sheet and a privacy notice. Interviewees were asked to sign and return the consent form if they were willing to participate. Interviews took place online and by telephone, lasting up to 60 minutes. Where agreed, interviews were recorded, transcribed, and summaries created for analysis. All data were anonymised, and research participants were given an identifier. In total, ten in-depth interviews were conducted and three focus groups (consisting of nine participants in total).

3. Understanding national practice supporting VET systems

This report is the second deliverable for work package 7. It builds on an understanding of national contexts and skills formation systems for VET presented in deliverable 7.1. The practice of career guidance and counselling (or lifelong guidance) in those systems was investigated in each of the case study countries, including Bulgaria, Germany, Estonia, Norway, Austria, Finland, and the UK.

The first case study, presented in Section 4, provides an example of how a vocational school in **Bulgaria** successfully implemented dual education through partnerships with employers, offering students real-world experience alongside classroom learning. The programme, developed under the DOMINO project, prepares students for local labour market needs and includes paid practical training in the final years.

The second case study from **Germany** is presented in section 5, which provides an example of how young people undertaking vocational education and training programmes are supported and support those considering VET. The Youth Employment Agencies provide integrated, localised support for young people navigating education and employment, while Vocational Training Ambassadors promote vocational paths through peer storytelling. These initiatives address declining interest in vocational training and mismatches in the labour market.

The third case study presented in section 6 outlines and assesses how compulsory education is being reformed in **Estonia**. This case provides an example of national-level changes to the management and organisation of the VET system. Estonia's education reform extends compulsory schooling to age 18 and introduces flexible vocational pathways to reduce dropouts and align with labour market needs. The reform includes new curricula, earlier final exams, and the creation of educational centres, supported by EU funding. It aims to make vocational education more attractive and responsive to future workforce demands.

In section 7, the fourth case from **Norway** provides an example of how regional and local collaborations between the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (Nav) and career centres are supporting those engaged in VET. In Norway's Trøndelag region, a long-standing collaboration between Nav, career centres, and schools supports job seekers through tailored vocational education and employment pathways. The model evolved from compact programmes to standard VET formats due to implementation challenges. Despite regional differences and employer engagement issues, the partnership remains vital for addressing unemployment and lifelong learning.

The fifth case study from **Austria** is presented in section 8. It provides a regional example of how a VET initiative, the Vienna Weeks, is providing accessible career and education guidance through public events in city districts. It targets underserved groups like migrants and low-qualified adults to improve their skills. Organised by the Vienna Employee Promotion Fund, it fosters regional cooperation and supports the city's qualification goals. Rebranded as the "Future Fit Festival 2025," the programme continues to expand despite challenges in maintaining engagement and partner capacity.

The sixth case study, in section 9, is of **Finland**'s Ohjaamo model, which was developed as part of the Finnish Youth Guarantee in 2014. It comprises a network of one-stop guidance centres aimed at providing integrated services to individuals under 30 years. These centres consolidate support across education, employment, health, social services, and youth work, addressing the fragmentation of

youth services across municipalities. They play a pivotal role in bridging education and employment systems, supporting coherent transitions for young people, and fostering innovation in service delivery within Finland's vocational education and welfare frameworks.

In section 10, the final case study from **England**, **UK**, provides an example of the implementation of skills programmes managed at the local level through collaborations between policy makers, education and training providers and employers. Skills Bootcamps in England offer short, employer-aligned training for adults to gain in-demand skills, supported by government funding and local partnerships. They aim to address socio-economic challenges like automation and unemployment, with flexible delivery formats and a focus on inclusivity.

Sections 4-10 provide the full national case studies, but summaries of each initiative or programme are presented next.

The case studies presented in this report offer an opportunity for a comparative analysis of the structures, practices, and innovations shaping career guidance and counselling within VET systems across diverse national and regional contexts. They enable an examination of several interrelated dimensions critical to understanding the effectiveness and equity of guidance provision in VET. Firstly, the case studies illustrate the organisation and management of career guidance and counselling within VET systems, highlighting how responsibilities are distributed across institutional levels and how governance structures influence the coherence and accessibility of services. This includes the extent to which guidance is embedded within national education strategies, decentralised to regional authorities, or integrated into school-level planning. Secondly, the studies illustrate cooperation and collaboration among stakeholders, including schools, employers, public employment services, and community organisations. The case studies provide concrete examples of how such collaborations are structured and maintained, and the institutional conditions that enable or hinder their success. Finally, the case studies offer insights into how career guidance and counselling in VET systems are evolving in response to changing educational, economic, and political landscapes. They allow for the identification of practices, common challenges, and context-specific innovations that can inform policy and practice across Europe.

3.1. Dual education: A case study of a vocational high school in Bulgaria

Based on the example of one of the country's vocational schools, the case study describes how dual education was introduced in Bulgaria through the participation of all stakeholders (including the Ministries, regional education departments, public employment services, the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training, local policy makers and employers). This vocational school is located in the district of Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. The school has a rich, 90-year history with strong VET traditions. In 2017, it joined the DOMINO project (2015–2019), financed by the Swiss-Bulgarian Cooperation Programme and realised in 2015 in Bulgaria under the framework of another project, "Swiss support for the introduction of dual track principles in the Bulgarian vocational education system". The school started to develop a dual form of learning at the request of employers, also changing its profile from agricultural to industrial education, reflecting the region's current job vacancies. Since the completion of DOMINO, the school has continued to actively take part in projects (under operational and national programmes) and, in partnership with local companies, it has succeeded with infrastructural improvements, as well as improving the quality of teacher-facilitator

training. The school has set a goal to prepare cadres for the local labour market, receiving assistance from the municipality and actively partnering with businesses in the region with a vested interest and regular need for qualified personnel. The active participation of all stakeholders enables the students to gain experience in a real working environment through the dual form of learning. According to the school website, all students were included in the dual education system at the beginning of the 2021/2022 academic year. The study programme lasts 5 years, with admission after 7th grade, and is divided into two stages. In the first stage (from 8th to 10th grade), students are given theoretical and practical instruction by general education and vocational teachers at the school. During the second stage, in the 11th grade, students enrich their knowledge for 3 days a week in school, while on the other 2 days they build on what they have learned in a real working environment at the local enterprise partner, under the supervision of mentors. In 12th grade, the days for practical training increase, with 2 days per week spent learning at school and the other 3 days at the job site. Students in the 11th and 12th grades, who work for one of the companies, receive compensation for this and graduate with real professional experience by the end of the 12th grade. A dual education from the vocational school is considered an advantage in terms of career development and a future with the in-demand specialities of the region.

Despite this successful example, the dual education system in Bulgaria is insufficiently developed — those starting a dual education programme for vocational study in the 2024/2025 school year represent only 9% of secondary students in the entire country. Through the prism of a specific secondary school with successful results, examining the development of dual education there will help to identify obstacles hindering the effective implementation of dual education and, most importantly, how to address these challenges, as well as provide career guidance for students towards in-demand professions at the enterprises involved in this type of training.

3.2. Local Collaborations: Youth Employment Agencies and Vocational Training Ambassadors in Germany

In Germany, the journey from school to work has long been guided by the dual vocational education and training (VET) system—a model well-regarded for its ability to blend classroom learning with practical experience. The system faces challenges as young people and their families increasingly view academic routes as more prestigious, and many are turning away from vocational training. At the same time, mismatches between what young people want and what employers offer have become more pronounced. To address these challenges, Germany has introduced a variety of initiatives aimed at smoothing the transition from school to work. Among the most promising are two innovative programmes: Youth Employment Agencies (Jugendberufsagenturen) and Vocational Training Ambassadors (Ausbildungsbotschafter). Each offers a unique approach to guiding young people toward meaningful careers, while also helping to build a skilled workforce.

Youth Employment Agencies (YEAs) emerged from the idea that young people need a single, accessible place to turn for help navigating the complex world of work and training. Rather than creating a new institution, YEAs bring together existing services—employment agencies, job centres, and youth welfare offices—under one roof. These agencies collaborate to offer personalised support to young people from the age of 15 up to the age of 25, helping them find a place in the labour market.

YEAs stand out for their adaptability. They are locally organised, and they can tailor their services to the specific needs of their communities. They also focus on the whole person, offering not just career advice but also social and emotional support. For young people facing multiple challenges, such as homelessness, addiction, or mental health issues, this holistic approach can be beneficial.

However, the decentralised nature of YEAs means that quality and structure vary widely from one region to another. Many agencies struggle with limited resources and lack a shared understanding of what integration really means. Despite these hurdles, YEAs are evolving. Experts call for nationwide standards, better data sharing, and more consistent funding to help these agencies reach their full potential.

While YEAs focus on structural support, the Vocational Training Ambassadors (VTAs) programme takes a more personal approach. Launched by local chambers of commerce, this initiative sends current vocational trainees (generally aged 18-25 years) into schools to share their stories. These young ambassadors speak candidly about their training experiences, offering students a glimpse into real working life from someone just a few years older. Students often relate more easily to peers than to teachers or career counsellors. By hearing first-hand what it's like to be a mechanic, a baker, or a medical assistant, they begin to see vocational training not as a fallback, but as a viable and rewarding path. For small and medium-sized companies, the programme helps them attract new talent in an increasingly competitive labour market. Yet, it can be criticised as it often fails to reach parents/carers, who play a crucial role in shaping young people's career choices. While the programme is growing, it is not yet available nationwide. More research is also needed to understand its long-term impact, but anecdotal data confirms that the enthusiasm from students, schools, and companies suggests that VTAs are making a meaningful difference.

Together, YEAs and VTAs represent structural and personal support to young people. Both aim to make the transition from school to work more accessible, more supportive, and more inspiring. As Germany continues to manage demographic shifts and a growing demand for skilled labour, these programmes offer an innovative approach to support young people in their local area.

3.3. Compulsory education reform in Estonia

In a significant step toward enhancing educational continuity and equity, the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research has launched a comprehensive reform of the country's compulsory education system. Developed in collaboration with working groups comprising representatives from various partner organisations, the reform package introduces substantial amendments to key legislative frameworks, including the Education Act, the Basic and Upper Secondary Schools Act, and the Vocational Education Institutions Act. These amendments were formally ratified by the Estonian Parliament (Riigikogu) on December 4, 2024 (Ministry of Education and Research, 2025a).

At the heart of the reform is the extension of the compulsory education age from 16 to 18 years. This policy shift is designed to ensure that all young people in Estonia remain engaged in formal education until adulthood, thereby reducing dropout rates and supporting smoother transitions into higher education or the labour market. The reform underscores the principle that every learner should have access to a personalised and uninterrupted educational trajectory beyond the basic school level, which encompasses the first nine years of formal education.

To accommodate diverse learner needs and aspirations, the reform introduces five distinct post-basic education pathways: academic upper secondary school, applied upper secondary school, adult upper secondary school, vocational education, and a newly established preparatory studies programme for students who are not yet ready to commit to one of the four primary options. This diversification aims to empower students to make informed choices aligned with their interests and capabilities.

A key innovation within the reform is the increased flexibility in general education, particularly through the formal recognition of non-formal learning. The legislative amendments clarify the relationship between upper secondary school subject courses and the credit point system used in vocational and higher education. This alignment facilitates the integration of various educational experiences into both school-wide and individual curricula, promoting a more modular and learner-centred approach.

In addition, the timing of basic school final examinations will be adjusted to occur earlier in the academic year. This change is intended to make the graduation process less stressful and more student-friendly, while also enabling schools to incorporate exam results into their admissions processes, thereby reducing the need for redundant testing.

The reform is supported financially in part by structural funds from the European Union, reflecting a broader commitment to educational investment. The new compulsory education requirements will apply to students entering the 9th grade in the autumn of 2025, with the obligation to continue studies taking effect from the 2026/2027 academic year.

A central pillar of the reform is the transformation of vocational education. The overarching objective is to elevate vocational and applied secondary education to a status equal to that of academic upper secondary education. By 2035, the reform aspires for at least 40% of basic school graduates to pursue applied secondary education. This shift is expected to produce a steady stream of skilled professionals equipped with competencies aligned with the evolving demands of the labour market, thereby contributing to national economic growth and productivity.

Key initiatives under the vocational education reform include:

- Curriculum Development: New vocational secondary education curricula will be introduced, characterised by broad-based, sectoral structures that offer multiple specialisation options. Students will initially enrol in a general sectoral programme, allowing them time to make informed decisions about their specific area of focus. These curricula will include an expanded general education component, extending the programme duration from three to four years. The first of these new curricula will be available from the 2025/2026 academic year, with full implementation by 2026/2027.
- Labour Market Alignment: Vocational training curricula will be closely linked to OSKA[1] labour demand forecasts to ensure a balanced match between training provision and workforce needs.

[1] OSKA - The Estonian labour market needs a monitoring and forecasting system, known as OSKA https://oska.kutsekoda.ee/en/, which is managed by the Qualifications Authority (Kutsekoda). OSKA assesses skill needs by economic sector (such as information and communications technology, accounting) and develops new evidence and intelligence for stakeholders in education and the business world.

Since 2024, educational institutions have received guidance on adjusting admissions to align with these forecasts.

- Adult Education Regulation: A new regulation will introduce tuition fees for adult learners under specific conditions, such as those who have previously completed free higher education, dropped out of programmes twice, or enrolled in non-Estonian language programmes. This policy will take effect from the 2025/2026 academic year.
- Educational Centres: The reform also envisions the establishment of integrated educational centres that combine vocational and upper secondary schools. These centres will facilitate resource sharing, such as teaching staff and facilities, and offer more diverse and flexible learning pathways. The first centres are expected to begin operations in the 2026/2027 academic year.

In summary, Estonia's compulsory education reform represents a forward-looking strategy aimed at fostering inclusive, flexible, and labour market-relevant education. By extending the duration of compulsory education and enhancing the appeal and accessibility of vocational pathways, the reform seeks to equip your people with the skills and qualifications necessary for lifelong learning and meaningful participation in the economy.

3.4. VET for employment: Collaboration between the welfare administration and career centres in Norway

The collaboration between the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (Nav) and regional career centres represents a long-standing and evolving effort to bridge the gap between education and employment. For over two decades, this partnership has played a critical role in supporting job seekers and adult learners, particularly in the county of Trøndelag, where the model has been further developed to include upper secondary schools offering vocational education and training (VET). This expanded collaboration, often referred to as the "Trøndelag model," reflects a strategic commitment to aligning educational pathways with labour market needs, thereby enhancing the employability of individuals who are either unemployed or seeking to upskill.

At its inception, the model introduced compact, one-year school programmes designed to accelerate the transition from education to employment. These intensive programmes were particularly effective in helping motivated adults quickly gain the qualifications needed to enter apprenticeships or secure jobs. However, despite their initial success, these condensed formats proved difficult to sustain. Schools faced significant challenges in delivering comprehensive vocational training within such a short timeframe, leading to concerns about educational quality, student support, and institutional capacity. As a result, the model transitioned to more traditional VET programmes with standard progression, which, while slower, offered a more stable and pedagogically sound approach.

Today, the collaboration continues to focus on providing individualised education pathways tailored to the diverse needs of adult learners and job seekers. Nav, career centres, and schools work closely to design flexible learning trajectories that take into account prior learning, work experience, and personal circumstances. This personalised approach is particularly valuable for individuals who may have been out of the education system for some time or who face barriers to employment, such as low formal qualifications or limited work experience.

One of the key benefits of this model is its ability to integrate support services across institutional boundaries. Job seekers are not only offered educational opportunities but also receive career guidance, labour market counselling, and assistance with job placement. This holistic support structure enhances the likelihood of successful outcomes, both in terms of educational attainment and employment. Furthermore, the model promotes lifelong learning by creating accessible pathways for adults to return to education and acquire new skills in response to changing labour market demands.

The inclusion of upper secondary schools in the partnership has also strengthened the institutional framework of the model. Schools are now more actively involved in designing and delivering VET programmes that are responsive to the needs of adult learners and aligned with regional economic priorities. This has led to a more coherent and coordinated VET ecosystem, where education providers, employment services, and employers collaborate to ensure that training programmes are relevant, flexible, and outcome-oriented.

However, the model is not without its challenges. One of the most persistent difficulties has been maintaining strong engagement from employers. As VET programmes have become more extended and diversified, it has become harder to secure consistent employer participation, particularly in regions where labour market conditions vary significantly. Employers may be hesitant to invest in apprenticeship placements or training partnerships if they do not see immediate benefits or if the programmes do not align closely with their operational needs.

Another challenge lies in the complexity of coordinating multiple stakeholders. The success of the model depends on effective communication and shared objectives among Nav advisors, market advisors, career counsellors, educators, and employers. In practice, this requires robust governance structures, clear roles and responsibilities, and a commitment to ongoing collaboration. Variability in regional capacity and institutional resources can also lead to uneven implementation, with some areas better equipped than others to deliver high-quality, integrated VET services.

Looking to the future, the Trøndelag model holds significant promise as a framework for addressing structural unemployment and promoting inclusive economic participation. By equipping individuals with relevant skills and qualifications, the model contributes to a more adaptable and resilient workforce. It also supports broader social goals, such as reducing inequality, enhancing social mobility, and fostering community development. In the longer term, the model could serve as a blueprint for national policy, offering valuable insights into how cross-sector collaboration can enhance the effectiveness of vocational education and training systems.

Moreover, as technological change and demographic shifts continue to reshape the labour market, the need for flexible, responsive, and inclusive VET systems will only grow. The Trøndelag model, with its emphasis on personalised learning, institutional cooperation, and labour market alignment, is well positioned to meet these emerging challenges. Its continued evolution will depend on sustained investment, policy support, and the active engagement of all stakeholders involved.

3.5. The Vienna Weeks: An innovative outreach approach and its function as an entrance to lifelong guidance in Austria

The Vienna Weeks for Lifelong Guidance and Further Education, organised by the Vienna Employee Promotion Fund (*waff*), are aimed at informing and engaging people with limited access to education

and training. Taking place annually across various city districts in Vienna, the Vienna Weeks offer low-threshold counselling and interactive events on education, career guidance, and further training, often in familiar public spaces like parks and shopping centres since 2015.

The initiative is built on strong local networks, with numerous partner organisations and district administrations contributing to event delivery and promotion. Until 2023, the Vienna Weeks were co-financed by the European Social Fund (ESF); since then, the *waff* coordinates the overall framework and funds selected formats based on its own means.

Target groups include low-qualified adults, people with a migrant background, young people without school or apprenticeship qualifications, and young people who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEETs). The Vienna Weeks contribute to the Vienna Qualification Plan 2030 by promoting awareness of learning opportunities and supporting individual empowerment, while also addressing broader goals like improving employability and tackling skills shortages.

Over time, the Vienna Weeks have become a well-established model for coordinated, city-wide educational outreach. Their success highlights the importance of regional cooperation, targeted communication, and flexible formats. Key challenges include managing partner capacity and maintaining public interest without oversaturating districts. In 2025, the existing cooperation was continued, and activities and public relations were extensively expanded under the name “FutureFitFestival 2025”.

3.6. Ohjaamo: One-Stop Guidance Centres in Finland

Finland’s approach to youth employment and VET reflects a long-standing commitment to social equity, educational inclusivity, and proactive welfare policy. Over the past decade, Finnish youth policy has evolved in response to both structural economic shifts and the changing needs of young people, culminating in a robust framework that supports smoother transitions from education to employment.

A cornerstone of this framework is the Finnish education system, which is widely recognised for its comprehensive and egalitarian design. In 2021, compulsory education was extended to age 18, encompassing both general and vocational upper secondary education. This reform was intended to ensure that all young people attain at least a secondary-level qualification, thereby reducing the risk of marginalisation and enhancing long-term employability. Within the VET sector, the 2018 reform introduced a competence-based model that emphasises individualised learning paths and workplace-based training. This shift aligns vocational education more closely with labour market demands, fostering a more flexible and responsive system.

Despite these progressive reforms, Finland has faced persistent challenges related to youth unemployment and disengagement, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. In response, the Finnish government launched the Youth Guarantee in 2013, a policy initiative that ensures all individuals under 25 years (and recent graduates under 30 years) receive an offer of employment, continued education, or rehabilitation within three months of becoming unemployed. This initiative laid the foundation for the development of Ohjaamo, a network of one-stop guidance centres designed to provide holistic, low-threshold support to young people.

Launched in 2014 and expanded nationally in the years that followed, the Ohjaamo model represents a key instrument in the implementation of the Youth Guarantee. Funded through a combination of

European Social Fund (ESF) resources and national budget allocations, and coordinated by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, Ohjaamo centres aim to address the fragmentation of youth services by integrating education, employment, health, social services, and youth work into a single, accessible location. By 2025, approximately 70 centres were operational across Finland, including in remote and rural municipalities, demonstrating the model's scalability and adaptability.

Ohjaamo's defining feature is its low-threshold accessibility. Young people can access services without referrals, appointments, or formal diagnoses. This inclusive approach is particularly effective for vulnerable groups such as NEETs (those Not in Education, Employment, or Training), early school leavers, and youth with migrant backgrounds. Services include career and educational guidance, psychological counselling, employment support, housing advice, and health services. Each centre is tailored to local needs and operates through a bottom-up approach, while national coordination is provided by KEHA-centre, which supports capacity-building, evaluation, and resource sharing.

Ohjaamo is not a static programme but an evolving model of service delivery. Since 2021, it has become a permanent component of municipal youth services. The Finnish National Youth Work and Youth Policy Programme (2020–2023) explicitly frames Ohjaamo as a core element of Finland's youth inclusion strategy, reflecting its central role in cross-sectoral coordination and inclusive growth. The model serves as both a safety net and a springboard, coordinating disconnected services and fragmented life paths while also fostering innovation in how youth services are designed and delivered.

In summary, the Ohjaamo initiative exemplifies Finland's integrated and forward-looking approach to youth policy. By situating itself at the intersection of education, employment, and welfare, it not only addresses immediate needs but also contributes to the long-term resilience and inclusion of young people in Finnish society.

3.7. Skills Bootcamp: A government-funded outcome-based approach to upskill and retrain citizens in England, UK

Skills Bootcamps were launched by the UK Department for Education as a strategic response to changing labour market and skills needs. The Skills Bootcamps were introduced in 2020 as part of the government's "Lifetime Skills Guarantee" and "Plan for Jobs". The programme aims to provide adults aged 19 and over with the opportunity to gain in-demand skills through short, flexible training courses. These bootcamps, which typically last up to 16 weeks, are designed in collaboration with employers to ensure alignment with real-world job requirements. They are free for learners and partially subsidised for employers who use them to train existing staff.

Skills Bootcamps were developed in response to several pressing socio-economic challenges, including the economic fallout from COVID-19, the effects of Brexit, increasing automation, and the need to support an ageing workforce. These factors have contributed to a growing demand for a more agile and responsive skills training system that meets regional skills needs. Skills Bootcamps offer an alternative to traditional qualifications like apprenticeships, particularly for adults seeking to transition into new occupations and sectors by reskilling or upskilling. The aim is to help people remain employable in the long term.

In the East Midlands city featured in the case study, the local council played a central role in commissioning the Skills Bootcamps, working closely with independent training providers, employers,

and the regional Chamber of Commerce. The programme's success in this region is founded on strong collaboration between these stakeholders. Employers were involved in shaping the curriculum and in some instances, co-funding the training. Training providers were responsible for delivering the courses and supporting learners throughout their journey, from enrolment to job placement.

Although career counselling is not a formal component of the Skills Bootcamps, learners receive wraparound support that includes CV writing, interview preparation, and job search assistance. This support is intended to complement the technical training and help learners transition into employment. However, stakeholders noted that the programme assumes participants have already received career advice elsewhere, and there is limited provision for long-term guidance.

Inclusivity is a key feature of Skills Bootcamps, which are open to all adults regardless of employment status. They are designed to accommodate diverse learning needs through online, in-person, and blended delivery formats. The programme actively encourages participation from underrepresented groups, including ethnic minorities, women, people with disabilities, and older adults. Despite this, older workers remain underrepresented, prompting government efforts to promote "returnerships" aimed at re-engaging this demographic.

Funding for the programme is primarily provided through the National Skills Fund. Employers contribute 10% to 30% of training costs, depending on their size. Local councils manage the procurement process, evaluating bids from training providers based on quality, relevance, and alignment with local skills needs. Funding is performance-based, with payments tied to enrolment, course completion, and employment outcomes.

Nationally, the programme has shown promising results. Between April 2022 and March 2023, over 42,000 learners started a Skills Bootcamp, with a completion rate of approximately 66%. Of those who completed the training, more than 15,000 reported positive outcomes such as securing employment or progressing in their careers. In the case study region, stakeholders reported even higher completion rates and noted that the Skills Bootcamps had a transformative impact on learners, helping them gain confidence, broaden their skillsets, and access new career opportunities.

Despite these successes, the Skills Bootcamps face several challenges. Stakeholders highlighted the short-term nature of funding cycles, which makes it difficult for providers to plan and retain staff. There is also a need for a more coherent national skills strategy, as employers often struggle to navigate the complex landscape of training options. Additionally, the administrative burden associated with outcome-based funding and the difficulty in securing suitable job interviews for all participants were cited as ongoing issues.

Skills Bootcamps have emerged a successful approach to addressing vocational and skills shortages, supporting workforce development. While Skills Bootcamps have demonstrated positive outcomes, their long-term success will depend on sustained funding, stronger integration of learner feedback, and more strategic coordination across the skills ecosystem.

3.8. Next steps

The case studies presented in the report enable a range of meaningful comparisons across national, regional, and local contexts, offering insights into how different countries and systems approach VET and career guidance. At the national level, Estonia's reform provides a macro-level example of systemic

change, illustrating how compulsory education policy can be restructured to strengthen VET pathways and reduce dropout rates. In contrast, Austria's Vienna Weeks initiative and England's Skills Bootcamps highlight regionally and locally managed interventions that focus on accessibility, inclusivity, and responsiveness to labour market needs, particularly for underserved populations.

The case studies also allow for comparisons in terms of institutional collaboration and governance. For instance, Germany's Youth Employment Agencies and Norway's Trøndelag model both demonstrate integrated service delivery through cross-sectoral partnerships, yet differ in their institutional configurations and target populations. Similarly, Bulgaria's dual education model showcases how employer engagement can be embedded within school-based VET, offering a contrast to more guidance-focused models like those in Austria and the UK.

Furthermore, the studies facilitate analysis of how career guidance is embedded within broader skills strategies. Some cases, such as Estonia and Germany, integrate guidance within systemic reforms or institutional frameworks, while others, like Austria, Finland and Norway, use guidance as a tool to support transitions and reduce inequalities. The inclusion of diverse target groups—such as migrants, low-qualified adults, NEET youth, and students with special needs—also enables comparative reflection on equity, inclusion, and the adaptability of VET systems to social and demographic challenges.

Overall, these case studies support comparative analysis across dimensions such as scale (national vs. local), governance (centralised vs. decentralised), integration (standalone vs. embedded guidance), and target groups, offering a rich basis for understanding how different systems respond to shared challenges in skills formation and youth transitions. The next steps will be to draw together the evidence collected as part of work package 7 to produce a cross-country comparison report.

4. Dual education: A case study of a vocational high school in Bulgaria

By Svetlana Alexandrova, Veneta Krasteva, Pepka Boyadjieva and Petya Ilieva-Trichkova

4.1. The Bulgarian context

In recent years, Bulgaria has made significant strides in aligning VET system with the needs of the labour market through the implementation of dual education. This model, which combines theoretical instruction in vocational schools with practical training in real work environments, was formally introduced in the Strategy for Development of Vocational Education and Training (2015-2020). The strategy emphasised the importance of partnerships between schools and employers to enhance the quality and efficiency of VET. One of its primary goals was to expand access to vocational education for individuals over 16 years of age, including early school leavers, thereby facilitating a smoother transition from education to employment and addressing youth unemployment.

The legal foundation for dual education in Bulgaria is established through several key legislative acts. The Preschool and School Education Act (PSE Act) [*Zakon za preduchilishtnoto i uchilishtnoto obrazovanie*] introduced the term "work-based learning (dual education system)" as one of the forms of student education, along with daytime, evening, independent study, and others (PSE Act, Art. 106, para. 1, item 8). According to this Act, professional qualification in the dual education system includes theoretical learning and practical training in a real work environment, is organised on the basis of the partnership between a vocational school and one or more employers, and takes place in the upper secondary level of education with students over 16 years old.

The Vocational Education and Training Act (VET Act) [*Zakon za profesionalnoto obrazovanie i obuchenie*] detailed the structure and requirements of the dual system. These include the roles of mentors and teacher-methodologists (they support the pedagogical aspects of vocational training), the conditions for employer participation, and the creation of a national database of eligible employers. The Labour Code (LC) [*Kodeks na truda*] further supports this framework by regulating internship contracts, working conditions, and student remuneration. Together, these laws ensure that dual education is not only accessible but also standardised and accountable.

The 2018 amendments to the VET Act introduced mandatory vocational curricula in schools, including those within the dual education system, that must be updated at least once every five years (VET Act, Art. 13d, para. 5). It also added requirements for employers taking part in a partnership for work-based training (dual education system) (Art. 17a3). In addition to school representatives, employers, and employees, representatives of the employer-partner in the dual system are included on the committees which conduct professional qualification examinations (Art. 35, para. 1). The Act also creates rules for employers' organisations related to the dual system: they are obliged to facilitate partnerships between employers and schools for the implementation of dual education (Art. 56, para. 7). With the Amendment and supplements to the VET Act of 2018 (State Gazette, iss. 92, 6th Nov. 2018), a series of changes were addressed in the dual education system's regulatory framework to achieve better standards in vocational education and dual programmes. It regulated the requirements for employers participating in partnerships for the implementation of dual education, mandated their inclusion in the database and that their curricula should be updated at least once every 5 years, distinguished between protected professions and specialised professions projected to experience

labour market shortages, and defined the roles of mentors as well as teacher-methodologists (MES, 2022).

Building on this foundation, Bulgaria continues to develop its dual education system through strategic initiatives and funding programmes. In 2025, the Ministry of Education and Science launched a new procedure under the “Education” Programme 2021–2027, aimed at enhancing the quality and relevance of dual education in line with labour market demands. This initiative supports partnerships between vocational schools and employers, including private institutions and NGOs, and emphasises regional adaptation of training programmes. The Strategic Vision for Developing Dual-track Vocational Education and Training in Bulgaria by 2030 further outlines Bulgaria’s long-term commitment to integrating education with economic development, ensuring that vocational training remains responsive to evolving workforce needs.

4.2. Developing dual education

In 2017, the vocational secondary school of this case study joined the DOMINO project — "Swiss Support for the Introduction of Dual Track Principles in the Bulgarian Education System" (2015-2019) — financed by the Swiss Confederation under the Bulgarian–Swiss Cooperation Programme. The project’s partners were the Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training and the Bulgarian-Swiss Chamber of Commerce. It was carried out jointly with the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science (MES), the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), and the Ministry of Economy (ME). The project aimed to create a practical guide for dual education to support its implementation, containing a description of the regulatory framework, the roles and responsibilities of institutions, schools, and employers, the rights and obligations of students, templates, guidelines for developing curricula/programmes in collaboration with businesses, and quality assurance in work-based learning. It also envisioned the development of new curricula and programmes, as well as the training of teachers, mentors, and dual education experts. The Forum for Dual Vocational Education coordinated the participation of all stakeholders in the dual system in Bulgarian education (state institutions, private firms, industrial and business organisations, various chambers, local institutions, and the NGO sector) and aimed to contribute to the successful reform of Bulgarian vocational education[2]. DOMINO planned to cover at least 1,200 students, 15 vocational schools, and a minimum of ten professions; its goal was not simply to offer the Swiss model of dual education but to aid in the process of creating a Bulgarian model, in harmony with local traditions and values. “The vision of the project involves a sustainable Bulgarian system of vocational school education, which is directly linked to the needs of the business. The creation of a replicable model and capacity for the introduction of the dual-track vocational education and training system in Bulgaria is the main goal of the project” (Evtimova et al., 2019, p. 5).

Initiatives calling for the development of a dual form of learning and a drive for sustainability in the dual system were provoked by legislative changes in 2018. In 2023, the Vocational Education and

[2] Dual education in Bulgaria is still developing with the support of the “Dual Education in Bulgaria” project, an initiative of the Austrian Economic Chamber (https://www.godual.eu/en/), and the “Dual Vocational Education” cluster initiated by the German–Bulgarian Chamber of Industry and Commerce (https://bulgarien.ahk.de/bg/), as well as through the active cooperation of local companies.

Training Board at the Ministry of Education and Science also adopted the Strategic Vision for Developing Dual-track Vocational Education and Training in Bulgaria by 2030 alongside an implementation plan. “The vision is focused on the leading role of business in learning, the development and modernisation of the country’s dual education system, as well as more communication to promote it. Its development is financially supported by the Fund for the Preparation of Support Measures under the Swiss–Bulgarian Cooperation Programme” (Germanova, 2023). The Strategic Vision for Developing Dual-track Vocational Education and Training in Bulgaria by 2030 supports changes in the regulatory framework, creating opportunities for flexible shifts in the form of education from dual to daytime (traditional school hours), changes in the admission guidelines for students in the dual education system, synchronising it with curricula to facilitate educational tracks transition, encouraging block teaching and reflecting seasonality of some professions, and supporting the leading role of business throughout the whole process. To attract Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to participate in dual education, the Strategy for Small and Medium Enterprises 2021–2027 contains measures intended to bolster broader business participation, including the introduction of tax relief and support for SMEs.

We have taken one vocational school that successfully managed to establish a dual education system following the wrap-up of the DOMINO project as an example of good practice. The goal of the school administration has been to reach an effective level of cooperation with businesses through providing qualified personnel with the right professional training and work experience to fit the needs of companies in the region and, simultaneously, to ensure the job fulfilment and professional development of its students, easing their transition from education to sustainable employment in Bulgaria. The school aims to serve the needs of the local labour market with staff, works actively with parents/carers, receives the support of local government and universities, and actively partners with industrial enterprises in the area. The school administration is motivated to create conditions for the successful realisation of its students by providing them with professional qualifications relevant to the region that have been coordinated with hiring companies or opportunities for continuing their education at university (Naidenova, 2022).

Thus, the secondary school has been transformed from an agricultural vocational school to one offering VET with a dual form of learning in up-to-date specialities that are relevant to the industrial sector developing in the region. Together with local companies, in 2020 it also launched a new, modern website where information is published about the admission guidelines, specialities, and career prospects for youth. With the assistance of the municipality, it has managed to develop effective partnerships with local enterprises and state institutions, and the support of businesses and higher education institutions helps the vocational school deal with its shortage of qualified teaching staff and the general deficit of professional training for them (Naidenova, 2022).

Since the completion of DOMINO, the school has continued its active participation in the project’s activities, allowing it to improve the learning environment, increase the teaching staff’s qualifications, pedagogical and methodological skills, and provide opportunities for students’ practical experience in a real work environment both in the country and abroad, as well as for career guidance or continuing their education in higher education institutions. The vocational school participated in the project

“Supporting a Dual Education System”, implemented by the MES with co-financing from the European Social Fund and the state budget under the Operational Programme “Science and Education for Smart Growth” (OP-SESG) 2014–2020 and aiming to help ensure that VET corresponds to labour market needs and to create opportunities for improving the qualifications of the future workforce in professions that are essential to the national economy. Its activities are aimed at promoting the dual education system among parents/carers, students, and businesses, improving the competences of VET teachers and trainers, and the acquisition of pedagogical and methodological skills among mentors from partner enterprises. The vocational high school is included in all MES projects and programmes related to support for vocational education — “Student Practicums”, “Innovative School”, “STEM School Environment”, “Modernisation of VET”, all financed under the Education Programme 2021–2027 and co-financed by the EU. In 2023, the school began actively implementing a project under the National VET Programme, Module 1: “Modernising the material-technical base”. It also works with the Erasmus+ Programme, under which teachers and students have the opportunity to exchange experience and conduct teaching practice in other countries, providing real opportunities for improving the quality of educational services and for acquiring the skills needed in an economy undergoing digital and ecological transition.

The admission guidelines for dual-form learning within the school are implemented at the behest of local employers, depending on their workforce needs. Following the regulatory framework for dual education in Bulgaria (Ordinance № 1 of 8th Sept. 2015, Art. 9 [2]), each year by mid-December of the current academic year, partner-employers must declare in writing to the school principal how many interns should be admitted and which professions and specialties with work-based training (dual education) are to be included as part of the study programme for the next academic year. According to the school website, in the 2024/2025 academic year, it offers a dual form of learning in three upper-secondary specialities for professional qualification with extended study of a foreign language. These specialities have been requested by local companies in metal production, ore extraction, mining, electrical equipment, construction, and the repair of machinery and equipment. Theoretical training is provided in school every day (8th, 9th, and 10th grades), with students in school three days a week with two paid internship days at a company (11th grade), or in school two days a week with three paid internship days at a company (12th grade). The school website also describes the terms and conditions of the programme, which declare that the enterprise-based internships are considered paid work experience and enumerate a monthly stipend of 50 leva (25 euros) for dual learners with up to 5 unexcused absences. The school provides additional stipends for students with excellent marks, for students from low-income households (if they have marks above 4.50) or for orphans. A free school bus transporting students from the surrounding area to the school is provided, as well as free courses and a license to drive Category B vehicles, tractors, forklifts, and road construction equipment. Additional learning opportunities on school grounds or at partner worksites offer a jumpstart for graduates and a chance for their job market realisation, as they leave with a secondary education diploma, a certificate of professional qualification, and a driving license (Naidenova, 2022). The vocational school also works with students from vulnerable groups, and the transportation and stipends provided facilitate their easier access to training.

4.3. Aims and objectives of the DOMINO project and a dual education system

"Dual-Track Vocational Education: Practical Guidelines" (Evtimova et al., 2019), prepared as part of the DOMINO project, indicates that the dual education system began being offered in 2015 as a response to the growing needs of the Bulgarian economy and the country's high level of youth unemployment. Its goal is to create "conditions for sustainable cooperation between schools and businesses with the aim of training students in a quality, practical real working environment and centring the student in the educational process" (Evtimova et al., 2019: 6).

In the particular case of the vocational school, the aim is to prepare professional cadres to fit the needs of local enterprises and to establish effective external partnerships as well as ones within the government, with the municipality, economic enterprises in the region, universities, and parents/carers. Its main goal is to achieve quality education for students, including having a well-prepared teaching staff, and the opportunity for their successful realisation on the labour market while meeting the most current needs of local enterprises for trained professionals: auto mechanics, electricians, machine fitters, and operators in the mining industry. In addition to providing specialists with suitable professions for industrial enterprises, through developing its dual form of learning the school also aims to directly influence the unemployment and depopulation trends in the region by preventing "*the outflow of young people to larger cities, while at the same time providing an opportunity for students at a social disadvantage to get a suitable vocational education and have a chance to get a job in the school's partner companies*" (Interviewee 1, school representative).

4.4. The delivery of career guidance and counselling services in a dual education system

Effective partnerships with industrial enterprises in the region support the career guidance process for vocational secondary school students. They and their parents/carers have the opportunity to get acquainted with the working conditions in these companies first-hand within the framework of initiatives for networking meetings and open-door days at the enterprises where students learn in a real working environment. University professors' participation in the educational process allows students to get acquainted with opportunities for further education, while the vocational school, through a mutual cooperation agreement with the university specialising in their area of study, offers the advantage of preferential admission to a degree programme of their choice.

Support for vocational guidance takes place at different levels and involves all stakeholders. The regional Department of Education (RDE) for the Sofia district assists prospective students in organising a vocational education exhibition, where they can get acquainted with the opportunities provided by vocational secondary schools. Partner enterprises also play a very important role in the career guidance process within secondary schools. They maintain and update a joint website with the school, present advertising materials during the school's annual admissions process, and actively participate in information campaigns for career guidance organised by either the school or RDE Sofia, providing materials related to their business activities and career opportunities.

The possibility to influence and effectively provide career guidance is greatest when, firstly, there are already positive attitudes about students' successful professional development through dual education and, secondly, "*prospective candidates and parents can have face-to-face conversations*" with those

who have made this "*conscious choice*" (Interviewee 1). "The dual system offers very good chances for students to realise their visions for the future", but applicants to vocational schools have different motivations. Some students who select this form of education were attracted by the opportunity to earn a free Category B or tractor license, "without any affinity" towards learning a speciality or seeking that career path. The most problematic group are those students who have registered for a programme "out of financial gain" and because of the opportunity to receive stipends and a salary for their work completed in the upper secondary stage. Coming from low-income households, many are forced to help support their families, which often leads to their frequent "*absence from school*", "*loss of interest in their education because they don't understand the material*", and "*giving up on their education*" before completing it, afterwards only being able to get jobs in the informal sector (Interviewee 1).

Keeping students from vulnerable groups in school is a problem that has been identified in policy papers. For example, the Strategic Vision for Developing Dual-track Vocational Education and Training in Bulgaria by 2030 foresees targeted support to develop basic technical skills among vulnerable groups and facilitating their transition to the dual VET, ensuring focused financial assistance for inclusion in dual VET for vulnerable families (linked to the educational success), and targeted support measures for dual VET as a priority instrument towards the social inclusion of ethnic minorities (Strategic Vision ... 2030). To better inform the public and businesses about dual education, traditional Vocational education exhibitions are planned, digital content about professions and career paths, as well as open-door days with enterprises and the "active participation of employers in activities with students from 8–10th grades aimed at career guidance and motivation for dual education" (Petrov, 2024b).

4.5. Target population

The dual education system targets:

- Those thinking about, considering and engaging in VET;
- Those transitioning from VET;
- Young people up to the age of 19;
- Employers;
- Students from vulnerable groups.

4.6. Participants

In accordance with "Dual-Track Vocational Education: Practical Guidelines" (Evtimova et al., 2019), dual education is implemented on the basis of a partnership between **the school** and one or more **employers**. This partnership is regulated by a signed contract (partnership agreement) between the school and the enterprise(s), which regulates the terms and conditions for carrying out training, as well as the rights and obligations of the signatory parties. The agreement specifies the number of students which the employer has requested, the period of their training, what material and technical provisions need to be made, as well as the number of mentors to be provided by the employer for students' practical training.

The Practical Guidelines refer to internships in a real work environment that are carried out according to a programme developed jointly by representatives of both the school and the enterprise. The basic principle of dual education, linking curricula and learning plans closely with business practices, is

applied to the greatest extent possible. Business is at the centre of the proposed methodological approach, while schools and institutions (MES, Agency for Vocational Education and Training, etc.) play only an organisational and supporting role in the development of curricula and educational programmes (Evtimova et al., 2019).

For each student, the employer determines a specific workplace and a mentor, under whose guidance the work-based training is carried out. One mentor cannot be responsible for more than 5 students. Mentors are incentivised by their employer for this additional work performance with supplemental remuneration or added days to their paid annual leave. The relationship between the school, the employer, and the mentor is overseen by a teacher-methodologist who is appointed by the school principal, who may be responsible for the coordination and connection with no more than 6 mentors from partner companies. The teacher-methodologist performs the functions of a subject teacher or leads modules for vocational training, as well as being a methodologist on general and specific issues regarding the pedagogical, didactic, methodological, and professional qualification of vocational teachers and mentors from companies (Evtimova et al., 2019).

As specified in the Practical Guidelines, admission to the dual system takes place in the eighth grade, with practical work-based training in enterprises throughout the eleventh and twelfth grades. During the first secondary school stage, students in the dual system receive their instruction in school; at the second secondary school stage, they combine their studies with training in a real working environment. Enterprise-based internships are determined by the curriculum and, in most cases, are carried out two days a week in the eleventh grade and three days a week in the twelfth grade. Parents/carers and students familiarise themselves in advance with the conditions of practical training in partner enterprises and submit an application to the school principal with their selection preferences. Students sign an employment contract (LC, Art. 230) and receive remuneration for days worked. The employment contract must meet the conditions specified in Chapter Fifteen, Section I of the Labour Code (Art. 301–305). The state covers the costs of health insurance and (since 2024) social insurance. For each student, the employer must obtain permission from the territorial labour inspectorate. During their practical internships, students keep a diary to record the topics studied, the practical tasks assigned, the materials, machines, and tools used, the skills acquired, and any problems that may have arisen (Evtimova et al., 2019).

Within the VET system, the Minister of Education and Science has the authority to determine, independently or jointly with the relevant competent ministry, which professions will be assigned to students with special educational needs and/or chronic illnesses and to persons with deviant behaviour.

4.7. Stakeholder involvement

The roles and responsibilities of institutions within the vocational education system are indicated in “Dual-Track Vocational Education: Practical Guidelines” (Evtimova et al., 2019).

The Ministry of Education and Science implements the state policy in the field of vocational education and training. In the VET system, the Minister of Education and Science has the power to: adopt state educational standards for professional qualification; approve the list of VET professions; propose a list

of regulated professions; maintain a register of schools training students to acquire professional qualifications; approve the state admission plan for schools with national significance that provide VET; ensure the successful implementation of state educational standards for the vocational education system; approve qualification programmes; organise vocational guidance; determine independently or jointly with the relevant competent ministry the professions for students with special educational needs and/or chronic diseases, and for persons with deviant behaviour; allocate and manage funds for VET; conduct quality assessment in the VET system; and propose a list of state-protected professions and a list of professions for which there is an expected shortage of specialists on the labour market to be approved by the Council of Ministers (Evtimova et al., 2019).

The Vocational Education and Training Board at the Ministry of Education and Science has been operational since 2018. It has advisory functions and supports the implementation of state VET reform policy in Bulgarian secondary schools, including by coordinating all stakeholders' efforts, accepting proposed legislative changes in the regulatory framework as needed, and making recommendations and proposals for the strategic development of the VET system. The board is comprised of a chairman and members. By law, the chairman of the VET Board is the Minister of Education and Science. The director of the Vocational Education and Training Directorate at the Ministry of Education and Science also has the right to board membership. Members of the board include: deputies of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES), the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), and the Ministry of the Economy (ME); representatives of the Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI), the Union for Private Economic Enterprise (UPEE), the Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association (BICA), the Bulgarian Industrial Association (BIA), and the Confederation of Employers and Industrialists of Bulgaria (CEIB); the presidents of the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria (CITUB) and the "Podkrepa" Labour Confederation; the chairmen of the Bulgarian Teachers' Union (BTU) and the National Statistics Institute (NSI); a representative of the Council of Rectors of Higher Education Institutions of Bulgaria; the chairman of the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training; a representative of the National Association of Municipalities in Bulgaria (NAMRB); heads of regional departments of education; principals of vocational schools; a representative of the Parents' Association; directors of dual-education partnering firms; representatives of sectoral and professional and employers' organisations; and the DOMINO project management team leader. At the discretion of the board, individuals, legal entities, and representatives of governmental and non-governmental organisations or bodies may be invited to its meetings with respect to the issues being discussed (Evtimova et al., 2019).

Regional education departments liaise between the institutions within the school education system, which provide or conduct professional training and/or vocational education, and the regional head offices of the Employment Agency, Employment Office, health inspectorates, local government bodies, and social partner structures at regional level; they approve the state admission plan and the additional state admission plan for vocational education and training; they take part in organising exams certifying professional qualifications in vocational schools, vocational colleges, secondary, special or integrated schools with vocational training classes (Evtimova et al., 2019).

The National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET) is a state agency within the Council of Ministers. It develops and proposes to the Minister of Education and Science the list of VET professions, as well as the state educational standards for professional qualifications. It also authorises monitoring and evaluation of the activities of licensed institutions in the VET system and coordinates activities to develop strategic documents for VET (Evtimova et al., 2019).

Municipalities participate in local policymaking and its implementation in the VET field on their territory about: staffing requirements; career guidance for students; the opening, modification, transformation, and closure of municipal vocational secondary schools and vocational colleges, as well as the appointment of municipal vocational college principals; the distribution and management of approved financial resources for VET and career guidance; improving the facilities and equipment in schools, municipal vocational colleges, vocational training centres, and information and career guidance centres through municipal budgetary financing; and mandating the state admission guidelines for schools (Evtimova et al., 2019).

Employers' organisations ensure the successful realisation of partnerships between employers and educational institutions where work-based learning takes place (dual education system); they stipulate the conditions for internships in enterprises in the dual education system; they prepare proposals for the inclusion of new professions and specialties in the list of VET professions and are involved in its development, coordination, and revision; they participate in the development, coordination, and revision of state educational standards for professional qualifications; they take part in the organisation of certification exams for professional qualifications and elect representatives to sit on exam boards; they collaborate as part of the management board and expert committees at NAVET; they propose additions to the list of state-protected professions and the list of professions with an expected shortage of specialists on the labour market; they assist in drafting directives for quality assurance in VET; they aid in the development and updating of VET curricula and study programmes; they work on national examination programming; and they participate in the evaluation of vocational education and training (Evtimova et al., 2019).

Workers' and employees' organisations at the national level participate in updating the state educational standards for professional qualifications; they aid in the development, coordination, and revision of the list of VET professions; they participate with their representatives in the Management Board and the Expert Committee on Vocational Orientation at the NAVET; they assist in improving the quality of practical internships; and they help draft legislation for quality assurance in VET (Evtimova et al., 2019).

4.8. Resourcing dual education

The vocational secondary school initially received financial support to carry out its dual education programme under the DOMINO project, which was used to "pay for scholarships and purchase appropriate equipment for students' practical training." Partner companies and the municipality also provided resources for "refurbishing the training classrooms" (Interviewee 1).

In “Dual-Track Vocational Education: Practical Guidelines” (Evtimova et al., 2019), it is indicated that at the national level of the VET system, the Minister of Education and Science has the authority to allocate and manage funds for vocational education and training.

Municipalities are also active when it comes to ensuring adequate funding, being charged with controlling the distribution of approved financial resources for VET and career guidance; through allocations from municipal budgets, they support the improvement of facilities and equipment in schools, municipal vocational colleges, vocational training centres, and career guidance and information centres (Evtimova et al., 2019).

The Labour Code determines the minimum remuneration for students in the dual education system. During their work-based training, students receive remuneration in the following amounts: in the 11th grade, no less than double their monthly stipend; and in 12th grade, no less than three times the maximum monthly stipend, fixed according to Art. 171, para. 3 of the Preschool and School Education Act (LC, Art. 230, para. 6). At the employer’s discretion, higher amounts can be paid than those provided for by law. The state covers the costs of health insurance and (since 2024) social insurance.

In accordance with the VET Act (Art. 17a1, para. 5), the training of mentors can be financed by the mentors themselves, by employers, by both employers and schools as partners in dual education, or through funds from national projects and programmes, European funds, and other sources. Mentors are incentivised by their employers for the instruction they provide through additional remuneration or increased annual paid leave.

4.9. Key learning from implementing and developing a dual education system

A major problem in terms of attracting students who would prefer a dual method of study is the widespread negative societal attitude towards vocational education and training. In a regional context, no less challenging for the case study school are the demographic shifts and high competition in the area, in which there are three vocational schools, three secondary schools, and one private language school. The school administration manages to overcome these challenges via active communication and cooperation between the municipality and the state, on one side, with local businesses and universities, on the other, as well as with parents/carers and students, on the third side (Naidenova, 2022). An essential factor for the development of dual education is the existence of a favourable environment, i.e., functioning enterprises and employers that express a need for people with certain qualifications and are willing to hire them. In this regard, the region where the school is located has a positive influence, since it has plenty of industrial enterprises. According to a representative of the vocational schools in the country, “the difficulty for a school to organise dual education comes from whether there are enough companies in the town or nearby that are open to the educational process and ready to engage in creating jobs in a real working environment for student-interns. Because it may turn out that none of the interns remain at their job after graduation and the company is left with only the costs for those two academic years” (Petrov, 2024a). Conversely, when there are large companies with a long-term perspective towards investment operating near the school, regular efforts are made to attract other new business partners, and when each enterprise applies for 3–4 student-interns, this

allows for the formation of a class (Petrov, 2024a). The broader macroeconomic framework and the potential for investment offered by the state are also important.

An impact assessment of the DOMINO project has shown that the main difficulties faced by businesses can be summarised as follows: uncertainty among companies carrying out the dual education system about retaining trained interns and the lack of a guaranteed return on the time and effort invested; the discrepancy between business needs and the skills and knowledge received by Bulgarian students in the VET system; and insufficient state measures to encourage cooperation between the educational system and businesses (Gallup International, 2019).

Another problem is ineffective communication with public institutions. The analysis shows that the schools themselves seek out cooperation with companies, while the mediating role of state institutions is not well developed (Gallup International, 2019). Among the measures intended to overcome this insufficiency is Ordinance No. 04-4 of 8th Nov. 2019 on the establishment and maintenance of a database of employers who meet the requirements for participation in partnerships implementing work-based training (dual education system), but information about the opportunities offered by the dual education method is generally limited and has not been fully disseminated to all stakeholders.

The cumbersome administrative procedures for interns' employment contracts and the lack of tax benefits are also serious problems for enterprises (Gallup International, 2019). According to current research, excessive administrative burdens on both schools and businesses continue to stand out among the main obstacles. "The broader implementation of work-based education means acquiring practical knowledge and soft skills, taking advantage of modern facilities and the opportunity to work, and finding the necessary personnel on the part of employers. In this regard, regulations on dual education (about preliminary notification, mentors, the number of students, documentation) should be severely limited" (Institute for Market Economics, 2025: 12).

4.10. Outcomes at the vocational school

The vocational school began admitting students under a dual form of learning in the 2017/2018 school year, upon local employers' request, with two specialities in one class — one supported by the DOMINO project with 12 students, and one supported with funding from partner companies with 13 students. Since the beginning of the 2021/2022 school year, the school has been an entirely dual education system. The annually announced admission plan by speciality takes into account the professional qualifications sought by enterprises in the region. Students engaged in the dual form of learning demonstrate satisfaction with their chances to train in a real working environment, to participate in various professional competitions, and to compare their knowledge and skills in learning practicums outside Bulgaria under Erasmus+ (Naidenova, 2022). Additional motivation for them takes the form of material incentives — scholarships, pay, and insurance for their accrued workdays in the 12th grade. The recognition of internships as official work experience in the given speciality and hiring preferences among enterprises for those trained under the dual education system benefit these students when looking for jobs in the future. Training in a real working environment offers an advantage to graduates from the dual education system, including potential access to more modern technologies and the experience of mentors. Learning by doing helps students acquire not only professional skills, but also "*learn soft skills, work ethics, and teamwork*" (Interviewee 1).

Data provided by the school indicates that 2/3 of former students among the three most recent graduating classes under the dual education system have been successful. Most of them have continued working in their completed speciality, while others have chosen to continue their education at university. A relatively small number of successful graduates have not managed to effectively get a job and/or continue their education, the reasons being their weaker motivation, insufficient commitment to the learning process, or lack of authentic interest in working in their speciality. Some students have dropped out before the graduation stage due to moving to another school or town, or for socio-economic reasons. These students are predominantly members of vulnerable groups, and the analysis shows that policies to support VET and career guidance should prioritise them.

The 2019 impact assessment of the DOMINO project shows that the initiative exceeded its initially expected results. At the end of the project, 1,600 students had completed dual education in 12 professions in 32 vocational schools in 19 cities across the country. 170 Bulgarian and foreign firms were involved, and capacity-building was achieved through the training of 112 teachers, 199 mentors in enterprises, and 25 experts in dual education (Evtimova, 2019). Qualitative data has shown that the dual form of learning offers a great advantage with the combination of theory and practice throughout the learning process. The analysis recommends specific measures to diversify opportunities and directly involve students in a real working environment by increasing the number of working days and hours, more directly involving them in the work process, rotating student internships in different companies, and providing a dual form of learning in more specialties (Gallup International, 2019).

4.11. Assessing the impact of vocational schools

Offering dual education has been important for the development of the local economy in the area where the school is located. In addition to staffing local businesses, it also contributes to reducing internal migration to the capital and larger cities. The establishment of dual education also plays a significant role in improving the quality of professional training by contributing not only to the acquisition of practical skills but also to the understanding of theoretical knowledge and its connection with practical training. This is backed up by a study of the labour market realisation among secondary education graduates in Bulgaria from 2018 to 2023, within the framework of the "Pilot Model for VET Graduate Tracking" developed by the MES. The data show clear trends of stable employment for graduates from a dual form of learning and high levels of employment among those who obtaining a diploma and certificate of professional qualification from vocational education: up to “70% in the fifth year after leaving school” (Open Society Institute-Sofia, 2024: 47). Compared to students who have not completed vocational education, “the specificity of vocational education, which is more directly related to the labour market”, and especially the acquisition of a professional qualification predicts higher medium-term employment, as well as employment stability and profitability in the medium-term for vocational education graduates (Open Society Institute-Sofia, 2024: 47–52). In terms of continuing education, “60% of vocational graduates continue their studies in higher education after graduation”, and this is a prevalent choice in professions such as computer animation, music, finance, and operational accounting (Open Society Institute-Sofia, 2024: 53).

Despite the vocational secondary school’s successful example and gradual national increase from 0.1% (2017/2018) to 6% (2022/2023) of 12th graders registered in a dual form of learning (Open Society

Institute-Sofia, 2024: 46), dual education is not yet widespread in Bulgaria. In the academic year 2024/2025, only 9% of newly admitted students in VET are enrolled in a dual form of education (Institute for Market Economics, 2025). Following the wrap-up of the DOMINO project, its impact assessment has identified several major obstacles to the sustainability of dual education in the country. First is companies' concern regarding investments in personnel, without guarantees that they will remain working for them, as shown by the specific experience of the case study school; second are the clear, deep overall gaps in vocational education in the country; and third is finding enough interested companies to form a dual cohort. An additional part of the problem is the lack of sufficient awareness about dual education among parents and companies, as well as an absence of support for small and medium-sized enterprises to engage in these programmes (Economic.bg, 2023).

A key factor for the development of the dual education system will be overcoming the negative public attitude towards vocational training, "*as a result of the continuous prioritisation of humanities and language education*" in the country (Interviewee 1). Efforts to improve the overall image of vocational training and specific "*unattractive*" professions through increased information about the opportunities offered by this type of education, expanding admission numbers for vocational classes, and upgrading the facilities of vocational schools (Interviewee 1) would have a positive impact.

4.12. Assessment of the implications for policy and practice

The case study analysis shows that the development of dual education depends to a great extent on the active participation of people working in schools. Though the government has created a regulatory framework and appreciates the importance of vocational education, there is not enough practical support for the relationship between vocational schools and employers.

On the employers' side — the other chief stakeholder, without whom dual education cannot exist — a number of difficulties hindering their active engagement can also be observed. The accumulated experience of one small-town Bulgarian school cooperating with local companies demonstrates that the problem with weak interest among economic enterprises to engage with dual education could be solved with more practical and flexible regulation when it comes to training vocational cadres, as well as the educational centres in which students have their practicum with mentors from the affiliated enterprise. For example, in the first year of their education (11th grade), when students are still learning the ropes in a real working environment, their mentors could be retired specialists from that enterprise. The materialisation of this idea would generate more interest on the part of businesses to participate in dual education, so far as their participation wouldn't negatively affect production — the mentors would be free of the inconvenience of combining their work duties with the training process, while 12th graders would be "able to work in a real workplace" (Petrov, 2024a).

Specific proposals from businesses are: more flexible and user-friendly legislation regarding both employers and schools in terms of the administrative requirements on either side; a simplified framework for student placement and a simplified procedure for labour inspection; greater involvement of employers in curriculum development; and tax breaks, for example, the tax-free recognition of costs related to student internships and practicums (Petrov, 2024b).

The dual education system is strategically important to overcome the discrepancies between labour market needs and the training and career prospects of graduates. A key factor for its success is the

active involvement of all stakeholders, as observed in the case study of a Bulgarian vocational school. Measures such as paying more attention to vulnerable groups in the drafting of national policies for the development of VET and when monitoring the effect of their impact would have an additional positive effect on the dual education system. A very important aspect in this regard is maintaining a sustainable mechanism for evaluating and monitoring the effects of the practical implementation of VET policies.

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Legislation

In the Strategy for Development of Vocational Education and Training (2015–2020) [*Strategiya za razvitie na profesionalnoto obrazovanie i obuchenie*], the first goal in Priority Area of Impact 1, Ensuring the Quality and Efficiency of VET, is structuring vocational education and work-based training (dual education) as a form of partnership between vocational schools and employers. Through the establishment of dual education, it is expected that access to VET will be expanded and made easier for those over 16 years of age, including early school leavers, to create a lasting, effective relationship between VET and businesses, to smooth the transition from school to the workplace and limit youth unemployment.

The Preschool and School Education Act (PSE Act) [*Zakon za preduchilishtnoto i uchilishtnoto obrazovanie*] introduced the term "work-based learning (dual education system)" as one of the forms of student education, along with daytime, evening, independent study, and others (PSE Act, Art. 106, para. 1, item 8). According to this Act, professional qualification in the dual education system includes theoretical learning and practical training in a real work environment, is organised based on a partnership between a vocational school and one or more employers, and takes place in the upper secondary level of education with students over 16 years old.

Work-based training (dual education system) is planned and carried out by the following: the Labour Code, Ordinance № 1 of 8th Sept. 2015 (amended in 2018), the VET Act, Art. 17a, para. 7, and the Programme for Mentor Training, endorsed by the Minister of Education and Science with Framework

Directive № 09-997 of 2nd April 2019. Ordinance № 04-4 of 8th Nov. 2019, endorsed by the Minister of Economy, specifies the terms and conditions for the establishment and maintenance of an information database of employers meeting the requirements for participation in partnerships to implement work-based training (dual education system).

The Vocational Education and Training Act (VET Act) [*Zakon za profesionalnoto obrazovanie i obuchenie*] regulates the conditions and procedures for conducting work-based learning (dual education system). It also provides institutional definitions except information and career guidance centres: institutions in the system of vocational education and training are secondary schools, specialised secondary schools, or theological schools, as long as they provide vocational training (Art. 17a, para. 7). The VET Act introduced the role of mentors (selected by the employer, workers or staff members of the enterprise under whose guidance the practical aspect of training in a real work environment takes place) and the stipulations for their professional experience, training, and financing (Art. 17a1). The VET Act also introduced the role of teacher-methodologists, who liaise between the employer, mentor, and school and are appointed by the school principal (Art. 17a2).

The VET Act obliges the Ministry of Economy to establish and maintain an information database of employers which meet the requirements for participation in the dual education system (Art. 17a4). The database should be publicly accessible through the website of the Ministry of Economy. Its information includes an employer's name and legal structure, unique identification code (UIC), BULSTAT Registry number, the facility where real-world practical training will be carried out, and which professional specialities are offered for work-based internships (dual education system).

The Labour Code (LC) [*Kodeks na truda*] governs the conditions under which an employment contract can be drawn up under the dual education system (Art. 230). This is an internship contract through which an employer undertakes the preparation of an employee in the process of their work in a certain field, and the employee attempts to master it. A dual education system contract determines the form, place, and duration of the internship, as well as other issues related to the employee's preparation like working conditions (Art. 304), limitations on working hours (Art. 305), and the minimum remuneration for students (Art. 230, para. 6). Under a dual system, the duration of a student's internship is determined according to the curriculum of their study programme.

Ordinance № 1 of 8th Sept. 2015 (amended in 2018) regarding the conditions and procedure for carrying out vocational training (dual education system) was issued by the Minister of Education and Science based on Art. 17a, para. 5 of the VET Act. It describes all stages and responsibilities in the process of organising and implementing work-based training.

The Programme for Mentor Training for acquiring basic pedagogical and psychological knowledge and skills when working with interns in work-based training (dual education system) was approved by Framework Directive No. 09-997 of 2nd Apr. 2019 by the Minister of Education and Science. It is aimed at individuals who wish to be mentors in enterprises conducting work-based learning and includes: the objectives of their training, the distribution of academic hours, the learning content, and the expected learning outcomes. The programme explains the regulatory framework of work-based learning (dual

education system) and provides a toolkit for implementing an effective partnership between schools and enterprises in the implementation of a dual education system in Bulgaria.

Ordinance № 04-4 of 8th Nov. 2019 sets out the procedures to establish and maintain an information database of employers who meet the partnership requirements to participate in the implementation of work-based training (dual education system).

The Strategic Vision for Developing Dual-track Vocational Education and Training in Bulgaria by 2030 and its implementation plan were adopted at the end of 2023 by the Vocational Education and Training Board at the Ministry of Education and Science.

5. Local Collaborations: Youth Employment Agencies and Vocational Training Ambassadors in Germany

By Daniel Neff, Isabelle Le Mouillour and Philipp Grollman, with support from Lorenza Schlumbom and Jule Rocholl

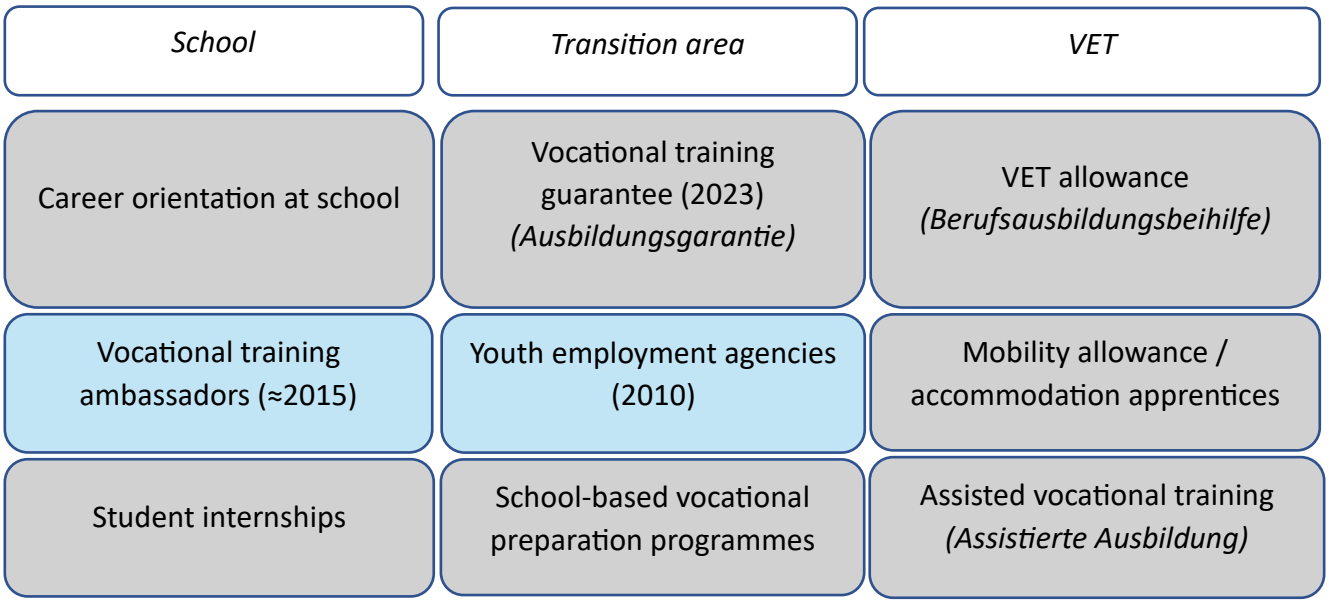
5.1. The German context

The transition from school to work is crucial for the future labour market prospects of young people, but it is not always a straightforward process. In Germany, dual vocational training is an important career pathway and is believed to be a successful model for securing skilled workers (and for combating youth unemployment). However, in recent decades, the dual VET system has come under pressure. One reason is that young people and parents/carers see dual VET as less prestigious, and hence there is an increasing tendency for young people to opt for higher education pathways.

The transition from school to the training market is also not without problems. Reasons for this include, among other things, personal aspects, the situation of the local training market, and "matching problems", which are a substantial problem for VET in Germany (see Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung, 2024, p. 21ff). These occur when career aspirations of young adults do not match with what companies have to offer, when there is a limited match between (regional) demand and supply, or a mismatch between the applicant's qualifications and the requirement profiles of companies (Enggruber and Neises, 2023a, p. 3). In Germany, this has led to a sizeable number of young people without a formal qualification, of whom around 90% are employed, but more or less trapped in the low-wage sector (YEA Interview 1). Moreover, the growing complexity and confusion of education and training pathways and changes in the world of work are making it difficult to orient themselves in the transition phase between school and work (AGJ, 2023, p. 7). This is exacerbated by a multitude of federal, state and municipal programmes, which have led to a funding jungle, duplicate structures and competing programmes and measures that are difficult even for experts to keep track of (Neises 2018). Recruiting young people for and channelling them towards dual vocational training thus remains one of the key challenges for securing skilled labour in the future.

In order to overcome the declining relevance of dual vocational training and matching problems, young people need funding structures and support programmes tailored to their needs, as well as an individually viable access to working life (Enggruber and Neises 2023a, p. 3). In Germany, as pointed out above, there are numerous (financial and non-financial) programmes and support structures in place to promote the transition from school to the training market of young people. These can be found at the communal, federal state and national level and practically cannot be overseen by youth and their parents. Figure 5.1 highlights some of these programmes. This case study focuses on two support structures: youth employment agencies (Jugendberufsagenturen); and vocational training ambassadors (Ausbildungsbotschafter).

Figure 5.1: Selection of school-to-training transition activities (stylised)



Source: Based on BMAS, 2023a, p. 4; Mobility allowance (Mobilitätszuschuss) and accommodation for apprentices (Wohnen für Azubis).

5.2. Youth employment agencies (Jugendberufsagenturen)

Youth employment agencies (YEA) are not new authorities or legally "fixed" defined institutions. Instead, youth employment agency is an umbrella term for a conglomerate of local-level cross-legal co-operation in the area of youth support. In fact, only around 80 % of all institutions carry YEA in their name (Servicestelle Jugendberufsagenturen, 2025a).

In the context of a survey, the BIBB (Servicestelle Jugendberufsagenturen, 2022, p. 6; BIBB, 2023, p. 250) provided a working definition of YEA (regardless of whether they used youth employment agency in their name or not). Co-operative alliances were classified as youth employment agencies if they:

i. include at least the three co-operation partners employment agency (Arbeitsagentur), the job centre (Jobcenter) and the local youth welfare organisation (Jugendhilfe);
ii. have young people or at least a subgroup of young people as their target group, which they support on a permanent and structured basis (within the scope of their responsibilities); and
iii. have bindingly agreed on the nature and scope of their cooperation.

The first forerunners of youth employment agencies date back to 2007 were local initiatives tried to establish cross-jurisdictional alliances to support youth (Burmeister, 2021) as part of the programme "Regionales Übergangsmanagement" (YEA Interview 1). The first official youth employment agencies were then founded in 2010 as part of the project "*Arbeitsbündnis Jugend und Beruf*" of the Federal Employment Agency (Bundesagentur für Arbeit (BA)) and the Federal Ministry for Employment and Social Affairs (Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales (BMAS)) (Neises and Nuglisch, 2016). This original concept was then politically backed and pushed through the coalition agreement of a grand-coalition (between Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union and Social Democratic Party under Angela Merkel) in 2013, where it was agreed upon that youth employment agencies are to be set up across Germany to enable "[…] customised and sustainable transitions from school to training and work" (Deutscher Budestag, 2013, p. 66).

To support young people in this transition in line with their needs, the measures of a single social service provider are often not sufficient. Youth employment agencies were therefore envisaged as special contact points that support young people with all questions and problems related to starting a career. This implies that they combine various support measures and services from different social service providers, operating on different legal bases, under one roof.

As laid out above, youth employment agencies are provided by three stakeholders: the employment agency (*Agentur für Arbeit* - based on the social code III (*Sozialgesetzbuch* - SGB III)), job centres (*Jobcenter* - based on social code II) and local youth welfare services (*Jugendhilfe* - based on social code VIII) (BMAS, 2025). Some have or plan to integrate social assistance (Eingliederungshilfe – based on social code IX) (Enggruber and Neises, 2023b; Beierling et al., 2024). In almost all cases, other stakeholders are also involved (SBJA im BIBB, 2022). The actual composition of actors, the methods of cooperation and objectives can, however, vary locally and are a matter of local negotiations between the relevant stakeholders (BMAS, 2023).

The three major actors, due to their different positioning in the system, have very different understandings and practices of integration. While the job centre's main purpose is to bring young people into the labour market, the employment agency aims to promote sustainable and high-quality vocational training and employment, and the youth welfare agency is focused on individual development and social integration of young people. Hence, the three agencies have different institutional selection and steering criteria, as well as different professional practices and logics of action of the employees (Ahrens, 2024, p. 3)

Most YEAs were founded between 2016 and 2018 (YEA Interview 1). There are currently about 360 youth employment agencies in Germany (Beierling et al., 2024), which corresponds to an approximate coverage of 90% of all employment agency districts and independent cities (see also SBJA im BIBB, 2022). To support the establishment and working of youth employment agencies across Germany, the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (*Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales* - BMAS) established the Service Centre for Youth Employment Agencies (Servicestelle Jugendberufsagenturen) at the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) in 2019, which informs and advises YEAs. YEAs usually serve young people up to the age of 25, are funded by the involved agencies and in some instances are additionally financed through the European Social Fund (ESF) (Practitioner interview).

5.2.1. Aims and objectives of Youth Employment Agencies

The task of the youth employment agencies is to individually support young people (up to the age of 25) in their entry into the professional world as a kind of local "one-stop-government" (Enggruber and Neises, 2023a, p. 8). The aim is thus to provide needs-oriented and individually tailored advice, guidance and support as well as easier access to support services for young people to ease their transition from school to work (BMAS, 2023). In this context, the agencies are, for example, supposed to open up opportunities for practical experience (i.e., through internships, visits to companies, exploration of occupational fields, etc.). Further, they can help to initiate contact with prospective employers (i.e., through apprenticeship fairs or direct interactions) or to enhance personal experience (stays abroad, training worldwide, language holidays, voluntary services, etc.). The second task of YEAs is to structure the transition management at the local level (YEA Interview 1).

5.2.2. Assessment of Youth Employment Agencies

Young people do need targeted and coordinated counselling which considers the totality of their life circumstances to successfully master the transition from school to the world of work. This holds especially for young people in complex life situations, who need *"[…] fast, well-coordinated and […] needs-based, needs-orientated services from a single source that focus equally on their social and professional integration in equal measure*" (AGJ, 2015, p. 2, *own translation*).

In the German context, YEAs are innovative as they could provide the institutional structure needed to meet the needs of young people in the transition phase, thus addressing mismatches:

Firstly, YEAs are *organised regionally*. This allows them to adapt the support of young people to the respective training and labour market structures and to provide local counselling and coaching. Moreover, YEAs thus help to structure transition management at the local level and can also help to achieve the goals of the regions and municipalities, such as, for example, helping to keep young people in structurally weak regions (Interview 1).

Secondly, YEAs are *cross-jurisdictional cooperations* between the most relevant authorities combining the most important support measures for the transition phase under one roof in the form of a *one-stop government*. Other relevant local partners can be incorporated through networking. This implies that one central contact point for young people in the transition phase exists at the local level.

Thirdly, YEAs are flexible in that they are supposed to be able to adjust their services to the changing needs of their clientele.

And finally, YEAs are based on *individual casework* with young people, including counselling and coaching, which are not deficit-oriented.

Taken together, YEAs are innovative in the German context, as they:

- help to organise the transition area more clearly and efficiently overall;
- are easily accessible;
- oriented on strengths (not deficit-oriented) and the holistic individual needs of young people (including inclusion);
- and can thus overcome some of the previous problems in the transition area.

As Ahrens (2024, p.5) points out, the strengths of the YEAs are also their weaknesses. She argues that there is a lack of a common understanding of how to overcome the tensions between a market-regulated training system and case management designed to meet individual needs, as well as a lack of understanding of integration (ibid., p. 5). Moreover, as YEAs are organised very heterogeneously at the local level, large variations in terms of quality can be found (DGB, 2024, p. 8). YEAs should, however, be understood as dynamic in the sense that they gradually evolve, grow and adapt to changing circumstances, hence constantly aim to improve the quality of their services (YEA Interview 1).

Another issue is that the success of YEAs depends on the commitment of all relevant local stakeholders and their willingness to compromise, as well as the necessary political backing. Moreover, it requires

the use of their own resources and additional work and stamina to realise YEAs, as it takes a long time until synergy effects are achieved (YEA Interview 1).

Moreover, another challenge is the sharply increased need for support of young people in various life situations. YEAs are often forced to prioritise hardship cases, where young people encounter multiple problems such as drug abuse/addiction, homelessness, debts, psychological problems, experience of violence, etc., so that many other steps have to be mastered first, before these youth can be guided into vocational orientation.

Lastly, despite many efforts, YEAs need to provide low-threshold access (see Servicestelle Jugendberufsagenturen, 2025b) In order to be able to reach out to all young people – especially the most difficult cases- the YEAs must provide easy-accessible, permanent services based on continuity and reliability in order to build up trust over time.

5.2.3. Key learning from Youth Employment Agencies

There seems to be an agreement that YEAs are a good idea in principle, but further improvements need to be made. Several experts and stakeholders have put forward suggestions on what needs to be done to strengthen the work of YEAs, which are laid out below:

Nationwide expansion as reliable local contact points: Until now, not all German areas are covered by YEAs. Hence, the German Trade Union Council, together with the Confederation of the German Employers (DGB and BDA, 2024), both demand that YEAs are available nationwide and are expanded as a reliable central point of contact for the transition from school to work for young people at the local level.

Minimum standard: As youth employment agencies are a matter of individual negotiations between the stakeholders at the regional level (Burmeister, 2021), the concepts, structures and players to be found under the collective term do vary substantially, as well as the standards under which they operate and thus the overall quality. The German Trade Union Confederation (DGB, 2024, p. 8; Ahrens, 2024, p.4) suggests the introduction of legally stipulated national minimum standards for youth employment agencies, which Ahrens believes could also form the basis of a uniform professionalisation concept.

Shared understanding of support: As laid out earlier, the three major stakeholders do have a very different understanding of support, due to their different understanding of tasks and objectives. Hence, it is necessary to develop a common understanding of holistic support and transparency in case management (AGJ 2015: p. 2). Moreover, these shared aims and strategic goals need to be reflected upon and evaluated at regular intervals and, if necessary, need to be adapted (YEA Interview 1).

Resources: The decentralised approach also means that YEAs remain dependent on the voluntary commitment of the local partners and are dependent on existing local funding structures. YEAs do not have their own independent budget, nor do they have their own independent area of responsibilities and personnel resources. Instead, in most cases, each partner has control over their own respective resources and the responsibilities of the local YEA are defined by the legal tasks of the actors involved. To be able to meet the growing demand, it is necessary to equip YEAs with the needed financial and personnel resources (Neises & Nuglitsch, 2016, p. 8; DGB. 2024, p. 8; DGB and BDA, 2024; Ahrens, 2024, p. 4; BMBF, 2024). In practice, the installation of a local coordinator for the YEA seems to be a

way forward in bringing together the respective stakeholders, and improving, extending and monitoring the services of the YEAs (Practitioner Interview).

(Regional) Monitoring and Steering: There is a lack of systematic and continuous data on educational biographies and individual progress of school leavers, as most federal states do not have provisions in place to collect such data. As a consequence, due to the lack of such monitoring, youth employment agencies are not in the position to generate an overview of the scale and extent of support needs of young people in their region, making an early intervention practically impossible (Neises and Nuglitsch, p. 9; Ahrens, 2024, p. 4; BMBF, 2024, p. 137). With the so-called "Schülerdatennorm", the legal basis for the sharing of student data with the YEAs was set up in 2022. This permits the forwarding of student contact data to the employment agencies, which enables the employment agencies to contact young people directly (Bundesgentur für Arbeit, 2022). However, due to the federal set-up of Germany, each federal state has to implement this individually.

Actively reaching out to young adults: YEAs must thus overcome institutional hurdles to create youth-friendly entry points to their services by actively reaching out to young people and at an early stage. This involves recognising and addressing their life situations before problems arise. Such a proactive and personalised approach lays the groundwork for a long-term relationship, ensuring continuous exchange and support throughout their transition into vocational training and employment (Servicestelle Jugendberufsagenturen, 2025b).

Participation: Neises and Nuglitsch (2016, p. 9) also suggest fostering the systematic active participation of young people, for example, in the context of committee work or advisory councils, as participation forms the best basis for motivating young people. In this context, the relevance of feedback from young people to ensure constructive work in the long term, to continuously adapt it to the needs of young people, and to monitor and evaluate their work is emphasised (Servicestelle Jugendberufsagenturen, 2025b).

Joint further qualification of staff: Staff at YEA from the different agencies have to be qualified according to their new tasks at the young employment agencies, to realise a holistic support of their clients (AGJ, 2015, p. 5). This includes, for example, the use of easy-to-understand language; knowledge of the different measures/programmes in all three legal fields, etc.

Exchange networks: In some regions / federal states, the youth employment agencies have formed open exchange networks to collectively tackle shared challenges. Such networks can provide a trusted space for peer learning, open dialogue, and innovation in youth employment support. They help to rapidly disseminate best practices, to amplify voices (i.e., to gain political support), and create a sense of collective agency that extends beyond bureaucratic boundaries and could thus foster the further development and expansion of local youth employment agencies (Servicestelle Jugendberufsagenturen, 2025c).

Regular evaluation: In the view of the German Trade Union Confederation (2024, p. 8), YEA should regularly evaluate their services and adapt them to the target groups and regional conditions (see also BMBF 2024, p. 137).

5.3. Vocational Training Ambassadors (Ausbildungsbotschafter)

The local chambers play an important role in the German dual VET system as "competent bodies" as defined in the VET law (1975). They, among other things, monitor the company-based training and advise companies, maintain a register of all VET contracts, set up a local VET committee and examination board, issue the final VET certificates, and recognise qualifications acquired abroad (VET law, Bundesministerium der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz, 2005). Each company in Germany has to be a member of a local chamber. Hence, the local chambers are a central contact point for companies for different issues, among other things, also about securing skilled labour. As Germany is undergoing a severe skilled labour shortage (which, however, varies regionally), many local chambers are increasingly asked to support, especially the small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) in their endeavour to secure skilled workers. Companies reported that they either did not get applications for their advertised jobs or did not receive the right applications they were seeking (VTA Interview 2).

The Vocational Training Ambassador (VTA) programme was thus launched based on this initial situation, where companies, especially SMEs, demanded support through the local chambers to increase the number of apprenticeship applicants. The desk research found the first initiatives in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg dating back to 2011 (IHK Nordschwarzwald, n.d.). As the chambers know each other and exchange ideas, they learn from each other and work together (VTA Interview 2). In this context, the idea of VTAs spread to other states and the number of training ambassador programmes grew across Germany, but is still very unevenly spread across the federal states, with some still without such a programme.

As laid out above, the Vocational Training Ambassadors (VTA) programme is run by the local chambers and is seen as "*[…] one of the best career guidance projects that you can actually organise*" (VTA Interview 2). Vocational training ambassadors are vocational training students who visit schools and/or fairs or talk online about their career choice, their search for an apprenticeship placement and their occupation. In self-prepared presentations, the VTA give insights into their respective occupations and their everyday training. They are trained, supervised, guided and (sometimes) accompanied by experts from the chambers, which serve as the link between VAs and schools. They also request the exemption of the VA from their companies when they visit schools, which is usually granted (Athanasiadi et al. 2020, p. 40; VTA Interview 2).

The VTAs are prepared for their tasks before they visit a school, usually in the form of a workshop. Here, one focus lies on the tasks of the VTAs and presentations in front of a class, but also other aspects, the coordinators identified as important, such as to also report how they came to choose their training occupation (VTA Interview 2). However, the VTA decides what they find important, what they would like to pass on to the students. Only through this, they can remain authentic (VTA Interview 2). VTAs are also often provided with a PowerPoint presentation template and supported in drafting their presentation. Coordinators often try to accompany VTAs when they visit a school for the first time to be able to give constructive feedback to the VTA (VTA Interview 2). At the beginning, VTAs are often recruited by contacting regional companies providing vocational training. Now, due to the success of the programme, the companies actively encourage their new apprentices to participate in the programme, so that there is often no shortage of VTAs. The main problem, however, is that few VTAs exist for the "smaller" occupations (VTA Interview 2).

5.3.1. Aims and objectives of the Vocational Training Ambassadors programme

Vocational training ambassadors are supposed to be role models of their respective occupations. They provide authentic first-hand reports on their everyday training, the requirements and opportunities in their occupational field and give young people practical insights into the world of work at eye level (Athanasiadi et al., 2020; VTA Interview 2). Moreover, they are supposed to motivate and inspire their peers and to provide a positive image of persons working in their occupation. Among other things, this should help the pupils to develop initial ideas about their professional future (Ausbildungsbotchafter.online, n.d.). As many youths do not know much about different occupations, or are simply overwhelmed by the vast amount of potential career pathways (VTA Interview 2), VTAs can serve as "[…] an anchor on which they can develop or realign their ideas from the prototype of the occupation" (Athanasiadi et al., 2020, p. 42).

5.3.2. Assessment of the Vocational Training Ambassadors programme

Firstly, as laid out above, it is focused on the demand of local companies. Especially local SMEs can benefit from the programme, as it offers the opportunity to publicise their company and the training occupations in the immediate vicinity. This works better than participating in apprenticeship fairs or through other means, which the companies have quickly realised (VTA Interview 2).

Secondly, VTA programmes offer a direct and authentic career orientation at eye-level. The VTAs are more or less of the students they visit in their schools and are thus perceived as peers. They provide direct, first-hand information presented in a way that is suitable for young people

Thirdly, the VTA programme can also help to reduce gender-specific stereotypes and increase confidence in their own abilities, although more research is needed in this context.

Fourthly, it is believed to be a win-win-win-win situation for all involved actors (see Table 5.1). Students in schools gain practical information and a realistic representation of the occupation of the VTA, which supports their vocational orientation. They could thus become motivated and inspired to follow the route of dual vocational training. Schools do profit as they can supplement their curriculum, gain support for their career guidance activities and develop stronger networks with the local chamber and companies. The employers of the VTAs (companies) profit as they can increase their attractiveness as an employer and cultivate their image, which could potentially result in attracting more vocational training applicants. The company also promotes their vocational training student, which would also lead to a stronger tie to the company. Finally, the VTAs themselves profit, as participating in the programme could foster personal development (e.g., gaining more self-confidence, promoting their own social and interpersonal skills, etc.), they can gain recognition and appreciation, broaden their network and their perspectives.

Table 5.1: VTA programme – Who gains what?

Students	Schools	Companies	VTAs
Practical information	Supplementing the curriculum	Attractiveness as an employer	Personal development (e.g. self-confidence)
Realistic representation	Support for career guidance	Image cultivation	Network development
Vocational orientation	Networking with chambers and companies	Promotion of own trainees	Recognition and appreciation
Motivation und Inspiration	Greater practical focus	Future apprentices/ applicants	Broadening perspectives

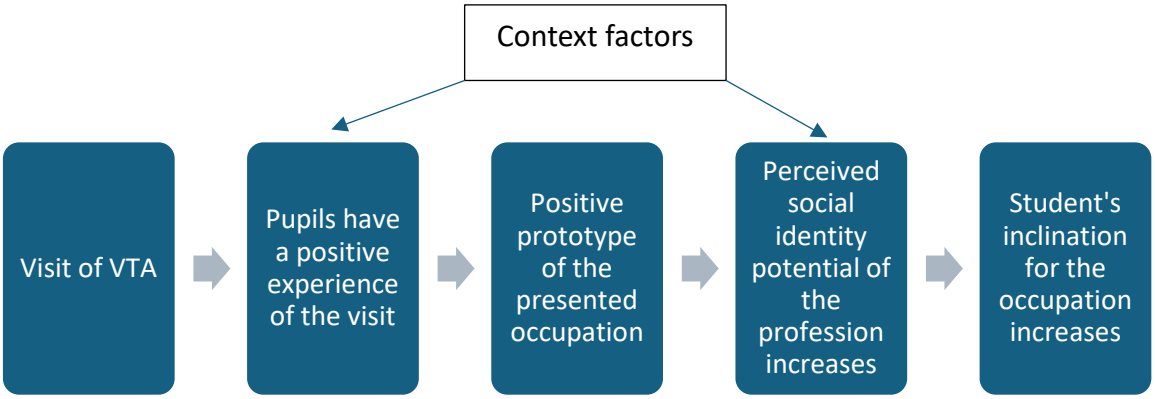
Based on Was sind Ausbildungsbotschafter? - ausbildungsbotschafter.online, accessed 31.03.2025,

Athanasiadi et al. (2020, p. 43) illustrate the potential effect of a vocational training ambassador visit in the following (ideal-typical) way:

Do not reach friends and family: As the VTAs visit schools and are focused on the students in these schools, the programme usually does not reach the friends and the family of the students, especially their parents, who often have a strong influence on the career orientation of their children (Athanasiadi et al. 2020, p. 43).

Not much is known about the actual impact: Although the programme has been in place for quite some time, not much research has been undertaken on the specific impact of VTAs. Open questions are, for example, the actual impact of the programme on final career choices (long-term effect); the possible negative reactions to role models (such as fear – see Athanasiadi et al., 2020, p. 43). Figure 5.2 provides a visualisation of the potential effect of a VTA visit to a school. Nevertheless, the programme is perceived as a success and an integral part of occupational orientation at the local level with positive feedback from schools, students, companies and the VTAs (VTA Interview 2).

Figure 5.2: Potential effect of a Vocational Training Ambassador visit



Source: Athanasiadi et al. (2020, p. 43)

No nationwide coverage: The use of VTAs is increasing steadily but slowly. The starting and success of the programme essentially depend on several factors, such as the initiative of federal states and/or the local chambers; whether the schools integrate it into their curriculum and whether the companies exempt the VTAs from working hours (BO Plus, n.d.). The VTA programme is not very cost-intensive for companies and mainly requires the use of coordinators at the regional level. The programme could thus rather easily be rolled out at the regional and national level, but in the end depends on the financial and human resources of local chambers and their willingness to initiate the programme.

5.3.3. Key learning from the Vocational Training Ambassadors programme

The following sets out some of the key learning and implications for practice addressing the challenges highlighted earlier:

Reaching of family and friends: As noted earlier, VTAs only address students in school, but do not reach friends and family. To change this, some chambers have started to also target parents. Some chambers, for example, have extended the VTA programme and sent senior vocational training ambassadors to parents' evenings in schools (as part of the campaign "Ja zur Ausbildung")(IHK Nordschwarzwald, n.d.). Some provide occupational guidance for parents/carers in other languages, but it seems that those parents/carers who visit evenings in schools are often not those who need more information about occupations (VTA Interview 2). An online platform has started to provide online occupational orientation by providing insights into occupations by apprentices (see zynd…und wofur brennst dy?).

Financial and personnel resources: Most VTA programmes are an integral part of the work of chambers, hence it is assumed that there is no need for additional support for the programme. Nevertheless, more financial and human resources are needed to further roll out the programme to cater for the growing demand. Most programmes can only serve a limited number of schools per year (and not all in their district) due to the lack of adequate financial and personnel resources (VTA Interview 2). In some federal states, such as Baden-Württemberg, the state finances the initiative, including a central office as well as coordinators in the chambers (BMBF 2019, p. 19).

Inclusion in overall portfolio of vocational training orientation: VTAs are an important component of occupational orientation for pupils. Although the VTA programme is generally well embedded in the entire spectrum of vocational orientation measures organised by the chambers, it is less well embedded in the overall vocational orientation measures outside the chambers.

Stronger ties with schools: An early evaluation of the VTA programme in the state of Baden-Württemberg showed that one of the few identified problems was that the cooperation between the coordinators and schools could be improved, by for example providing guidelines for the involved teachers and information sheets for the students (Zinn et al., 2014). Moreover, the ties with high schools (Gymnasien) should be developed, as they traditionally did not show much interest in providing vocational orientation to their students, although a substantial number of graduates from high school do enter vocational training (see BIBB, 2024).

5.4. Assessment of the implications for policy and practice

Youth Employment Agencies serve as local, cross-agency hubs that bring together employment services, job centres, and youth welfare organisations to provide holistic, individualised support for

young people up to age 25. Their core mission is to simplify access to career guidance and support services, particularly for those facing complex life situations. By offering a “one-stop” model, YEAs aim to reduce fragmentation in the support system and tailor services to local labour market conditions. However, their decentralised nature leads to significant variation in quality and effectiveness across regions. To address this, policy recommendations could include establishing national minimum standards, ensuring consistent funding, and fostering a shared understanding of integration among the participating agencies. In practice, YEAs should also improve outreach, especially to marginalised youth, and invest in staff training and regional monitoring to better align services with young people’s evolving needs.

Vocational Training Ambassadors, on the other hand, offer a peer-led approach to career guidance. These are current apprentices who visit schools to share their personal experiences and insights into vocational training. Their relatable, first-hand accounts help demystify the world of work and inspire students to consider dual vocational training as a viable and attractive career path. The programme is particularly beneficial for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which often struggle to attract applicants. While the initiative is widely praised for its authenticity and motivational impact, it faces limitations in reach, particularly in engaging parents and families, who play a crucial role in shaping career decisions. Expanding the programme’s coverage, strengthening ties with schools and integrating it more fully into broader vocational orientation strategies are key areas for development. Additionally, more research is needed to assess its long-term impact on career choices.

Together, these programmes highlight the importance of coordinated, accessible, and youth-centred career guidance. They underscore the need for systemic reforms that not only streamline support structures but also empower young people through relatable role models and personalised guidance.

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6. Compulsory education reform in Estonia

By Maaris Raudsepp

6.1. Estonian context

Estonia is a knowledge society, whose processes and practices are based on production, distribution and use of knowledge, and where education is a key factor in economic and social development. Therefore, it is in the state's interest to ensure that as many young people as possible are qualified. In 2022, 83% of 20-24-year-olds had secondary education or higher. The Estonian Education Development Plan 2021–2035 sets a target that by 2035, 90% of Estonians aged 20-24 will have completed secondary education. Such a goal is set because an increasingly complex environment requires self-awareness and the acquisition of new skills and competencies to cope successfully. According to research, each year of education increases the likelihood of both better health and higher income, which overall supports the country's economic growth. Over the past decade, 12 OECD countries have extended the duration of compulsory education. Estonia's nine years of compulsory education are below the OECD average of 11 years. The acquisition of secondary education has also been set as a priority goal in the Estonian Education Development Plan.

Estonia's labour market is experiencing profound structural changes driven by automation, artificial intelligence, and digitalisation, which are diminishing the demand for low-skilled labour while simultaneously intensifying the need for specialised qualifications, particularly in high-growth sectors such as information technology, engineering, and healthcare. In this context, basic education is increasingly insufficient to equip young people with the competencies required for sustained employability and lifelong learning. The resulting skills mismatch has contributed to a widening gap between labour market demands and the qualifications of new entrants, heightening the risk of unemployment and underemployment among individuals with limited educational attainment. In response, recent educational reforms have been strategically aligned with Estonia's broader digital transformation agenda. These reforms prioritise the integration of digital literacy as a foundational competency, the deployment of AI-enhanced learning environments, and the development of a unified electronic admissions and data tracking system to facilitate student transitions and ensure compliance with compulsory education mandates.

At the same time, Estonia faces a range of interrelated societal challenges that intersect with education policy. Demographic trends, including an ageing population and declining birth rates, necessitate the rationalisation of the school network to maintain educational quality and sustainability. Moreover, persistent social inequalities (such as gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and special educational needs—continue to impede equitable access to educational opportunities. While the reform is expected to yield positive outcomes for marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities and at-risk youth, through the formal recognition of non-formal learning and cultural education, concerns remain regarding the capacity of vocational institutions to adequately support students with special needs. Additionally, disparities in digital infrastructure raise the risk of technological inequality, potentially undermining the equitable implementation of digital learning tools. Variations in school resources and student health behaviours further underscore the need for targeted interventions to ensure that all learners can benefit from the reforms. Collectively, these measures reflect Estonia's commitment to

constructing a more inclusive, technologically advanced, and labour market-responsive education system capable of addressing the complex demands of a rapidly evolving socio-economic landscape.

6.2. Educational reforms

Estonia's recent reform of its compulsory education system constitutes a significant policy intervention aimed at enhancing educational equity, continuity, and alignment with labour market demands. The educational reform builds upon Estonia's existing legal framework for education, which includes the Constitution, the Education Act, the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act, and the Vocational Education Institutions Act. The Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act regulates compulsory education, curriculum, and student rights, while the Vocational Education Institutions Act governs vocational training and alternative education pathways.

The educational reform initiated by the Ministry of Education and Research and formally adopted by the Riigikogu in December 2024, extends the age of compulsory education from 16 to 18 years and introduces a diversified framework of post-basic educational pathways, encompassing academic, applied, adult, vocational, and preparatory programmes. The reform is part of the current government's commitment to raising the compulsory school age to 18 (Vabariigi Valitsuse tegevusprogramm 2023-2027). It is also aligned with Estonia's Education Strategy 2035 (Haridusvaldkonna arengukava 2021-2035), which sets ambitious goals for increasing educational attainment and reducing inequality.

It is underpinned by a commitment to reducing early school leaving, promoting personalised and inclusive learning trajectories, and ensuring that all learners remain engaged in formal education through to adulthood. Notable innovations include the formal integration of non-formal learning into the education system, the harmonisation of credit systems across secondary, vocational, and higher education, and the rescheduling of final examinations to facilitate smoother transitions between educational stages. A central objective is the elevation of vocational education to parity with academic education, with a strategic target of directing at least 40% of basic school graduates into applied secondary education by 2035.

This objective is supported by the development of sectoral curricula, alignment with national labour market forecasting (OSKA), regulatory adjustments for adult learners, and the establishment of integrated educational centres that consolidate resources and expand learning opportunities. Co-financed by European Union structural funds, the reform is positioned as a long-term investment in human capital, aiming to cultivate a skilled, adaptable workforce and to strengthen Estonia's social cohesion and economic resilience through a more inclusive and future-oriented education system.

6.3. Background to education reforms in Estonia

Estonia's education reform is closely aligned with the country's broader digital transformation and e-Government strategies, positioning digital innovation as a central pillar of its future-oriented education system. Key initiatives include the integration of AI-driven learning tools and interactive e-learning platforms such as eKool and Stuudium, with digital literacy established as a core competency to prepare students for the demands of a technologically advanced labour market. Legislative amendments support the creation of a unified electronic admissions environment and a centralised register of admission data, aimed at streamlining student transitions and ensuring compliance with compulsory education requirements. These systems, built on modern technological infrastructure, will

enhance data processing and facilitate the automatic integration of non-formal learning records. Schools are mandated to use national education information systems for data collection and communication, with parents required to engage through designated digital channels. While these reforms promise greater flexibility, personalisation, and efficiency in education, their successful implementation depends on equitable access to digital infrastructure and careful resource planning to prevent disparities and ensure system reliability.

The recent amendments to Estonia's Compulsory Education Act represent a strategic policy response to enduring structural challenges within the national education system, particularly the high rates of non-progression following basic education. A significant proportion of students either drop out or fail to transition into upper secondary or vocational education, contributing to a growing demographic of low-skilled youth. This phenomenon is particularly problematic in the context of a knowledge-based economy, where educational attainment is a critical determinant of employability, economic resilience, and social well-being. The reform seeks to mitigate this issue by reducing the number of young people classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), a figure that remains above the European Commission's recommended threshold, and by enhancing Estonia's comparative performance in international educational benchmarks.

Central to the reform is a comprehensive strategy to reduce dropout rates across all levels of secondary education, with particular attention to the first year of vocational programmes, where attrition is most pronounced. The legislative changes introduce early intervention mechanisms, clarify institutional responsibilities for student retention, and promote increased parental engagement in monitoring academic progress. Furthermore, the reform addresses systemic deficiencies, such as the shortage of qualified educators and support personnel, the underdevelopment of adult retraining pathways within vocational institutions, and the lack of a robust, integrated system for tracking student transitions, especially for those requiring additional support services.

By extending the duration of compulsory education and reinforcing institutional accountability, the amendments aim to ensure that a greater proportion of young people complete upper secondary education and are adequately prepared for either further study or entry into the labour market. The overarching objective is to reduce the prevalence of low educational attainment, enhance social mobility, and optimise the return on public investment in education. Informed by international best practices, including Finland's comprehensive student monitoring framework, Estonia's reform initiative aspires to construct a more inclusive, adaptive, and future-oriented education system capable of meeting the evolving demands of society and the economy.

The amendments to the three education laws were initiated by the Government on 03.06.2024. Parliamentary debates lasted from 04.06. to 04.12.2024. The law was promulgated on 12.12.2024, and it will take effect on 01.09.2025.

The proposed activities to be implemented or supported by the law amendments:

Replacing "school obligation" with "learning obligation": Shifting the focus: replacing the notion "koolikohustus" (school obligation) with the notion "õppimiskohustus" (learning obligation) is a core change. The change in terminology from "koolikohustus" (school obligation/compulsory schooling) to "õppimiskohustus" (learning obligation) signifies an ideological shift in focus. Instead of merely emphasising formal school attendance, the new term underscores substantive learning (the focus

moves towards the actual process and outcomes of learning) and student responsibility: it highlights the learner's own responsibility for their development and engagement in the learning process. This redefinition means the obligation is not just to be present at school, but to actively participate in basic, secondary, or vocational education, fulfil learning tasks, and acquire knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary for personal development.

Extending the learning obligation/compulsory education age: Up to now, compulsory education in Estonia spanned nine years, covering grades 1 through 9, typically for students aged 7 to 16. At the beginning of the 2024–25 academic year, Estonia extended compulsory education until the age of 18. This change addresses concerns about students discontinuing their studies after basic education, and it aims to ensure that all students acquire either an upper secondary education or vocational qualifications, reflecting the increasing necessity of advanced skills in today's labour market.

Diversified educational pathways: The policy is aimed at accommodating diverse student needs and aspirations and aims to do so through the reformed system, which offers five distinct post-basic education pathways:

- Academic upper secondary education focuses on traditional academic subjects, preparing students for higher education.
- Applied upper secondary education combines academic learning with practical skills, bridging the gap between theory and application.
- Vocational education: provides specialised training for specific trades or professions, facilitating direct entry into the workforce.
- Adult education: caters to individuals seeking to continue or resume their education later in life, offering flexible learning options.
- Preparatory studies: designed for students uncertain about their educational or career direction, this programme helps them identify suitable paths and overcome potential barriers to further education.

These options aim to reduce the number of young people without qualifications and ensure that all students have access to an educational track that aligns with their interests and capabilities.

Creation of a unified digital platform: This platform will manage the admissions process for students entering upper secondary general education and vocational training after completing basic school (grade 9). This new system aims to make it easier for students and parents/carers to find information about study options, admission requirements, and apply to schools through a single, centralised platform. It aims to unify and increase the efficiency of the admissions process for both applicants and educational institutions, reducing administrative burdens. It should also improve monitoring and support by providing the state and local governments with a clearer overview of where basic school graduates are transitioning to. This allows for better monitoring of student pathways and enables authorities to quickly identify young people who have not secured a study placement and may need support to continue their education.

Introduction of a preparatory study: This new educational pathway known as Ettevalmistav õpe (preparatory study) is designed to support students who have completed basic education (grade 9) but are not yet ready to transition directly into upper secondary or vocational education. This programme, sometimes likened to a "gap year," guarantees a study place for all students subject to the learning

obligation who do not immediately continue formal education. Its primary objective is to facilitate personal development, career exploration, and the acquisition of foundational competencies necessary for informed decision-making regarding future educational and career trajectories. The programme is highly individualised, structured around a personalised learning plan that addresses each student's specific needs, goals, and barriers to progression. It emphasises competency development across general, subject-specific, social, and self-management domains, and includes targeted support such as Estonian language instruction for students with limited proficiency, including recent immigrants. Learning typically occurs in small groups and continues year-round until the student achieves the outcomes defined in their individual plan. Delivered primarily by state vocational and upper secondary schools, the preparatory study is intended to enhance readiness for formal education and facilitate smoother transitions. Learning outcomes attained during the programme may be recognised by subsequent institutions, potentially fulfilling admission criteria or contributing to the student's future curriculum.

A **framework for recognising non-formal learning**: A key innovative aspect of the Estonian education reform is the creation of a clearer, more systematic framework for recognising non-formal learning that takes place outside the traditional classroom within the formal general education system. This includes:

- non-formal education - structured, voluntary learning often provided by youth work organisations, hobby schools (e.g., art, music, sports), adult training centres, and cultural associations (like national culture societies),
- other formal Institutions - studies undertaken at different schools or educational levels (e.g., vocational or higher education modules),
- informal learning - volunteering, community practice, or job shadowing, especially within the context of the preparatory study programme.

The purpose of this measure is to create more personalised learning pathways tailored to student interests and needs and to acknowledge and integrate skills and knowledge gained in various environments. Potentially, it will increase student motivation, especially for at-risk youth, by recognising their achievements outside of school. It is also aimed at better integration of different education types by facilitating smoother transitions and combinations between general, vocational, and higher education, as well as hobby education. It will support specific needs, for example, by allowing the recognition of mother tongue and culture studies for national minorities or Estonian language acquisition for immigrants outside the formal school setting. By instilling the value of continuous learning in various forms, it will lay the foundation for lifelong learning.

The mechanism for recognition is initiated by a request from the student (or their legal guardian if they have limited legal capacity). The school evaluates whether the external learning enables the student to achieve specific learning outcomes defined in the school's curriculum or the student's individual learning plan. Each school must define the conditions, procedures, and assessment principles for recognising external learning within its own curriculum. This includes how the learning will be assessed (based on general school assessment rules and subject specifics). Clear processes aim to mitigate teacher subjectivity. An agreement may be made outlining the recognised outcomes, assessment, and how the student will use any freed-up time. An individual learning plan might be created. Schools are expected to inform students and parents/carers about these possibilities and provide guidance. Here, teacher involvement is crucial. National curricula will provide the foundational principles upon which

schools build their specific procedures. Support materials are planned to aid implementation and teacher readiness.

A system of comparable and equivalent credits is being established to facilitate integration of different education types: 1 gymnasium course (35 lessons) is equated to approximately 1.5 ECTS (higher education) or ECVET (vocational education) credit points. This allows modules from vocational or higher education to be integrated into general education (e.g., as electives) and vice versa. Learning outcomes achieved during the Preparatory study can also be recognised by subsequent institutions as fulfilling admission requirements or as part of the curriculum. The Preparatory Study itself often corresponds to 60 ECVET credits. This builds upon existing VÕTA (Recognition of Prior Learning and Professional Experience) principles, making learning pathways more transparent and supporting student mobility.

Flexible learning pathways: The reform introduces and emphasises several mechanisms designed to create more flexible and personalised learning pathways tailored to individual student needs: Schools have the explicit option to create Individual Learning Plans for students. These plans allow for adjustments in learning time, content, organisation, and environment, provided the core learning outcomes of the school curriculum are still met. Vocational education offers programmes at different qualification levels, allowing students to choose a suitable path. It also allows for combining school-based and workplace-based learning and creating elective studies in collaboration with other institutions or companies.

Funding changes: Restrictions are being placed on free re-education to direct state resources more purposefully. Vocational education, which has been largely free until now, will be subject to tuition fees under certain conditions. Innovation lies in directing resources towards acquiring a first-time qualification, and towards young people who are subject to compulsory education. Ministry of Education and Research thus wishes to increase students' responsibility in shaping their own learning path and free up resources to support young people's learning opportunities. Free re-entry for adults in vocational training in a similar way to higher education will be limited. For example, a person can no longer study free of charge if they have already been accepted for a place in free vocational training or higher education, or if they have completed free vocational training in the previous five years. However, there are differences, for example, for the target group entering vocational education through the Unemployment Insurance Fund and for areas where the state needs additional workforce. Paid vocational education does not apply to curriculum groups or specialities where, according to OSKA, there is a critical need for training skilled workers.

6.4. VET reforms to enhance VET pathways

Several strategies are planned for enhancing the appeal and relevance of vocational education (kutseharidus) as a viable pathway after basic school.

- **Strengthening the general education component:** The new vocational secondary education model increases the volume of general education studies and general skills development. This aims to make vocational education a more competitive alternative to traditional upper secondary school (gümnaasium), better preparing students for state exams and enabling smoother transitions to higher education if desired. This responds to feedback from employers and OSKA labour market reports.

- **Enhancing flexibility in duration and pathways:** While general education content increases, not all vocational secondary programmes will become rigidly 4 years long. Durations can vary (e.g., 3.5 to 4 years) depending on employer needs and the technical complexity of the field. Furthermore, plans include creating "transition years" in certain fields – either in collaboration with higher education institutions for those aiming for further studies or focused on practical internships for those planning to enter the workforce directly after graduation.
- **Positioning VET as an equal alternative:** The extension of the learning obligation aspires to position vocational secondary education as an equally valid choice alongside gümnaasium, emphasising that multiple educational pathways exist after basic school across various qualification levels.
- **Focusing on practical skills and labour market needs:** Vocational education will continue to emphasise the acquisition of practical skills relevant to specific professions and demanded by the labour market. Employer feedback and OSKA research remain crucial inputs for curriculum development.
- **Developing new relevant programmes:** Consideration is being given to creating new vocational programmes specifically designed for basic school graduates, based on identified national needs and incorporating relevant technology.

Together, these measures aim to modernise vocational education, making it more flexible, better aligned with both student aspirations and labour market demands, and ultimately, a more attractive and respected choice after basic school.

6.5. Aims and objectives of the legislative reform

The main objectives of the law amendments are:

i. The primary objective is to raise the overall level of education among young people in Estonia. The aim is to reduce the share of low-educated young people by keeping the proportion of young people (18-24) with low educational attainment below 5% to meet European Union education targets. One of the main goals of the legislative amendments is to reduce the number of young people who do not continue their studies after completing basic school. The Education Development Plan 2035 sets the goal that 90% of 20–24-year-olds will have completed secondary education by 2035.
ii. Reduction of early school leaving (dropout rates) by providing more flexible and supportive learning pathways, by introducing multiple educational tracks and flexible learning paths. The reform aims to reduce the proportion of young people who do not continue their studies after basic education to less than 5% and to ensure that all young people can acquire either secondary education or vocational skills.
iii. Improve workforce readiness by ensuring that young people gain practical skills and qualifications necessary for employment or further education in a rapidly changing labour market.
iv. Promote lifelong learning: A key goal is to instil a readiness for lifelong learning and adaptation to a changing labour market.
v. Make vocational education more attractive: This objective ties in with the broader goal of making vocational education a competitive and desirable alternative to general upper secondary education (gymnasium).

vi. Strengthen state and local government roles: The law aims to clarify the roles and responsibilities of both the state and local municipalities in ensuring compliance with the learning obligation.

vii. Increase flexibility in learning: The law aims to make the education system more adaptable to individual needs and interests

viii. Increase state efficiency by better spending of the public funding by limiting publicly funded vocational school courses for adults.

6.6. The delivery of career guidance and counselling services

Estonia's education reform is expected to significantly improve career counselling and guidance. Support is delivered through a multi-faceted approach integrating schools, national services, digital platforms, and employer collaboration.

School-based integration: Career support is becoming a central part of the school system as compulsory career education is embedded in basic schools, covering labour market trends and skills. Upper secondary and vocational schools employ career counsellors who will be offering one-on-one consultations, workshops, and planning tools. Students receive structured guidance from advisors when choosing academic, vocational, or applied learning tracks based on their interests. Schools are mandated to systematically organise and provide career services to students and parents/carers. Enhanced school-parent collaboration, including mandatory development talks, involves parents/carers in pathway planning.

External services and digital platforms: Career support extends beyond individual schools. Municipalities, regional career service models, and external counselling teams (like Rajaleidja specialists) supplement school-based services, particularly when specialised or external intervention is needed to fulfil the learning obligation.

National digital platforms like Tööelu.ee and Rajaleidja.ee provide assessments, labour market data, and training information. Accessible online sessions with career advisors are available. Platforms like eKool and Stuudium incorporate guidance resources. The Estonian Education Information System (EHIS) is crucial for tracking student progress, managing admissions (via a unified SAIS-based system), and providing municipalities with data dashboards to monitor youth fulfilling the learning obligation. This digital infrastructure supports informed guidance by providing a comprehensive overview.

Work-based learning and employer links: The reform strengthens connections between education and the labour market. Schools collaborate with businesses to offer internships, apprenticeships, job shadowing, and career days. Employer feedback and labour market needs (e.g., OSKA reports) influence vocational education curricula and programme structures (like the option for 4-year VET programmes).

Support for at-risk students: Career counselling is a key tool for early identification and support of students at risk of dropping out, guiding them towards suitable pathways. Schools must assess the need for individual career counselling for students with significant absences or academic difficulties. Career education and counselling are integral components of support programmes like preparatory ("ettevalmistav õpe") and additional study ("lisaõpe") years for students needing extra support.

Systematic tracking, involving schools and municipalities, ensures that basic school graduates find suitable pathways. Career guidance is linked with psychological and social support services.

Guidance continues beyond formal schooling: Graduates can utilise national career services, the Unemployment Insurance Fund provides career information, counselling, and transition support. Upskilling and reskilling programmes are available for young adults to adapt to market changes.

In summary, career support is delivered through an integrated system involving mandatory school-based activities, national digital tools and services, workplace exposure, targeted interventions for vulnerable students, and lifelong learning resources, all underpinned by collaboration between schools, families, municipalities, and employers.

6.7. Target population

The target population of the law amendments can be defined as **young people residing in Estonia**, particularly those who are of school age (7-18). In particular:

- Those transitioning from 9th grade and have not yet found a particular area of study, want to better familiarise themselves with the options. Young people who have completed basic education and are not continuing their studies. These include those who are at risk of dropping out of the education system or who lack the motivation to continue their studies. The aim is to ensure their monitoring, intervention and support in finding a learning path.
- Young people aged 15-17 (soon to be 18) with compulsory education who need additional support to continue their studies.
- More vulnerable groups, such as young people from difficult social backgrounds and young people whose home language is Russian.
- Students participating in additional education. Additional education is an additional opportunity to acquire general competencies and support social coping.

The law is primarily targeted at young people to increase their educational attainment, but it also has broader implications for other groups involved in supporting their education and future success. The change of the terminology from "school obligation" to "learning obligation" also emphasises this notion.

6.8. Participants

The policy documents highlight specific challenges and considerations related to the education reform for two vulnerable groups - youth from difficult social backgrounds and youth with Russian as their home language:

Youth from difficult social backgrounds: Local governments (municipalities) have a clear legal obligation to support students and families facing difficulties (as defined by child protection or social welfare laws) to ensure the learning obligation is met. This includes providing necessary assistance. A lack of sufficient support structures is acknowledged, specifically the shortage of student accommodation for youth lacking adequate home support and the limited availability of affordable counselling and training for families.

Limiting free repeat vocational education for adults is noted as potentially having a negative social impact on less well-off individuals, possibly leading to social exclusion or poverty.

Youth with **Russian as home language:** A significant change is that vocational education conducted in languages other than Estonian (primarily Russian) is now fee-based. This greatly restricts access to education and lifelong learning for non-Estonian speakers who were previously able to study for free in Russian. These students must now either study in Estonian (which remains free) or pay tuition fees for programmes offered in Russian at state/municipal schools. The necessity to improve access to public services, including education, and to provide information about these services in Russian is specifically highlighted (by the Child Protection Union) to better support vulnerable families, including those with **disabilities.**

It is supposed that increasing the **recognition of non-formal learning** can improve the accessibility of services to students from different socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds, as well as to students with disabilities. For students with different backgrounds, non-formal learning offers the opportunity to acquire Estonian outside the school environment, thereby supporting the transition to Estonian-language education. Students' self-fulfilment opportunities are expected to improve, as learning outcomes acquired outside of school are also considered as part of the school curriculum, which can increase students' motivation to participate in hobby education and youth work.

In summary, the reform acknowledges the need for targeted support for youth from challenging social backgrounds via municipalities, while also recognising existing resource gaps. For Russian-speaking youth, the most significant change involves the transition away from free vocational education in their native language, raising concerns about accessibility and requiring adaptation or payment for continued study in Russian.

6.9. Stakeholder involvement

The reform aims to establish a more integrated and collaborative ecosystem, demanding active participation and shared responsibility from government bodies, local authorities, schools, educators, families, and employers to guide students effectively through their educational and early career pathways.

Government and policymakers: The Ministry of Education and Research leads policy development, sets curriculum standards, oversees compulsory education laws, funding, digital tools, and career counselling integration.

Local municipalities' (KOVs) role is significantly expanded as central coordinators and guarantors of the extended learning obligation. Key responsibilities include monitoring - using a dedicated EHIS dashboard ("Haridussilm") to track at-risk students and obligation fulfilment, proactive collaboration with schools, parents/carers, and support specialists to prevent dropouts and ensure suitable learning conditions; functioning as a: coordination hub linking schools with social services, youth work, the Unemployment Insurance Fund, and other providers for tailored student support; and guaranteeing child protection by intervening if parents/carers fail to ensure the child meets the learning obligation.

Schools, Teachers, and Educators: Schools/Educational Institutions implement new academic, applied, and vocational pathways; provide personalised career counselling and digital tools; partner with businesses for practical experiences (internships, apprenticeships). Teachers and career counsellors receive updated training; guide students through individualised paths; collaborate with parents/carers and employers to support student transitions.

Students and Parents/Carers: Parents/Guardians have strengthened responsibilities. Their primary duty is to ensure the child fulfils the learning obligation (creating home conditions, ensuring participation). Their active communication (by using school channels, informing about issues/absences) and collaboration (by participating in development talks, consulting external teams if recommended) are expected. Parents'/carers' failure to fulfil duties triggers KOV intervention.

Students receive guidance, make educational choices (with parental confirmation), and benefit from increased support structures.

Employers and industry representatives: The reform impacts employers by intending to increase the pool of qualified labour and seeks their input to adjust vocational education based on labour market needs and employer feedback (e.g., influencing curriculum, allowing flexible programme lengths). Employers have to adjust due to restricted free adult retraining (though exceptions exist) and potential barriers from fee-based non-Estonian VET programmes, possibly requiring more investment in language training. Stakeholders like the Chamber of Commerce emphasise the need for resources beyond legislation to effectively support youth.

6.10. Resourcing

The total impact of the bill's implementation on the state budget for 2028 is 6.2 million euros (including 3 million for the implementation of preparatory education for 600 students and 3.2 million for the continuation of 3,200 vocational secondary education students in the 4th year) and from 2029 12.7 million euros (including 3 million for the cost of preparatory education and 9.7 million for the 4th year of vocational secondary education). Of this amount, the additional need from the state budget in 2028 is 3.2 million euros and 9.7 million euros in 2029. The additional need is due to the addition of one academic year to vocational secondary education, which today is predominantly 3 years. The cost is not progressive, meaning it will remain at the same level in the following years. The funds for the implementation of the compulsory education are planned mainly from the European Social Fund Plus measure, totalling 4,162,316 euros.

The changes will not directly entail costs for local governments. Local governments can apply for support from the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications' measure, which aims to increase the employability of unemployed young people aged 16–29 and help them find work or integrate them into the education system.

6.11. Key learning from Estonia's educational reforms

While Estonia's compulsory education reform aims to improve student outcomes and workforce readiness, several challenges must be addressed for successful implementation. These challenges include funding limitations, teacher shortages, student engagement, and regional disparities.

According to critical voices presented by different stakeholders officially and in the media, the main challenges of the Estonian education reform are:

Severe resource shortages and funding issues: Long-term financial sustainability is a concern, as the reform requires significant investment in teacher salaries, infrastructure, digital tools, and vocational education programmes. Municipalities may struggle to fund local schools, particularly in rural areas, where resources are more limited. Dependence on EU funding raises concerns about what happens if external financial support decreases in the future.

Student motivation and behaviour: There are concerns that extending compulsory education may bring unmotivated students into schools who simply exist on lists until they reach adulthood. There are concerns that forcing them to attend school may not be effective, especially for students who are unable or unwilling to study and who have little support at home. There is also concern that inappropriate behaviour can no longer be the main reason for excluding a compulsory student from school.

Teacher shortages and training needs: Estonia faces a shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) subjects and vocational education. Many educators are nearing retirement, creating a need for more young and digitally skilled teachers. Teachers require extensive training to adapt to new digital learning tools and career counselling responsibilities. There is a critical shortage of support specialists (psychologists, social pedagogues, special education teachers), and potentially administrative staff to handle the increased student numbers and diverse needs. There are doubts about whether teachers are adequately trained and equipped to handle the increased diversity of student needs, including mental health issues, special educational requirements, and varying motivation levels.

Estonian general education schools may not be ready for a situation where compulsory education is extended from 16 to 18, as this could mean a large additional burden on schools. There is already a shortage of resources to help students with weaker academic performance. The willingness of teachers to consider non-formal learning if it is not yet part of their daily practice is also questionable.

Vocational education institutions do not have enough support staff (social educators, psychologists, etc.), and support and counselling are largely the responsibility of teachers. In parallel with the extension of compulsory education, it would be important to pay attention to career counselling and the empowerment of support staff and teachers.

Addressing regional disparities: The policy documents highlight several significant regional challenges and disparities that interact with or are potentially exacerbated by the education reform. There is a severe lack of teachers, particularly in sparsely populated regions, which risks widening the quality gap between rural and urban schools. A large proportion of teachers are nearing or already at retirement age, especially in small rural schools, and the pipeline of new qualified teachers is insufficient. Part-time employment is also common. The current school network is seen as inefficient, with many schools located in areas with few or no children. This leads to half-empty classrooms, tying up more teachers than necessary, worsening the overall shortage.

In some counties (e.g., Põlva, Jõgeva, Hiiu) that lack a vocational school in their main centre, directing students (especially those struggling) towards vocational pathways presents significant logistical challenges related to transportation and accessibility. The ongoing consolidation of the school network, particularly the closure of small upper secondary school levels (gümnaasiumid with <100 students), has regional implications. For example, concentrating secondary education in larger centres could help address teacher shortages by allowing for full-time positions, making jobs more attractive. State schools in these centres might also offer better living arrangements for teachers. At the same time, it could negatively impact access to education in more remote areas, although most small secondary schools are reportedly within 50km of another secondary school.

Significant demographic decline is projected in the school-age population (5-19 years) by 2035 in about half of the counties (20-30% decrease), with the most drastic reduction (around 37%) expected in Ida-Virumaa on the border with Russia. This necessitates careful regional planning of the school network and resource allocation. The availability of crucial support specialists, such as school psychologists (available in only 53% of schools overall), varies significantly by region. It can be particularly difficult to secure these services in smaller educational institutions or remote areas where hiring full-time specialists may not be feasible or attractive. The increased responsibility placed on municipalities to ensure compliance with the learning obligation could lead to resource problems for them.
The success of these well-intentioned measures hinges significantly on practical factors.

Transferability (to other countries): The age of compulsory education or schooling is at least 18 in many countries, and there are also similar formats of preparatory training in different countries (e.g. in Finland). What is novel about the reform of extending compulsory education is that it is treated as a comprehensive solution, not just as individual measures.

6.12. Educational reform outcomes

The expected results of the proposed law amendments are as follows.

The proportion of young people continuing their studies after basic education and the proportion of young people who have acquired secondary or vocational education are important indicators of reduced drop-out rates. In particular, the need to improve the educational level of men is emphasised.

The reform also aims to raise the **average educational level** of the Estonian population and give young people a better position in the labour market. Thus, the success of the reform can be assessed through the change in the proportion of people aged 20-24 who have completed at least secondary education. The national goal is achieving a situation where 90% of 20–24-year-olds have completed secondary education by 2035.

The Estonian Education Information System (EHIS) will start collecting data to monitor persons with compulsory education and to conduct the admission process of student candidates. This suggests that EHIS data on the fulfilment of the compulsory education obligation, continuation of studies and attainment of educational level are **important observable indicators.**

Better employment rates: A rise in the number of qualified young people to improve employability.

Cost-Effectiveness: The government argues that investing in education and extending the learning period is a cost-effective way to improve individual well-being, reduce social costs, and contribute to economic growth. Higher skills and knowledge levels correlate with better economic outcomes and lower social support needs. In the longer run, the aim is to raise the amount of qualified high-school graduates that would boost innovation and research in the Estonian market.

Socio-economic outcomes: In addition to educational attainment, the socio-economic impact of the reform is also important. It has been proven that each year of participation in the education system increases the likelihood of achieving a better socio-economic status in adulthood. Thus, in the long term, the impact of the reform on the later position of young people in the labour market and society can also be an indicator.

Wider societal outcomes: "The obligation to study until adulthood is an important intervention, the impact of which is measurable in both the short and long term. Experiences from different countries show that systematic investment in education reduces dropout rates and improves overall quality of life. Time invested in education significantly increases the likelihood of being healthy and satisfied and having a higher income. The most vulnerable members of society benefit most from the obligation to study," argued the upper secondary education strategy manager of Ministry of Research and Education Mari Tikerpuu (2024).

Specific expected outcomes for vocational education:

The reform is expected to bring several positive outcomes for vocational education in Estonia:

- Potential **increase in student numbers**: Extending the learning obligation to age 18 is expected to channel more young people, particularly the 4-5% who might otherwise drop out after basic school, into further studies, with vocational education being a likely destination for many.
- **Increased attractiveness and parity:** By strengthening the general education component within vocational secondary programmes, these pathways become a more attractive and viable alternative to traditional gymnasiums. This enhanced general education provides a better foundation for state examinations and potential progression to higher education, positioning vocational education as an equivalent choice.
- **Collaboration and resource sharing**: The strengthening of general education in vocational schools is envisioned to occur through collaboration and resource sharing (including teachers) between vocational institutions and gymnasiums, rather than at the expense of general education quality.
- **Reduced social exclusion**: Implementing inclusive education principles and emphasising learner rights within vocational education aims to reduce social exclusion and better support learners with diverse needs.
- **Development of support services**: The reform highlights the need to strengthen support services within vocational institutions, including career counselling and empowering staff (teachers, support specialists) through training to better handle diverse student needs, including those with special educational requirements.
- **Increased retention**: The rule preventing the expulsion of students under the learning obligation (except for specific reasons such as transferring schools) ensures that young people remain within the education system, increasing their chances of completing a vocational or secondary qualification.

6.13. Assessing the impact of educational reforms

Potential **positive impact** for different stakeholders, according to the reform initiators include:

- **Students:** A longer period of mandatory education (until 18) aims to improve their skills and educational attainment. The reform addresses the 4-5% of students who wouldn't have continued their education otherwise, potentially decreasing social exclusion and poverty risks. Broader learning pathways (preparatory studies, more choices in vocational education) might increase motivation and provide tailored support. There will be increased chances for those at risk of NEET status to continue education, leading to better prospects.

- **Parents/Carers:** Increased awareness of the obligations related to the study journey of a child. Increased support from the local municipality if they struggle to fulfil their obligations as parents/carers.
- **Basic schools, gymnasiums, and Vocational Education Institutions:** wider availability of formal studies.
- **Local municipalities:** More efficient tools to track potential students to enter study environment. Better way to follow-up with potential students who require support.
- **The state:** All residents will be guaranteed to receive a high school education.

The law amendments aim to raise educational attainment and reduce social exclusion. While most stakeholders are expected to benefit, some (particularly those with low motivation or those seeking repetitive training) may experience negative impacts. The state and local municipalities will shoulder increased responsibilities and potential costs, but also benefit from a more skilled and engaged population in the long run.

Concerns about the educational reforms

Critical voices expressed in the media articles, mention potential negative impacts of the reform, affecting various stakeholders and the system itself:

- For **students (especially those targeted by the reform - less motivated/struggling)** might be physically present but remain disengaged, gaining little actual knowledge or skills. The obligation might feel like a punishment rather than an opportunity. Without adequate, individualised support (due to resource shortages), their underlying issues (learning difficulties, social problems, lack of motivation) won't be addressed, potentially worsening their relationship with education Being pushed into vocational education they don't want or aren't suited for could lead to later dropouts or dissatisfaction. While proponents see delayed entry into workforce as positive, critics worry it might just delay the inevitable for those not benefiting from schooling, potentially hindering practical experience gain.
- For **motivated students,** the presence of a significant number of unmotivated or disruptive students could negatively impact the learning environment for everyone, potentially lowering overall academic standards and hindering the progress of motivated students.
- **Teachers** will face higher workloads, more complex classroom management challenges, and the stress of dealing with diverse student needs (including mental health and motivation issues) often without adequate training or support, potentially leading to increased burnout and teachers leaving the profession.
- **Schools**, particularly vocational ones, and municipalities will lack the necessary teachers, support specialists, funding, and infrastructure to adequately handle the increased student population and their diverse needs. This could lead to larger class sizes and compromised educational services.
- The **vocational education system** may become perceived as a "dumping ground" for unmotivated students could dilute the focus of vocational training, harm its reputation further, and make it harder to attract genuinely interested students. Without significant new investment, the system will struggle to cope with increased demands and maintain/improve quality, potentially falling further behind general education. If parts of vocational training

become fee-based, it could create barriers for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

- **Municipalities (school administrators)**, local governments, especially smaller ones, will struggle to meet the increased financial obligations associated with the reform if state funding is insufficient, potentially leading to cuts in other local services or increased inequality between regions.
- For **parents/carers**, requirements like daily eKool checks and ensuring home study conditions could be burdensome or impossible for some families due to lack of resources or capacity. Difficulty in motivating their children or dealing with school non-attendance issues may increase, especially if support systems are inadequate.
- For the **wider education system and society**, forcing attendance without addressing motivation and resource issues could lead to a decline in the overall quality and effectiveness of the Estonian education system. Due to the perceived rushed timeline and lack of clear guidelines, the reform's implementation could be disorganised, leading to confusion among schools, students, and parents/carers, and ultimately failing to achieve its intended goals smoothly.
  The reform might temporarily keep young people within the education system, but may fail to address the root causes of disengagement (family issues, poverty, lack of relevance). Consequently, these individuals might still end up NEET after turning 18, having gained little benefit from the extra compulsory years.
  Significant public funds might be invested in implementing a flawed system, while core issues like the chronic underfunding of vocational education or the need for more support specialists remain unaddressed.
  Critics fear the reform could lead to a stressed, under-resourced system struggling to cope with unmotivated students, potentially harming the quality of education for everyone involved and failing to deliver on its primary goal of better integrating youth into society and the workforce.

6.14. Assessment of the implications for policy and practice

The broader aim of the education reform is to ensure the accessibility and sustainability of education for all young people until they reach the age of 18 or complete secondary education, responding to both the challenges of the education system and the expectations of society.

The reform consists of many new elements - such as the change of official terminology (replacement of *school obligation* with *learning obligation*), reflecting the active role and responsibility expected of the learner; innovative IT solutions, designed to make the transition to the next level of education smoother, more transparent, and provide better support mechanisms for students; introducing preparatory studies for everybody needing them; clear definition of the roles of different stakeholders in preventing dropout from education; cooperation between upper secondary schools and vocational training institutions etc.

The most innovative among the new elements can be considered the systematic development of the integration of formal and non-formal learning, as it significantly changes the concept of learning and creates opportunities for more individual learning paths, conceptualising learning more broadly than only what happens in the school environment. This innovation significantly expands the scope of recognised learning, empowering schools to validate and integrate knowledge and skills acquired beyond their walls, supported by a framework of national guidelines and a comparable credit system.

The reform is still in its beginning. Therefore, we cannot assess the progress of its implementation or its actual consequences. We can only rely on the anticipatory assessments and opinions of various parties.

The Ministry of Education and Research is the main initiator and proponent of the reform. The reform is implemented through different mechanisms. The primary mechanism is through changes in legislation (laws). This is supplemented by the creation of additional regulations and guidance materials. Specific implementation actions include schools being required to define the conditions for recognising non-formal learning in their own curricula and state vocational institutions being tasked with offering the new preparatory study programmes.

While the Ministry is driving these changes with specific rationales and implementation plans, various stakeholder groups have actively provided feedback and raised concerns. These concerns focus heavily on the adequacy of resources (especially teachers and support specialists), the practicalities of implementation, and potential unintended negative consequences (e.g., whether preparatory study is sufficiently planned). This indicates that while the Ministry proposes the framework and expects positive outcomes, successful implementation is seen by stakeholders as dependent on addressing these practical challenges and resource needs.

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7. VET for employment: Collaboration between the welfare administration and career centres in Norway

By Markus Roos Breines and Tove Mogstad Aspøy

7.1. Trøndelag county context

The Skills Strategy Trøndelag (a county in central Norway), first passed in 2019 and revised in 2023 (Kompetanseforum Trøndelag, 2023), provides an important backdrop for the Trøndelag model and the following collaboration between career centres, Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (known as Nav in Norwegian) and upper secondary schools. The Trøndelag strategy is embedded in the National Skills Strategy 2017-2021, which called for a stronger emphasis on the counties' role in labour market inclusion, strengthening adult skills and improving labour market matching. In accordance with the national skills strategy, the counties of Norway have each established tripartite bodies working specifically with the development of competence and skills according to the regional labour market. This collaboration is manifested in a "competence forum" in each county. The forum in Trøndelag has approximately five annual meetings and takes an active role in lobbying for making priorities to upskilling and labour market inclusion in the county budget.

The number of NEETs among young adults in the county is a topic of great concern among politicians, county administration, Nav as well as the competence forum. The Nav offices in Trøndelag have been given extra support since 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in labour market exclusion. Although the rate of those registered unemployed is relatively low in both Trøndelag and Norway, the share of NEETs among people aged 15-29 has been around 10% in the past 15 years (Sliper, 2022), which is approximately equal to the national average (SSB, 2025). Around 15% of adults are not in education or work. At the same time, Trøndelag enterprises experience both a labour and skills shortage and the number of vacancies is relatively high compared to other regions.

The Trøndelag model is a strategy aiming at reducing exclusion and filling labour market needs in Trøndelag. An important principle from Nav and the county administration's point of view is that the model must not crowd out apprentices following ordinary VET tracks.

7.2. Collaboration between the Nav and Career Centres in Trøndelag county

The collaboration between the Nav and Career Centres in Norway has existed for the past two decades. In this case study, we have studied a specific collaboration model for obtaining labour market inclusion and lifelong learning in the Trøndelag county. Located in the central part of the country, Trøndelag county is one of 15 counties in Norway. It is the third largest county, and has close to 500,000 inhabitants.

Even though the collaboration between Nav offices and career centres is well established, the administrative county Trøndelag seeks to strengthen the collaboration by including upper secondary schools offering vocational tracks in the partnership. In the Norwegian labour market, trade certificates are known to strengthen employment opportunities. For those who lack formal qualifications, such education is seen as an important means to avoid extended periods of unemployment. The aim of the collaboration was to mobilise those who are outside of work through VET and to provide opportunities to obtain and remain permanently employed. The main tool being used to achieve this is closer dialogue between Nav, career centres and upper secondary schools, which are owned by the county

administration. The are 21 Nav offices in the county, and 32 upper secondary schools spread around the county.

In the following, we provide an overview of how this collaboration has been developed and how it currently works. The purpose is to consider how the use of VET as a pathway for adults to gain formal education and employment is operationalised.

7.2.1. The collaboration

The NEET (those not in employment, education, or training) rate in Trøndelag county is around 10% every year (among 15-29 year olds). Moreover, Trøndelag enterprises experience a shortage of both skills and labour. To alleviate this challenge, what came to be known as 'the Trøndelag model' was established as a cooperation strategy between Trøndelag county administration and Nav in 2021. The goal was to reduce the number of people outside of work or education, and meet the needs for skills in Trøndelag, and several of the learning points from this formal collaboration have been taken forward, and practices remain in place across the region.

The Trøndelag model covered collaboration on a range of issues, including VET as a means to reduce unemployment and generate the skills companies need. In the model, VET programmes were offered as compact training programmes (the same education as the regular part of the school-based part of VET offered through one year in school instead of two) to facilitate quicker transition into apprenticeships and employment for adult students. The whole model is centred around stronger collaboration between institutions to support job seekers in finding pathways into employment through individualised and flexible education opportunities. The county administration organised the model, whereas Nav mapped potential participants, the career centres organised meeting places where the participants could have 'speed-dates' with companies, where they could learn more about different occupations and employers, while the companies could identify future employees.

The collaboration between key actors continues and is currently referred to as 'the interaction model' (samhandlingsmodellen). The project funding that the county currently provides is focused on including schools in the collaboration and additional activities such as promoting certain occupations (fagdager) and skill centres (kompetansesenter).

Despite the continuation of some aspects of the Trøndelag model as a framework for collaboration, some things have changed. This is partly because there are significant variations in the need for apprentices and how companies operate in different parts of Trøndelag. The compact training programmes of the Trøndelag model were considered a success. They were beneficial for participants wanting an efficient training period, and they were very useful for companies as they could get skilled workers quickly. Nevertheless, it was challenging for schools to provide multiple, alternative VET programmes. The length of the school-based part of the VET education for adults has therefore been upscaled to two years. This corresponds to the regular VET education in Norway, which generally consists of two years of school-based training followed by two years of apprenticeship training. The extension of the school-based training period has made it more challenging for a group of employees called 'marketing consultants' in Nav to get companies on board. However, the system for adult training in Norway allows for individual adjustments, and there are ways to shorten the school-based training period based on prior training and education. Nav works with local upper secondary schools to create individual VET education trajectories, as there is some scope for individual adaptation, for

example, to facilitate the completion of missing subjects. Career centres also collaborate with schools, though primarily to discuss possible education pathways for individual cases, which may shorten the school-based training period.

The key actors in the collaboration are: Nav advisors, market advisors working for Nav and career guides working for career centres, as well as schools and employers.

- **Nav advisors** work closely with unemployed people for various reasons. A central part of their task is to identify how people can return to work, and for adults who have not completed upper secondary education, there has in recent years been additional attention to VET as a path to finding employment. While Nav advisors often seek to ensure that people return to work as soon as possible, VET has become more commonly used as a tool for this. For example, some Nav expert case workers with small portfolios of only 20 people have an explicit aim that 10% of the users they work with should pursue Vocational Education and Training. However, the recommendation for VET education must be made based on job market opportunities, and through discussion with the job seeker to ensure that they are interested in the education and occupation. In many small places in Trøndelag, there are limited job opportunities, and for Nav to provide funding for someone to pursue VET education, there must be a realistic opportunity for gaining employment upon completion.
- Nav also has a group of employees known as '**market advisors**'. Their role is to survey the labour market and emerging trends and changes. They work closely with companies to stay up to date on their skill needs and if they are planning to restructure or downsize, and companies contact market advisors to express their need for labour, especially in industrial areas with large demand for qualified workers. Such information is fed back to the Nav system to ensure that companies and job seekers can be connected, but is also used to assess the prospects for offering adults VET education. Market advisors reach out to career centres when they obtain information about companies that are laying off staff, to plan for possible education and employment routes for these employees.
- **Career guides** work for the county's career centres and are responsible for providing individual guidance. They focus on career development and provide support with writing job applications, developing CVs and advice on search engines for finding vacancies. This differs from Nav advisors, who also have to take into consideration a wider range of factors and provide support that enables people to get by while looking for employment.
- **Upper secondary schools** provide both VET education and education that prepares students for college or university level education. Some offer adult education, but there is significant variation within Trøndelag county with regard to which subjects they offer. The VET education normally follows the dual model, with two years of school-based training and two years of apprenticeship training.
- **Employers** hire apprentices and other employees in collaboration with Nav. Employers obtain funds to have apprentices and Nav pay for people to try out occupations during practice periods.
- **Adults with limited formal qualifications** are the main target group for the collaboration. Some of these are already employed, but others are unemployed. Some people receive a daily allowance or a work assessment allowance. While their situations within the Nav system vary, many are potential candidates for VET as a pathway to expand their employment opportunities. Many users of Nav need substantial support to embark on education, though others may have studied for VET education previously and not completed. One Nav informant gave an example that some only lack practical training in the school-based part of VET (which is mandatory), and

for such people, it would be suitable to try to undertake workplace training for two or three months before transitioning to adult apprenticeship positions that will lead to trade certificates upon completion.

7.2.2. How it works

Nav provides webinars for job seekers, but will also suggest to users that they should speak to career centres to help them think about what they can do to obtain employment. Users can also book appointments with the career centre on their own initiative. The career guide will have exploratory conversations about what kind of employment the users consider relevant options, and ask about why they are drawn towards specific options. There are national websites that provide career guidance and information about education pathways, as well as online meetings. Career guides use these websites as tools in meetings with job seekers to explore possible education pathways and what they might be interested in studying. The career centre can work with an individual to develop a learning plan for reaching his/her aim of VET, including what paths exist towards the trade certificate, how long the education will be and what kind of employment they will obtain afterwards. This learning plan can be shared with Nav, but this depends on the user signing a consent form allowing such sharing of information.

The collaboration is limited by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) that came into force in 2018. It is not always considered necessary to share information, as career centres are not seeking to interfere with the work of Nav, but this means that Nav and career centres cannot share information about individuals, which makes it difficult for the case workers to gain insight into individuals' circumstances and the advice and information they have obtained from other institutions. GDPR has made it impossible to share information about what the individual user has spoken about with the career centre, and if the user does not want to pursue education or the other pathways career guides suggest, Nav will not have any means to find out about it.

Recently, a consent form has been introduced to overcome the information-sharing challenge. This requires the agreement of the individual user to share their learning plan with Nav, for instance, their possible VET education trajectory, the career guide has identified. The form is not linked to an application for a school place but contains a temporary training plan which outlines possible education pathways, including, for example, workplace training opportunities. If the workplace training is successful and the person wants to pursue education in the same field, the career guide can follow up with what is called a 'permanent training plan' where specific aims of applying for a study place through adult education are included. The learning plan being prepared as a document that has the explicit consent from the user makes it possible to share information across institutions and enables Nav advisors to develop a plan that aligns with the advice from the career centre.

In some cases, Nav advisors and career guides meet users together. These meetings allow for building a better understanding of the individuals' needs and aspirations. The Nav advisor knows the background of the individual user, and career guide has an outside perspective and will ask different types of questions. Many advisors in Nav lack familiarity with the various education opportunities that exist, whereas career guides know little about individuals' backgrounds in terms of education, employment history, and interests. When they are working separately, they often get different impressions and ideas of their potential and limitations, but when meeting together they are often able to combine these perspectives in such a way that it makes it clearer what opportunities that are suitable for each

individual and the opportunities and challenges of providing VET as a means to ensure employment. It is especially the places where Nav offices and career centres are located in the same building that they work closely.

VET schools are important partners in the effort to make more adult job seekers attractive in the labour market. Career centres identify education opportunities and paths to employment, and Nav is involved in the operationalisation of these plans. Nav advisors work with schools to develop individualised education trajectories and with employers to provide job practice, apprenticeships and employment. Nav advisors in one municipality explained that they have contact with the schools every two weeks to stay up to date on the progress of the students and any potential challenges. Some Nav advisors had in the past been able to contact schools directly to register individuals who lacked only one or two subjects to complete their VET education, which allowed for quick completion of education and entry into the labour market. However, this has changed in recent years as all access to upper secondary education has to go through a national admission system.

Another pathway is through modular structured education for adults in upper secondary education. The Nav advisors we interviewed had some experience with users pursuing this path, but only within health care VET for immigrants.

The opportunities for collaboration are also shaped by variations within the region. The sizes of Nav offices differ, and there are no upper secondary schools near all Nav offices. The VET education offered at upper secondary schools also varies. Using VET to qualify adult job seekers is therefore not always the most suitable option for some Nav offices.

The financial support for adults who pursue VET through the Nav system varies. Some adult apprentices receive what is called ‘adult apprentice salary’, which is higher than the salary of youth who follow ordinary VET pathways. Even though companies must pay adult apprentices more than ordinary apprentices, Nav advisors experience that adult apprentices are still recruited and that the decision to hire them rests more on the suitability of each applicant. There is also support for VET education from Nav, but the kind of funding depends on each person’s status and individual circumstances. This support is provided during the education period to ensure that people can get by and complete their education without facing financial hardship. Support from Nav, known as daily allowance, is limited to a maximum of two years, which means that many are likely to lose their right to daily allowance during their VET studies, which are two years in school before apprenticeships. The students will still be entitled to other forms of financial support from Nav, but this will be a lower amount and make it challenging for them to complete their education. In the original ‘Trøndelag model’, the participants were expected to finance the education through support from the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund or through basic social assistance from Nav, which turned out to be a challenge for many.

The collaboration appears to work well, but faces some obstacles. Some career guides and Nav advisors pointed out that the collaboration was better in the past, before GDPR imposed restrictions on their ways of working together. However, this is gradually improving again as the implementation of the consent form allows for the sharing of some information. Career guides and Nav advisors also pointed out that the compact training programmes in the Trøndelag model offered a more suitable training path for the target group. Both parties agreed that there had been greater focus on VET in recent

years, and that there are currently many job seekers who have this in mind when they meet career guides.

7.3. Aims and objectives of the collaboration between Nav and Career Centres

To reduce exclusion from education and work, and fill the needs of the labour market.

7.4. The delivery of career guidance and counselling services

The career guidance system in Norway has expanded significantly in recent years. In 2023, there were 27 career centres nationwide, conducting a total of 40,690 career counselling sessions, and more than half of these inquiries came from individuals aged 30 to 49 (NOU 2025: 1). The Directorate for Higher Education and Competence has the overarching responsibility for career guidance. Since 2021, the county administrations are legally obligated to provide counselling on educational and vocational choices for adults. This includes a legal obligation for county municipalities to have career centres to support career development, where the aim is to serve as lifelong career guidance for both young people and adults. Thus, adults in Norway have a right to receive career guidance, and this encompasses students in upper secondary school and prisoners. Moreover, newly arrived refugees and immigrants have, since 2021, both a right *and* a duty to participate in career guidance (Arbeids- og inkluderingsdepartementet, 2024, p. §11).

Each county is responsible for offering its inhabitants free career guidance. The career centres are owned by the county administration, often in joint partnership with Labour and Welfare Administration (Nav) offices at the regional level. The career guidance framework consists of advisory services that can take place physically as individual or group-based consultations, or as online meetings. There are variations in the organisational structure and capacity of career centres across different countries.

Both career guidance and VET are high on the regional political agenda. Competence forum Trøndelag works in favour of increased support for the career centre towards the county committee. Career guidance services are not geared specifically towards VET as an education pathway. However, VET pathways are considered as a central means to obtain national and regional strategic skill goals: better use of skills, increased labour market participation and inclusion and better labour market matching. Information on VET pathways and transition to and from VET is part of the career guides' knowledge base.

There are also webpages offering information on education and career opportunities, and these include:

- Karriereveiledning.no is a free, national digital career guidance service operated by the Directorate for Higher Education and Competence. It offers information and support related to education choices, career transitions, lifelong learning, and studying abroad. The website received 15,400 requests in 2022. Two-thirds of its users were under 30, but there was a notable increase in users over 30 compared to the previous year. Across both digital and in-person services, users were fairly evenly distributed across different educational backgrounds (NOU: 1, 2025, p. 1).
- Utdanning.no is a government-run website providing educational and career information. The platform provides details on higher vocational education as well as undergraduate and graduate programmes at universities and colleges. It also includes information on continuing education

options for those already in the workforce, covering courses and formal qualification programmes. The website compiles comprehensive lists of secondary education programmes for adults, covering both academic and vocational tracks, and is working with county municipalities to develop an overview of modular training options. Users can also access tools for comparing salaries and unemployment rates across different careers, calculate admission scores to determine eligibility for specific programmes, and explore labour market trends and job opportunities linked to various education paths in different county municipalities. To maintain updated and accurate information, the website collects data from various stakeholders. However, educational listings are not continuously updated due to limitations in data exchange processes. The information on available study programmes is quality-checked in collaboration with educational institutions, and efforts are underway to develop an improved search function to help users find relevant information.

- Vilbli.no is an information service for applicants seeking secondary education in Norway. The target groups include young people and adults applying for secondary education, as well as advisors and parents/carers. Information is available both as general guidance and for each county municipality, and the website provides comprehensive details on educational programmes, admission requirements, regulations, and application procedures. Additionally, the website offers overviews of various occupations, outlining the necessary qualifications and educational pathways leading to specific careers, as well as descriptions of relevant workplaces and typical job responsibilities for each occupation.

7.5. Target population

The collaborative activities of the Nav and career centres are aimed at:

- Those thinking about, considering and engaging in VET
- Those transitioning from VET
- Those continuing their training
- Young people up to the age of 30
- Adults (unemployed/in-work/returners)
- Employers
- Career guidance and counselling professionals

7.6. Participants

The participants are job seekers below 30 years old, ordinary applicants within adult learning and candidates with discontinued apprenticeship contracts.

There is no specific register for participants receiving support within the Trøndelag model. All participants receiving support affected by Trøndelag model cooperation may follow different support programmes in Nav, different educational tracks, career guidance support and so on, which all operate with their registers.

7.7. Resourcing

The county authorities obtain state funding, which is distributed to upper secondary schools and career centres. Nav is funded through both state and municipal funds.

7.8. Key learning from the Nav and career centres collaboration

The collaboration between the Nav and career centres, as well as with companies and schools, to promote the use of vocational education appears to improve access to the labour market.

There are, however, some challenges in making such collaborations work. A key challenge that has emerged in Trøndelag is for schools to provide short training for adults. Even though it was considered a success, it turned out to require too many resources. The possibilities for providing specialised programmes also depend on the local contexts, partly in terms of the local labour market opportunities and the upper secondary programmes available in local schools. Considering the variations, it seems that upscaling or formalising the collaboration further could be challenging. The short training path, however, is an option that could be explored for generating faster paths from upper secondary school to employment for adults.

Another challenge that was identified was the limitation of digital meetings. Several informants mentioned the value of representatives from Nav and career centres meeting in person, and that the collaboration between them worked better when they had offices in the same building.

Collaboration between these institutions, as well as schools and companies, appear to work well. They might not need to be formalised, but similar collaborations could be developed both in Trøndelag and other parts of Norway, as long as they are adapted to each local context.

7.9. Assessing the impact of the collaboration

The efforts to provide and support VET through a closer collaboration between Nav, career centres and upper secondary schools appear to have an impact. Even though there are no data available on any causal effect, it is well established that people with completed upper secondary education have better chances in the labour market. There are some concerns about the cost of providing education for adults, but these investments are likely to be less costly than long-term unemployment.

7.10. Assessment of the implications for policy and practice

The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration and the career centres fulfil different roles in facilitating employment. Despite the differences, VET has become an important tool for both institutions to align individuals' skills with the needs of the labour market. There are, however, opportunities to strengthen and formalise the collaboration between Nav, career centres and schools to ensure that information and knowledge about both education programmes and the labour market are shared in ways that enable both the institutions and users to make well-informed decisions that lead to employment.

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Further information:

- https://www.trondelagsmodellen.no/
- https://karrieretrondelag.no/
- https://www.trondelagfylke.no/vare-tjenester/utdanning/strategier-og-planer/kompetanseforum/kompetanseforum/

8. The Vienna Weeks: An innovative outreach approach and its function as an entrance to lifelong guidance in Austria

By Eva Steinheimer and Tessa Pittrof

8.1. The context of outreach in Austria

Since its founding in 1995, the Vienna Employee Promotion Fund (*waff)* has developed into a central actor in the field of labour market policy and lifelong learning in Vienna (Steinheimer et al., forthcoming). Since then, in addition to its other areas of work, it has focused on the task of encouraging disadvantaged population groups to participate in existing (continuing) education opportunities.

Building on experiences from various outreach activities, the Vienna Weeks were established in 2015 as a framework and have since offered up to 100 outreach events annually in a range of formats. Moreover, the Vienna Weeks are closely linked to the Vienna Qualification Plan 2030 (*waff* (Wiener ArbeitnehmerInnen Förderungsfonds), 2018). Based on its predecessor strategy, the Vienna Qualification Plan 2020 (*waff* (Wiener ArbeitnehmerInnen Förderungsfonds), 2013), this plan aims to reduce the disparity between labour supply and demand in the low-skilled employment sector by upskilling individuals with low formal qualifications (Steinheimer & Hefler, 2024b).

The key target groups are the same as those addressed by the Vienna Weeks: young people and young adults, with a focus on preventing early dropouts from education and training, as well as adults with low levels of qualification who are to be encouraged to acquire further qualifications. It also includes people who are not yet able to use their qualifications in the Austrian labour market, for example, due to unrecognised qualifications obtained abroad.

The quantitative targets of the Vienna Qualification Plan 2030 include (according to the current work programme (*waff* (Wiener ArbeitnehmerInnen Förderungfonds), 2024)):

- Reducing the share of people who have completed only compulsory schooling and no further education from 8.4% (school year 2020/21) to 7% (school year 2024/25);
- Reducing the rate of early training leavers (i.e. school or dual VET) from 11.1% (2021) to 8% (2030);
- Reducing the proportion of early school leavers from 12.1% (2023) to 9% (2026);
- Increasing the number of extraordinary apprenticeship completions from 1,999 (2023) to 2,200 (2026).

The Vienna Weeks also contributed to the strategic objectives of the Vienna Qualification Plan 2030. These include:

- Enabling young people to attain qualifications beyond compulsory schooling. This requires supporting the transition from lower to upper secondary education and preventing young people from pursuing unsustainable transition strategies. In addition, efforts are made to reduce gender segregation in career and training choices.
- Reintegrating young people who are not in school-based or dual education or a comparable support measure into an appropriate training or education offer and supporting them in fulfilling their compulsory training obligation up to the age of 18. Special support is provided for newly arrived young migrants, including those who are no longer of compulsory school age.

- Supporting adults with no more than compulsory schooling to complete formal qualifications, and providing access to meaningful employment, education and training, or other forms of support for those not currently in work or education. Particular focus is placed on disadvantaged groups, people with illnesses or disabilities, women, and newly arrived migrant adults.

The Vienna Weeks represent a key measure within the strategic action area of "Information and Motivation" in the Vienna Qualification Plan 2030. This area aims to actively approach target groups with information and advice. These low-threshold services should, where possible, be promoted under the established umbrella brand used by the Vienna Weeks, "Meine Chance" ("My Opportunity").

The Vienna Qualification Plan is regularly adapted to changing environments and labour market trends. In the work programme for 2018–2020, for example, digitalisation was defined as a key cross-cutting issue. Since 2019, the Vienna Weeks have explicitly addressed this, not only by expanding existing event formats but also by introducing a thematic focus on digitalisation. In recent years, similar focus topics included nursing and care jobs or green skills.

8.2. The Vienna Employee Promotion Fund

Since 2015, the "Vienna Employee Promotion Fund" (in German *Wiener Arbeitnehmer*innen Förderungsfonds*; in the following addressed as "*waff*"[3]) has been organising the "The Vienna Weeks for lifelong guidance and further education" (in German *Wiener Wochen für Beruf und Weiterbildung*; in the following addressed as "Vienna Weeks"*)*. They are an example of regional outreach activities aimed at reaching people who rarely or never participate in (further) education. Building on prior experience, the Vienna Weeks have been established as an independent event format since 2015. Since then, the formats of the events have been continuously developed and adapted to current needs, something that became even more necessary due to the changes brought about by the pandemic since 2020.

The Vienna Weeks provide a structured framework in which low-threshold counselling and interactive activities on lifelong guidance, education, and further training opportunities are offered within a concentrated period of just a few weeks. One of the key strengths of the Vienna Weeks is the involvement of various organisations that are active locally or within specific districts. These organisations are part of regional networks of education and training providers, either within individual districts or across district networks consisting of two to three districts. This district-based approach enables a regional concentration of Vienna Weeks events.

In addition, larger events are organised during the Vienna Weeks in collaboration with multiple partner organisations, with a strong focus on low-threshold information and guidance, such as career guidance activities in shopping centres and parks.

[3] "The Vienna Employment Promotion Fund is a semi-autonomous agency in Vienna, working mainly in the fields of employment and lifelong learning policies. […] It provides lifelong guidance to the employed […] and offers financial support to the individual costs of CVET […]. The waff is active in the development of various related policies, including the support of the accreditation of prior learning and educational outreach." Cedefop, & Project Consortium (3s; Visionary Analytics, I. (2022 (unpublished)). *Financial and non-financial incentives to encourage provision of and participation in training – Final Report (April 2022) - Annex 5 – In-depth case studies on the interplay of financial and structural incentives*.

The *waff* is responsible for the overall framework of the Vienna Weeks, as well as the ongoing coordination and maintenance of regional cooperation networks. Waff counselling teams take part in events, and *waff* also funds selected event formats, using European Social Fund (ESF) co-funding until 2023. Cooperation partners either participate in joint events—offering activities such as information and guidance services at lifelong guidance fairs or interactive sessions—or conduct their own outreach activities.

The overarching framework of the Vienna Weeks facilitates broad public outreach, allowing additional population groups to be reached. A large-scale advertising campaign was carried out for the first edition in 2015. Alongside *waff's* promotion efforts—including posters, brochures, social media, and a dedicated website—cooperation partners also contribute to publicity efforts. District administrations play a key role in this by sending out personal invitations to specific events, ensuring that all households in the district are informed.

In most years, between 4,000 and 5,000 visitors attended the events. Fluctuations in the number of events, invitation policies, participating districts, and thematic focuses over the years contributed to higher attendance figures in 2015 and 2023 (see also section outcomes below). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Vienna Weeks continued with a variety of event formats, including numerous online activities, although overall reach was lower (Hefler et al., 2021).

The year 2025 marks a considerable shift in the organisation of the event. All activities are concentrated in three months in spring, covering all Vienna districts at once. The new format is accompanied by a large-scale promotion campaign and runs under the new name "FutureFitFestival 2025". While the festival builds on the cooperation networks established within the Vienna Weeks and continues many good practice events, the number of events and partners is considerably broadened with many innovative new formats. Outcome and impact data will be available later this year, however, the planning for 2026 already foresees a continuation at a scale and mode more resembling the Vienna Weeks.

8.3. Aims and objectives of the Vienna Weeks

The aim of the Vienna Weeks is to present training and further education programmes, career guidance and support services for young people and adults. By guiding potential interested parties to existing offer structures, the Vienna Weeks contribute to achieving the goals of the Vienna Qualification Plan 2030. Following this regional skills strategy, the Vienna Weeks focus on young people, young adults, as well as various other sub-target groups in adulthood, including the following:

- adults with low formal qualifications, i.e., those with at most compulsory schooling (ISCED 2);
- adults with higher qualifications who are still employed in unskilled positions;
- employed with a migration background;
- youth and young adults without a school-leaving certificate or apprenticeship qualification or with a migrant background, as well as people (18-24 years) not in education, employment or training (so-called NEETs);
- pupils during the last two years of compulsory schooling (lower secondary schools).

8.4. The delivery of career guidance and counselling services

Career counselling and guidance within the Vienna Weeks is delivered through a diverse range of low-threshold activities. The initiative supports individuals in thinking about educational pathways, considering and engaging in VET, and transitioning from VET. The activities can be distinguished in events mainly targeting younger generations/youth (up to 18 years old) and ones mainly targeting older generations/adults (19 years or older).

For youth (13-18 years), the focus lies on vocational orientation and exploring educational and occupational pathways. Interactive formats such as occupational guidance events in public spaces, games, open houses in schools or training centres, and taster days at companies provide hands-on experiences and direct interaction with professionals, trainers, and peers. These activities encourage early engagement with VET and help young people identify their interests and skills in an accessible and engaging way.

For adults (19+), career guidance focuses on (re-)entry into the labour market, upskilling, and lifelong learning. Lifelong guidance fairs, workshops, and targeted outreach, such as counselling in parks, shopping centres, or nursery schools, address diverse needs, including those of migrants, parents/carers, the unemployed, and low-qualified adults. Activities support reflection on career changes, access to further training, and engagement in VET. Presentations on specific occupations also offer insight into concrete career paths and transitions from training into employment.

Overall guidance is given and embedded in interactive, inclusive settings, often co-organised with district-level education networks and specialised organisations, ensuring accessibility and relevance for local populations.

8.5. Target population

The Vienna Weeks are aimed at:

- Those thinking about, considering and engaging in VET;
- Those transitioning from VET;
- Those continuing their training;
- Young people and adolescents.

8.6. Vienna Weeks participants

The activities under Vienna weeks are accessible to all interested, but mainly targeted towards younger adults and adults of working age. The activities are held in accessible locations close to the social sphere of potential visitors (parks, shopping centres, community or youth centres), as well as different formats (in-person, online), accommodating different needs.

People with a migration background are one of the core target groups of the regional networking activities. Multipliers in NGOs or associations working with migrants or refugees play an important role in reaching out to these groups. Some activities or events are offered in several languages (e.g. guidance in Turkish, etc.), and multi-lingual personnel support the large-scale lifelong guidance fairs.

Activities targeting women/girls offer support on topics like the transition from parental leave to work or taking up VET in traditionally male-dominated fields.

8.7. Stakeholder involvement

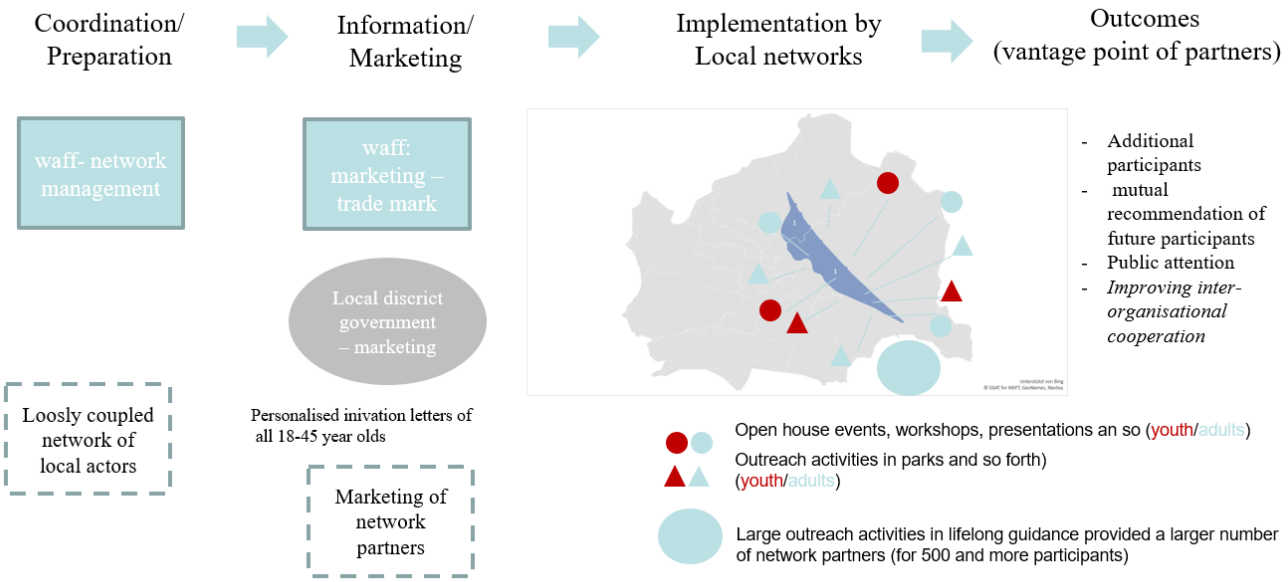
The framework of the "Vienna weeks" has been developed by members of the *waff* Department of Coordination and Regional Networking (in German *Koordination und regionale Vernetzung)* for more than a decade (Hefler et al., 2022).

Each year, a total of 100-130 organisations took part in the Vienna Weeks. Participating organisations include adult education providers, schools, youth centres, community centres, healthcare institutions, enterprises, migrant and refugee support groups, women's advocacy organisations, and other NGOs.

Among the most active beyond *waff*, were the Vienna Adult Education Centres (*Volkshochschulen*), the Austrian Public Employment Service (*AMS*), Educational Guidance Vienna, and the City of Vienna. Many smaller local associations, such as youth centres and NGOs in inclusive VET, also made important contributions to the programme. High-profile events that concentrated on apprenticeships (*#gemmalehre*) or the lifelong guidance fair (*Weiterkommen im Beruf*) held five to six times a year with several hundred visitors each, helped attract new private sector partners, further expanding the initiative's network and strengthening its impact on skills development and career orientation across the city (Steinheimer & Hefler, 2024a).

A key strength of the Vienna Weeks lies in the broad and diverse involvement of these local stakeholders. The initiative brings together a wide range of organisations that are active either city-wide or in specific districts, allowing for a targeted, neighbourhood-based approach. This local anchoring has enabled the Vienna Weeks over the years to effectively reach a wide audience and address specific community needs (see Figure 8.1 for the implementation and marketing of the Vienna weeks).

Figure 8.1: Overview of the 'functional core' of the Vienna weeks



Source: Authors' own description

8.8. Resourcing the Vienna Weeks

From 2015 to 2022, funding for the framework—including organisational support for network partners, marketing efforts, programme coordination, and ongoing monitoring—was jointly provided by the European Social Fund and *waff's* resources, which were financed by the City of Vienna. However, since 2023, *waff* has taken full responsibility for funding the framework.

In addition to this core funding, organisations responsible for specific activities contribute their own resources. For larger events, such as education fairs, the framework may assist with expenses like venue hire and security. Furthermore, participating districts make a significant contribution to marketing costs by distributing informational materials to a substantial number of households. The annual budget allocated to the framework was approximately EUR 600,000, with 50% of the funding previously co-financed by the ESF.

8.9. Key learning from the Vienna Weeks

A key strength of the framework is its foundation on pre-existing networks, its integration with complementary activities carried out by partner organisations, and the proactive role of district administrations in promoting events through direct invitations. Additionally, the close relationship between participating organisations and their target audiences, as well as the strategic selection of event venues within attendees' familiar surroundings, further enhances its impact.

An important boost for participation is the personal invitation letter sent out by the Vienna district's administration to all adults between 20 and 45/50 years, thereby reaching a large proportion of households. The contribution of the Vienna districts, in terms of support and costs for the mailing, is a valuable resource and only possible due to intensive networking and cooperation activities. Over the years, between 50% and 75% of all visitors mentioned the personal invitation as their primary source of information about the events; therefore, by far the most important source of contact (Steinheimer et al., 2022).

Over time, one notable challenge has been maintaining a balance between providing a sufficient number of events and avoiding 'audience fatigue'. To prevent oversaturation, district participation was rotated most years, as an increase in events did not always lead to a larger audience and sometimes created competition. Nonetheless, maintaining consistency in event organisation helped establish credibility and strengthen the initiative's reputation among potential attendees. Smaller partner organisations, however, faced difficulties related to flexibility and staffing, particularly when turnout was lower than expected.

8.10. Outcomes

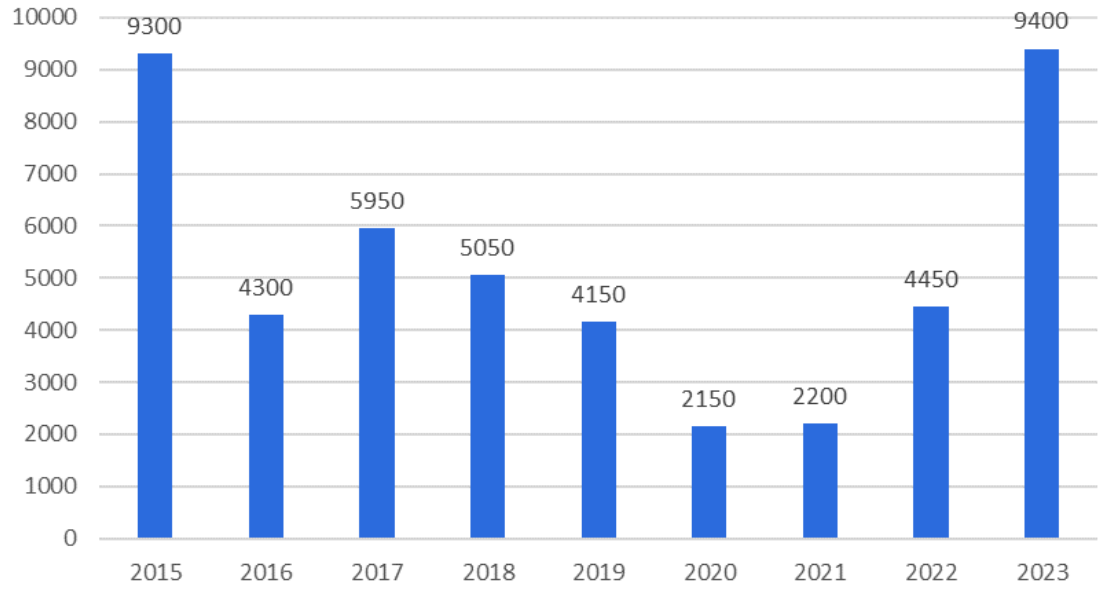
Over the past nine years, the Vienna Weeks have been held annually. The format, number of events, and primary target groups changed several times, with particularly notable adjustments during the pandemic years. Different thematic focuses were introduced over the years, including topics such as digitalisation, sustainability, and technology.

The following section examines changes in visitor numbers and the composition of the target groups reached, based on key characteristics and their development over time.

Visitor numbers fluctuated between 2,150 and 9,400 during the observed period. Participation was particularly high in the first year of implementation (2015), with around 9,300 visitors, largely due to significant initial investment, including a substantial advertising budget. The highest attendance was recorded in 2023, driven by a considerable expansion of events, with more districts and district networks hosting activities over an extended period.

The lowest visitor numbers, around 2,200 each year, were recorded in 2020 and 2021 (see figure 8.2). In 2020, large parts of the planned programme had to be cancelled or postponed due to COVID-19 restrictions. In 2021, many events were held in online formats and often targeted smaller visitor groups, which also contributed to a lower overall attendance.

Figure 8.2: Participants of the events during the Vienna Weeks, 2015 to 2023 (total)



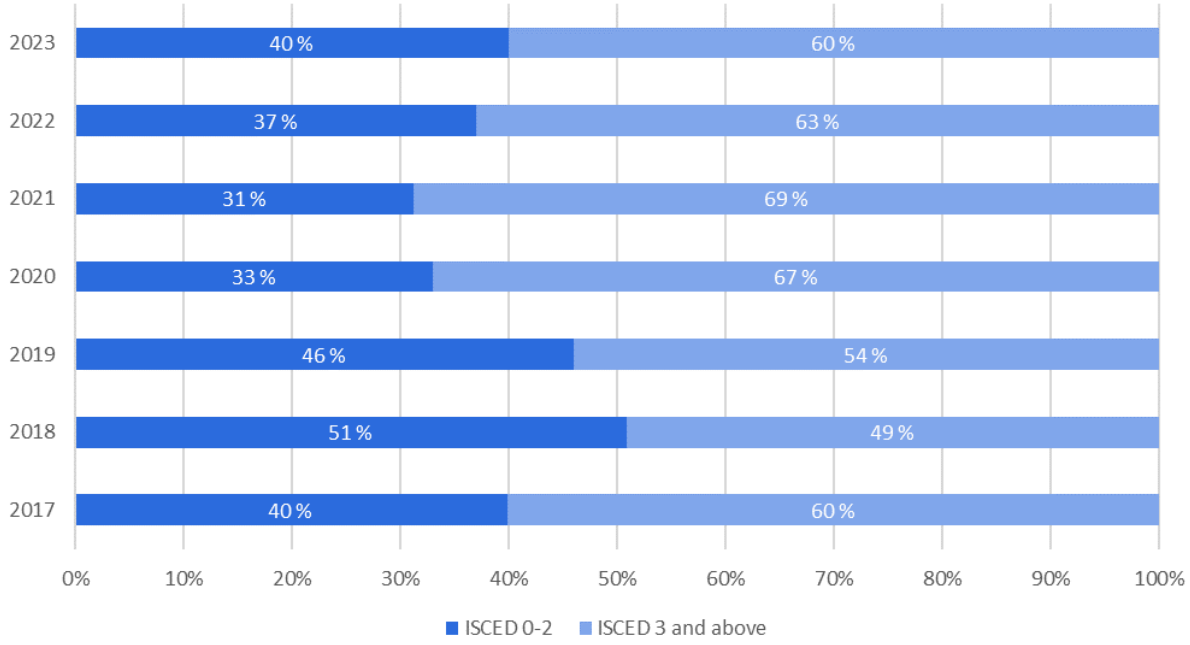
Source: Steinheimer & Hefler (2024a)

The proportion of male and female visitors was fairly balanced in most years. During the pandemic, however, the percentage of female participants was slightly higher than in other years, largely due to the positive reception of online offerings among women. In 2023, the share of female visitors remained high at 53%, primarily because many key events were specifically aimed at women or covered topics that predominantly attracted female participants, such as major information sessions on careers in nursing and care. The only year in which male visitors significantly outnumbered female visitors was 2017. This was mainly due to an imbalance among younger participants, with a strong overrepresentation of boys at events primarily attended by school classes from New Middle Schools (in German *Neue Mittelschulen*) and Polytechnic Schools (in German *Polytechnische Schulen*), where male students are in the majority.

In line with the objectives of the Vienna Qualification Plan, individuals with low formal qualifications—i.e., those with at most compulsory schooling (ISCED 2)—were a key target group in all years of implementation. This group was consistently well-reached, as evidenced by the proportion of visitors with low formal qualifications compared to their share of the overall population.

Across Vienna, the proportion of people with no more than compulsory schooling stood at around 22% in recent years, according to employment statistics (*Abgestimmte Erwerbsstatistik*). In the districts and district networks that frequently participated in the Vienna Weeks, this figure ranged from 16% (4th/5th/6th districts in 2021) to 31% (10th/11th districts in 2021) (see figure 8.3). Among visitors, the proportion was consistently (and often significantly) higher, both overall and at the district level. The difference was least pronounced in the two pandemic years, 2020 and 2021, as the numerous online events during this period were less effective in reaching individuals with low formal qualifications.

Figure 8.3: Share of visitors by level of formal education

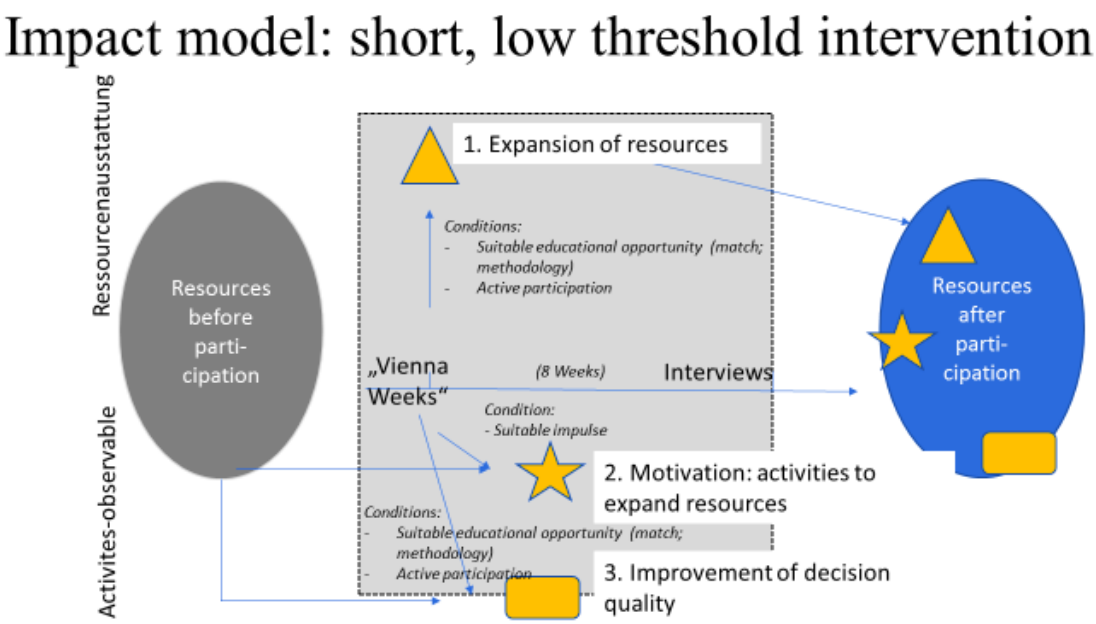


Source: Steinheimer & Hefler (2024a)

8.11. Assessing the impact of the Vienna Weeks

In the monitoring and evaluation accompanying the Vienna Weeks from 2016 to 2023, an impact model was applied including three conceptualised dimensions: to expand the resources of each visitor (1), to enhance motivation to set activities (2), and to improve their decision making (3) (see figure 8.4).

Figure 8.4: Overview of the intended impact model of the Vienna Weeks



Source: Bacher et al. (2017)

In qualitative interviews at the events (first round) and four to six months after the events (second round), visitors were asked about their perception of the events, what information and impulses they gained, what that meant for their further plans, and finally what steps in pursuing their educational and career goals they had taken after visiting the Vienna Weeks.

Age-related differences were revealed in how participants responded to the events. Younger attendees (particularly teenagers and young adults) were more likely to plan and set actions, while older participants were more likely to follow through with concrete steps after the events, reflecting different needs depending on individuals' life phases, underlining the importance of tailored support for different age groups.

In the interviews, four to six months after visiting the events in 2023, 79% of the respondents reported that they had taken at least one further step towards their personal goals in their career and training or further education since attending the event. This proportion is similar to the previous year 2022 (71%) and most other previous years (Hefler et al., 2021; Steinheimer & Hefler, 2024a; Steinheimer et al., 2022; Bacher et al., 2017). Young people in the sample were often standing before a transition when visiting the events together with their class (from lower to upper secondary education, or from school to work/university), thus taking the next steps, like taking up an apprenticeship, a new education was often mentioned. For adult visitors next steps covered taking up (further) education and training or planning to do so (e.g., having applied for a study place), applying for a job or starting a new job, joining active labour market programmes or seeking additional guidance or counselling.

8.12. Assessment of the implications for policy and practice

Within its regional context, the Vienna Weeks framework has become a central reference point for numerous organisations aiming to enhance networking and collaboration. Although other federal states recognise its advantages, its design is specifically adapted to an urban environment like Vienna.

The Vienna Weeks serve as a valuable model for large-scale educational outreach, highlighting the importance of effective coordination, strong partnerships, and resource allocation. Its success stems from leveraging pre-existing networks, integrating activities with partner organisations, and engaging district administrations to promote events, while balancing event frequency to avoid audience fatigue. Despite challenges faced by smaller partners in staffing and turnout, the initiative has built credibility and consistently reached its target groups.

The priorities set out in the Vienna Qualification Plan 2020/2030 are well-aligned with the "Information and Motivation" segment, which emphasises networking and advisory services closely tied to the Vienna Weeks. This initiative plays a crucial role in informing low-skilled adults in Vienna about their education and career opportunities while helping to lower the barriers that might prevent them from taking action. While these objectives focus on personal development, they also align with broader strategic goals, such as enhancing employability and addressing labour market skill shortages (Steinheimer & Hefler, 2024c).

The Vienna Weeks initiative is deeply interconnected with these strategic aims, contributing to both economic and human development. However, its emphasis on reaching marginalised groups, hosting event-based activities, and collaborating with organisations that address wider social concerns—such as youth centres, social services, migrant organisations, and adult education providers—demonstrates a comprehensive approach that extends beyond employment-related themes to provide broader social support and guidance.

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Further information:

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- https://www.esf.at/termin/wiener-wochen-fuer-beruf-und-weiterbildung-in-floridsdorf-und-der-donaustadt/ (example for distribution 2024)
- https://www.waff.at/future-fit-festival-2025/ (activities in 2025 under new brand)

9. Ohjaamo: One Stop Guidance Centres in Finland

By Jaana Kettunen and Hanna Pullinen

9.1. The Finnish context

Finland's approach to youth employment and vocational education and training (VET) has been shaped by a combination of socio-economic factors, policy initiatives, and a commitment to social equity. The country has consistently prioritised education and youth welfare, resulting in a robust framework that supports young people's transition from education to employment.

The Finnish education system is characterised by its comprehensive and inclusive nature. Compulsory education extends until the age of 18, encompassing both general and vocational upper secondary education. This extension, implemented in 2021, aims to ensure that all young people acquire at least a secondary-level qualification, thereby enhancing their employability and reducing the risk of social exclusion. In the realm of VET, Finland has undertaken significant reforms to make vocational pathways more attractive and responsive to labour market needs. The 2018 VET reform introduced a competence-based approach, emphasising individualised learning paths and workplace-based learning. This shift aims to provide students with the skills and competencies required in the modern workforce, fostering a closer alignment between education and employment.

Despite these efforts, Finland has faced challenges related to youth unemployment and disengagement. The global financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent economic downturns led to increased unemployment rates among young people. In response, the Finnish government launched the Youth Guarantee in 2013, a policy initiative ensuring that all young people under 25, and recent graduates under 30, receive an offer of employment, continued education, or rehabilitation within three months of becoming unemployed.

The Youth Guarantee laid the groundwork for the establishment of Ohjaamo, a network of one-stop guidance centres designed to provide comprehensive support to young people. These centres aim to address the fragmentation of services and offer integrated assistance in areas such as education, employment, health, and social services.

Legislatively, the Ohjaamo model is supported by the Youth Act (1285/2016), which emphasises the importance of youth participation, inclusion, and the provision of services that promote young people's growth and independence. The Act mandates municipalities to offer youth services, including outreach youth work and multidisciplinary cooperation, aligning with the objectives of the Ohjaamo centres.

9.2. The Ohjaamo Model

The Ohjaamo model, launched in Finland in 2014 as a pilot and expanded nationally in the years that followed, represents a key component of the Finnish government’s implementation of the Youth Guarantee. It is a coordinated network of one-stop guidance centres designed to provide young people under 30 with low-threshold access to a wide array of integrated services. The primary idea behind Ohjaamo is to address the fragmentation of youth services across municipalities and sectors by bringing together actors from education, employment, health, social services, and youth work into a single, accessible location.

The initial development of Ohjaamo centres was facilitated through co-financing from the European Social Fund (ESF) and national budget allocations, coordinated by the Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment. The centres were built as collaborative hubs that would foster better cooperation between municipal actors and state-level service providers, ensuring that young people facing challenges would not fall through the cracks. The programme gained traction quickly due to positive feedback from users and professionals alike, and by 2018, over 60 Ohjaamo centres were in operation across Finland's regions, including in remote and rural municipalities. As of 2025, almost 70 One-Stop Guidance Centres operate across Finland.

Ohjaamo is designed around the principle of service integration, which enables the combination of various forms of support under one roof. This includes guidance in education and career planning, psychological and social counselling, employment services, information on housing and financial aid, and support for health and well-being. The youth accessing Ohjaamo services do not need prior referrals, appointments, or diagnoses, making it a uniquely low-threshold service within the Finnish welfare system. This accessibility has proven to be particularly beneficial for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as early school leavers, NEETs, or those with a migrant background.

Each Ohjaamo is tailored to the needs of the local population and implemented through a bottom-up approach, though it is coordinated nationally through the KEHA-centre (The Development and Administrative Services Centre), which oversees capacity-building, evaluation, and resource sharing. Despite national coordination, local centres have considerable autonomy in developing their models of cooperation, staffing, and specialisation. Some Ohjaamos, such as in Helsinki, operate with highly developed partnerships with vocational institutions and employers, while others in rural regions may emphasise more outreach work.

Ohjaamo is not a fixed programme in the traditional sense but an evolving model of service delivery. Since 2021, the Finnish government has committed to developing the Ohjaamo network into a permanent part of the municipal youth services infrastructure. This was reinforced in the 2020–2023 Government Programme, which emphasised the importance of strengthening cross-sectoral youth services and improving the coordination of the Youth Guarantee. Consequently, Ohjaamo has become more than a project. It now functions as a cornerstone of Finland's youth employment, education, and welfare strategy.

The model's evolution continues with the 2025 employment services reform, which transferred responsibility for organising public employment services from the state to municipalities on January 1, 2025. This reform further embeds integrated services within municipal governance structures, creating potential for even stronger coordination between Ohjaamo centres and employment services under unified municipal management. With employment services now under municipal control alongside education, health, and social services, the structural barriers that previously limited cross-sectoral coordination have been significantly reduced**.** This represents a systemic adoption of the multi-agency approach that Ohjaamo centres have been demonstrating for over a decade.

Ohjaamo initiative responds to both structural and individual challenges in Finnish society. It bridges the gap between disconnected services and fragmented life paths, enabling young people to construct sustainable and coherent transitions from school to work or further education. It also acts as a platform for innovation in how services are delivered, designed, and evaluated within the wider VET and welfare

systems. Its integration with vocational institutions, career guidance systems, and labour market services places it at the nexus of education and employment policy, making it a vital instrument for achieving the long-term goals of the Finnish VET system and the broader objectives of inclusive growth.

9.3. Aims and objectives of One-Stop Guidance Centres (Ohjaamo)

The Ohjaamo One-Stop Guidance Centres model was established with the central aim of improving young people's transitions into education, employment, and adult life by integrating support services under one accessible and youth-friendly umbrella. Its objectives are rooted in both social inclusion and labour market participation, recognising that young people's challenges are often multifaceted and cannot be addressed through siloed services. The overarching vision of Ohjaamo is to ensure that no young person is left behind due to systemic gaps in support structures.

At the core of Ohjaamo's mission is the provision of early, personalised, and low-threshold support for individuals aged 15 to 29. The service seeks to address the complex interplay between education, employment, health, housing, and social wellbeing by offering multidisciplinary guidance and support. This approach is grounded in the understanding that difficulties in one area of life often spill over into others. For example, housing insecurity may hinder participation in vocational training, while untreated mental health issues can disrupt employment pathways. Ohjaamo centres aim to remove such barriers by delivering comprehensive, immediate, and coordinated support.

One of the foundational objectives of Ohjaamo is to operationalise the Finnish Youth Guarantee by ensuring that every young person receives an appropriate offer, whether that be employment, continued education, training, or rehabilitation, within a timely manner. To achieve this, Ohjaamo promotes rapid engagement with services, building trust between young people and professionals and reducing the risk of long-term disengagement from society.

Equally important is the model's focus on promoting autonomy and empowerment. Ohjaamo does not function merely as a corrective service for those in crisis but also as a preventive and developmental tool for all young people, including those who are already in education or employment but seeking career guidance, re-training options, or help navigating life transitions. The service is intended to be universal but with targeted features for those at risk of social exclusion.

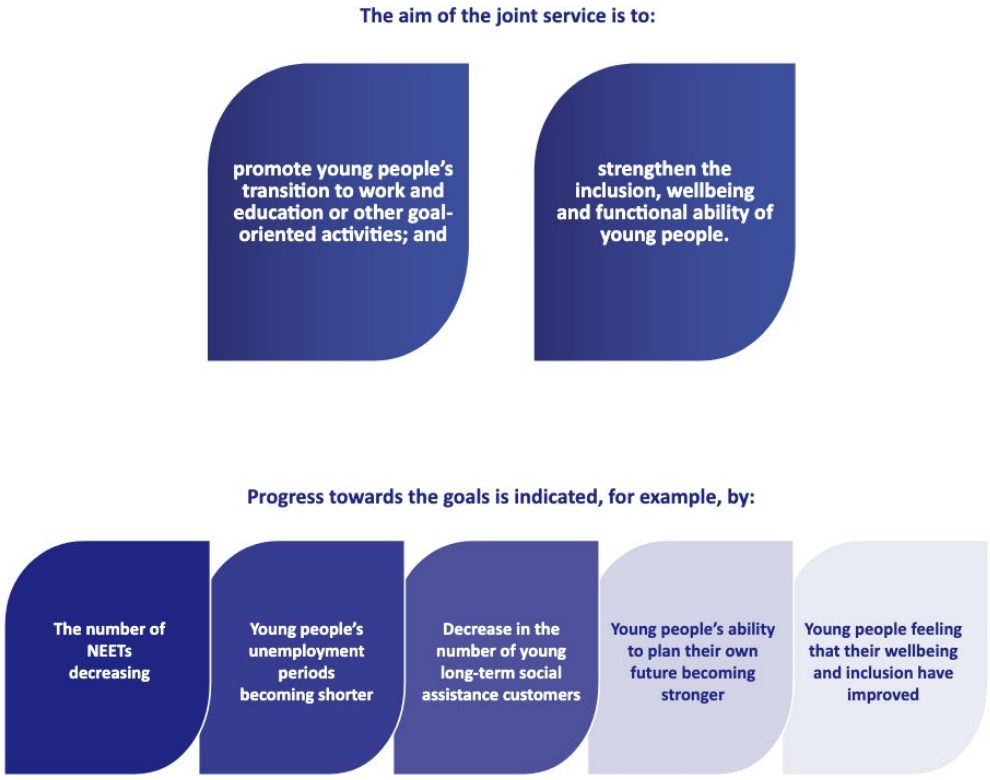
From a systems perspective, another aim of Ohjaamo is to reduce service fragmentation and inefficiency by fostering cross-sectoral cooperation between municipalities, employment services, educational institutions, social and healthcare providers, and NGOs. This objective reflects a broader policy shift in Finland toward integrated service delivery (palveluintegraatio), particularly in relation to youth and employment services. By breaking down institutional silos, Ohjaamo seeks to simplify service pathways, reduce duplication, and provide young people with a coordinated plan rather than disconnected interventions.

A further key objective lies in data-informed service development. Ohjaamo centres are tasked not only with service provision but also with the systematic collection of anonymised user data to inform both local practice and national youth policy. This includes data on service uptake, demographics, employment or education outcomes, and service gaps. The national coordination body (KEHA-centre) uses these data to refine service design, develop new tools and indicators, and disseminate good practices across the network.

The importance of these aims is underlined in several national and international evaluations. The Finnish National Youth Work and Youth Policy Programme (2020-2023) explicitly frames Ohjaamo as a core element of Finland's youth inclusion strategy. It notes that the centres should improve youth participation, reduce regional disparities in service provision, and serve as pilots for wider public administration reforms. Similarly, the OECD's review of Finland's youth policy (2023) emphasises the role of Ohjaamo in enhancing coordination between services and preventing long-term youth unemployment.

In practice, this means that Ohjaamo operates with a dual logic: individualised support on one hand, and system-level innovation on the other. It empowers young people to make informed decisions about their futures while simultaneously challenging traditional models of service delivery. Through its multidimensional objectives, Ohjaamo is an integral mechanism for realising an inclusive labour market, reducing inequality, and supporting the aims of Finland's VET system and lifelong learning strategy (see figure 9.1).

Figure 9.1: Overview of KEHA-Centre aims and goals



Source: KEHA-centre (2025, p. 3)

9.4. The delivery of career guidance and counselling services

Career guidance and counselling services delivered through the Ohjaamo model are distinguished by their holistic, integrated, and low-threshold nature. Rather than providing fragmented or referral-based support, Ohjaamo centres are designed to offer on-the-spot, comprehensive guidance to all young people under 30 who seek help with their educational, vocational, or broader life planning. This model

challenges traditional silos in public services by enabling multidisciplinary teams to work together within the same physical or virtual space, offering young clients coordinated and often immediate responses to their needs.

At the heart of Ohjaamo's delivery model is the presence of a multidisciplinary team that typically includes career guidance professionals, social workers, municipal youth workers, health professionals, municipal employment service advisors (reflecting the January 1, 2025 transfer of TE services to municipal control), and often representatives from NGOs or educational institutions. The ability to access this diverse expertise in one visit makes Ohjaamo distinct from more traditional models of guidance delivery, where young people might need to navigate multiple agencies and bureaucratic procedures to receive comprehensive support.

Career guidance itself is built on a strengths-based, client-led approach. Ohjaamo professionals engage with young people using motivational interviewing and solution-focused dialogue to help clients identify their interests, aspirations, and potential pathways. For many, this might involve structured career planning, skills assessments, or support with applications to upper secondary VET programmes, apprenticeships, or higher education. For others, especially those facing complex life situations, the guidance may initially focus more on stabilising their everyday lives—securing housing, resolving income issues, or mental health support—before moving onto vocational planning. The principle is that guidance must meet the young person where they are, not where the system expects them to be.

The delivery of guidance in Ohjaamo is also characterised by its flexible formats. Services can be accessed in-person, online, via phone, and increasingly through digital platforms. Digitalisation has become particularly important since the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the development of virtual guidance environments. Despite the availability of online services, in-person guidance remains the preferred and most impactful mode, particularly for vulnerable groups. Some centres also organise group-based activities, such as career exploration workshops, job application clinics, and vocational taster programmes in collaboration with local educational institutions and employers.

Ohjaamo centres offer walk-in access without prior appointment or referral, which removes a significant barrier for many young people, particularly those who have become disengaged from institutional structures. This open-access model is based on the "no wrong door" principle, whereby, regardless of a young person's reason for visiting, whether related to housing, income, mental health, or education, they are able to receive career guidance either immediately or via a coordinated follow-up process.

Evidence from evaluations has shown that this integrated approach improves service uptake and satisfaction. In client satisfaction surveys, the experience was rated more than 4 on a scale of 1–5, with the strongest feeling of involvement in the personal guidance process, where "almost everyone felt that they were heard and involved". Recent evaluations continue to demonstrate high client satisfaction rates, with feedback consistently highlighting the respectful, non-judgmental attitudes of Ohjaamo staff and the value of being treated as an individual rather than as a "case".

In a nationwide client survey conducted by KEHA-centre, over 85% of young users stated they received help with issues that mattered to them, and nearly 80% said that Ohjaamo helped them better understand their educational and career options. Feedback often highlights the respectful, non-

judgemental attitudes of Ohjaamo staff and the value of being treated as an individual rather than as a "case."

Collaboration between Ohjaamo and educational institutions is another crucial element of guidance delivery. Ohjaamo counsellors often liaise with vocational colleges (ammatilliset oppilaitokset), general upper secondary schools, and adult education centres to coordinate transitions, particularly for students who have dropped out or are considering re-entry into education. In some cases, Ohjaamo staff are seconded part-time from these institutions to enhance coordination and alignment. Joint events such as education fairs, campus tours, or "career week" programmes are also part of the proactive outreach strategy.

Career guidance delivery within Ohjaamo is supported by several national tools and frameworks. The ePerusteet platform, maintained by the Finnish National Agency for Education, provides up-to-date curricula and qualification criteria, which Ohjaamo staff use to inform young people about vocational training options and the Finnish qualification system and understand their learning and employment pathways.

Furthermore, Ohjaamo centres play a key role in early intervention. Outreach youth work is often co-located or closely partnered with Ohjaamo, ensuring that disengaged or at-risk youth are proactively contacted and invited to receive guidance. This outreach is essential for ensuring that career guidance reaches not only motivated young people but also those who may be alienated from the school system or formal labour market.

9.5. Target population

The primary target population for the Ohjaamo model consists of young people aged 15 to 29 living in Finland, regardless of their educational background, employment status, or life situation. The universality of this age bracket is significant: it reflects the understanding that the transition from adolescence to independent adulthood does not occur linearly or uniformly, and that many young people require varying degrees of support throughout this extended life phase. By encompassing such a wide age range, the Ohjaamo model ensures that it can accommodate the diverse needs of youth at different stages—whether they are completing basic education, transitioning into post-compulsory education or training, entering the labour market, or managing life challenges such as housing, health, or financial insecurity.

While comprehensive recent statistics are not publicly available for 2024-2025, historical data from KEHA Centre and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment show that a large proportion of Ohjaamo users fall within groups that are underrepresented in other public services. Statistics from the KEHA Centre and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment show that a large proportion of Ohjaamo users fall within groups that are underrepresented in other public services. In 2023, approximately 60% of visitors to Ohjaamo centres were either unemployed or inactive at the time of their first visit, and roughly one-third had previously had no recent contact with public education or employment services. This demonstrates the model's effectiveness in reaching segments of the population that conventional guidance or welfare services may struggle to engage.

Importantly, the Ohjaamo model is not only reactive but also proactive in identifying and engaging its target population. Outreach youth work (etsivä nuorisotyö) is frequently integrated into or closely

partnered with Ohjaamo services. Outreach workers maintain contact with upper secondary schools, vocational colleges, and social service agencies to identify young people who may be at risk of dropping out or who are no longer in contact with education or employment structures. These workers often initiate direct contact with disengaged youth—by phone, social media, or home visits—and encourage them to visit the Ohjaamo for guidance. This practice ensures that even the most vulnerable young people, who might otherwise be unaware of or distrustful of official services, are given personalised pathways back into education, training, or work.

Gender and cultural diversity are also core considerations in defining and engaging Ohjaamo's target population. Data from 2022 show that approximately 55% of clients were women and 45% were men, though some regional centres reported a higher percentage of male users, particularly in areas with elevated youth unemployment. Moreover, several Ohjaamo centres in larger cities, such as Helsinki, Espoo, and Turku, have developed specialised services for young people with migrant backgrounds. These include multilingual counselling, integration planning, and guidance tailored to navigating the Finnish education and labour systems. The centres work closely with the Finnish Immigration Service and adult education providers, offering preparatory education (VALMA and TUVA programmes) for immigrant youth entering vocational education.

Age-wise, Ohjaamo serves a continuum of youth stages. For 15-17 year olds, the focus is often on preventing dropout and supporting decisions related to upper secondary education. Among those aged 18-24, services often emphasise vocational pathways, employment readiness, and securing basic financial independence. For those aged 25-29, support may be more targeted toward re-skilling, upskilling, or navigating unemployment benefits and adult education systems. The age range also reflects broader changes in labour market participation and societal expectations: young people today often face delays in achieving permanent employment or stable housing due to economic precarity or shifting career trajectories. Ohjaamo responds by providing flexible, individualised support regardless of where a young person is on this continuum.

9.6. Participants

The participants of the One-Stop Guidance Centres are young individuals, under the age of 30, who may be at various stages of their education, career, or personal development. Centres provide an inclusive and accessible service to all young people, including those who may face social, educational, or economic challenges.

In 2022, the Ohjaamo network recorded more than 140,000 individual client contacts across approximately 70 centres operating nationwide. As of 2025, approximately 70 One-Stop Guidance Centres across Finland continue to provide information and guidance fast and based on need. These contacts include both first-time visitors and repeat users who may engage with the service multiple times over weeks or months. Of these contacts, nearly 60% involved individuals who were not currently engaged in employment, education, or training, validating the model's success in reaching a core priority group of NEET youth. This proportion has remained relatively stable since the programme's national rollout, suggesting the model's continued relevance for its intended users.

The gender distribution of participants has varied by region and year, but on a national level, data show a near-even split, with a slight overrepresentation of female clients in urban areas. For instance, in 2021, 53% of all clients nationally identified as female, 45% as male, and around 2% as non-binary or

did not disclose. In cities with larger migrant populations or higher youth unemployment rates, male users have comprised up to 60% of participants, particularly those seeking assistance with work-based pathways such as apprenticeships, heavy machinery training, or supported employment.

Participants span the full 15-29 age range targeted by the service, though the highest levels of engagement typically occur among 18-24 year olds. This age group is most likely to be navigating the transition from upper secondary education to work or further study and is also most at risk of becoming disengaged during this period. Data from KEHA-centre show that about 47% of all Ohjaamo users in that year were aged 18 to 24. The 25–29 cohort made up around 30% of users, often returning to the system for reskilling, vocational rehabilitation, or life planning after periods of inactivity or unemployment.

The educational background of participants is similarly diverse. Some arrive at Ohjaamo seeking help with continuing studies after basic education, while others already hold qualifications but lack direction or access to employment. Around one-third of participants each year report having only completed basic education, while another third have completed some form of vocational or upper secondary education. A smaller but growing segment, approximately 10-12% in recent years, includes university dropouts or individuals with higher education degrees who are struggling to find relevant employment and are now considering alternative vocational pathways or entrepreneurship.

Migration background is a growing area of focus for the Ohjaamo network, particularly in urban centres with increasing numbers of young people from refugee, asylum-seeking, or second-generation immigrant backgrounds. Many of these participants are involved in integration training or preparatory education (VALMA and TUVA programmes) and seek guidance on navigating the Finnish education system, finding employment with language barriers, or applying for study permits and social benefits. Centres have responded by recruiting multilingual staff, offering culturally sensitive guidance, and coordinating closely with NGOs serving migrant youth.

Young people with disabilities or special support needs also form a notable segment of Ohjaamo's participant base. The integrated nature of the Ohjaamo model allows these young people to access specialised vocational rehabilitation services or be referred to municipal employment services for disability-inclusive job search assistance. In many centres, career counsellors collaborate with psychologists and municipal social workers to create tailored action plans, sometimes including supported internships, workplace adaptation, or mental health therapy alongside employment goals.

Ohjaamo is also designed to accommodate repeat engagement. A young person might initially visit to receive help applying for a study place and return later for financial counselling or psychological support. Longitudinal data show that nearly 40% of users return to the service within six months of their initial visit, often to update progress or receive further guidance. This re-engagement is facilitated by the model's person-centred approach and the building of trust-based relationships between staff and young people.

Participants have also been involved in shaping the development of Ohjaamo services. Several centres have established youth panels or advisory groups that provide feedback on service quality, accessibility, and relevance. In Helsinki, for example, the youth panel worked with centre staff to develop outreach campaigns targeted at young men disengaged from education and employment, leading to a 10% increase in male user participation within one year.

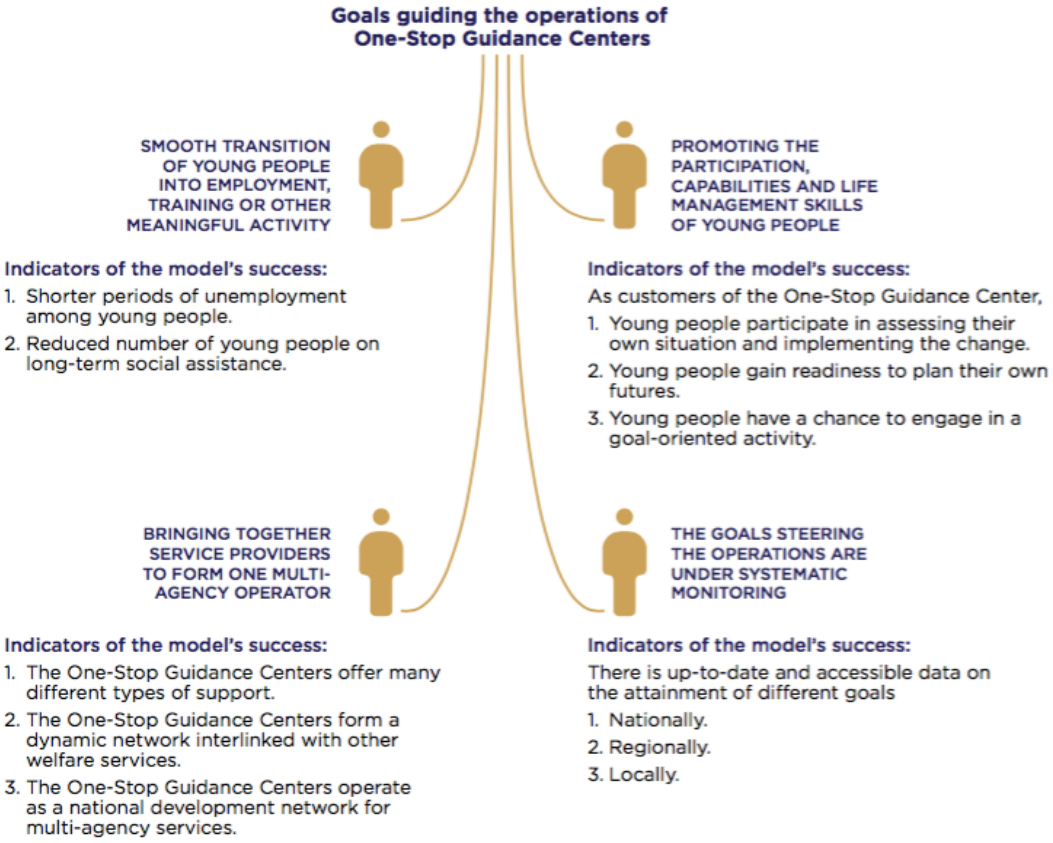
Feedback from participants has consistently been positive. In a nationwide client satisfaction survey conducted in 2022, 86% of users reported that the service had helped them clarify their goals, 79% said it increased their knowledge of education and employment opportunities, and 91% stated they would recommend the service to others. Importantly, qualitative data from interviews and focus groups highlight that young people value Ohjaamo not just for the practical support, but also for the sense of dignity and non-judgment they experience from staff. Many users emphasised the importance of being "listened to as a whole person" and appreciated the lack of bureaucratic barriers compared to other public services.

9.7. Stakeholder involvement

The operation is nationwide and originates from the ministerial level through collaboration between the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

The foundation and guiding principle of One-Stop Guidance Centre operations is multidisciplinary cooperation between experts from different fields, enabling clients to address multiple matters in a single visit, with services being physically located in the same premises. The services are delivered through a partnership model based on local agreements (see figure 9.2).

Figure 9.2: Goals guiding the operations of One-Stop Guidance Centres



Source: MEAE (2018, p. 2)

The effectiveness and sustainability of the Ohjaamo model are deeply dependent on the breadth and depth of stakeholder involvement. From its inception, Ohjaamo has been conceived as a collaborative,

multi-actor model that draws upon the strengths and expertise of a wide array of public, private, and third-sector organisations. The aim is not simply to co-locate services, but to foster meaningful, operational collaboration across institutional boundaries to support young people more holistically and efficiently.

At the national level, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment has been the lead governmental actor responsible for the overall coordination and strategic oversight of the Ohjaamo initiative. It manages policy frameworks, budget allocation (particularly the early co-financing with the ESF) and the development of performance indicators and quality guidelines. Through its agency, KEHA-Centre, the Ministry has provided training for Ohjaamo staff, supported the digitalisation of services, facilitated peer learning among centres, and collected national data for evaluation and policy development.

Municipalities serve as the main operational backbone of the Ohjaamo model. They are responsible for establishing and maintaining local centres, recruiting staff, providing housing services, and forming agreements with other local partners. Given the decentralised nature of the Finnish public administration, municipalities have wide discretion in designing their own service delivery models based on regional needs and resources. In this way, each Ohjaamo is a local innovation within a nationally coordinated framework. Successful cases have often been those in which municipal youth services, social services, and education departments worked together under unified leadership, pooling resources and aligning strategies.

A central stakeholder in each Ohjaamo is the municipal employment service, whose representatives are embedded within the centre or maintain regular presence following the major structural reform of January 1, 2025, which transferred responsibility for organising public employment services from the state to municipalities. This reform has strengthened the integration of employment services within Ohjaamo centres, as both now operate under unified municipal management, eliminating previous coordination challenges between state and municipal services. These employment counsellors provide job-seeking assistance, labour market information, vocational rehabilitation services, and guidance on income benefits or unemployment allowances. Their close integration within Ohjaamo ensures that clients are not required to navigate separate bureaucratic channels to access employment support—a particularly important factor for NEET youth who may be disengaged from institutional settings. Municipal employment representatives also contribute directly to client action planning and can initiate referrals to work-based training, internships, or subsidised employment programmes.

Educational institutions are another key stakeholder group, ranging from upper secondary vocational education and training (VET) providers to adult education centres, folk high schools, and universities of applied sciences (UAS). Many Ohjaamos have developed formal partnerships with local VET, which send guidance counsellors to work part-time at the centres or refer students at risk of dropping out. Collaborative efforts often include career fairs, application workshops, and shared case management for students requiring additional support. Furthermore, preparatory education programmes such as TUVA and VALMA—intended to help youth transition to upper secondary education—are often closely coordinated with Ohjaamo guidance services.

Social and healthcare professionals are indispensable in multidisciplinary teams, particularly in addressing the complex needs of young people facing mental health issues, addiction, or unstable

family or housing situations. These stakeholders are typically drawn from municipal social services, youth clinics, or NGOs with specific mandates. In many centres, social workers and psychiatric nurses conduct joint assessments with career guidance professionals, ensuring that clients receive both psychosocial support and pathway planning simultaneously.

Employers and private sector actors have increasingly been engaged as stakeholders, particularly as the model matures and its focus shifts more directly toward employment outcomes. Ohjaamo centres work with local businesses to create internship and apprenticeship placements, co-develop short vocational modules, and provide site visits or “job-shadowing” opportunities. In some cities, local chambers of commerce have facilitated dialogue between Ohjaamo and SMEs to align youth support with regional labour market needs. While this collaboration has not yet been uniformly strong across all regions, pilot initiatives such as the Youth into Work partnership model have shown promising results in terms of employer involvement in service design and delivery.

The strength of the model lies not only in co-location, but in genuine co-creation among a diverse range of actors—from municipalities and ministries to educators, employers, NGOs, and youth themselves. As Finland continues to develop its service system for young people, the role of these stakeholders in shaping, scaling, and sustaining Ohjaamo will remain vital.

9.8. Resourcing

The One Stop Guidance Centre activities were primarily funded by the ESF's employment-promoting funding until 2020, which was allocated by the decision of the ministries to implement the Youth Guarantee. Funding specifically aimed at promoting youth employment, directed towards the construction and development of One-Stop Guidance Centres. In addition, the Sipilä government granted annual additional funding for the operation in 2017 for four years

National projects were also funded by the ESF participated in supporting the work of the One-Stop Guidance Centres, which included coordination of operations, training for multidisciplinary joint work, the incorporation of multicultural guidance practices in One-Stop Guidance Centres, strengthening career guidance expertise, and enhancing the resources and skills related to psychosocial support in the centres. In 2023, the One-Stop Guidance Centres were able to apply for state aid funded by the EU Recovery Fund to strengthen the multidisciplinary nature of their services.

The funding model of the One Stop Guidance Centres continues to be based on multi-channel financing, combining funds from the state, municipalities and various project-based funding streams. The operations are primarily funded by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment and the Ministry of Education and Culture. ESF funding continues to play a significant role in service development.

The resourcing of the Ohjaamo model is multi-faceted, involving financial investment, human capital, infrastructure, and inter-agency coordination. While the operational core of each Ohjaamo centre is grounded in municipal-level management, the overall system is supported through national government funding mechanisms, European structural funds, and in-kind contributions from local stakeholders.

Initially, Ohjaamo centres were financed largely through the ESF during the 2014–2020 programming period. With the successful expansion and institutionalisation of the model, Ohjaamo centres

gradually became integrated into Finland's regular municipal youth services budget. In 2021, the Finnish government committed to securing the continuity of Ohjaamo centres beyond the ESF framework by allocating funds to ensure stable operations. Municipalities are expected to co-finance the model through local budgets, and many also draw on discretionary grants or earmarked social innovation funds to enhance their centres. Following the 2025 employment services reform, municipalities now have unified responsibility for both Ohjaamo and employment service funding, potentially creating more streamlined resource allocation and budget coordination.

Most Ohjaamos employ a combination of municipal staff (e.g., youth workers, guidance counsellors), employees from the municipal employment service and seconded staff from educational institutions or NGOs. Staffing levels are carefully structured to ensure that multidisciplinary services can be delivered on-site or through a coordinated referral system. In some regions, Ohjaamos operate on a rotational model, where different professionals are present on different days of the week, depending on user demand.

Resource coordination is further enhanced by joint steering groups established at the local level. These groups usually comprise representatives from the municipality, municipal employment services, educational institutions, social and health services, and youth NGOs. They meet regularly to allocate resources, monitor usage, discuss staffing needs, and evaluate the effectiveness of service delivery. In cities with multiple youth service points, steering groups also coordinate the activities of mobile or satellite Ohjaamo units to ensure outreach to underserved areas.

9.9. Key learning from Finland's One-stop centre model

The implementation and evolution of the Ohjaamo model have generated significant insights into integrated service delivery for young people, particularly in the context of VET, employment, and social inclusion. Drawing from nearly a decade of experience, a number of key lessons have emerged that are both locally valuable and internationally transferable. These learnings concern the practical aspects of service design, the strategic value of cross-sector collaboration, the centrality of youth participation, and the broader systems-level change required to support holistic youth transitions.

One of the most significant lessons from the Ohjaamo experience is the importance of service integration and low-threshold access. Many young people who are not in education, employment, or training face overlapping challenges, ranging from mental health issues and housing insecurity to lack of guidance or motivation. Traditional public service models, which are often fragmented and bureaucratically siloed, are ill-equipped to address these intersecting needs. Ohjaamo has demonstrated that bringing together guidance counsellors, social workers, employment advisors, health professionals, and youth workers under one roof can create a synergistic effect: services become more responsive, communication between professionals improves, and young people are less likely to fall between the cracks.

Relatedly, the success of Ohjaamo has underscored that accessibility is not just a matter of geography or opening hours but also atmosphere, language, and relational quality. The youth-friendly, informal, and welcoming design of Ohjaamo centres, both physically and in terms of staff approach, has been repeatedly cited in evaluations as a key factor in encouraging young people to seek help early. By removing gatekeeping procedures, such as the need for formal referrals or diagnoses, Ohjaamo creates a space where young people can engage without shame, stigma, or administrative burden. This lesson

is particularly relevant in international contexts where youth services may be overly formalised or require eligibility verification that discourages participation.

Another critical learning relates to the power of multidisciplinary teams and co-location. While Finland already has a strong tradition of public sector cooperation, the Ohjaamo model formalises and operationalises this collaboration through shared spaces, joint planning, and integrated case management. This approach has enabled professionals to learn from one another, understand each other's roles and competencies, and develop a more holistic understanding of the client's situation. This has not only improved outcomes for youth but also enhanced the professional development and job satisfaction of staff working in Ohjaamo. However, this also required time and trust-building, and several centres noted that success depended on regular joint training, consistent team meetings, and leadership that supported cross-boundary collaboration rather than reinforcing institutional hierarchies.

A further key insight concerns the role of municipalities. Although the Ohjaamo model is nationally coordinated and partially state-funded, its implementation is highly decentralised, with municipalities playing the central role in adapting services to local conditions. The 2025 employment services reform has further strengthened municipal control by transferring employment service responsibilities to municipal level, creating unified governance structures that can enhance service coordination. This has resulted in valuable flexibility and innovation. For example, in smaller towns, Ohjaamo staff may also conduct outreach in schools and youth clubs, whereas in urban centres, the focus may be on migrant integration or mental health support. This local adaptability is one of Ohjaamo's strengths, but also creates challenges around consistency and equality of service access. National evaluations have therefore highlighted the need for stronger quality assurance mechanisms and clearer minimum service standards, without undermining local innovation.

Youth involvement and feedback have also emerged as a vital component of Ohjaamo's success. Unlike traditional service delivery models, where young people are treated as passive recipients, Ohjaamo has increasingly embraced participatory approaches. Feedback loops, including digital surveys, client interviews, and peer-to-peer sessions, have been institutionalised in many locations, helping ensure that services remain relevant, respectful, and effective. One key insight is that when young people are involved in shaping the services they use, they are more likely to trust and benefit from them.

Another important lesson from Ohjaamo is the recognition that career guidance and counselling must be understood as a life-wide and life-long process. Many young people visiting Ohjaamo are not ready to choose a career path immediately; they may need time to stabilise their lives, improve their health, build confidence, or simply explore their interests. The model acknowledges that meaningful vocational decision-making often requires preparatory steps, such as volunteering, trial internships, or short-term courses, and supports these transitions accordingly. This developmental perspective on guidance aligns with international best practices and contributes to reducing early dropout and labour market mismatch.

Ohjaamo has also highlighted the importance of data and evaluation. Through KEHA-centre, each centre contributes to a national data system tracking visitor profiles, service usage, and outcome metrics. These data have enabled continuous improvement, informed policy adjustments, and supported evidence-based advocacy for continued funding. At the same time, stakeholders have

learned that quantitative outcomes alone do not capture the full impact of Ohjaamo, especially in cases where success means building trust, stabilising life situations, or preventing deterioration. Thus, many centres now combine statistical monitoring with qualitative evaluation methods such as client stories and case studies.

Several challenges have also provided learning opportunities. One such challenge is maintaining service continuity amidst changing funding structures. Many centres began as ESF-funded projects and struggled with uncertainty when transitioning to municipal budgets. This experience has shown the importance of political commitment and embedding integrated youth services in long-term municipal planning, rather than treating them as temporary innovations. Moreover, variations in municipal capacity have created regional disparities in service quality and scope, prompting discussions about whether some level of national standardisation or legislation might be necessary in the future.

Ohjaamo has demonstrated that collaboration with employers and VET providers is essential but requires proactive effort. While many centres have succeeded in building strong relationships with local training institutions, employer engagement remains uneven. Some business sectors have actively participated in youth employment programmes or provided short-term placements, while others have remained sceptical or unaware of the potential benefits. The lesson here is that employer partnerships need dedicated staff, regular communication, and clearly articulated mutual benefits, something that Ohjaamo centres with employer liaison officers have managed particularly well.

9.10. Outcomes

The outcomes of the Ohjaamo model are multi-dimensional, reflecting its holistic and integrated approach to supporting young people in their transitions to education, training, employment, and independent life. Evaluations at both national and local levels have shown that Ohjaamo has been effective not only in reaching its intended target groups but also in producing measurable improvements in educational and employment participation, reducing service fragmentation, and enhancing user satisfaction. At the same time, its outcomes also extend to institutional and systemic impacts, including stronger inter-agency cooperation and new working cultures within public services.

Quantitative data collected by KEHA-centre, which oversees national monitoring of the Ohjaamo network, indicate that Ohjaamos receive over 130,000-140,000 service visits annually. As of 2025, approximately 70 Ohjaamo centres across Finland continue to provide services to young people under 30**.** Of those users, nearly 60% were not in education, employment, or training (NEET) at the time of first contact. This demographic focus illustrates that the model is effectively reaching its core target audience, particularly relevant given that NEET rates remain a concern globally, with international data showing persistent challenges in youth employment transitions.

Among those engaging with Ohjaamo services, roughly one-third transition to education or training, and another one-third into employment, either directly or through intermediary support measures such as job search coaching, apprenticeships, or short-term vocational courses. For instance, according to 2021 national data, approximately 31% of Ohjaamo users found employment within six months of their first visit, and 28% entered a form of study or training. These figures compare favourably to national NEET re-engagement rates and highlight the model's effectiveness in creating positive educational and labour market pathways.

In addition to these hard outcomes, Ohjaamo has consistently delivered high levels of user satisfaction. Annual feedback surveys conducted by KEHA-Centre and individual Ohjaamo centres reveal that over 85–90% of users report being either satisfied or very satisfied with the services they received. The most frequently cited benefits include the respectful and youth-friendly treatment by staff, the speed of service access, and the relevance and clarity of the guidance provided. A 2022 nationwide client survey found that 91% of respondents said they would recommend Ohjaamo to their peers, and 87% felt they had a clearer direction after their visit. The most recent national feedback survey conducted in 2024 continues to show similarly high satisfaction rated, demonstrating the sustained quality of services.

In qualitative studies, many users describe the centres as places where they felt heard, respected, and supported without judgement. This sense of relational safety and empowerment is particularly valuable for youth with prior negative experiences of institutions or those facing mental health issues, learning difficulties, or trauma. Professionals within Ohjaamo have also reported observing increased motivation and self-efficacy among users, particularly when young people are given space to explore options without immediate pressure to make definitive choices.

On the institutional level, Ohjaamo has also led to improved cooperation among service providers. In many municipalities, the model has established new routines of inter-agency working, from joint client planning to co-facilitated workshops and joint data systems. Staff from different sectors (education, employment, health, social work) frequently report greater mutual understanding of each other's roles, shared learning, and improved communication channels. This has enhanced both the quality and efficiency of services, reducing duplication and fragmentation, which are often cited challenges in youth service systems.

Nevertheless, some limitations in outcome tracking remain. While short-term transition rates into employment or education are well-documented, there is less systematic data on the sustainability of these outcomes. For example, it is not yet consistently recorded whether youth who enter a VET programme with Ohjaamo support go on to complete it, or whether employment outcomes are stable and long-term. As such, several reports have recommended developing a more robust longitudinal evaluation framework that can assess lasting impacts.

Another area requiring ongoing attention is the variation in outcome quality and type between different Ohjaamo centres. While some centres with strong municipal support and multidisciplinary teams produce highly positive outcomes, others, particularly in smaller municipalities, face challenges in achieving similar levels of service integration or breadth. These disparities underline the importance of securing equitable resources and building professional capacity across the network.

Despite these challenges, the overall outcomes of the Ohjaamo model have been broadly positive and impactful. It has successfully reduced barriers to service access, provided young people with integrated guidance, and produced strong short- and medium-term transitions into education and employment. Moreover, it has contributed to changing the culture of public service delivery in Finland, moving towards a more user-centred, collaborative, and preventative model.

9.11. Assessing the impact of One-stop centres

Assessing the impact of the Ohjaamo model requires a multidimensional approach that goes beyond conventional metrics of service output or employment statistics. As a holistic and integrated service

model, Ohjaamo influences individual outcomes, institutional practices, and broader public service systems. Its impact must therefore be understood across short-term behavioural change, medium-term educational and employment transitions, and long-term structural and cultural shifts in youth policy and service delivery. Over the past decade, a growing body of national and local evaluations, academic studies, and government reports has contributed to this understanding, although challenges related to measurement, data integration, and longitudinal tracking persist.

On an individual level, the impact of Ohjaamo can be assessed through changes in client trajectories, including transitions into education, training, or employment. As discussed in the previous section, approximately 60% of Ohjaamo clients make a measurable transition into education or employment within six months of contact. While this is a significant result in itself, qualitative research highlights that the most meaningful impact for many young people is the development of self-efficacy, restored trust in institutions, and improved well-being. In a longitudinal study conducted by the University of Helsinki (2021), youth who had used Ohjaamo services reported a significant increase in their confidence about the future and a reduction in perceived barriers to pursuing vocational training or employment. One young participant described their experience as "*the first time someone really listened without rushing me*" pointing to the relational quality of the service as a key mechanism of impact.

Evaluations conducted by the KEHA-centre have further demonstrated that Ohjaamo is especially effective in re-engaging so-called "invisible youth", those not registered with employment services, not in school, and not receiving social welfare support. Outreach youth work and cooperation with schools and NGOs have enabled Ohjaamo to identify and engage these young people earlier and more effectively than siloed services could. This early intervention prevents long-term disengagement and the accumulation of complex problems that often require more expensive and intensive support later. From a policy perspective, this is a vital impact, aligning with Finland's preventative social policy goals.

At the institutional level, Ohjaamo has transformed how youth services operate. The co-location and joint operation of employment services, education counselling, health services, and social work have resulted in a "one-door-many-services" model that is now seen as best practice in municipal governance. According to a 2022 survey by the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, more than 80% of municipal administrators rated Ohjaamo as having "significantly improved" collaboration between departments, reduced duplication, and increased the reach of youth services. In many municipalities, the presence of Ohjaamo has also led to broader reforms in how youth affairs are structured, such as the development of integrated youth service strategies or the establishment of cross-sector youth coordination committees.

Systemically, the Ohjaamo model has had broader ripple effects on national youth policy. It has played a critical role in operationalising the Youth Guarantee and has become a flagship example of Finland's commitment to integrated, person-centred service design. The model has influenced government strategies on reducing youth unemployment, developing inclusive VET pathways, and improving the well-being of young people. In the most recent National Youth Work and Youth Policy Programme (2020-2023), Ohjaamo is explicitly referenced as a cornerstone of national efforts to improve life chances for young people. It is also cited in Finland's reporting to the European Commission on the implementation of the European Youth Guarantee and has been highlighted by the OECD as an international example of effective youth service integration (OECD, 2023).

Nonetheless, several challenges remain in fully assessing the long-term impact of Ohjaamo. First, while the national database coordinated by KEHA-Centre provides a robust overview of service use and immediate outcomes, it does not yet provide consistent longitudinal tracking. That is, it is difficult to determine what happens to clients one or two years after they engaged with Ohjaamo: do they complete their studies, remain employed, or require further interventions? Some municipalities, such as Tampere and Helsinki, have begun piloting follow-up systems that link Ohjaamo records with education and employment registries, but these practices are not yet uniform or supported by national legislation. Addressing data protection, interoperability, and administrative burden will be key to enhancing this aspect of impact measurement.

Second, the qualitative dimensions of impact, such as improvements in life satisfaction, social networks, or psychological well-being, are more difficult to quantify but no less important. Research by the Youth Research Network (Nuorisotutkimusverkosto) has shown that many youth perceive Ohjaamo not merely as a functional service point but as a safe and empowering space. These “soft outcomes” often precede more measurable transitions and are critical to long-term development, particularly for young people with mental health difficulties, migrant backgrounds, or prior negative experiences with institutions. The lack of nationally coordinated tools to systematically measure these types of outcomes remains a gap in current evaluation practices.

Another aspect to consider is variation in impact across regions. Ohjaamo centres differ significantly in size, capacity, and integration level. While centres in larger cities often report strong partnerships, diversified services, and consistent outcomes, smaller municipalities may lack access to specialised staff, youth clinics, or employer networks. This geographical variation affects both the quantity and quality of services available and complicates attempts to draw uniform conclusions about the impact. There have been calls from both national evaluators and local practitioners to establish minimum service standards or a formal certification process for Ohjaamos to ensure more equitable access and comparable outcomes.

9.12. Assessment of the implications for policy and practice

The Ohjaamo model has wide-reaching implications for both policy and practice within Finland’s vocational education and training (VET) ecosystem and beyond. As an integrated service system that transcends traditional sectoral divides, Ohjaamo represents a paradigmatic shift in how public services can be structured to respond to the complex, interlinked challenges faced by young people. These implications concern not only the delivery of career guidance and support but also governance, funding, professional development, data systems, and equity in public services.

At the policy level, Ohjaamo has reinforced the case for structural integration of services in youth policy. The traditional siloed approach, where education, employment, health, and social support systems operate in isolation, has long been criticised for its inefficiency, duplication, and inability to address the holistic needs of young people, particularly those who fall outside conventional institutional pathways. Ohjaamo provides a working alternative. Its success shows that multisectoral governance can lead to improved outcomes when underpinned by shared objectives, collaborative leadership, and adequate resourcing.

The 1 January 2025 transfer of employment and economic development services (TE services) from the state to municipalities represents a systemic validation of the integrated service delivery principles that

Ohjaamo centres have been pioneering since their inception. This reform, which created 45 employment areas under municipal control, reflects broader recognition of the effectiveness of locally integrated, multi-sectoral approaches - precisely what Ohjaamo has been demonstrating. With employment services now under municipal management alongside education and social services, the structural barriers that previously limited Ohjaamo's integration capabilities have been significantly reduced, creating conditions for even more seamless service delivery and unprecedented opportunities for deeper coordination between Ohjaamo guidance services and employment support at the local level.

Ohjaamo makes a strong case for embedding guidance and counselling across multiple service domains, with vocational, psychological, and social elements offered in parallel. It requires inter-ministerial cooperation. This integration also means that VET institutions should see Ohjaamo not as a parallel actor but as a strategic partner in ensuring student retention, preventing dropouts, and fostering transitions between different levels of learning and work.

In terms of funding policy, Ohjaamo challenges the conventional logic of short-term, project-based financing for social innovation. The positive outcomes associated with the model, especially reductions in youth unemployment and NEET rates, suggest that investing in integrated guidance services yields both social and economic returns.

For practice, the model underlines the importance of adopting a user-centred, strengths-based approach. Ohjaamo professionals are trained to engage with young people as agents of their own change, not as passive recipients of services. This philosophy is embedded in every aspect of service delivery, from the informal and welcoming design of physical spaces to the collaborative nature of goal-setting and action planning. Practitioners in other countries or sectors looking to replicate Ohjaamo would do well to understand that success lies as much in organisational culture as in structural design. Professional development programmes must therefore extend beyond technical competence to include relational skills, cultural competence, and multidisciplinary collaboration.

Another critical practice implication is the need for flexibility and responsiveness. Ohjaamo’s most effective centres have adapted their services to meet local needs, whether through mobile outreach in rural areas, multilingual counselling in urban centres, or partnerships with mental health providers for trauma-informed guidance. This localisation shows that a “one-size-fits-all” model is inadequate in diverse social contexts. National frameworks should support local innovation while also providing tools, training, and quality assurance mechanisms to ensure a shared vision and comparable standards.

The implications for digital service provision are also noteworthy. Ohjaamo has shown that integrated youth services can extend into the digital domain, particularly through platforms that offer virtual guidance, chat services, appointment systems, and self-help resources. However, digital services must be complemented by in-person interactions, especially for young people facing exclusion, digital illiteracy, or complex challenges. For policymakers and practitioners, this reinforces the importance of hybrid models that combine the accessibility of technology with the relational depth of face-to-face support.

Data governance and evaluation also emerge as major themes. The success of Ohjaamo has been underpinned by a national monitoring system that collects data on service use and short-term outcomes. This infrastructure supports continuous improvement and accountability. Yet, as several

evaluations have pointed out, there remains a need for more comprehensive, longitudinal tracking to understand sustained impact, such as educational attainment, labour market integration, and social well-being over time. Investing in secure, interoperable data systems and ethical data sharing agreements between municipalities, ministries, and education providers would enhance the evidence base for policy and improve service coordination.

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10. Skills Bootcamp: A government-funded outcome-based approach to upskill and retrain citizens in England, UK

By Chandrima Roy and Sally-Anne Barnes

10.1. UK context for Skills Bootcamps

There are several trends affecting the UK economy and influencing the skills required in many sectors. The key trends identified are the recessionary effect of COVID-19, automation in entry level jobs, macroeconomic factors such as Brexit, and an ageing society bringing longer working lives and the need to upskill and retrain (William *et al*., 2021). Skills are considered crucial and integral to supporting the development of the United Kingdom as a high wage-high growth economy and for enhancing the quality of life and wellbeing of the society. Improving the skills system is identified as "at the heart of addressing the UK's low productivity level and the associated high proportion of low-skilled and low-paid jobs in the economy" (Crowley, 2024). So, governments (earlier and current) in the UK have been driving a skills agenda to improve workforce readiness, and promote economic growth and social well-being.

The UK's VET system has been an integral component of the UK's skills strategy. The earlier Conservative government's focus in this regard manifested in various policies and initiatives such as the development of T Levels, Skills Bootcamps, the expansion of apprenticeships, funding for further education, and Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) (DfE, 2022). One of the key initiatives, Skills Bootcamps (https://www.skillsforcareers.education.gov.uk/pages/training-choice/skills-bootcamp) was launched in 2020 and was promoted as key part of the government's skills and job creation strategy. It was designed to help adults upskill and retrain in areas with skills shortages, like Construction, Digital, and Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) driving. Reports and interview responses provide evidence that the government invested significantly in these programmes through the National Skills Fund, aiming to help adults aged 19 and older to acquire in-demand skills and improve their career prospects. Skills Bootcamps formed part of the then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson's Lifetime Skills Guarantee scheme, helping everyone gain 'Skills for Life'. 'Skills for Life' campaign was launched by the Department for Education (DfE) in the UK, aiming to empower individuals and businesses by promoting skills and technical education opportunities. At a FE Week roundtable (Whieldon, 2020) on the Lifetime Skills Guarantee, the then skills minister, Gillian Keegan emphasised the employability aspect of bootcamps more than the educational purpose. It was also argued that Skills Bootcamps will help employers play a leading role in the skills system by enabling them to fill skills gaps at a local level and as one of interviewees informed that the bootcamps are very much *"designed to be employer driven […] it's about the needs of employers and matching the skills"* (Senior Leader 2 – Adult Education, Senior Leader 1 – Local Council).

As a national Department for Education Programme, Skills Bootcamps was commissioned locally in the case study site by the city council on behalf of the city and the wider county (Senior Leader 2 – Adult Education) to provide people with the opportunity to train in a new industry or progress in their current careers. Senior Leader 3 – Policy and Strategy reported that *"they [skills bootcamps] were born very much out of COVID in regards to kind of a call to action to bring people back into the workforce."*

They further stated that the skills landscape in the region from a business perspective continues to be challenging due to a dearth of skilled workforce in the majority of the sectors. This was attributed to various factors, including businesses finding it difficult to navigate educational and skills pathways or the ability to connect enough apprenticeships with businesses. This promoted the rise of skills bootcamps (Senior Leader 3 – Policy and Strategy).

10.2. Skills Bootcamps

Skills Bootcamps are a national Department for Education programme to upskill and retrain adults 19 years and older in the UK. These are short-duration, flexible training courses that can last up to 16 weeks and are generally co-designed with employers. The primary aim is to support people who have the right to work in the UK to get better jobs and gain in-demand skills for jobs in specific sectors and meet employers' skills needs. Skills Bootcamps cover a wide range of sectors, including digital, green, technical, health and social care, construction, HGV driving to name a few. The Skills Bootcamps are available to people who are unemployed or inactive, self-employed and those in employment and free for all learners. Where employers use Skills Bootcamps to train their workforce, they are expected to contribute to training costs. This amounts to 30% of the training costs for large employers and 10% for small or medium employers. Participants or learners, who are unemployed are offered a job interview with an employer upon completion of the course. A guaranteed job interview upon the completion of a course is a core component of the Skills Bootcamps' offer. Those who are self-employed or undertake the Skills Bootcamp via their employer are not required to have a job interview on completion of their course.

Introduced to support the 2019 UK Government's manifesto commitment, this new approach to upskill and train had a pilot rollout to test the approach. The pilot wave was followed by two waves of Department for Education (DfE) commissioned Skills Bootcamps, in six regions in 2020-2021 and then scaled up to all regions of England from 2021. The Skills Bootcamps focused on supporting individuals transition from declining occupations and sectors by upskilling or reskilling for roles within sectors considered strategically important within the region where the Skills Bootcamp was being delivered (Garner et al., 2024, pp. 4-5). Skills Bootcamps are funded primarily through the Department for Education's National Skills Fund. Interviews with key stakeholders in the case study location underscored meeting the local skills needs through Skills Bootcamps and regional funding, allowing for alignment with Local Skills Improvement Plans.

Skills Bootcamps can be seen as the government's investment in alternative forms of training to support entry and progression in work. The idea behind Skills Bootcamps was that not all experienced people wanting to change careers would want to pursue extensive Apprenticeships and Higher Technical qualifications (at Level 4 or 5). Skills Bootcamps come as more targeted provisions to respond to emerging technical skills needs (digital skills, CAD, green skills, solar panel installations) required in the current time to transition to new sectors or skill areas. The potential to link Skills Bootcamps to accelerated apprenticeships has also been discussed in many published sources (for example, Garner et al., 2024).

10.3. Aims and objectives of Skills Bootcamps

Skills Bootcamps were launched as part of the conservative government's broader "Lifetime Skills Guarantee" and "Plan for Jobs" initiatives to provide lifelong learning opportunities for adults and address skills gaps in sectors facing skills shortages.

10.4. The delivery of career guidance and counselling services

Skills bootcamps help develop new practical skills and focuses on specific skills and job opportunities within certain industries facing skills shortages. While the core emphasis remains on the acquisition of specific technical skills, career support is offered as supplementary to the primary goal of skill development such as in terms of providing guaranteed job interviews and offering ongoing support after the course ends. DfE guidance document (2023) includes a list of wraparound career and personal development support for learners of skills bootcamps. It specifies that the support could include providing assistance with drafting of industry standard, sector-specific CVs and preparation for interviews, imparting wider employment skills and behaviours and sector specific behavioural skills support for employment, tailored career coaching from experienced industry professionals, personal development plans, maintaining relationship between learner and employer throughout the programme and tracking the learners' employment status for the number of months after completion of the relevant Skills Bootcamp.

Providing extensive or long-term career guidance or career counselling services are not considered within its remit and as noted by one senior leader *"does not sit very well in the skills agenda"* (Senior Leader 3 – Policy and Strategy). Another senior leader explained that the skills bootcamps programme *"specifically has not got a career advice element in it. The assumption really is that they [learners] have had the career advice somewhere else previously and they have been signposted to the bootcamp as an action from that careers advice"* (Senior Leader 2 – Adult Education). In the case study site, learning providers incorporated career guidance through ongoing support to help participants/learners find and secure employment, including job search assistance, connecting participants with job opportunities, CV reviews, and interview preparation. One manager of a learning provider in the case study site mentioned having an in-house 'employment coach' who is a qualified HR professional who goes to the job centres and to careers fairs to provide career advice and then follows up with enrolled learners at the back end of the qualification (Middle Manager 1 - Operations Manager). A manager from another learning provider discussed how learners are provided career support across the programme through mandatory one-to-one professional development discussions, professional development plans, and optional CV and applications master classes held (Middle Manager 2 – Education and Skills Manager).

10.5. Target population

Skills Bootcamps are aimed at:

- Those thinking about, considering and engaging in VET;
- Those transitioning from VET;
- Those continuing their training;
- Young people of age 19 and above;
- Adults (unemployed/in-work/returners).

10.6. Participants

DfE guidance document (2023 updated 2024) states *"Skills Bootcamps should be designed to encourage the participation of underrepresented groups which may include but is not exclusive to, ethnic minority background, disability, women, veterans, prison leavers, serving prisoners due to be released within 6 months of completion of the Skills Bootcamp, prisoners on temporary release or learners with childcare or similar responsibilities, those with protected characteristics (as defined in the Equality Act 2010) and those who might face barriers to employment."* (p.5).

Skills Bootcamps are offered to all individuals 19 years and older, regardless of their employment status. Many bootcamps do not require any prior knowledge or experience in a specific job or sector to enrol (Interview data; Skills for Careers, DfE, 2025). Bootcamps are designed to be flexible and offer face-to-face, online or blended delivery methods to suit different learning preferences and allowing participants to fit their learning around other commitments. Often structured in modular formats, learners can progress at their own pace. However, while a number of bootcamps can be completed entirely online, a learner can only complete the course if it is made available in the area they reside in and if they have access to a reliable Internet connection, a laptop or computer with a camera and microphone and access to Microsoft Office.

One senior leader shared that the Skills Bootcamps in the region allowed for people from different backgrounds to participate including people who had mental health issues that kept them out of the workplace (Senior Leader 2 – Adult Education). Bootcamps imparted them with skills sets that they could take back into different workplaces. According to the data available (provided by Senior Leader 2 – Adult Education), learners were engaged from across the region and were ethnically diverse.

Wave 1 of the Skills Bootcamps was a pilot, so there is limited data on outcomes, but evaluations suggest high learner satisfaction. Wave 2 completion rates varied by provider and sector, but were estimated to be between 65% and 70% (CFE Research Ltd./Department for Education, 2023). Of the 42,340 learners who started a Skills Bootcamp as part of Wave 3 (April 2022 - March 2023), 27,730 completed their course, resulting in a completion rate of approximately 65.5% (Department for Education, 2024).

Wave 4 (2023-24) consisted of approximately 200 participants, whereas for Wave 5 (2024-25), there were more than 200 participants (see Table 10.1). The demographic breakdown of participants is presented in the table below. Data for Wave 6 (2025-26) was not available when data was collected for this case study.

Table 10.1: Demographic profile of Skills Bootcamp participants

	Wave 4 (2023-24)		Wave 5 (2024-25)	
	All Participants	City Participants	All Participants	City Participants
White British	41%	33%	26%	13%
Asian/Asian British	22%	28%	35%	46%
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	14%	17%	15%	21%
Female	49%	29%	43%	47%
Declared a Disability	18%	12.5%	18%	17%
Under 30	33%		37%	45%
Over 50	22%		11%	7%

When it comes to older workers, then Chancellor Jeremy Hunt had claimed that schemes like Skills Bootcamps will get over 50s back to work and will help businesses "to plug their skills gap". Reports from published sources indicate that over 50s were underrepresented in the uptake of Skills Bootcamps to which interviewees concurred. According to government figures, 280,000 workers in the over-50s category were declared economically inactive since the start of the pandemic in 2020 (Rankl, 2023). The Government had announced 'returnerships' to signpost older workers to already available training, including apprenticeships and Skills Bootcamps. According to reports, less than one in 20 new starters on the Government's 'skills bootcamps' were aged between 55 and 67 (Labour Newsroom, 2023).

While Skills Bootcamps are designed to be inclusive and has opened up opportunities for learners, this case study research found that there is scope to prioritise participants'/learners' voice when it comes to incorporating their perspectives and feedback into the design and delivery of bootcamps, or having their involvement during the commissioning stages of bootcamps. Currently, Skills Bootcamps are viewed as mainly employer led training initiatives offered in areas, particularly in sectors where employers are experiencing skill shortages and are struggling to recruit. As one of the interviewees put it *"It's about the needs of the employers and matching the skills"* (Senior Leader 1-Local Council).

10.7. Stakeholder involvement

Skills Bootcamps are being delivered in partnership with employers, further education colleges, independent training providers, national training providers and local government. With regards to Wave 1 Skills Bootcamps, the process evaluation research report (DfE, 2021) identified employers as one of the key stakeholders and mentioned co-designing content with employers or employers having the opportunity to input into the content of the bootcamps. It is reported that this helped develop employer confidence in skills that learners acquired through the bootcamps. Employer engagement is considered key for Skills Bootcamps. Employers are expected to engage in a variety of ways, such as offering guaranteed interviews, co-funding an employee to participate in the training, supporting curriculum design and delivery, mentoring, offering work experience placements, or venue/equipment provision to support provider delivery.

In the case study site, the council is an important stakeholder having commissioned several waves of Skills Bootcamps on behalf of the city and the county and "*established attractive funding for a couple of sector specialists skills initiatives*" (Senior Leader 1 – Local Council). All interviewees discussed working closely with businesses to identify their skills needs. Another key stakeholder in delivering Skills Bootcamps are the training providers, the majority comprising independent training providers. They play a vital role in designing, delivering, and evaluating the programmes for Skills Bootcamps, as was understood from the interviews with Middle Manager 1 – Operations Manager, Middle Manager 2 – Skills and Education Manager from independent training providing firms and from Senior Leader 2 – Adult Education. They work with employers to tailor the training, ensuring high-quality content and instruction. They are responsible for providing ongoing support to learners throughout the process, from recruitment to job placement. Senior Leader 2 – Adult Education, having oversight of the management and quality of delivery of Skills Bootcamps in the city emphasised the "*importance of training providers having links with the employers already set up*".

The regional chamber of commerce is also a key stakeholder who participates in the delivery and support of Skills Bootcamps particularly in the city and the county. With its commitment to skills development through the local skills development plan (LSIP) it aims to align skills provision with business needs which involves connecting with various stakeholders such as education and training providers, engaging with local employers and analysis of data from employer surveys to get insights into skills gaps and identify areas where Skills Bootcamps can make significant impact.

The Department for Education is an important stakeholder that provides funding for Skill Bootcamps and monitors the outcomes of Skills Bootcamps in partnership with various organisations. It was learnt from the interviews conducted that Ofsted will also be an important stakeholder involved in inspecting the quality of training provided through Skills Bootcamps for 2025-2026. It was reported that all learners will progress on to a guaranteed job interview upon the completion of the Skills Bootcamp and will need to be compliant with OFSTED regulations.

10.8. Resourcing Skills Bootcamps

According to the Department for Education guidance document (2023 updated 2024), Skills Bootcamps is a £3bn Government initiative and is fully funded by the UK government for independent learners (individuals not being co-funded by their employer) and for the self-employed. The document states "*Where an employer is training an existing employee, they must contribute to the cost of the course. In the case of large employers, DfE will cover 70% of the cost of the Skills Bootcamp with the remaining 30% of the agreed learner rate to be funded by the employer… In the case of small and medium employers DfE will cover 90% of the cost of the Skills Bootcamp, so the employer contribution is reduced to 10%." (p. 9).* A small or medium-sized employer is defined as having fewer than 250 employees.

Garner et al. (2024) report that two waves of DfE-commissioned Skills Bootcamps (following a pilot wave of Skills Bootcamps) in six regions in 2020-2021, and then scaled up to all regions of England from 2021. Funding approaches were tested in early waves, and this included grant funding to

combined authorities and national level funding. With both options on offer, there can be regional variation in Skills Bootcamps allowing for regional funding to align with the Local Skills Improvement Plans.

In the case study site, the city council assumed the role of Lead Accountable Body for the procurement of Skills Bootcamps across the city and the county in 2023 (Senior Leader 2 – Adult Education) through the grant application process. In this case, the council puts an expression of interest essentially to the DfE, and they allocate the amount for the year, and then the council commissions the Bootcamps based on the rules around which or what areas the Skills Bootcamps could be offered in. It was informed that any organisation who is interested in running a Skills Bootcamp can put in an initial application as the first step which is followed by a stringent screening process to assess the legitimacy of the organisations, their experience in offering bootcamps, and whether their offerings are within the scope of what the commissioning authority is looking for. A full application is then invited that needs to include information on the course, where the learners are going to come from, who the employers are and what jobs are going to be lined up and how much funding is required to run the bootcamp. So, the companies interested design their bootcamp, cost it up and submit their bids to be evaluated based on the quality of the bid, area of focus, costing, wraparound support offered etc. Senior Leader 1 – Local Council and Senior Leader 2 – Adult Education further informed that it is not always that the best bid wins, it is more about what meets the local skills needs best through a process of further negotiations on cost and the number of bootcamps to be organised and delivered. After successful assessment and formal approval, there are three payment milestones associated with a learner on a Skills Bootcamp. 40% of the funding is paid upfront for enrolling participants, starting the course, and the learner completing 14 qualifying days of training. 30% is further paid upon the learner finishing the course (with assessment if any) and getting an interview lined up. For the co-funded learner, it could be a new role/responsibility within the current organisation which meets the criteria set out in the service requirements. The final 30% of the allocated funding is paid to the learning provider when there is evidence of a job secured by the learner/participant. The evidence can be submitted up to six months after the end of the course or the program.

In the case study site, a grant funding call for Wave 6 Skill Bootcamp for the financial year 2025-26 was launched in November 2024, the consultation phase for which is now closed. A consultation period was held in November 2024 to inform the potential wave 6 call for organisations to deliver Skills Bootcamps to people living or working in the city and the wider county. Senior Leader 2 – Adult Education informed that new providers will be funded to deliver a pilot Bootcamp, and subject to a successful delivery of the pilot, subsequent allocations will be made

Regarding future funding of Skills Bootcamps, data from interviews and desk research reveals that the current Skills Bootcamp programme has a specific timeframe. However, all interviewees were optimistic that since the previous government had already made significant investments in the Skills Bootcamps programme, there is potential for new programmes and funding initiatives in the future to continue funding such programmes, but it could be under new programmes or expanding the current programme.

10.9. Key learning from England's Skills Bootcamps

Skills Bootcamps were introduced with the aim of upskilling and retraining adults aged 19 and over for high-priority business sectors facing skills shortages. Interviews with key stakeholders highlighted that establishing and maintaining strong employer-provider relationships are key to delivering successful Skills Bootcamps. However, they reported that the level of employer engagement and the type of engagement varied across different sectors. Evaluation of Skills Bootcamps report (CFE/DfE, 2024) notes that Hospitality, Rail, Business Administration, Logistics, and Creative Skills witnessed the lowest level of employer engagement in Wave 3 Bootcamps at the national level. In the case study site, an interview with Senior Leader 3 – Policy and Strategy provided further insights. It was shared that businesses find it difficult to navigate the educational pathways available and to incorporate the "*various skills models into their businesses*" and emphasised the need for a "*coherent*" skills strategy - *"there are just too many skills models that exist at the moment for them [employers] to understand where to start or how to incorporate them into their business […] whether to go to universities, to colleges, to schools to, you know, training providers […] There are pockets of vocational education. There are pockets of apprenticeships, there are pockets of areas which cover this, but again, it's not a very coherent kind of strategy".*

Senior Leader 2 – Adult Education noted the importance of delivering high-quality Skills Bootcamps, providing good quality experience to learners and maintaining close ties with local employers and their needs to make Skills Bootcamps successful. In this context, Senior Leader 2 – Adult Education expressed the desire to get learners formally involved in terms of having their inputs inform the Skills Bootcamp programmes going forward, but recognised that it is hard for learners to stay involved after they have finished the course. Senior Leader 1 – Local Council added that if the programmes are for a longer term 4 to 5 years duration, there is scope to develop and embed learner voice and involvement, and suggested exploring the possibility of longitudinal tracking of learners in the future and engaging with the market and learners more strategically. Besides drawing attention to *"very short term"* nature of Skills Bootcamps program, Senior Leader 1 – Local Council and Senior Leader 3 – Adult Education discussed facing other challenges such as getting *"very late notice of the award of funding, literally weeks before the start of the financial year"* which they said made it *"particularly challenging for the learning providers who got to mobilise on rolling contracts - not quite clear a) whether they have got a contract or b) what the focus or the scale of the contract is going to be".* As a result, Senior Leader 1 – Local Council added, *"everybody ends up being very short-term running around in terms of planning but I think we are still doing a good job in that context…".* Senior Leader 2 – Adult Education also shared that a delay in confirmation of funding had implications for finalisation of the procurement for 2024-25 Bootcamps that resulted in providers deciding to reduce the number of cohorts they could complete within the timeframe.

It was further highlighted that investing in the development of new bootcamps takes time, and with the *"kind of stop-start cycle"* of commissioning, providers are commissioned for a year without much certainty about funding for the next cycle of commissioning. In this situation, they stated there is always the risk of losing the teaching staff as providers cannot guarantee them work. It thus *"makes it difficult particularly for smaller providers who might be the most innovative and the most creative to*

actually invest speculatively in topics and areas or around learner needs that are not being currently met by anybody [learning providers]".

CFE Research (2023, 2024) for the Department for Education reported other significant challenges that learning providers faced. National level data gathered revealed that providers found payment schedules 'unfair' due to the need to chase evidence for successful outcomes to get paid for the delivery of training. This added a significant administrative burden upon them. There were also challenges associated with sourcing and securing enough interviews to offer to all participants, and then offering interviews for roles that matched with content of the Skills Bootcamp.

With regards to funding, it is important to mention that a national level consultation asking for views on proposals for reforming the further education funding and accountability system, proposed a multi-year funding settlement to give Mayoral Combined Authorities and learning providers more certainty in terms of funding and enabling providers to adapt to changing employment needs (government consultation report, DfE, 2022). It is said that views from the consultations will be considered carefully to help shape the reforms the government will make to adult skills funding which includes suggestions to devolve adult skills funding to new areas, create a single Skills Fund and create *"an effective national approach to funding adult skills that can improve both the distribution and use of funding where the DfE funds providers directly, and acts as a model for local areas to use in their funding of providers"* (p.13).

10.10. Skills Bootcamp learner outcomes

Real job openings and guaranteed interviews for each Skills Bootcamps participant are a key feature of the programme. After finishing Skills Bootcamp, participants/learners are guaranteed a job interview with an employer. They can also get a new job or apprenticeship, progress in their current job or find new business opportunities if they are self-employed (Skills for Careers, DfE, 2025; interview data). At the national level, completions and outcomes for courses that started between April 2022 and March 2023 in England are available from GOV.UK sites (DfE, 2025). Of the 42,340 Skills Bootcamps starts between April 2022 and March 2023 there were 27,730 completed Skills Bootcamps. This suggests a completion rate of around 65.6%. Of these completions, 15,570 reported positive outcomes. These figures are based on numbers reported to the Department for Education by Skills Bootcamp providers.

In the case study location, key stakeholders interviewed shared information on the impact of Skills Bootcamps within the region. Senior Leader 2 – Adult Education reported that the programme is paid based on results achieved. 30% of funding is associated with a positive employment outcome within 6 months of completing the bootcamp. While specific regional data is not readily available, it was reported that Skills Bootcamps generally had completion rates that are higher than the national average. All interviewees unanimously agreed that Skill Bootcamps are targeted programmes to prepare learners for the changing labour market. Senior Leader 2 – Adult Education explained how learners in one organisation benefited from having a full set of skills in an area "*that they could [then] use in a multitude of different ways*" and practice a broad range of things. Accordingly, it also helped broaden participants' perception of themselves as employees of their organisation. To this, Senior Leader 1 – Local Council further added that Skills Bootcamps as *"an intensive programme is quite a*

good way to create a change in someone's life […] kind of immerse them in a changed situation … and gives them quicker returns". Middle Manager 2 – Education and Skills Manager shared that for employed learners, Skills Bootcamps provided the space for professional development, new growth areas to focus on, updated job descriptions, things which people normally do not always get from employers in the way they want. They thought that Skills Bootcamps "*opened up opportunities*" for people because of the longer-term support designed to help learners succeed not only throughout the programme but also beyond, including post-completion employment or further training. Where positive work outcomes were not achieved within six months of finishing the course, learning providers reported keeping in touch with learners until they got their positive work outcome.

The above descriptions are based on self-reports from commissioning authorities and training providers. It is important to explore participant perceptions about the guaranteed interview process, wraparound support and associated outcomes. CFE Research (2023) that shared learners' experiences based on data collected at the national level, is not foolproof as not all learners who participated in the fieldwork had completed their training at the time of data collection, and the management data for completion rates was also incomplete.

10.11. Assessing the impact of Skills Bootcamps

Information gathered from interviews and published sources suggests Skills Bootcamps are differentiated from other training programmes in their offer of a guaranteed interview and positive employment outcome. Participants securing successful outcomes, expanding their networks, gaining professional development and employability skills were reported by interviewees. Senior Leader 1 – Local Council and Senior Leader 2 – Adult Education claimed that they were able to enhance skills provision in the local area and have been able to focus on high-priority sectors such as construction, digital marketing, cyber security, and environmental management, to name a few. In the case study location, Senior Leader 3 – Policy and Strategy noted *"From a business perspective, it continues to be a challenging landscape in the majority of sectors in finding the skilled workforce that is needed"* and highlighted the need for funding to continue for *"short modular skills boot camps in areas where businesses can work together to deliver positive effect."*

According to a published source (CFE Research Ltd., 2023 updated 2024), employers felt that Skills Bootcamps helped to increase the diversity of their organisation and supported them to recruit underrepresented groups with diverse previous experiences. An important point that comes to the forefront from desk research is whether the effectiveness of Skills Bootcamps in meeting its aims and objectives have been successfully met. Camden and Mellor (2024) notes that *"despite a £500 million funding between 2020 and 2025, it is not clear how effective Skills Bootcamps have been in helping people to progress in their careers or move to a new sector because timely outcomes data has not been published"*. Early outcomes and impact reported in "Evaluation of Skills and Bootcamps" Wave 3 implementation report (CFE Research, 2024) are indicative of the mixed results - positive results co-existing with the challenges discussed in this case study report.

10.12. Assessment of the implications for policy and practice

The Skills Bootcamps initiative has significant implications for VET policy in the UK, particularly in how vocational training is conceptualised, funded, and delivered. By prioritising short, flexible, and employer-led training models, the programme challenges traditional VET structures that often rely on longer-term qualifications like apprenticeships or diplomas. This shift reflects a growing policy emphasis on rapid upskilling to meet immediate labour market needs, especially in sectors facing acute skills shortages. The integration of Skills Bootcamps into Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) also signals a move toward more decentralised and responsive VET planning, where local authorities and employers play a central role in shaping provision. However, the short-term nature of funding cycles and the administrative burden on providers raise concerns about the sustainability and scalability of such models, particularly for smaller, innovative training organisations.

In terms of practice, Skills Bootcamps have introduced a results-driven approach that ties funding to learner outcomes, such as course completion and employment. This performance-based model incentivises providers to focus on employability and job placement, but it also introduces challenges in securing suitable job interviews and tracking long-term learner success. The emphasis on employer co-design and co-funding has strengthened the alignment between training content and labour market demand, yet it risks marginalising learner voice in programme design. To ensure equitable and high-quality provision, future practice must balance employer needs with learner aspirations and support mechanisms, including more consistent learner involvement in the commissioning and evaluation of bootcamps.

For career guidance, the Skills Bootcamps model presents both opportunities and limitations. While the programme includes wraparound support such as CV writing, interview preparation, and job search assistance, it does not formally integrate long-term career counselling. Stakeholders noted that learners are often assumed to have received prior guidance before enrolling, which may not always be the case. This gap highlights the need for a more holistic approach to career development within VET, where guidance is embedded throughout the learning journey, from initial exploration to post-training transitions. Strengthening partnerships between training providers, job centres, and career services could enhance the support available to learners, particularly those from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds. As the VET landscape continues to evolve, integrating robust career guidance into short-term training models like Skills Bootcamps will be essential for fostering meaningful and sustainable employment outcomes.

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Appendix 1: Interview guide

Welcome and introductions

- Thank participants for volunteering
- Ensure all participants have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet
- Collect signed consent form

Background to the study

As part of the Skills2Capabilities project, we are undertaking seven case studies in Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Norway and the UK. Each case study is researching innovative practice in terms of how support for vocational education and training is established, funded, or delivered or how stakeholder involvement drives support and services. The aim of the case studies are to explore innovative and good practice career guidance and counselling services in VET systems that support those considering, engaging in and transitioning in and out of VET .

Aim of interview [adapt to your interviewee]

As discussed, in the interview we will explore your understanding and experience of X. We are interviewing a number of people to gain an understanding of how X was developed over time, and it is supporting learners with their VET journey.

Contracting

- Thank you for volunteering to take part in this interview.
- The session should take approximately 45 minutes.
- Everything you say will remain confidential and anonymous.
- The information from all interviews will be combined. Quotations may be used to illustrate points within the case study report and final report which will combine all country case studies. However, nothing that will identify you as an individual will be reported.
- Taking part is voluntary. You can withdraw at any time without giving a reason
- Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview questions

The following proposed questions and probes are a guide and should be adapted to your case study and interviewees. It is not expected that every question is asked and answered.

X = programme, project/activity/initiative under study for case study

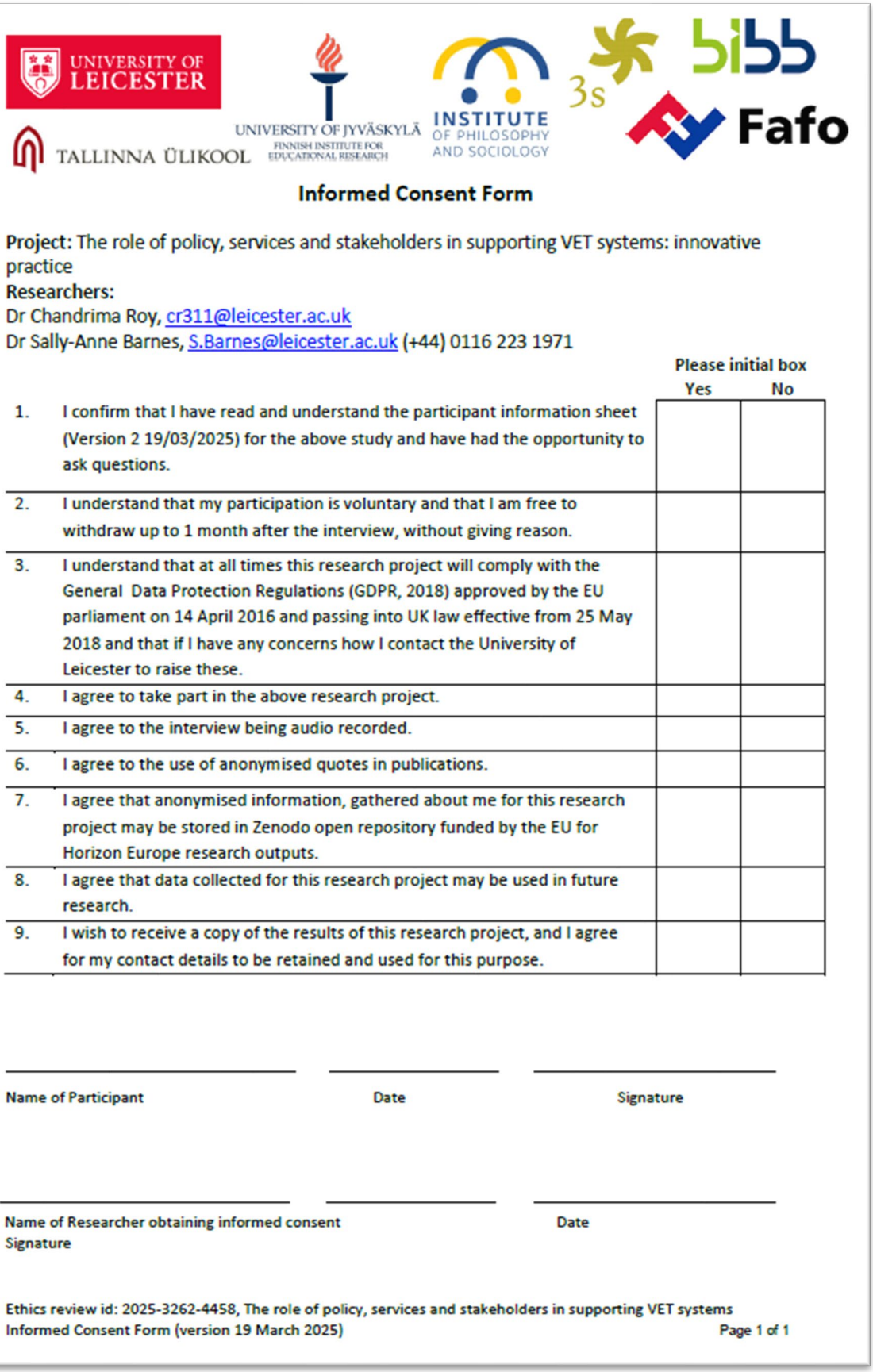
Describe initiative, activity, programme	Can you tell me about X and your role? What makes X innovative/interesting? [probe response] Has X opened up opportunities for vocational education and training? Does X prepare learners for the changing labour market? What skills have been developed by X? What are the important factors within the VET system that contribute to strengths and weaknesses of X? How does the X support extend the delivery of services for individuals thinking about and/r considering a VET pathway? **Organisation and management** How have the organisation and/or management of VET system changed? What was the context of this change?

	[if established policy/strategy] Where does X fit into the VET system? **Resourcing of VET** How is X resourced (in terms of funding)? What is resourced through this funding? How is career guidance provision(or other support for learners) resourced in X? What is the long-term view of resourcing X? **Labour Market Information (LMI) and data** (these data may be collected as part of wider VET system or relevant to initiative/activity/programme which is part of case study, so questions need to be adapted) What LMI and data are collected to support X, by whom, from what sources and how? How are LMI and data processed, analysed and used to identify skills gaps/mismatches and project future skill needs? How is LMI and data disseminated to the various actors and stakeholders in VET system (particularly those in career guidance and counselling)? And how do they use this LMI to inform VET policy and delivery? How effective are these information systems at informing X and/or VET policy and delivery decisions? What further data are needed and why? In your opinion, how well does the information system work? [inform policy, delivery of VET, use in guidance] **Delivery of career guidance and support for VET** (see also section below) **Collaboration** Who are the key stakeholders in X and how do they collaborate? [explore role of collaborators] Is collaboration formal or informal? What is the extent of collaboration? Do you think the stakeholders involved in the management/delivery of X collaborate well? [probe response] How have stakeholders shaped or influenced X? Do others need to be involved in X? [probe answer] **Digitalisation** How is technology used to manage/deliver/disseminate X? Explore whether technology is a key part of X? Is technology used to support the delivery of guidance within X?
Aims, objectives, goals of initiative, activity, programme	What is the overall aim of X?

	[explore link to changing labour market, digitalisation, skills mismatch/gap/obsolescence, improved individual capability/employability/career management skills/well-being]
Provide background information and context	Why was X developed/delivered/initiated? [probe the context of X in terms of shifts for changes in legislation, strategy, labour market change, digitalisation, stakeholder needs, etc.]
How is career counselling and guidance support delivered/provided as part of initiative, activity, programme?	How is career guidance and counselling support provided as part of X? How is career guidance and counselling support delivered [online, face-to-face]? At what stage of the learner journey is support delivered? [i.e., stage can be considered in terms of those: Thinking about education pathway; Considering VET; Engaging in VET; Transitioning from VET] Who delivers this support? Do others collaborate with career guidance and counselling services to provide more holistic support? [holistic support could be linked to well-being, finances etc.]
Target population	Who are the target population for X? Please could you explain. How was this population chosen? [probe whether evidence or data identified them as in need] Possible target population • Those thinking about, considering and engaging in VET • Those transitioning from VET • Those continuing their training • Young people up to the age of… • Adults (unemployed/in-work/returners) • Employers • Career guidance and counselling professionals • Others (please state)
Participants (include information on accessibility and inclusivity of initiative, activity, programme**)**	[if not targeted] What measures are in place to ensure that X is inclusive and accessible? Probe – equity, diversity and inclusion, social justice
Stakeholders involved	Who leads X? Who are the key stakeholders in X? [probe role in X – key player, manager, delivery partner, customer] Do you think other stakeholder needs to be involved? Who? What role do you see them playing in X? ☐ Ministry - education ☐ Ministry - labour/economy/work ☐ Ministry - youth and sport ☐ Ministry - culture ☐ National agencies ☐ Chambers of Economy/Commerce

	☐ Social partners / NGOs ☐ Education institutions ☐ Post-compulsory education institutions ☐ VET and Training institutions/centres ☐ Vocational education and guidance centres ☐ Professional associations ☐ Employers ☐ PES ☐ PrES ☐ Social partners – Communities, youth services ☐ Trade Unions Other (please state)
Description of stakeholder involvement and collaborations	How are X stakeholders involved in X? What are their role?
Resources – funding	How is X resourced? Who pays? What is budget for X? Is this funding sustainable? How has funding impacted/shaped/influenced the design and delivery of X? With current funding, how long will X operate?
Key learning and challenges (scalability; practice, use of technology, stakeholder engagement, stakeholder collaboration, transferability)	What has worked (or is working) well? [probe practice, outcomes What do you think the key challenges are in maintaining X? What have you learnt? What do you consider to be good practice? [probe why] Do you consider X to be scalable? Do you consider X to be transferable to other contexts/areas/countries?
Outcomes	What are the key performance indicators for X? Has X been evaluated? Have outcome data been collected for X? [probe whether publicly available data] Are there any data on engagement, completion rates, satisfaction? [If not get interviewee assessment]
Impact (consider your stakeholders and wider impact)	What do you think the impact of X has been/going to be? [Consider local to wider impact] Do you think practice/policy/… will change as a result of X? How do you think X has impacted stakeholders? Is there a better match between VET system and employer/labour market needs? Are learners utilising skills better developed as part of X? [improved career management skills, employability, transferable skills] What lessons, principles or ideas might be applied from X to other contexts?

Appendix 2: Informed consent form



Informed Consent Form

Project: The role of policy, services and stakeholders in supporting VET systems: innovative practice

Researchers:

Dr Chandrima Roy, cr311@leicester.ac.uk

Dr Sally-Anne Barnes, S.Barnes@leicester.ac.uk (+44) 0116 223 1971

		Please initial box Yes	No
1.	I confirm that I have read and understand the participant information sheet (Version 2 19/03/2025) for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.		
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw up to 1 month after the interview, without giving reason.		
3.	I understand that at all times this research project will comply with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR, 2018) approved by the EU parliament on 14 April 2016 and passing into UK law effective from 25 May 2018 and that if I have any concerns how I contact the University of Leicester to raise these.		
4.	I agree to take part in the above research project.		
5.	I agree to the interview being audio recorded.		
6.	I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications.		
7.	I agree that anonymised information, gathered about me for this research project may be stored in Zenodo open repository funded by the EU for Horizon Europe research outputs.		
8.	I agree that data collected for this research project may be used in future research.		
9.	I wish to receive a copy of the results of this research project, and I agree for my contact details to be retained and used for this purpose.		

Name of Participant _____ Date _____ Signature _____

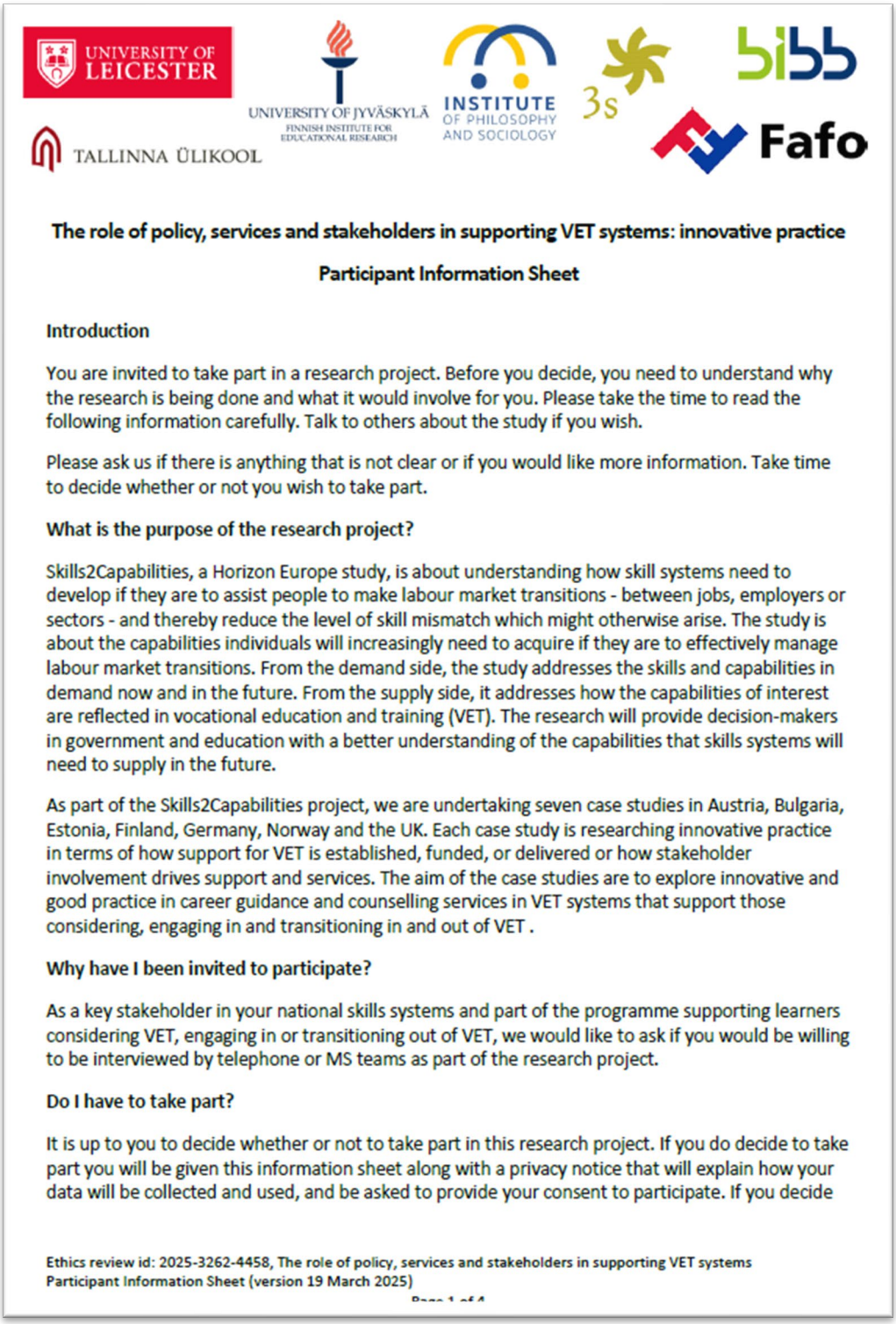
Name of Researcher obtaining informed consent _____ Date _____

Signature

Ethics review id: 2025-3262-4458, The role of policy, services and stakeholders in supporting VET systems

Informed Consent Form (version 19 March 2025) Page 1 of 1

Appendix 3: Participant Information Sheet



The role of policy, services and stakeholders in supporting VET systems: innovative practice

Participant Information Sheet

Introduction

You are invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Talk to others about the study if you wish.

Please ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the purpose of the research project?

Skills2Capabilities, a Horizon Europe study, is about understanding how skill systems need to develop if they are to assist people to make labour market transitions - between jobs, employers or sectors - and thereby reduce the level of skill mismatch which might otherwise arise. The study is about the capabilities individuals will increasingly need to acquire if they are to effectively manage labour market transitions. From the demand side, the study addresses the skills and capabilities in demand now and in the future. From the supply side, it addresses how the capabilities of interest are reflected in vocational education and training (VET). The research will provide decision-makers in government and education with a better understanding of the capabilities that skills systems will need to supply in the future.

As part of the Skills2Capabilities project, we are undertaking seven case studies in Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Norway and the UK. Each case study is researching innovative practice in terms of how support for VET is established, funded, or delivered or how stakeholder involvement drives support and services. The aim of the case studies are to explore innovative and good practice in career guidance and counselling services in VET systems that support those considering, engaging in and transitioning in and out of VET .

Why have I been invited to participate?

As a key stakeholder in your national skills systems and part of the programme supporting learners considering VET, engaging in or transitioning out of VET, we would like to ask if you would be willing to be interviewed by telephone or MS teams as part of the research project.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this research project. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet along with a privacy notice that will explain how your data will be collected and used, and be asked to provide your consent to participate. If you decide

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Participant Information Sheet (version 19 March 2025)

to take part you are still free to withdraw up to one month after the interview and without giving a reason, by contacting the researcher. After this time, all data will be synthesised.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you agree to take part in the research project, we will ask you to complete a consent form and then arrange a convenient time for an interview. The aim of the interview is to gather information on the programme and how it supports those considering, engaging and transitioning from VET, to learn about your experience and to provide an opportunity for insights on your experience of the programme.

The interview would last approximately 45 minutes and can be arranged at a time suitable to you. The interview can be undertaken by telephone or MS Teams. If you agree the interview will be audio recorded to support the interviewee make a transcript and detailed interview summary. The audio recording will be stored or used for other purposes once the transcript has been produced.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no anticipated disadvantages, side effects, risks, and/or discomforts of taking part in this study as the interview focuses solely on your own experiences.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Taking part in this research study could potentially benefit others by providing more robust research on the skills system in your country and an improved understanding of how services to support those considering, engaging and transitioning from VET can be better supported. We hope that any key learning or practice could help those delivering services in other contexts and countries. Once published, we would be happy to share the published report with you which will be later in 2025.

What data will you collect about me?

We will collect your personal contact details and some basic information about your role and professional background.

Will what I say in this research project be kept confidential?

We will not report your name or anything that would make you personally identifiable in any outputs from the research project and all best endeavours will be made to ensure that data in any publications are pseudonymised. All participants will be given an identifier for the purposes of reporting, and any identifying information will be removed to ensure confidentiality. For example, the outputs may describe interview participants in the following way: 'Interviewee 1' or 'Interviewee 2'. Your interview data will be stored safely in a restricted access folder at the national institution undertaking the research and will only be accessible by that research team. Contact

details will not be stored in the same file as your interview data. All data storage procedures are fully compliant with GDPR. Please see the privacy notice below for more details about the personal data we will collect from you and how it will be used.

How will you look after the data you collect about me?

We need to ensure that you understand what will happen to data we collect about you as well as your legal rights. This document is accompanied with a separate Privacy Notice (provided by the researcher) providing further details.

Your normal rights under the Data Protection Act and the General Data Protection Regulation apply. However, we need to manage your records in specific ways for the research project to be reliable. This means that we won't [always] be able to let you see or change the data we hold about you.

You can stop being part of the research project at any time, without giving a reason, but we will keep information about you that we already have and continue to use this for the purposes of the research project as outlined here.

Data generated by the research project must be retained in accordance with the University's Research Code of Practice. You should include a statement that the data generated in the course of the research must be kept securely in paper or electronic form for a period in line with Section 5 of the Research Code of Practice.

An anonymised interview summary will be stored in Zenodo. This is a free trustworthy open repository for EU-funded research. It allows uploading research outputs from Horizon Europe projects, such as Skills2Capabilities.

At all times this research study will comply with the UK General Data Protection Regulations (2018).

What will happen to the results of the research project?

The results of the research project will be published as part of the Skills2Capabilities research outputs. Peer-reviewed articles may also be prepared for publication in an academic journal. If you do not wish for your data to be included in future research publications, please indicate this while completing the consent form or let us know at the time of the interview.

What should I do if I want to take part?

You will be asked to complete an Informed Consent Form and to opt-in to a variety of research options by initialling the Yes or No box. This will confirm you understand how your data will be processed, protected and reviewed for research purposes.

Who is organising and funding the research project?

We are conducting the research project as a member of staff at the University of Leicester School of Business. The research is funded under the Horizon Europe programme.

What if something goes wrong?

In the very unlikely event of you being harmed by taking part in this research project, there are no special compensation arrangements. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action but you may have to pay for it.

Who has reviewed the research project?

This research project has been approved by the University of Leicester Research Ethics Committee, Reference number:

If you have any questions about any aspect of the study, or your participation in it, not answered by this participant information sheet, please contact:

Dr Sally-Anne Barnes, Principal Investigator, University of Leicester School of Business, UK
S.Barnes@leicester.ac.uk Tel. (+44) 0116 223 1971

If you have any concerns or queries about the way in which the research project has been conducted, please contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee on ethics@le.ac.uk.

If you require more GDPR data protection information then you can access this via the University's Information Assurance Services:

Information Assurance Services
University of Leicester
University Road
Leicester LE1 7RH
T: +44 (0)116 229 7945 E: dpo@le.ac W: https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ias

Thank you for taking the time to read this Participant Information Sheet

Appendix 4: Privacy Notice for Research Participants

Privacy Notice for Research Participants

Project: The role of policy, services and stakeholders in supporting VET systems: innovative practice
Researchers: Dr Chandrima Roy, cr311@leicester.ac.uk and Dr Sally-Anne Barnes, S.Barnes@leicester.ac.uk (+44) 0116 223 1971

This Privacy Notice provides information about how the University of Leicester collects and uses your personal information when you take part in this research projects.

Please also refer to the Participant Information Sheet given to you for further details about the research project, what information will be collected about you, and how it will be used.

The University of Leicester will usually be the *Data Controller* of any data that you supply for this research. This means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. This means that the University will make the decisions on how your data is used and for what reasons. The exception to this is joint research projects, if this is applicable you will be informed on the Participant Information Sheet as to the other partner institution(s) who will also have responsibilities for looking after your information. You can access more information on this via the University's Information Assurance Services:

Information Assurance Services
University of Leicester
University Road
Leicester LE1 7RH
T: +44 (0)116 229 7945 E: ias@le.ac.uk W: https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ias

Why do we need your data?

University of Leicester's legal basis for collecting this data is: Processing is necessary for the performance of a task in the public interest such as research.

What type of data will the University of Leicester use?

As part of the research project, the named researcher will undertake desk research and interviews. Interviews will be recorded where permission is granted. The interview will be transcribed and anonymised with an identifier assigned. Interview recordings will be securely deleted once transcribed and kept for no longer than 10 working days after the interview.

Who will the University of Leicester share your data with?

All data will be stored at the University of Leicester and only accessible to the named researchers.

Will the University of Leicester transfer my data outside of the UK?

No data will be shared with project partners. Only completed anonymised case study reports will be shared.

Ethics review id: 2025-3262-4458, The role of policy, services and stakeholders in supporting VET systems
Privacy Notice Version 1.0 (version 19 March 2025)
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What rights do I have regarding my data held by the University of Leicester?

Your normal rights under the Data Protection Act and the General Data Protection Regulation apply. However, we need to manage your records in specific ways for the research project to be reliable. This means that we will not [always] be able to let you see or change the data we hold about you.

You can stop being part of the research project at any time, without giving a reason, but we will keep information about you that we already have and continue to use this for the purposes of the research project as outlined in the Participant Information Sheet.

Are there any consequences of not providing the requested data?

There are no consequences of not providing data for this research. It is purely voluntary.

Will there be any automated decision making using my data?

There will be no use of automated decision making in scope of UK Data Protection and Privacy legislation.

How long will the University of Leicester keep my data?

In line with the law, we will only keep your data for as long as we need to so that we can fulfil our research objectives. We will keep your personal data, such as your name and email address until we have completed all the actions that require us to hold them, for example sending you a copy of the results of the study if you have requested this, and then the data will be destroyed. This will take no longer than 6 months from when the study ends in December 2025. An anonymised interview summary will be stored in Zenodo. This is a free trustworthy open repository for EU-funded research. It allows uploading research outputs from Horizon Europe projects, such as Skills2Capabilities.

Who can I contact if I have concerns?

In the event of any questions about the research project, please contact the researchers in the first instance.

- Dr Chandrima Roy, cr311@leicester.ac.uk
- Dr Sally-Anne Barnes, S.Barnes@leicester.ac.uk (+44) 0116 223 1971

If you have any concerns about the way in which the research project has been conducted, please contact the **Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee at** ethics@leicester.ac.uk. The University of Leicester Data Protection Officer is:

Data Protection Officer
University of Leicester,
University Road, Leicester LE1 7RH
T: 0116 229 7640 E: DPO@le.ac.uk

For further details about information security, please contact the Information Assurance Services team.

Ethics review id: 2025-3262-4458, The role of policy, services and stakeholders in supporting VET systems
Privacy Notice Version 1.0 (version 19 March 2025)

This report was authored for Skills2Capabilities by Dr Sally-Anne Barnes and Dr Chandrima Roy (University of Leicester, UK) Professor Jaana Kettunen (University of Jyväskylä, Finland) and Hanna Pullinen (University of Jyväskylä, Finland). This paper is a deliverable from the work package entitled 'The role of policy, services and stakeholders in supporting VET systems: innovative practice' led by the Finnish Institute for Educational Research at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

This report represents the views of the authors based on the available research. It is not intended to represent the views of all Skills2Capabilities affiliates.

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