

# Statement on Vocational Education and Training

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# 1. Definitions

As different terms are used for different aspects of VET in different countries/regions, it is necessary to define some key terms used in this statement.

<b>Vocational Education and Training (VET)</b>	"learning which aims to acquire knowledge, know-how, information, values, skills and competences – either job-specific or transversal – required in specific occupations or more broadly on the labor market", according to the <a href="#">European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP)</a> . It is a broad category of education, involving education at both the secondary or tertiary levels, from levels 3-8 in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).
<b>Higher Vocational Education and Training (H-VET)</b>	VET at the tertiary level, mostly at EQF levels 5 and 6, but in some systems also at EQF levels 7 and 8. It focuses on practical skills and experience-based knowledge, while also integrating theoretical foundations and applied research.
<b>Initial Vocational Education and Training (I-VET)</b>	Defined by <a href="#">CEDEFOP</a> as "learning carried out in the initial VET system – usually before entering working life – to acquire skills and competences leading to a specific occupation or job." It includes education at

	upper secondary level and post-secondary level.
<b>Continuing Vocational Education and Training (C-VET) and Further Vocational Education and Training (F-VET)</b>	<p>C-VET is <a href="#">defined</a> as learning carried out after initial education or training – or after entry into working life – which aims to improve or update knowledge, know-how and skills (upskilling); acquire new skills for a career move (retraining / reskilling); and support professional development.</p> <p>In some areas F-VET is used for any VET after secondary education, while C-VET is VET after finishing one's initial education. However, they are often used interchangeably in practice.</p>
<b>Dual Education</b>	Dual education, or the dual model, combines apprenticeships or internships in a company with education at an educational institution.

## 2. Introduction

Vocational Education and Training (VET) includes various forms of education and training, but is characterized by practical and skill-oriented learning, and strong links to the labor market. It is provided, inter alia, by vocational schools, technical colleges, secondary schools, higher education institutions and in work-based programs, and the systems tend to differ more between countries/regions than the higher education systems do. This statement will

mainly focus on higher vocational education and training (H-VET), as these are the students represented in ESU.

VET plays a crucial role in the European education system in equipping students with practical skills and knowledge. ESU sees higher education (HE) and H-VET as complementary parts in an educational system which aims to equip students with new skills and knowledge, help students become democratic citizens of our society; and contribute to upwards social mobility. Through focusing on different forms of knowledge from different sources, and educating students through different methods, the two forms of education complement each other. ESU opposes the notion that VET is inherently “less than” HE, and wants to emphasize the contribution that both systems make to our societies. Though they are different, it should also be possible for students to move between the two systems, ensuring cross mobility between H-VET and HE. A strong European education system needs to include both a strong and diverse higher education system, and a well developed VET-sector.

According to CEDEFOP’s [Skills forecast](#), 40% of the required skills by 2030 are qualifications acquired on the higher education or professional level. Combined with the labor mismatch and skill gaps presented in the [Draghi report](#), the need for skilled labor will increase across Europe in the years to come, both in order to provide high quality welfare services to citizens, and to ensure economic growth and adaptability. To keep up with the digital and green transitions, the current workforce needs to be upskilled or reskilled so that they can keep up with the job market trends. VET will be especially important in this regard, as it is often more integrated in local and rural communities, making education accessible to and giving opportunities of up- and reskilling to rural people and companies.

Students in VET and HE face many similar challenges, including lack of financial support, unequal access to education, unsatisfactory student involvement in decision making, to name a few. In addition, VET-students also face specific challenges, owing to the distinctive characteristics of the VET-system. These include access to mobility opportunities, access to internships, quality assurance of VET, recognition between systems, financing of VET institutions, starker gender disparities, and access to qualified educators, and more. In national systems where HEI deliver H-VET programmes (EQF 5 to 8), it is essential to ensure that these institutions and their students benefit fully from all tools and policies promoting VET recognition, mobility, and funding.

In the spring of 2025, the EU published the union of skills, outlining its plan to improve high quality education, training, and lifelong learning in the 2024-2029 mandate. It contains several key initiatives for the development of the European VET sector, including creating a European Strategy for VET, developing a European framework for recognition of learning periods abroad, and strengthening several existing programs and initiatives. In the implementation of the union of skills, it is crucial that students and other stakeholders are involved as equal partners, that sufficient funding is provided for both higher education and VET, and that new tools build on existing initiatives, developing them rather than creating parallel structures. The various strategies and tools also need to allow for a large degree of national adaptation, as the VET sectors are very different between countries.

The Copenhagen process was launched in 2002, aiming to improve the overall performance, quality and attractiveness of VET in Europe. Through mutual recognition of qualifications, enhanced cooperation, and joint efforts to increase the quality of VET, it was supposed to support the development of the

European VET sector and remove barriers for mobility. However, implementation has been slow, engagement from member states has been low, and the process has not led to the vitalization of the VET sector that was initially intended. Instead of maintaining parallel solutions for VET and HE through the Copenhagen process, ESU believes that many Bologna process tools such as ECTS should be implemented in the VET sector, as this step is essential for facilitating cross mobility.

### **3. Quality and quality assurance**

Ensuring high-quality education in VET is essential for enhancing its credibility, attractiveness, and effectiveness in preparing students for the labor market and active citizenship, as well as for providing a meaningful, student-centered learning experience.. However, the quality of VET is challenged by the shortage of qualified teachers, fragmented quality assurance (QA) mechanisms, and difficulties in fostering student mobility and trust across different systems. To address these issues, a comprehensive and student-centered approach to quality and QA in VET is necessary, aligned with the ESUs policy principles on quality education.

#### **a. Strengthening the VET Teaching Workforce**

One of the most pressing challenges in VET is the recruitment and retention of qualified teaching staff. Many professionals opt to stay in their respective industries due to more attractive salaries and working conditions, leading to a

shortage of educators with up-to-date industry expertise. To enhance the attractiveness of teaching in VET, policies should focus on:

- Offering structured professional development opportunities, including pedagogical training and career advancement pathways
- Allowing and promoting hybrid teaching models that allow professionals to combine teaching with industry work while maintaining high educational standards
- Ensuring stable and secure employment conditions to retain committed educators and maintain curriculum continuity
- The attractiveness of teaching in VET needs to be specifically addressed in the EU Teachers and Trainers Agenda

## **b. Interlinkages between educational institutions and employers in dual systems**

Much of the strength of VET is due to its close connection with real-world situations in apprenticeships, traineeships and internships, and the application of different teaching methods in the educational institution and in the workplace. This allows the students to explore connections between theoretical knowledge and practical application. However, apprentices and interns are too often seen as free labor rather than students in education, and VET programs thus fail to live up to the claim of effectively combining theoretical and practical education. This can be solved by:

- Close cooperation between educational institutions and employers regarding the content and learning outcomes of apprenticeships and internships
- Collective agreements and company agreements with various stakeholders outlining clear expectations towards all parts involved in the dual education

### **c. Ensuring Robust and Transparent Quality Assurance Mechanisms**

A fragmented approach to quality assurance and the nonsuccess of the Copenhagen Process has led, in VET, to varying levels of trust in mobility between institutions and countries. To foster consistency and transparency, a shared EU-wide quality assurance framework should be promoted, drawing from best practices in higher education quality assurance. Such a framework should:

- Involve students as key stakeholders in quality assurance
- Establish common accreditation and assessment standards to facilitate cross-border recognition of qualifications and mobility
- Enhance trust between institutions by fostering cooperation and the exchange of best practices in quality assurance across the EU
- Include a European-wide lifelong learning approach to enable a holistic recognition system of skills, prior learning and formal qualifications across sectors for all learners and workers, based on existing initiatives.



- Develop a common language and understanding of learning outcomes based on the Bologna tools, to ensure alignment of obtained credentials and certifications across all sectors of learning.

However, this should be carefully balanced with the strong connection VET has to professional practices and its practical, hands-on nature. VET programs are deeply rooted in meeting the specific needs of industries and the workforce, often requiring flexibility and adaptability to respond to evolving labor market demands. Any quality assurance framework must respect this practical focus, ensuring that standards are not overly bureaucratic but instead support the real-world applicability and relevance of VET qualifications.

#### **d. Student Involvement in Quality Assurance**

In line with ESU's commitment to student-centered learning and democratic participation in education governance, students must play an active role in shaping VET quality assurance policies. This can be achieved by:

- Periodically collecting and embedding student feedback and encouraging student participation in quality reviews at the institutional, national, and European levels
- Encouraging student-led quality reviews to provide insights into the learning experience and institutional quality from a learner's perspective
- Strengthening mechanisms that ensure student representation in governance structures related to VET policy and quality assurance

- Actively involving VET students in the drafting and revision of national quality assurance policies to ensure these frameworks are adapted to the specific needs of VET learners

## **e. Improving Active Citizenship Education and Professionalization of VET Teachers**

Beyond technical and vocational skills, VET must also contribute to the development of active and responsible citizens. Citizenship education should be integrated into VET curricula to foster democratic values, critical thinking, and social responsibility. Integrating the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) or similar approaches, as well as community-based and service-learning into VET curricula can significantly enhance citizenship education by embedding democratic competences across various educational activities. This approach ensures that learners are prepared not only for the labor market but also for active participation as citizens in culturally diverse democratic societies. To achieve this:

- VET curricula should incorporate the RFCDC's 20 competences or similar approaches, organized into values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding, as transversal themes across all education and training activities.
- VET institutions and teacher training institutions should include training on pedagogical methodologies, inclusive education, and student-centered learning into their curricula.

- Strengthen community-based learning and service-learning within VET curricula.

High-quality VET requires a well-supported and -trained teaching workforce, harmonized quality assurance mechanisms, and active student involvement. By addressing the structural challenges in teacher recruitment, ensuring robust and transparent QA systems, and embedding citizenship education, VET can enhance its role in providing students with the skills and knowledge necessary for both professional success and active participation in society. A unified European approach to VET quality assurance, with student engagement at its core, is essential to strengthening trust, mobility, and educational excellence in the sector.

## 4. Mobility

In 2021, only [2.1%](#) of VET learners benefited from learning mobility abroad. We are far behind the EU's objective of [25%](#) for Higher Education and 15% for VET and the EHEA objectives of [20%](#) mobility. Tackling barriers to access mobility is urgent.

### a. Recognizing learning outcomes

One of the barriers to access mobility is the recognition of learning outcomes gained during mobility either through classes or through internships. The difficulties in recognizing learning outcomes have been an ongoing problem for several years, creating obstacles for students to go on mobility. The EU has announced the creation of a common framework by 2027 for the automatic

recognition of study qualifications and learning periods abroad in school, VET and Higher Education. ESU welcomes this initiative, but in addition countries and Higher Education institutions need to properly implement the Bologna commitments to ensure proper comparability and increase trust between educational systems to facilitate VET mobility. Therefore ESU asks for:

- A strong common framework for the automatic recognition of study qualifications and learning periods abroad in school, VET and Higher Education based on the work of the Council of Europe and supporting Bologna tools.
- Bologna process members countries to ensure swift implementation of existing and future Bologna process tools in order to create an adequate context for a swift facilitation of flexible learning pathways and enhancement of recognition of learning outcomes between VET and HE.

## **b. Financing of mobility**

Another problem for accessing mobility is related to the financing of mobility. In ESU's last publication of Bologna with Student Eyes 89% of ESU's members reported that finances were the number one reason why students didn't partake in student mobility. ESU has been advocating for several years that mobility grants should be increased to reflect the real costs of mobility. In addition to financing it is also important to guarantee equal access to local grants, support services and others when a student arrives in a new city. The first step to make mobility more accessible to VET students should be:

- Basing the amount of Erasmus+ scholarships on the actual cost of living, while also taking into account the specific additional expenses often faced by VET learners.
- Encourage EU member states to use EU funding like the cohesion funds to support student mobility.
- At least a five-fold increase in the Erasmus+ budget for the 2028-2034 program period.

### **c. Flexibility and accessibility**

VET programs are often conducted with a dual model, having classes and work-based learning in parallel. This can make mobility more challenging. To offer those students the opportunity to go on mobility, more flexibility is needed from educational institutions but also from companies. Blended intensive programs (BIPs) can be an alternative for students who are unable to go on a long-term mobility program. However, they should not be regarded as equivalent to long-term mobilities.

International collaboration between vocational institutions should be further encouraged. Streamlining administrative processes, including inter-institution contracts and securing adequate budgets, will institutionalize student mobility and create a more accessible platform for cross-institutional cooperation. Initiatives like [Erasmus Without Paper](#) would support the simplification of administrative processes, and reduce administrative burden for students.

Additionally the development of comprehensive agreements between institutions is vital for fostering student mobility. These agreements should cover

credit transfer and quality assurance to ensure that learning outcomes are mutually recognized. This will enable seamless transitions between vocational institutions, contributing to the equal position of vocational students promoting VET as an attractive learning pathway.

In summary ESU advocates for:

- Reducing the administrative burden on students to access mobility through initiatives like Erasmus Without Paper.
- Exploring Blended Intensive Programs in VET as an alternative to offer more flexible and shorter mobility for students who cannot access long-term mobilities.
- flexible and shorter mobility for students who can't move for a long period.
- In the national systems where HEIs offer H-VET programs, ensure full integration and recognition of those institutions as central actors in the development and implementation of European H-VET strategies.

#### **d. Centers of Vocational Excellence**

The Centers of Vocational Excellence in the EU are a valuable instrument in ensuring connections and collaboration between vocational and higher education institutions and the industry, with mutual benefits. In addition these partnerships are an important vessel in creating mobility opportunities, from which students could benefit more than is currently the case. In order to maximize these mobility opportunities the Centers of Vocational Excellence

should be closely aligned with other Erasmus+ mobility instruments to ensure that students too can profit from these partnerships. ESU proposes:

- To ensure that more projects created in the Centers of Vocational Excellence have a student mobility component that is aligned with other Erasmus+ mobility instruments.
- That a European VET diploma/label like the European Degree/label is implemented only if it has a concrete added value.

## 5. Cross mobility between VET and HE

Degree and credit mobility between Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE) at the same EQF level is hindered by systemic differences, inconsistent recognition of qualifications, and misalignment between credit systems. While there are EQF Level 5, 6 and 7 study programs delivered by HEIs in some countries and non-HEIs in other countries, this divergence creates barriers for students transitioning between the two pathways. To ensure a seamless and equitable learning experience, measures must be taken to enhance recognition, provide adequate preparation, and align credit transfer mechanisms.

### a. Systemic Differences and Recognition of Qualifications

The classification of H-VET programmes on EQF Level 5, 6 and 7 varies across Europe, making it difficult for students to partake in mobility freely between VET

and HE. Automatic recognition of VET qualifications for HE admission is essential to eliminating these barriers. A shared European framework for recognizing learning outcomes and competencies at this level will foster trust between institutions and ensure that qualifications are transferable across national systems. This can be achieved by:

- Establishing automatic recognition of VET qualifications to facilitate access to HE
- Allowing VET students, if the study programs are compatible and comparable, to partake in mobility on the same EQF levels even if the partner country classifies that as Higher Education and vice-versa

## **b. Further development of ECVET and alignment with ECTS enabling Credit Transfer**

A major obstacle to mobility between VET and HE is the incompatibility between the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Reestablishing a European Credit System for Vocational and Educational Training (ECVET) would ensure comparability between ECVET and ECTS. The structures need to be aligned to enable the smooth transfer of credits. Collaboration between VET and HE institutions is necessary to develop a standardized approach for credit equivalencies and learning outcome mapping. Such an approach should:

- Reestablish ECVET as an independent structure to allow for seamless credit transfer, ensuring that students' learning outcomes are recognised when transitioning between the two sectors



- Promote institutional cooperation to harmonize learning outcomes and build trust across education sectors

### **c. Access to higher education**

Admission to higher education based on a Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualification is an important pathway that broadens access for learners with diverse educational and professional backgrounds. To facilitate this, structured entry routes for VET graduates are needed through direct admission into bachelor's programs. In some cases, additional bridging courses may be required to ensure academic readiness. Enabling admission of learners with VET qualifications also enhances accessibility by providing alternative pathways for learners with diverse backgrounds and career aspirations. This alignment not only facilitates smoother transitions between VET and higher education but also promotes lifelong learning, reduces duplication of effort, and enhances workforce readiness by integrating practical, industry-relevant skills with academic knowledge. To expand these pathways, HEIs should:

- Create structured entry routes to Bachelor's programs based on VET qualifications
- Use Recognition of Prior Learning to facilitate admissions of learners with VET backgrounds
- Remove bureaucratic obstacles that prevent comparable and compatible VET learning outcomes from counting towards HE degrees
- Develop bridging courses that prepare learners with VET backgrounds for the academic requirements of HE

By implementing these measures, European education systems can support flexible learning pathways, enabling students to transition between VET and HE without unnecessary obstacles and fostering a culture of lifelong learning.

## **6. Social dimensions of VET**

VET systems have long been positioned as a more accessible alternative to academic pathways, yet despite this narrative VET pathways often reflect – and reproduce – social inequalities: VET students often face great financial burdens, lower access to support services, and weaker legal protections, and many students encounter structural barriers that are often overlooked in educational policy. The social dimension of VET must therefore go beyond basic access and focus on creating systems which are structurally inclusive, rights-based and designed to remove barriers – not just manage them.

### **a. Hidden Costs and Economic Barriers**

VET is often promoted as an accessible alternative to higher education – however, this perception does not reflect the reality faced by many learners.. VET students usually face more costs than students in other educational programs. Passed tuition fees, VET students often have substantial hidden costs when it comes to equipment, material, transport, and the financial strain of underpaid or unpaid training periods. In dual systems, students are often required to relocate, commute long distances, or fund placement out of pocket without adequate support. These conditions reproduce socio economic

exclusion and prevent students from fully participating in VET, disproportionately affecting students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, students with care responsibilities and students from marginalized groups. To counter this we need:

- All mandatory internships and in-company training in H-VET programmes should be fairly compensated and recognized with academic credit.
- Where these internships or in-company training are a graduation requirement, support schemes must ensure equity for all students, especially in peripheral regions.
- Public funding schemes to cover the costs of compulsory materials and equipment
- VET students to have cost-free access to compulsory materials and equipment
- VET student to have access to free or covered transport, regardless of their age
- Expansion of grant-based financial aid systems to cover living costs as well as tuition

## **b. Housing and Short-Term Relocation**

The structure of many VET programs requires students to relocate—often on short notice and for limited periods—due to in-company training or regional placement requirements. This flexibility in the learning pathway is not matched by equal flexibility in student support systems. ESU reaffirms its position that adequate housing is a right, not a privilege. Support schemes must be established to assist students in finding affordable short-term housing and

cover relocation-related expenses. Such support should be integrated into national and institutional funding frameworks, as outlined in ESU's Statement on the Social Dimension of Higher Education. This requires:

- Recognition of housing as a social right linked to education
- Publicly funded short-term housing infrastructure for mobile students
- Relocation grants and regional housing coordination

### **c. Student Support Services**

VET students frequently lack access to the same range of support services that are usually standard in higher education. Services such as psychological counselling, independent legal aid, and institutional ombudspersons are essential to protect students' rights and well-being, particularly during in-company training or work placements. In line with ESU's Quality Education Policy Paper, student support must be universally accessible, publicly funded, and learner-centered. Institutions and training providers must ensure that support structures are not only available but actively promoted and tailored to the specific needs of VET learners. This requires:

- Expanding student services to all educational settings
- Developing mobile, multilingual, and regionally accessible support structures
- Establishing student-run peer support spaces and VET-focused welfare structures

## **d. Reduce gender disparities and structural exclusion**

According to [CEDEFOP](#), the gender divide is much more extreme in vocational education than general education in almost all European countries. Women are typically underrepresented in STEM, construction and agriculture, while men are underrepresented in sectors like health, welfare, and the teaching profession. This gender divide is a result of persistent gender stereotypes, and a lack of visible role models in traditionally gendered occupations.

At the same time, VET systems must recognize the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination. Disadvantaged students are disproportionately affected by unequal treatment, microaggressions, accessibility barriers, and institutional neglect. In order to build an inclusive VET system, we need:

- The European Strategy for VET to address gender disparities, with concrete measures to reduce them
- A strong gender inclusion component in the EU STEM Education Strategic Plan
- To reduce the gender gap in basic skills in primary and secondary education
- Legal guarantees of non-discrimination and equal access, including protections based on gender identity, disability, residence status, etc.
- Tailored support for students with care responsibilities, including flexible schedules and access to childcare
- Flexible and student-centered learning environments with a focus on accessibility, diversity and inclusivity

## 7. Financing and governance

Good governance and sustainable financing of VET institutions is fundamental for them to be able to deliver quality education. Governance structures need to actively encourage students and other stakeholders to participate in decision making, and financing needs to be long-term enough to ensure predictability, but also flexible enough to ensure adaptability to the changing needs of the workforce.

With the Union of Skills and the wish of the commission to create an “EU invest in Talent Platform” under the InvestEU fund and the boosting of transnational university partnerships. Those partnerships must safeguard academic freedom and protect institutions from commodification.

### a. Public Responsibility and Sustainable Financing

Ensuring inclusive and high-quality vocational education and training requires strong and sustainable public investment. VET institutions must be financed in a way that supports the quality of teaching, enables decent working conditions for staff, and guarantees equitable access for all learners regardless of socioeconomic background. Collective agreements and company agreements between educational institutions, employers and other stakeholders can be used as a tool to secure sustainable funding and good working conditions during the in-company part of the curricula. ESU reaffirms its commitment to the principle that education is a public good. This requires:

- Long-term, stable and needs-based public funding for VET institutions
- Transparent governance and public interest criteria for all transnational education partnerships
- Countries to develop funding structures for HE and VET that do not disincentivize investments in VET by public institutions
- Tools that incentivize and coordinate private investment in training, upskilling and reskilling while protecting academic freedom and limiting commodification.

## **b. Student participation in decision making**

Active student participation and representation are vital for effective governance in all education institutions. Unfortunately, VET institutions often lack proper student involvement in their decision making organs, and VET students often have weak legal protection of their rights to be represented. It is essential that VET students get to be an active part in the development of their institutions and sectors, especially in a period where big changes will be happening in the sector. This can be achieved by:

- Ensuring student representation based on democratic electoral principles in VET institutions
- Protecting VET students' right to representation in decision making by law

### **c. Legal Protection of VET Students**

Subjecting VET students to private law during in-company training or apprenticeships creates a dual status that undermines their protections as learners. It places students in a legal grey zone where they are treated as workers without full labour rights, and as learners without full access to student rights. This legal ambiguity reinforces inequality and weakens the public responsibility for education. Therefore, we need:

- All VET students to be recognized as students under public education law instead of being subjected to private contracts
- A legal harmonization, at national level, between education and labor law, ensuring that rights are not lost when students cross into the workplace

### **d. Mandatory Internships**

In-company training and internships are central to many VET programs, but too often they are unpaid or insufficiently compensated. This leads to unequal access to training opportunities, disproportionately affecting students without the financial safety net to absorb lost income. As also stated in ESU's Policy Paper on Internships, all internships must be fairly compensated and subject to regulation, including quality standards and labor protections. Unpaid work cannot be a precondition for graduation. Compensation must reflect both the labor contribution of the student and the right to study without economic exploitation. In order to remedy this injustice, we need:

- Mandatory and fair compensation for internships



- Clear regulatory standards for training quality and safety, legal protections and labor rights
- Ensure clear learning outcomes proper mentoring, supervision and inclusion in quality assurance frameworks for traineeships.
- Recognition of internships for credits

## 8. Reference documents

- [Resolution on Ensuring quality internships, traineeships and apprenticeships in Europe](#)
- [Position on the European Degree \(label\)](#)
- [Policy Paper on Social Dimension](#)
- [Policy Paper on Internationalization and Mobility](#)
- [Policy Paper on Quality of Higher Education](#)
- [Policy Paper on Fundamental Values and Solidarity](#)
- [Bologna With Students Eyes 2024](#)