

## INCLUSIVE POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN THE FIELD OF CONTINUING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

**Denitsa Dimitrova<sup>1</sup>, Ivanka Yankova<sup>2</sup>, & Kamelia Nusheva<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Chief. Assist. Prof. Dr.//University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (Bulgaria)*

<sup>2</sup>*Prof. DSc//University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (Bulgaria)*

### Abstract

This paper aims to present various and good Bulgarian and international inclusive policies and practices in the field of continuing vocational education and training. Due to the financial crisis, EU policy has focused on investing in high-quality vocational education and training to promote smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and tackle high levels of youth unemployment, focusing in particular on promoting work-based learning place, ensuring quality, improving access to vocational education and training, strengthening key skills and professional development of teachers in the field of vocational education and training. The future of vocational education and training (VET) after 2020 will be based on a vision of VET policy promoting inclusion and equal opportunities and contributing to sustainability, social justice and prosperity for all. VET programs should be inclusive and accessible to vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities, people without skills or qualifications, people from minorities, people with a migrant background and people who have fewer opportunities because of their socio-economic background or area, in which they live. Targeted measures and flexible forms of learning can help prevent early leaving education and training and support the transition from school to work. This paper argues that the new society based on knowledge and digital technologies has the potential to provide access for all citizens to the advantages and benefits it creates. By utilizing methods of bibliographic research, analysis, and synthesis to explore publications on inclusive policies and practices in continuing vocational education and training, and drawing upon the findings, recommendations were developed to expand inclusive opportunities within this field. This paper was developed within the framework of a scientific research project “A model for evaluating the effectiveness and quality of inclusive education, training and lifelong learning” with contract № KII-06-H80/1, funded by National science fund of Bulgaria.

**Keywords:** *Inclusive education, continuing education, vocational education and training, policies and practices.*

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### 1. Introduction

Continuing Vocational Education and Training (VET) plays a key role in developing the skills and competencies of the workforce in today's world. However, to be effective, it must be accessible to all, including the differently abled, minorities and other vulnerable groups. In this context, inclusive policies and practices are central to ensuring equal access and equal opportunities for all actors.

### 2. Overview

In the 21st century, people are becoming increasingly aware of the ideas of humanism that underpin modern society. These ideas imply discovering and realizing the potential of each person, including the one with special needs. Creating equal opportunities and an accessible education environment, as well as successful integration into the social environment, is of paramount importance to these citizens (Eftimova, 2018).

One of the greatest problems of the 21st Century not only in our country, but also around the world, regardless of the strategies adopted and long-term policies is the accessibility and the inclusion. Legislative and regulatory changes as well as changes in public attitudes are very slow. Apart from legislative changes, it is important to work on a daily basis in a real environment to achieve sustainable results. As an element of the introduction of a new paradigm for humans, reconsideration at all levels is

required. One of them is education, the quality of education and the opportunities it provides for all. (Eftimova, 2020)

"Inclusive education" is a process of ensuring that all learners with special needs have equal opportunities to receive an effective and quality education. This is possible by applying new interactive additional aids in the learning process.

Inclusive education aims to make the educational process more accessible to persons diagnosed with physical, mental or emotional disorders. Persons who dropped out prematurely from the educational system, as well as the unemployed, can also be considered unaffected in the problematic of the research question. One of the key problems is that the standard training process is significantly more difficult and incomprehensible for the above individuals. This is where the role of inclusive education comes in, helping to adapt the learning content to be easier for learners to grasp.

Unfortunately, in most cases it is taught in the same way. How are those learners who are struggling and trying to catch up on their own expected to continue? For them, the standard training process is much more complicated and extremely difficult. These trainees do not lack desire, they make an extraordinary effort, but they do not always succeed. Inclusive education gives all learners a chance to know, to be able to, and to be educated.

In recent years, inclusive education has been considered for the stages of primary and secondary education, but the topic is poorly represented when we talk about the field of higher education, as well as continuing professional education.

### **3. Continuing vocational education and training (CVET) – flexible, inclusive and accessible**

One of the significant issues for the development of education is the approaches to overcoming the crisis phenomena as a result of the processes of globalization (Buzhashka et al., 2019) Inclusive policies and practices in Continuing Vocational Education and Training (CVET) include various strategies and measures to ensure the accessibility, support and successful participation of all learners. These policies may include adaptive learning, personalized approaches, support for learners with different needs, financial support for access and other tools to promote inclusion. Compared to formal education, VET assumes more flexible forms in terms of the forms of training, adaptation of the learning content and the application of more interactive forms to support the educational process.

#### **3.1. Key factors for accessible and quality CVET**

According to the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education the key factors are the follow:

- **Legal framework.** At the national and international level, a robust legal framework governing inclusive education within secondary and upper-secondary education domains is firmly established, ensuring that schools receive comprehensive support mechanisms. This support encompasses various provisions such as additional funding, optimized staff-to-learner ratios, dedicated support personnel, interdisciplinary teams, customized educational materials, and resources aimed at facilitating the adoption of learner-centered pedagogical approaches. Moreover, resources are allocated to enhance organizational adaptability, enabling institutions to effectively accommodate diverse trainee's populations. Furthermore, a legal framework is in place that empowers vocational education and training (VET) institutions to offer apprenticeships at varying levels, each with tailored curricula leading to distinct qualification levels. Policy flexibility is emphasized, granting VET institutions the autonomy to offer diverse VET programs, implement varied curricula, and confer different qualifications, all tailored to the specific needs of individual learners.
- **Leadership.** The leadership demonstrated by the director of the educational institution is not only effective but also characterized by its distributive nature, garnering appreciation and respect from all stakeholders involved.
- **Motivation and commitment.** The principal, teaching staff, and all other members of the staff exhibit exceptional levels of motivation, diligence, dedication, and a willingness to openly express their enthusiasm. Within the educational institution, there pervades an authentic atmosphere characterized by a profound sense of commitment, care, and inclusivity, coupled with a resolutely positive attitude that fosters equal opportunities for all. The collective team ethos within the institution is grounded in a steadfast belief in the abilities of the learners, embracing a mindset that perceives opportunities rather than challenges.

- **High qualifications.** When it comes to delivering affordable and high-quality training, the pivotal components encompass educators, support staff, and auxiliary personnel who are highly skilled and proficient. These individuals possess a spectrum of qualifications, ranging from official university degrees to professional certifications, or they may bring extensive practical expertise gained through long-term immersion in the relevant field.
- **Further training and educational opportunities.** Comprehensive in-service or further training opportunities are extended to all educational and support staff, aimed at upholding and enhancing the quality of education provided. Educational staff are furnished with ample support mechanisms to ensure the consistent implementation and preservation of a learner-centered approach, thereby fostering an environment conducive to personalized and effective learning experiences for all students.
- **Partnership, co-operation and networking structures.** Comprehensive partnerships are forged, uniting all stakeholders and services, with meticulous attention to formalizing and coordinating these alliances. This entails the establishment of robust cooperation frameworks with local enterprises, facilitating practical training opportunities and potential employment post-graduation. Moreover, fostering collaboration between vocational education and training (VET) institutions and the trainees is prioritized, underpinned by a foundation of robust, formalized cooperation and ongoing dialogue, ensuring that they are regarded as equal partners in the educational journey.
- **Multi-disciplinarity.** Comprehensive multi-disciplinary teams are formed, comprising all professionals engaged in vocational education and training (VET), each with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. These teams operate under a collaborative framework, fostering a cohesive teamwork approach and demonstrating a high level of cooperation with other relevant services.
- **Suitable ratios/small classes.** Thanks to small class size of the groups, an optimal lecturer-learner ratio is maintained, ensuring that each trainee receives personalized attention and support. Additionally, coordinated at the school level, there are appropriate support staff-learner ratios, enabling the provision of a comprehensive range of support services tailored to the diverse needs of the learners.
- **Assessment.** Before embarking on their vocational education and training (VET) journey, learners engage in comprehensive assessment schemes. This proactive approach ensures the meticulous selection of the most suitable VET programs, aligning closely with the individual abilities, preferences, and aspirations of the learners.
- **Learner-centred approaches.** Embracing a learner-centered approach, pedagogical methods, materials, curricula, assessment techniques, and objectives are all tailored to meet the unique needs of each individual. This approach places a primary emphasis on harnessing the capabilities of the learners, ensuring that educational practices are finely tuned to maximize their potential for growth and success.
- **Individual plans.** Tailored individual education, learning, training, and transition plans are meticulously crafted and put into action, paving the way for the creation and execution of personalized curricula designed to meet the unique needs and goals of each participant.
- **Pathways.** Various avenues exist for learners to enhance their qualifications or grades, transition to alternative programs, explore different career paths, and attain academic and/or professional certifications. These options afford learners the flexibility and autonomy to pursue diverse educational and career trajectories that align with their evolving aspirations and goals.
- **Flexibility.** The vocational education and training (VET) settings exhibit a high degree of flexibility, with structures and durations of VET programs being readily adaptable to meet the evolving needs of learners. This flexibility may manifest in various forms, such as extending the duration of courses or providing longer internships within preparatory classes. Additionally, VET courses themselves are designed with flexibility in mind, allowing learners the opportunity to commence their educational journey at a lower-level program and seamlessly progress to higher-level programs, whether before or after graduation.
- **Certificates.** Certificates and portfolios are meticulously maintained to track learners' skills, achievements, and the support they necessitate within the workplace. These records serve as invaluable repositories of information, facilitating ongoing assessment, guidance, and tailored assistance to optimize learners' performance and success in their professional endeavors.
- **Quality assurance.** Stakeholders exhibit unwavering commitment to quality assurance and improvement strategies within the vocational education and training (VET) sector. Programs are meticulously implemented and certified to elevate VET standards, with a dedicated focus on continuously enhancing learners' readiness for the dynamic demands of the labor market.

Through these concerted efforts, stakeholders strive to ensure the sustained relevance, effectiveness, and excellence of VET offerings, thereby facilitating the seamless transition of learners into successful and fulfilling careers.

- **Dropout reduction strategy.** The education institutions undertake the development and implementation of effective educational measures aimed at preventing or mitigating dropout rates while concurrently exploring innovative educational alternatives tailored to re-engage disengaged learners. Through these proactive strategies, the educational institution endeavors to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment conducive to the sustained academic and personal development of all learners.
- **Matching.** The educational institution demonstrates proficiency in aligning with the skills demanded by the labor market while also effectively addressing the skills possessed by learners. Teachers and trainers exhibit adaptability in modifying their pedagogical approaches to meet the evolving needs of employers. Additionally, vocational education and training (VET) programs undergo regular and comprehensive reviews, both internally and externally, to ensure their alignment with current and anticipated skills requirements. Through these systematic evaluations and adjustments, the institution remains agile and responsive, equipping learners with the relevant competencies needed to thrive in today's dynamic workforce landscape.
- **Support in transition.** Career counselors or officers play a pivotal role in informing and guiding learners about potential employment opportunities. They facilitate and actively support learners in establishing contacts with employers, providing invaluable assistance in job-seeking endeavors. Additionally, these professionals offer comprehensive support throughout the job application and recruitment process, ensuring that learners are equipped with the necessary resources and guidance to pursue rewarding career paths effectively.
- **Availability of staff and resources.** Staff members, including job coaches, career counselors, and mentors, are consistently accessible throughout the transition into the workforce and throughout the duration of employment. Permanent availability of resources and support services ensures continuous assistance and guidance for individuals navigating the complexities of employment. Formal job coaching programs, comprehensive career guidance services, and ongoing support initiatives, including after-care provisions and employer preparation, remain readily accessible to facilitate smooth transitions and sustained success in the workplace.
- **Follow-up.** Highly skilled and proficient staff members offer continuous follow-up support activities tailored to the specific requirements of both employers and young graduates, ensuring the retention of learners' employment within companies for as long as necessary. This ongoing support is designed to address evolving needs and challenges, fostering a conducive environment for professional growth and long-term career sustainability among graduates.

### 3.2. Recommendations for future actions

Coordinated actions and strategies are needed to increase the effectiveness of inclusive policies and practices in Continuing Vocational Education and Training (VET). What are our recommendations?

- Improving information support and guidelines for inclusive practices.
- Integration of inclusive methods and technologies in the educational process.
- Increasing financial support for learners from vulnerable groups.
- Development of training programs for the training of trainers.
- Creation of measures and mechanisms for continuous qualification of trainers and other supporting staff, through active application of various methods of inclusion, accessibility and flexibility.
- Development of tools and guidelines to be applied in the training of the target groups
- Creation of a platform for sharing good practices for the implementation of inclusive education in all degrees and forms of formal and informal education

## 4. Conclusion

Inclusive policies and practices are crucial to ensure equal access to continuing vocational education and training for all participants in the educational process. By actively implementing these policies and practices, we can create an educational environment that is not only equitable but also inclusive. Such an environment provides opportunities for the development of skills and opportunities for each learner, regardless of their social or cultural context, physical or mental potential, or other factors. As a result, each participant in the educational process can reach their full potential and participate fully in society, which ultimately contributes to the development and progress of the entire society.

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