

Policy Paper: Enhancing Civic Engagement in Vocational Education and Training: Recommendations for Integrating AI and Social Issues



Executive Summary

Defining civic engagement can be challenging, as people generally understand the concept but struggle to articulate its exact components. Civic engagement covers a range of activities, such as political participation, volunteering, mentorship, and community empowerment, alongside topics like social justice, sustainability, inclusion, and gender equality (Arrufat, 2022). The way students engage with these concepts varies, particularly in Vocational Education and Training (VET). Integrating these topics into VET curricula is crucial to ensure that knowledge about social issues is widely accessible, not confined to higher education institutions, and that it promotes social cohesion by reducing knowledge gaps. Recent studies show that many young people express dissatisfaction with governmental institutions, including the European Union (EU), as evidenced by rising populism and EU skepticism. In several EU Member States, right-wing or populist parties have gained support at various levels of government. For instance, in the 2024 elections, hard-right parties hold power in six EU countries: Italy, Finland, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, and the Czech Republic. Meanwhile, in France and Germany, right-wing parties such as the National Rally (RN) and Alternative for Germany (AfD) are seeing increased support in regional and national elections (Coi, 2024). Given this context, it is more important than ever to integrate civic engagement topics into educational curricula, not only in higher education but also in VET, to ensure equitable access to knowledge. This approach will help reduce polarization, increase young people's awareness of social issues, and foster a more informed and engaged citizenry. In line with European citizenship, an ideal outlined in the Schuman Declaration and established by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, which granted EU citizens rights alongside national citizenship, VET institutions should play a key role in fostering this sense of European citizenship. While the European Commission has supported this effort, challenges remain, including criticism from those opposed to European integration and passive learning methods (Arrufat, 2022). On the other hand, the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) outlines two strategic objectives: to foster high-performing digital education ecosystems and to enhance digital skills and competencies for the digital age. Regarding Artificial Intelligence (AI), the plan recognizes its immense potential to transform teaching and learning practices. AI can help schools improve not only the way they organize and operate but also the delivery of education itself (EC, 2022). There is significant opportunity for this technology to enhance civic

engagement courses within VET curricula, making them more personalized, interactive, and aligned with the evolving demands of the digital era.

This white paper provides recommendations on how recent technological advancements, particularly AI, can bridge the gap and enhance civic engagement in Vocational Education and Training. It draws on insights from over 100 stakeholders working in VET institutions.

Methodology

The methodology for this paper combines qualitative and quantitative analysis. As part of EVBB's operational grant, MetaVET+, we conducted a survey that gathered more than 100 responses from a diverse group of VET schools and stakeholders. The survey asked participants to assess the integration of civic engagement courses and AI within their curricula. Additionally, respondents were asked to share their experiences and suggest ways to improve civic engagement using AI, as well as identify potential barriers or challenges they might face.

Analysis

In the EVBB community survey, 52% of respondents reported limited AI integration in VET curricula, while the rest had minimal or no strategies in place. Despite this, over 60% agreed that AI tools are effective in enhancing VET curricula. AI has significant potential to improve student engagement by increasing accessibility, fostering collaboration, and offering personalized feedback, though challenges such as insufficient funding, resistance from educators, and data privacy concerns hinder integration (EVBB, 2024). Civic engagement is moderately incorporated into VET programs, focusing on issues like sustainability and social justice. While there is consensus on its importance, inconsistent coverage and assessment highlight the need for a more standardized approach (EVBB, 2024). Participants believe AI can enhance civic engagement education by tailoring content to individual needs, tracking progress, and offering interactive scenarios. However, successful integration requires additional educator training, funding for AI tools, and reliable IT infrastructure. AI can improve civic engagement through chatbots, moderated discussions, and simulation platforms, but barriers like financial constraints, resistance to change, and ethical concerns must be addressed to unlock its full potential in VET.

Policy Recommendation:

1. **Invest in AI Infrastructure and Tools for VET Institutions** - Governments and educational institutions should allocate dedicated funding for AI technologies and the necessary infrastructure to support their integration into VET curricula. This includes ensuring reliable IT support, access to platforms, and modern software that can enhance both teaching and learning practices.
2. **Provide Comprehensive Training for Educators** - To ensure the effective use of AI tools in VET, policymakers should prioritize and fund professional development programs for educators. These programs should focus on building educators' technical skills, as well as their understanding of AI's potential to personalize and improve civic engagement education.
3. **Develop Standards for Civic Engagement Integration in VET** - Establish clear, standardized frameworks for integrating civic engagement topics into VET curricula. This would help ensure consistency across institutions, facilitating more widespread coverage of key social issues such as sustainability, social justice, and inclusion, while also improving the measurement of students' civic participation.
4. **Support AI-Based Personalized Learning Tools** - Promote the development and adoption of AI-powered tools that can personalize learning experiences, such as chatbots for instant access to information, AI-driven simulations of civic activities (e.g., public hearings or debates), and engagement tracking systems. These tools can increase accessibility, foster collaboration, and enable individualized learning paths.
5. **Address Ethical and Privacy Concerns Related to AI** - Establish strict regulations and ethical guidelines for AI integration in VET, particularly concerning data privacy, algorithmic bias, and the accuracy of AI systems. These measures will build trust among educators and students, addressing concerns about security and fairness.
6. **Encourage Collaborative Learning Environments** - Foster the development of collaborative learning environments powered by AI, which can support peer-to-peer learning and engagement in civic topics. AI can enhance virtual classrooms, ensuring that students from diverse backgrounds can interact meaningfully while tackling issues like political participation, social justice, and environmental sustainability.
7. **Measure and Evaluate AI's Impact on Civic Engagement** - Implement robust evaluation mechanisms to track the effectiveness of AI tools in promoting civic engagement. This could include gathering feedback from students and

educators, measuring participation in civic activities, and tracking long-term outcomes such as increased political participation or greater community involvement.

Discussion

Civic engagement in Vocational Education and Training plays a crucial role in addressing social issues like sustainability, social justice, and inclusion. Despite its importance, the integration of these topics into VET curricula remains inconsistent across institutions, hindering student engagement and awareness. Recent political trends, including the rise of populism and skepticism toward the EU, highlight the need for education that fosters active citizenship. AI technology holds significant potential to enhance civic engagement education by personalizing learning and promoting collaboration. However, challenges such as insufficient funding and ethical concerns must be addressed to fully harness AI's potential in VET.

Conclusion

In conclusion, integrating civic engagement into Vocational Education and Training curricula is essential for fostering active citizenship and addressing key social issues like sustainability and social justice. To achieve this, it is crucial to invest in AI infrastructure, offer comprehensive educator training, and develop standardized frameworks for civic engagement integration. Additionally, supporting AI-based personalized learning tools and fostering collaborative learning environments can enhance student engagement and participation. Addressing ethical concerns related to AI, including privacy and algorithmic bias, is also essential for ensuring trust and effectiveness in these educational initiatives. These recommendations aim to bridge gaps in VET education and better prepare students for informed, active participation in their communities and societies.

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