

Policy Paper: Enhancing Adult Learning in Vocational Education and Training (VET)



Executive Summary

The European Union stands at a critical juncture as the green and digital transitions, coupled with rapidly evolving labor market dynamics, demand robust strategies to upskill and reskill the adult workforce. Despite ambitious EU targets for lifelong learning, participation in adult education remains persistently low, particularly among those most in need—low-skilled workers and individuals in vulnerable situations. This paper examines the findings of the *Adult Learning in VET: The Role of Centres of Vocational Excellence* event held in Turin on 25-26 November 2024, co-organized by the European Training Foundation (ETF), the European Association of Institutes for Vocational Training (EVBB), and other key stakeholders. The discussions underscored the central role of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) as innovation hubs for adult learning in VET and identified pathways to overcome persistent barriers.

This paper outlines actionable recommendations to align adult education in VET with EU policy priorities, ensuring it contributes to economic resilience, social inclusion, and sustainable growth.

Introduction

Lifelong learning has been a cornerstone of EU policy, enshrined in initiatives like the European Skills Agenda and the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways. However, the implementation gap remains stark: the participation rate in adult learning stands at just over 10% in many Member States, far short of the EU target of 50% by 2030. This is particularly concerning in light of the challenges posed by automation, digitalization, and the transition to a green economy, which require continuous upskilling and reskilling of the workforce.

The *Adult Learning in VET: The Role of Centres of Vocational Excellence* event in Turin provided a unique platform for stakeholders from EU and neighboring countries to address these challenges. Through thematic discussions, practical case studies, and cross-sectoral networking, the event highlighted both obstacles and opportunities in advancing adult education within the VET ecosystem.

Key Challenges Identified

1. **Accessibility:** Adult learners, especially those in vulnerable situations, face systemic barriers to accessing training opportunities. These include financial constraints, rigid schedules, and a lack of tailored support.
2. **Relevance:** Many educational offerings fail to align with the skills demanded by rapidly evolving labor markets, leading to skills mismatches and reduced employability.

3. **Institutional Limitations:** Regulatory frameworks and insufficient institutional capacity hinder VET providers' ability to implement flexible and inclusive learning models.
4. **Educator Preparedness:** Teachers and trainers often lack the resources, tools, and professional development needed to adopt innovative and learner-centered approaches.
5. **Fragmented Collaboration:** Limited coordination among policymakers, VET providers, enterprises, and communities weakens the lifelong learning ecosystem.

The Role of Centres of Vocational Excellence

CoVEs have emerged as vital actors in addressing these challenges, serving as bridges between education and labor markets. By leveraging their expertise and networks, CoVEs can deliver tailored, high-quality, and demand-driven adult education. The event highlighted several areas where CoVEs excel and where their impact can be further amplified:

- **Innovation:** CoVEs can lead the adoption of microcredentials, modular learning pathways, and digital tools to make education more accessible and relevant.
- **Collaboration:** By fostering partnerships with industries, CoVEs ensure that training programs align with labor market needs.
- **Capacity Building:** CoVEs can act as hubs for professional development, equipping educators with modern tools and methodologies.
- **Inclusivity:** Their ability to tailor training to diverse learner profiles makes them critical to addressing the needs of marginalized groups.

Policy Recommendations

1. Strengthen Policy and Institutional Frameworks

The EU should provide Member States with guidelines to develop regulatory frameworks that incentivize the inclusion of adult learners in VET. Specific measures include:

- Creating flexible funding mechanisms to support CoVEs in delivering adult education.
- Encouraging national strategies to integrate lifelong learning within broader VET policies.

2. Foster Learner-Centered and Inclusive Approaches



To address barriers to participation, adult learning programs should prioritize:

- Modular and flexible formats, such as part-time courses and online learning.
- Tailored support services, including career counseling and financial aid for marginalized groups.

3. Align Education with Labor Market Needs

- Strengthen partnerships between VET providers and employers to ensure that training aligns with current and future skills demands.
- Utilize labor market intelligence to regularly update curricula.

4. Empower Educators

Invest in continuous professional development for VET educators, emphasizing digital skills, innovative pedagogy, and learner engagement.

5. Build Collaborative Networks

- Support transnational cooperation among CoVEs to share best practices and resources.
- Encourage public-private partnerships to pool expertise and funding.

Conclusion

Adult education in VET is a linchpin of the EU's efforts to achieve economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Centres of Vocational Excellence offer a proven model to address systemic challenges and catalyze innovation. By adopting the recommendations outlined in this paper, EU policymakers and stakeholders can unlock the full potential of adult learning in VET, ensuring that it contributes meaningfully to the goals of the European Skills Agenda and the Green Deal.

EVBB and its partners stand ready to support these efforts and call on the European Commission and Member States to prioritize adult learning as an integral component of the EU's policy agenda.

References

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