



## Editorial

# Inclusion in vocational education and training (VET)

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## Background and Rationale

The background for this special issue is the role that vocational education and training (VET) plays in the inclusion of young people from different educational and social backgrounds. Rising skill demands have made upper secondary diplomas a minimum for successfully entering the labour market and a basis for further participation in lifelong learning, and governments in most OECD countries have set targets to increase enrolment and completion rates in upper secondary education. In many countries, VET is assigned a key role in providing inclusion for diverse groups of students and in achieving the goal of education for all young people. On the one hand, this is connected to dropout rates, which are higher for vocational than general education programmes in most countries (Cedefop, 2016). On the other hand, this is also related to the potential of VET to attract and reintegrate young people into education and training, including those who drop out of general education (Cedefop, 2016; European Commission, 2014). VET offers a practical way of learning and the opportunity to work towards a specific profession, and it may thus constitute an attractive alternative to general education pathways for many young people. Therefore, including



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vulnerable young people in VET and reducing social inequalities in education has become one of the main aims of VET in many countries (e.g. Jørgensen, 2018; Moreno Herrera et al., 2022; Scharnhorst & Kammermann, 2020).

Despite an increased focus on completion of upper secondary education in recent years, according to recent figures, about 20 percent of people across OECD countries do not complete upper secondary general or vocational education before the age of 25. Although there are large variations across countries, graduation from upper secondary education remained stable on average across OECD countries between 2013 and 2019. Thus, while most young people achieve an upper secondary qualification before the age of 25, in most countries, about 10 to 40 percent of young people leave education and training early (OECD, 2021).

In the face of high rates of young people who are neither in employment, education nor training (NEET) in many Western countries, characteristics of the educational system have become the centre of attention in educational policy as well as in research. Research shows that a well-developed VET system has a positive effect on reducing early leaving from education and training (e.g. De Witte et al., 2013; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015), and VET has also been characterised as a “safety net against dropout” (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015, p. 307) or a “vehicle for social inclusion” (Moreno Herrera et al., 2022, p. 23). However, while the importance of VET pathways for the inclusion of vulnerable young people in upper secondary education is widely recognised, research also shows that different groups of young people struggle to gain access to apprenticeships (e.g. Bonoli & Wilson, 2019; Imdorf, 2017; Solga & Kohlrausch, 2013) or are at risk of leaving education or training early (e.g. Böhn & Deutscher, 2022; Cedefop, 2016; European Commission, 2014). Therefore, the need for measures to support educationally and/or socially disadvantaged young people to complete upper secondary education has come into focus in recent years, and countries have developed different strategies to promote the inclusion of young people with different preconditions, needs and abilities (e.g. Cedefop, 2016; European Commission, 2014; OECD, 2018).

Measures to promote the inclusion of young people with different educational and social backgrounds may be targeted at different levels. On the one hand, recent debates and research focus on questions related to the organisation and design of VET programmes, schemes and institutions. The OECD (2018), for example, suggests designing programmes that address the specific needs of young people at risk, such as preparatory programmes or programmes with shorter or longer duration. Different countries have developed such programmes, such as for example short-track VET programmes (e.g. Bonoli & Wilson, 2019; Schmid, 2020) or pre-apprenticeships (e.g. Bonoli & Wilson, 2019), in some cases targeting specific groups of vulnerable people, such as refugees (e.g. Aerne & Bonoli, 2021). On the other hand, debates and research on the inclusion of young people in VET address the analysis and shaping of education and learning processes that

may benefit the special needs of vulnerable students and apprentices. This may include, among others, special support measures, such as support measures for learners in short-track VET programmes (e.g. Scharnhorst & Kammermann, 2020), or questions related to the curriculum, such as examining the benefits of incorporating short-term structured workplace learning components into classroom-based upper-secondary VET courses (Polidano & Tabasso, 2014).

In this special issue, we apply a broad understanding of the concept of 'inclusion'. While inclusion was previously associated mostly with students with special needs and special needs education, there is now increasing agreement that the dilemmas of inclusion regard students with all kinds of variations in cognitive, physical, educational and social backgrounds (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). Hence, we wish to embrace learner diversity as the norm, thereby acknowledging that young people may be vulnerable in many different ways and that the question of inclusion concerns many. This perspective logically leads to the insight that students and apprentices form a heterogeneous group in need of different measures to support their educational achievements and to help their successful school-to-work transitions. In this special issue, we consider measures, offers and programmes as inclusive if they are part of a regular VET trajectory or if they intend to prepare learners for a regular VET trajectory. Thus, our understanding of inclusion transcends the notion of mere physical presence, to also include interventions that promote students' and apprentices' psychological belonging and social participation, and that aim to prevent early leaving from education and training. Inclusion may then occur on different levels, in different arenas and to different degrees (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). With this holistic perspective on inclusion in this special issue, we wish to gain insight into different approaches that promote inclusion in VET and to learn from other countries, regions, schools, strategies and experiences. By doing this, we aim to stimulate a discourse about the experiences with measures that are intended to promote inclusion in VET among vulnerable young people and to explore what can be learned from the diversity of VET systems and approaches to inclusion in VET.

## Overview of Articles in this Special Issue

The special issue includes nine contributions which focus on different questions and different measures regarding inclusion in VET in different countries, including Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Finland, Great Britain, North Macedonia, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and Zambia. Hence, the issue presents international perspectives on a universal challenge, and it allows the reader to compare similarities and differences in how inclusion in VET is understood and addressed around the globe.

**Niklas Rosenblad, Birgit Schaffar and Erika Löfström** take us to Finland, where they investigate the question of whom inclusion in VET involves, and to what and where this inclusion takes place. This thought-

provoking article uses the “Competency-Tetris” to analyse the idea of social inclusion in Finland’s competency-based VET. The authors use a design-based research approach that includes participatory observations of the interaction between practitioners and students, as well as interviews with counsellors and teacher practitioners. Amongst other findings, the authors describe how the Competency-Tetris approach acts as a social divider, favouring self-governing learners, while at the same time putting students in need of support at a disadvantage.

Using a qualitative approach, **Enni Paul** explores educational support practices during workplace-based learning in upper secondary apprenticeship education in Sweden. In Sweden, the number of young people attending an apprenticeship at the upper secondary level is very small compared to those in school-based VET programmes, and little is known about the support measures apprentices may need. Based on semi-structured interviews with upper secondary VET school personnel, Paul identifies three different support projects embedded within three practices: a workplace socialisation project, a qualification project and a social-pedagogical project. A conclusion from the study is that many apprentices are left without any support during the work-based part of their education.

**Åshild Tårnesvik** and **Evi Schmid** analyse how the training practice scheme, a two-year apprenticeship scheme that was implemented as a measure to reduce dropout from VET, contributes to inclusion in regular VET in Norway. Using a case study approach, they show how practice-oriented learning provides opportunities to experience success and mastery, the feeling of being members of communities of practice and a shift in the apprentices’ self-view and identity of themselves as learners. The contribution highlights the importance of identity constructions in different learning contexts for understanding motivation and success in education and training.

**Jill Hanson**, **Deborah Robinson** and **Geraldene Codina** explore how young people with special educational needs and disabilities can experience successful learning in VET through supported internships (SI). In Britain, SIs are typically 12-month unpaid study programmes comprised of college courses and workplace learning under the guidance of job coaches. The authors use a case study approach to look into the pedagogic structure of one SI, and they frame their study within Fuller and Unwin’s (2004) conceptual framework of the expansive-restrictive workforce development continuum. The SI in question provided accessible vocational learning experiences for young people with special needs, with work roles that afforded them both breadth and depth of learning.

Based on a comparison of policies to promote recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Bangladesh, North Macedonia, Sweden and Switzerland, **Markus Maurer**, **Mahboob Morshed** and **Ognen Spasovski** analyse the impact of RPL schemes on social inclusion. In contrast to the other contributions, the authors thus do

not focus on a specific programme or training at the upper secondary level, but on RLP as a means to acquire regular VET qualifications by recognising formal and non-formal qualifications that are not integrated into the regular education system. Despite considerable differences between the RPL schemes in these four countries, the study finds that RPL schemes have only made limited contributions to social inclusion in all four countries. In conclusion, the authors argue that, for RPL to contribute more to social inclusion, schemes must be less complicated and should also include complementary education and training provisions for those who lack work experience in sectors where access to employment depends on certain qualifications.

**Øyvind Laundal** and **Stine Solberg** use a theoretical framework of disengagement and re-engagement to explore how Norwegian youngsters at risk of dropping out of school experience an additional year of schooling before entering upper secondary school. The purpose of this extra school year is to prevent early school leaving by offering at-risk students a flexible and individually adapted learning and practice environment that helps them prepare for upper secondary education. Based on data from qualitative interviews, the authors describe how adolescents re-engage with school during the additional year, and how they become socially, academically and practically prepared to enter upper secondary school with confidence. Amongst others, participants describe their process of maturation, learning how to learn, and the importance of teacher and peer support.

**Samson Melesse**, **Aimee Haley** and **Gun-Britt Wärvik** analyse the curricular strategies of two Private-Public Development Partnerships (PPDP), one in Ethiopia and one in Zambia, which served as an intervention to revamp Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) for the inclusion of disadvantaged learners. While the intended target groups of the two TVET institutions were different, in both cases, the curricula were based on demands from industries, closely related to the work processes of particular jobs. The authors conclude that many students experienced that the education put them in a better position to cope with their life situation, and in some cases even gave hope of entering higher education.

Using a qualitative design, **Sanna Ryökkynen** and **Kaisa Rätty** analyse how Finnish vocational special needs teachers describe their interaction with students who receive intensive learning support. An important conclusion of the study is that special needs teachers' professionalism in VET special education colleges not only involves a dual professionalism based on a teaching identity and a vocational identity but also has a strong third dimension, which could be viewed as the role of a change agent. Consequently, the authors argue that to promote inclusion in VET, it is fundamental for teachers to acknowledge not only their professional and teaching competence but also their role as change agents tasked with breaking down prejudices and negative sentiments.

Using the dimensions of inclusion by Qvotrup and Qvotrup (2018) as a theoretical lens, **Sanna Ryökkönen, Anu Raudasoja, Sanna Heino, Katja Maetoloa** and **Päivi Pynnönen** analyse how representatives of Finnish national educational administration and vocational institutions' administration describe inclusion. Based on qualitative interviews with 18 administration staff representatives, the authors illustrate how the respondents describe inclusion from the perspectives of equal opportunity, equality and inclusiveness. The findings thus show the paradigm shift in inclusion from the old special needs support paradigm towards the new paradigm of inclusion for all. However, the authors also find that the representatives of the Finnish administration lack consideration of students' activity in different educational communities and students' own experiences of being included or excluded. Based on their findings, the authors argue that concepts of inclusion in VET need to be defined more precisely for education providers to have an explicit framework and goals to promote inclusion in practice.

Taken together, the contributions in this issue provide new insights into which strategies and measures may promote or hamper the inclusion of different groups of learners in VET. We hope that the insights offered in this special issue may contribute to the common goal of high-quality inclusive education that is stimulating for all. Moreover, we aspire that the different strategies presented in the studies may inspire researchers, practitioners and political stakeholders to think creatively about new ways to include learners from all backgrounds and with all kinds of prerequisites in VET.

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