



**Final report on the project LIFELONG LEARNING FOR
ALL (2019-2021)**

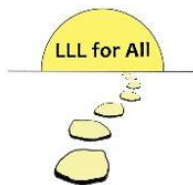


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1. Introduction

Quality vocational education and training (VET) plays a fundamental role in raising the level of education and developing the skills of young people and adults. In doing so, it supports their employability and social inclusion. As also stressed in the Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2018)¹, education and training are crucial to getting more people into decent jobs, to responding to the skills the labour market needs and to strengthening Europe's resilience. Moreover, it strongly contributes to personal development and employability in a broader sense. Connected with this, social dialogue is a key piece to the puzzle in promoting and ensuring quality VET and thus raising the attractiveness of the sector. Social dialogue helps improve the working conditions of the staff in VET institutes and thus ensures a supportive working environment for them in order to improve the inclusiveness and quality of teaching, learning, and management in education institutions. Education social partners are in a unique position to address specific new challenges facing VET in particular, such as the rapid societal, technological, environmental and demographical developments of today's society and related changes in skills and competences requirements, which expose the need for "an inclusive, lifelong-learning-based and innovation-driven approach to education and training", as stated in the European Council Conclusions of 14 December 2017², which set out the steps for further following-up on the European Pillar of Social Rights and for delivering on the European Skills Agenda.

However, in many European countries VET is not considered as first choice, as was also underlined in the European Skills Agenda. Furthermore, lifelong learning (LLL) strategies often do not reach those groups of people who are most threatened with exclusion and who are in greatest need of further learning and professional development. If European countries want to remain inclusive and competitive at the same time, it will be necessary to include education social partners in reforming VET practices in order to find ways to offer more tailor-made and flexible programmes (including apprenticeships and work-based learning opportunities). The aim should be to make participation in VET more attractive, feasible and accessible to all and thereby also enhance lifelong learning opportunities for all European citizens (no matter their socio-economic and educational background). Because of these reasons the education social partners decided to organise an international exchange of good practices through a number of Peer Learning Activities (PLAs) in different countries within the scope of this project. Unfortunately, the set-up of the project drastically changed halfway as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Following the PLAs in the Netherlands, Slovenia and Portugal, the remaining planned visits to Finland and Germany, as well as the final conference, needed to be held online.

1.2. Project description

Promoting quality, attractiveness and inclusiveness of VET is a necessity and a shared responsibility of employers, employees, education providers and governments. This as well as the close thematic link to social dialogue is also reflected in the fact that this project was led and conceived by MBO Raad and conducted with the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE), in partnership with the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE). With this project EFEE and ETUCE have aimed at further building and delivering on their previous work done in the framework of the European

¹ <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8299-2018-INIT/en/pdf>

² <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32204/14-final-conclusions-rev1-en.pdf>



Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education (ESSDE) on improving the attractiveness, quality and image of VET, to which they committed themselves in their Joint Work Programme 2018-19³ and in their joint Statement on improving VET in Europe (2017)⁴. In this statement, EFEE and ETUCE show their commitment to jointly take appropriate measures aimed at making VET more attractive for both students and adults, by improving the role and status of VET teachers, trainers, school leaders and other education personnel. They, furthermore, seek to contribute to high quality learning outcomes of VET and apprenticeships through social dialogue to better prepare students for life, further education, and quality jobs, by ensuring that students are supported both in the pursuit of their studies and during apprenticeships by qualified teaching professionals and trainers with up-to-date and appropriate skills. In addition, they want to promote the implementation of the Riga Conclusions (2015) and the goals of the European Alliance for Apprenticeships.

These objectives directly fed into the project at hand, with special attention put on the enhancement of access to VET and qualifications for all through more flexible and permeable systems. There are no 'one size fits all' solutions to tackle inclusivity of VET, but some countries clearly perform better than others. By exchanging good practices in line with the needs of all partners whilst learning from their strong points the project sought to find strategies on how social partners in education (and training) can promote quality and inclusive VET to enhance lifelong learning for all. The project scope consisted of five interactive Peer Learning Activities (PLAs), which all centred around the overall topic of how social dialogue can help promote quality and inclusive VET (including apprenticeships) to enhance lifelong learning for all, and which each focused on one specific country case study, highlighting one particular topic or set of challenges, opportunities, or strong points of the country context. As already mentioned above, the first three PLAs were held in the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Portugal. Since the Covid-19 pandemic made further physical country visits impossible, the next two PLAs, which illustrated the cases of Finland and Germany, were held online. In addition to these events, two additional online webinars, which specifically focused on the impact of the Covid crisis on the VET sector, were organised. Further project outputs include five short films on each of the country cases, highlighting central aspects of and discussions around these cases. These films were presented at the closing conference of the project, which took place in September 2021.

1.3. Project Objectives

The general overall objective of the project was twofold. The project partners, firstly, aimed at contributing to addressing a number of challenges identified at EU level regarding employment, social and economic issues on how to equip people with the right skills and create more unity within our societies in order to prepare them to become tomorrow's societies and world of work. The project partners also wanted to promote the implementation of the European Pillar of Social rights, in particular the principles on "education, training and life-long learning" and "active support to employment" through social dialogue. These principles state that everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and successfully manage transitions in the labour market. However, in order to make these principles a reality the first requirement is to reach the most vulnerable groups - pupils at risk of becoming NEETs, (low-skilled) adults, (newly arrived) migrants, pupils with physical

³ http://educationemployers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Final-ESSDE_WP2018-2019.pdf

⁴ http://educationemployers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/FINAL_ETUCE-and-EFEE-on-VET_20171123.pdf



or mental challenges - who are at risk of becoming socially excluded and who are in need of further and tailor-made support to find their way in our society by means of quality and inclusive VET.

Secondly, the project has contributed to the active implementation and promotion of the Work Programme of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee in Education (ESSDE) of 2018-2019 and 2020-2021 by advancing the joint work of EFEE and ETUCE on quality of VET and on the *Paris Declaration* on inclusive education. VET is a vital part of the education sector and appropriate measures need to be taken by education social partners in order to make it more attractive for the learners of any age. We strongly believe in the prominent role of teachers, trainers, school leaders, other education personnel, education trade unions and education employer organisations in achieving these aims. Through this project, EFEE – and MBO Raad as its member – as well as ETUCE also aimed at consolidating a solid basis for the continuation of the social dialogue process both at national and European level, considering that VET (being part of lifelong learning) is a shared responsibility of the governments and education social partners, including providers. For quality and inclusive VET, constructive social dialogue is a prerequisite. In addition, the commitment to promoting an effective social dialogue at all levels is also one of the key topics for EFEE and ETUCE, which was also at the heart of the project.

1.4. Purpose of the Final Report

As already outlined above, a number of activities were conducted throughout the duration of the project. The aim of this report is to showcase the project outputs and to give an overview of the key findings and main issues that (re-) occurred as topics within the project scope. Furthermore, the report also presents the Joint Recommendations that were elaborated as result of the project activities. The complete list of recommendations can be found in the annex of this report but the issues they address are reflected throughout the document and in particular throughout the following chapter, which focuses specifically on the key issues and challenges of the topic at hand.

2. Lifelong Learning for All - Social Partners in Education promoting quality and inclusive VET to enhance lifelong learning for all

As already outlined above, the project was designed around five PLAs, which were in line with either the specific needs, challenges or strong points of the partner countries involved. All of the PLAs aimed at contributing to together finding answers and solutions to the overarching question of this project, namely *How can social partners in education (and training) promote quality and inclusive VET to enhance lifelong learning for all*. At the first meeting of the Steering Group of this project, all of the countries represented defined the topics and specific angles of the PLAs which they would like to host. Other meetings of the Advisory Group (containing one representative from every partner organisation) were used to monitor the progress of the project and to prepare the meetings. These meetings became very important following the breakout of the Covid-19 pandemic, as the members of the Advisory Group had to take crucial decisions about planning online meetings instead of physical meetings and also had to apply for an extension of the project period. The subsequent sub-chapters reflect on and present the main issues which were discussed and learnt in these PLAs.



2.1. Lifelong Learning in VET through Public-Private Partnerships in the Netherlands

The main topic of the first PLA of the project, which was held in the Netherlands in June 2019, was public-private partnerships. The event was co-organised by the Dutch social partners in education (MBO Raad and AoB). This event involved a variety of speakers from the policy as well as from the practical level, with a particular focus being put on the question of reaching out to the most vulnerable groups. In addition to presentations from the Ministry of Education and Culture, which gave insights into the Dutch national programme on lifelong learning in VET, the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER), and the Labour Foundation for Employers and Employees (StvdA), organisations, such as the public-private partnerships network Katapult and Modriaan College, presented their approaches to lifelong learning in VET through such public-private partnerships. These presentations highlighted the importance of establishing balanced partnerships between VET schools and companies to ensure quality VET. Furthermore, the Ambachtshuis talent market in Amsterdam presented 'hands on' examples of how joint responsibility for vulnerable groups can lead to increasing learning options and opportunities for young people with a migration background. In this case, a partnership existed with companies working in STEM, which were looking to attract new talent.

Overall, the aim of this PLA was to showcase different examples of public-private partnerships taking place on different levels, from centres of excellence to initiatives focused on the inclusion of vulnerable groups. One central shift that could be noticed over time is that previously, companies were often considered as sorts of clients for the education sector, while these relationships have shifted to become fully fledged equal partnerships in the examples presented for this project. One reason for this is that (vocational) education and training has become more flexible and adaptive to the needs of companies. Due to this, education institutions increasingly and actively approach the private sector and seek out partnerships with companies that will benefit both partners, especially regarding the improvement of work based learning. One big advantage of a close cooperation between schools, companies and municipalities is, as was continuously emphasised throughout this project activity, the shared responsibility of all of these stakeholders for the development of the learners' education. If done successfully and sustainably, and within a fair and balanced partnership, such cooperation can lead to more inclusivity and quality of VET and increase learning outcomes as multiple stakeholders have an interest in their students' development and want to see them thrive professionally. However, there are striking differences between the VET systems in Europe and therefore the impact education social partners can have is often restricted to national contexts. One key learning point which can be taken from this project is that in order to improve the inclusiveness and enhance lifelong learning options in national VET systems, it is first necessary to understand the national contexts and specific characteristics of VET systems across the EU and the level of education social partners' involvement in shaping the systems.

2.2. Lifelong learning and language learning as vehicles for a successful (labour market) integration of migrants in Slovenia

Another central theme of the project, which featured most prominently in the second PLA, which was held in Ljubljana, Slovenia in November 2019, was the integration of migrants into the labour market coupled with language learning. The event was co-organised by the Slovenian social partners in



education (DR and ESTUS). As a small state and country of migration, Slovenia was well placed to host a PLA centred around these issues to allow for a sharing of valuable information, knowledge and best practices between the education social partners. One of the challenges faced by Slovenia is that it tends to be seen as a transit country by many migrants, which is why some of these migrants might not feel the need learn the Slovenian language. In contrast to this, Slovenia tends to be seen as a country to build a new life for many immigrants from other Balkan states and particularly from former Yugoslavia. The examples presented from Slovenia show that the integration of migrants should not just be seen as a problem, but rather that lifelong learning can help newcomers better integrate into the labour market as well as society. Education social partners therefore play a key role in improving lifelong learning strategies and in helping with the education needs of the migrants and refugees. This PLA boasted a mix of presentations from a range of different stakeholders from the political as well as from the more practical, educational level, including the points of view of trade unions and employers as well as providers, research institutes and Slovenian NGOs. One surprising issue which emerged during the event was that schools with language learning programmes are having to compete with NGOs providing leisure activities, which in some instances might complicate the integration and language learning process.

Overall, the discussions among the education social partners highlighted that creating a positive learning culture was important for everyone, not just for immigrants. Discussions in this PLA revolved around the importance of supporting people – from primary school age to adulthood –to help them with their learning and careers. But in order to achieve this, sustainable investment in education and in career guidance is needed. Unfortunately, some countries are opposed to investing in supporting the skills development of refugees and migrants in transit zones . A conclusion drawn in this PLA and in the project in general is that the concept of lifelong learning, alongside career guidance, needs to be fed into education from an early age on. The involvement of education social partners in improving the system is essential in this regard. The reason behind this is that VET is still not considered as attractive as other learning paths in many countries, which is whyore information needs to be provided to prospective VET students about their education and career opportunities. Furthermore, in some countries structural reforms in the education systems will be necessary as well to bring VET on parity of esteem with other further education options. For some people, learning on the job might be a better solution than classroom study. Therefore, more information needs to be provided to students about apprenticeship opportunities, which is a call shared by both ETUCE and EFEE and many of their member organisations as members of the European Commission's European Alliance for Apprenticeship. In order to facilitate this, a good cooperation between governments, education social partners, VET providers, companies and NGOs is a prerequisite. In order to improve quality and inclusiveness of VET, teachers need to be provided with the necessary time and resources - which many currently lack –to participate in quality and updated continuous professional developments, which are crucial as well in order to be better prepared for the changing needs of learners. While there have been many successful initiatives over the last few years, the Slovenian hosts of the event concluded that the cooperation between education social partners and other partner organisations could still be further improved.



2.3. Upskilling of young and low-skilled adults in Portugal

Another main topic of this project was what role the education social partners take in upskilling of young and low-skilled adults as well as the question of how to prevent early school leaving. One of the big challenges in this regard is outreach, as was shown in the third PLA, held in Portugal in February 2020 and co-organised by the Portuguese social partners in education (ANESPO and FNE). In Portugal, education was long considered as something that is only for a very small elite, with the literacy rate being considerably lower than in other European countries. Even though various Portuguese governments have made considerable progress in raising the level of education of the population since the revolution of 1974, it appeared to take long time to change mentality and minds towards the benefits of decent education for all. This is why contributions and interventions at this PLA centred on the issue of creating more inclusive VET and lifelong learning opportunities. Regarding this aspect, the model of ETAP schools was presented which aims at creating a triangle model between school, company and learner, resulting in apprenticeships or other variations of work-based learning, which has been gaining importance in Portugal since the 1980s. Furthermore, the project participants were introduced to the *School for All* initiative, which works in a decentralised manner in order to better meet specific regional education needs. It was also underlined that strong social dialogue was needed to raise the quality and attractiveness of VET and to ensure decent working conditions and adequate support for education personnel. This is why contributions and interventions around these issues also focused on the need to build bridges between education social partners, other organisations and companies for improving apprenticeship provision and to reduce the risk of learners dropping out.

The Portuguese PLA has also emphasised that the concept of having a job for life is not a reality anymore on today's labour market. Furthermore, the birth rate has lowered, which means that not enough young people are entering the labour market, which leads to a need to adapt older people's skills. VET teachers need to have access to continuous professional development in order to be able to meet the changing student demography. Unfortunately, there is still a considerable number of people who is neither in education nor in employment (NEETs). It is therefore a central conclusion that it is necessary to reach out to them and motivate them to start learning again. Such a system needs to be set up with the involvement of education social partners in order to make VET schools, teachers and management ready to adapt to the support of learners at the risk of dropping out. Sustainable investment is essential to ensure effective support to those vulnerable groups. One important aspect in the discussions was that lifelong learning should ideally not just be seen as a means to meet the needs of the labour market but also as something that can contribute not only to the professional but also to the personal development of an individual. As already mentioned in chapter 2.3. when discussing language learning and integration, the role of the teacher and school management to create supportive learning and working environment is absolutely crucial. An additional challenge related to this is the seemingly low attractiveness of the (VET) teaching profession combined with a salary level that is not seen as attractive enough. Teachers are aging and a great share of them will be retiring within the next decade, while there is a struggle of attracting and retaining highly qualified young teachers. However, despite these problems and challenges, it was noted that there has been considerable progress over the last few decades regarding the raising of the education level in Portugal as well as on the prevention of early school leaving.



2.4. The impact of Covid-19 on Lifelong learning in the VET sector

Due to the changed circumstances into which our world got plunged after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, not only the lives of students, teachers, school leaders and other education stakeholders changed alongside those of the general population but also this project did, as a number of new challenges were suddenly added on top of the ones the project originally set out to address. The impact of Covid-19 has presented itself as a sort of horizontal and almost inescapable issue which has affected the VET sector in a plethora of ways and which has also intensified some of the challenges which had already existed before. In order to provide enough space within the project scope for discussions and reflections on what suddenly became the 'new normal', two additional webinars were held. The first one focused on the impact of Covid-19 on VET in three countries, presented by education trade unions and employers from Slovenia, Portugal and the Netherlands. Throughout these webinars, the employers' organisations and trade unions underlined the importance of cooperation between teachers and school heads in situations where VET schools had to switch to distance learning. The importance of the role of VET teachers and trainers was also once more stressed. Despite highly motivated teachers, the partnership with the government was cut off or at least too weak in many countries during the crisis. Due to several countries adopting emergency measures, the social dialogue between employers and employees proved even more crucial. Education social partners witnessed an acceleration of digitalisation of education already before the pandemic, which now made the need for professional development regarding digital skills as well as the provision of general support to teachers even more relevant and important. In the challenging pandemic environment, the education sector continued to operate while the schools were not all ready to provide the necessary equipment and skills to their learners and teachers at the start of the crisis. In this period, many teachers showed an impressive dedication to their work. However, challenges such as a lack of proper training for teaching online courses as well as insufficiently adapted curricula and inadequate hardware and (access to) technical equipment also emerged very quickly. Education social partners worked to address various issues that arose during the pandemic, such as the dangers of deregulating working time; the need to guarantee the right to disconnect; protection for teachers' health and safety; investment in IT training for teachers; cybersecurity and protection of personal data; ensuring teachers' work-life balance and the professional transitions of workers at risk of losing their jobs because of the crisis. They ensured that teachers received updated information on government measures which would affect teaching and the health and safety of education support personnel who had to continue working in schools, such as IT maintenance staff.

On 8 December 2020, the project partners organised another online webinar on VET and LLL. This meeting was the occasion for the members of ETUCE and EFEE to share good practices and exchange views in discussion with guest speakers from national and European public bodies on the status of VET and lifelong learning, especially on new EU initiatives on apprenticeships, micro-credentials and individual learning accounts, whilst taking into account the current situation around the Covid pandemic. Particularly for the VET sector, the pandemic has increased the urgency of some of the challenges which have formed the basis of this project, namely addressing the risk of increasing education inequalities and a widening gap between high- and the lower skilled parts of the population. The pandemic has also shown us that the 'new normal' will likely never fully revert to the 'old normal', as the crisis has -out of necessity - boosted innovation in education, with digitalisation having facilitated changes in work practices and created a need for further learning and training. It has also transformed the role of students, teachers, and school leaders/managers. In addition, due to the pandemic as well as due to other fundamental challenges (e.g. climate crisis, demographic changes)



our societies are facing, there were discussions on labour market developments and future skills needs. In light of such challenges (including green and digital skills) discussions should be continued with regards to 'future-proofing' and raising the attractiveness of the VET sector.

At the opening, a representative from the European Commission gave an overview of individual learning accounts, the initiatives put forward in the new package of the European Skills Agenda with the objective to make adult learning more accessible. Other speakers' contributions were focused on decisions to invest in the VET system, as it is facing an increasingly dynamic and unpredictable labour market. In addition, the findings of a sectoral study from the Netherlands about lessons learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic in VET schools and higher education institutions during the lockdown were presented. Results showed that whilst the COVID-19 pandemic provided possibilities of innovation and flexibility, the crisis had some negative impact on timetables and sometimes sorely hindered the wellbeing of VET teachers. The importance of supporting VET teachers and students to help them deal with the challenges deriving from the digital revolution and recent COVID-19 pandemic was strongly underlined. A supportive VET policy should enable education institutions to organise and develop sustainable programmes to allow for smooth transition flows between education and the labour market. It needs to be added that students expressed the view that they felt more attention was paid to their educational needs in such digital learning environments than in a regular classroom situation.

Furthermore, Irish (TUI) and Belgian (ACV-CSC) education trade unions shared their good practices on addressing challenges and quality of apprenticeships within a lifelong learning framework. From the Irish perspective, a new initiative, the so-called "Generations Apprenticeship", was presented as a new VET system, which is more flexible, young-people-oriented, and which provides apprentices with a formal apprenticeship contract with the respective companies. The speaker from Flanders underlined that the dual apprenticeship model was not that successful, as it faced numerous challenges due to cuts in public funding, lack of adequate equipment, and lack of teaching and training personnel. Furthermore, a recent governmental decision to cut back on part-time vocational education is a concern which might cause many drop-outs and which could undermine the quality of the entire VET system. The participants stressed that flexibility in VET should not become a risk for VET teachers and LLL educators as it can increase their workload and can lead to a less sustainable work-life balance.

2.5. Achieving inclusive and attractive lifelong learning and VET provision in Finland

As already outlined previously, achieving fully inclusive VET and lifelong learning is the responsibility of governments with the effective involvement of education social partners and providers. This is why the fourth PLA focused on Finland's VET reforms from a social dialogue perspective. The event was co-organised by the Finnish social partners in education (FEE and OAJ). In 2018, Finland introduced a reform of its national VET system. One of the main aspects was that compulsory education was extended to age 18 and that the number of different qualifications offered was reduced in order to allow for a more transparent system. Thinking shifted from a system-oriented approach to a competence-based one. In Finland, the state also takes responsibility for all learners, irrespective of their age. There is also a high degree of flexibility for learners with a range of individual learning programmes being offered. However, these also require a lot of resources as well as personal guidance for learners. The Finnish example underlines the well-developed social dialogue between the ministry and the education social partners, the high qualification and motivation of teachers, and the attractiveness of the VET system as it offers flexible pathways for learners. As such it is a prime example of how the VET sector can be improved. In general, the Finnish reforms are considered as positive



developments by employers as well as education trade unions. Through the new competence-based approaches integrated in the Finnish VET reforms the continued labour market relevance of VET as well as lifelong learning opportunities have been strengthened and stronger links with the labour market have been created. However, as stated in the previous section, the impact of the pandemic can also not be underestimated when looking at the Finnish VET sector, as distance learning provides a particular challenge to VET, due to its applied focus, and protecting the mental health of students during this period became possibly more important than ever. In general, it was concluded that the Finnish reforms provided an adequate answer to the demands of our new times regarding lifelong learning opportunities, adaptability, flexibility and individual learning pathways. This is largely due to the active contribution of the education social partners in shaping and implementing the reform through social dialogue with the government and other stakeholders. However, the challenges presented by the Covid-19 crisis in relation to public funding to VET is a current problem in the implementation of the reform, which in turn could hinder students' right to learning. In addition, the Finnish case study also underlined the attractiveness of the country's education system and showed the importance of espousing a mentality of shared responsibility, which makes people feel that they have a stake in the development and advance of society in general and, in this case, education and VET in particular. Such aspects can definitely also be transferred to other countries' systems, in the context of peer learning.

2.6. Adult learning and teaching of digital skills to older people and vulnerable groups in Germany

Another main aspect related to the topic of the project is adult learning and providing digital skills to older people as well as to vulnerable groups. These issues were the focus of the German PLA, which was held online in June 2021. The event was co-organised by the German social partners in education (BBB and GEW). Overall, contributions to this PLA found that in Germany's quite complicated educational structures for adult learning, there is inadequate funding to provide vulnerable groups with the skills they need to be able to participate in today's labour market. Low-skilled adults are often left behind whereas highly skilled workers have more further training opportunities. This is why the project participants concluded that more investments in adult education in general as well as specifically into its digital infrastructure was needed and that improving initial and continuous professional development of the adult educators was required, not just in Germany but across Europe. Connected with this, the precarious working conditions for educators in publicly funded further education institutions in Germany were discussed and the importance of ensuring sustainable public investment in adult and further education to enable more permanent contracts for teaching staff and collectively negotiated salaries was outlined. This point, among others, is reflected in the Joint Recommendations which were formulated for this project.

Participants also had the opportunity to discuss and share their views on the attractiveness of adult learning, as well as on the employment conditions of teachers working in adult learning. Education social partners underlined that employees in the sector faced poor salaries, bad working conditions and precariousness, which have a big impact on the recruitment and retention of education personnel and on the quality of adult learning and further education. In some countries (Länder), adult learning teachers with temporary contracts do not have access to digital equipment which has caused serious problems during the remote teaching phase due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants also pointed out the diversity among federal countries (Länder) in relation to qualification requirements

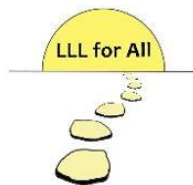


and initial education of adult learning teachers. The need for efficient and meaningful social dialogue was raised to help ensure better working conditions for adult learning teachers. Education social partners are also needed to promote policies that focus more on the 'wider' benefits of learning, particularly for later in life. Too often, education and acquiring skills seem to be solely assessed on the grounds of which economic benefits they may bring, which is why investment in lifelong learning after retirement often needs a special justification. In addition, the 'transition function' of adult education (particularly in respect to older people) was also highlighted alongside the importance of making older people feel relevant and communicate to them that their contributions to society are still valued. Particularly during the pandemic, the importance of digital skills and digital learning opportunities became even more relevant for older people. The PLA has highlighted that education social partners have a key role to play in order to prevent the exclusion of vulnerable groups from education and consequently from the labour market.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, the VET sector faces some incredible challenges, related to a seemingly low prestige of some of the professions and a low level of attractiveness of the VET teaching profession, with a higher tendency for education staff to be employed in temporary contracts than in the general education sector. Further challenges relate not only to overcoming the difficulties and disruptions vocational and work-based education and training has experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic but also to the broader challenges of digitalisation and green skills in education, which will continue to become more important on the labour market of tomorrow. In order to make VET accessible for all, there is a need for effective social dialogue with the education social partners to help improve the role of the VET sector in the twin transitions as well as a necessity to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights. Overall, this project has underlined the importance of the role of education social partners in improving the quality and inclusiveness of the VET sector, including apprenticeships, which not only supports learners' employability but also their social inclusion. It has also demonstrated the need for schools to turn into centres for innovation and practical education to help VET-learners to become the backbone of our new economy.

The PLAs held have certainly presented some key take-away points of the project which were then also once more reflected upon in a final conference, held on 28 September 2021. This conference offered participants the opportunity to get acquainted with the outcomes of this project, as well as to discuss the future of VET and the role education social partners and social dialogue plays within it. Most importantly, the conference aimed at introducing the 'EFEE/ETUCE Joint Policy Recommendations on Lifelong Learning for All'. The central role of education social partners in the success of VET and LLL systems was discussed in relation to the latest OECD report, which stated that 53% of principals of education institutions had found teacher recruitment difficult over the last three years due to an ageing teacher population and low attractiveness of the profession. In many places in Europe, VET teachers with temporary positions are not able to find a permanent job and the average VET teachers' salaries are 8% less than those of teachers in general education. Therefore, it was underlined that effective social dialogue with them at national, regional and school level needs to be ensured to achieve the goals of the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which is to make quality and inclusive VET a reality for all learners. The importance of the education social partners within the new CEDEFOP project on setting up an EU-wide survey on VET teachers and trainers was also addressed. The speakers from CEDEFOP and the European Commission pointed out that the joint



ETUCE/EFEE recommendations were an important contribution to the implementation of the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (2018), which identified 14 criteria to guide member states to improve their apprenticeship systems and focuses also on the VET teachers' role within.

Furthermore, education social partner representatives from Finland, Slovenia, Portugal, the Netherlands and Germany shared their experiences on the role of education social partners in VET. They underlined the needs of VET teachers and trainers to well-being, decent working conditions and salaries, continuous professional development and the importance of cooperation between ministries, providers and teachers. The education social partners also discussed that social dialogue regarding VET and LLL remains limited in many contexts. Moreover, whilst Covid-19 had forced systems towards digitalisation and more innovation, problems of inclusiveness, adequate teacher training, and sustainable investment are still major challenges. This includes the need to fund apprenticeships and practical VET, which cannot easily be conducted online.

As already emphasised previously, the findings of the project were channelled into 11 Joint Recommendations, which are addressed to EU institutions, the EU Member States, and national, regional and local decision-makers. Some of the recommendations are more broadly focused on the education system and its inclusiveness, on sustainable partnerships between VET institutions, companies and education social partners and on the quality of such institutions. Others focus more on the role and needs of certain actors within the VET systems, addressing specific needs of students, learners, teachers, trainers and also school leaders. These recommendations cover a broad spectrum of issues and actors related to the promotion of quality and inclusiveness in VET and lifelong learning, with two of them also specifically focusing on social dialogue and the involvement of education social partners, which will be crucial in order to make European VET systems more attractive, inclusive and if we want to enhance lifelong learning opportunities for all.



Annex: Joint Policy Recommendations

As social partners in education representing both education employers and education workers, EFEE and ETUCE call upon the **EU institutions, the EU Member States, national, regional and local decision-makers** to

1. Promote fair and sustainable **partnerships** between VET institutions, companies and education social partners in order to create more and high-quality apprenticeships and work-based learning for all learners;
2. Improve the **quality** of VET institutions to enhance good learning environments for students and supportive work environments for teachers, trainers, school leaders and other education personnel in relation to digital and green transition of VET institutions and in light of the recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. Develop innovative and flexible learning pathways that increase positive incentives to participate in VET and adult learning and increase the responsiveness of vocational education and training systems to **meet the needs of learners** and the society and to ensure smooth transitions from school to work and occupational progression for every individual.
4. Support the access of VET teachers, trainers, other education personnel and school leaders to quality and inclusive initial education and continuous **professional development**, upskilling and reskilling especially on professional technical skills in order to co-align with the needs of learners, the labour market and quality work. Professional development needs to be included in necessary reforms which are co-designed with the education social partners.
5. Guarantee the involvement of **education sector social partners** in the development of high quality VET, apprenticeships and work-based learning schemes and ensure effective and meaningful social dialogue with the social partners in the education sector which needs to be reinstated in many EU countries during and following the COVID- 19 crisis.
6. Ensure **democratic school governance** with the involvement of all relevant school actors (learners, teachers, trainers, school leaders, education personnel, parents, etc).
7. Ensure that all **students and learners**, regardless of **their socio-economic background**, have access to high-quality and inclusive vocational education and training that is an attractive learning option which is free of gender and social stereotypes, and provide effective support to the most vulnerable groups, in particular migrants and refugees, people with disabilities, unemployed youth and adults as well as early school leavers,



8. Promote further and sustainable **investment** for quality, inclusiveness, attractiveness, innovation and excellence in the VET systems especially for technical developments of VET institutions. In addition, bring targeted investments to ensure decent and supportive working environment for teachers, trainers, school leaders, and other education personnel to promote quality and inclusive teaching.
9. Increase the **attractiveness of the profession** of the VET teachers, adult learning educators, VET trainers, school leaders and other education personnel by improving recruitment processes, ensuring their retention and decent working conditions, and by promoting stable employment in the sector.
10. Promote and assure the **international cooperation** and **mobility** of students, teachers, trainers, and school leaders as part of their lifelong learning.
11. Facilitate meaningful and sustainable cooperation between different European, national, and regional/local **educational social partners and other stakeholders** in vocational education and training and lifelong learning which can take place in various formats.