



VETprep

Empowering Europe's Youth through VET

Enhancing Youth Participation in VET

Insights and recommendations from the VETprep project research on VET systems, policies, and strategies in European contexts

Policy Brief – VETprep | June 2026



Funded by
the European Union

Target audience

This brief is aimed at policymakers, VET leaders, and stakeholders involved in designing and implementing VET policies at national and regional level across Europe.

Background: Why participation in VET matters now

Vocational education and training (VET) plays a key role in supporting young people's transitions into the labour market, promoting social inclusion, and ensuring a skilled workforce in times of digital and green transformation.

Across Europe, improving participation in VET has become a central policy priority, reflected in EU-level agendas on attractiveness, inclusion, and excellence. Yet persistent challenges remain: uneven participation across social groups, dropout, and continued concerns about the status and perceived value of VET.

Across countries, formal opportunities in VET exist – but young people do not experience them equally. Participation is shaped not only by programme supply, but by:

- **The social status of VET**
- **The quality and timing of guidance**
- **Institutional capacity to support learners**
- **Regional differences in implementation**
- **The practical usability of VET pathways**





Why this matters

Policies to improve VET participation often fail not because the ideas are weak, but because implementation capacity, guidance, funding, and learner support are insufficient or unevenly distributed. Strengthening participation therefore requires attention not only to policy design, but to how policies work in practice.

What we did: Comparative policy analysis

The VETprep WP2 synthesis analyses policies in five European countries (Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Croatia, and Scotland) through:

- **Mapping national policy landscapes (2015–2025)**
- **In-depth analysis of selected policy measures**
- **Comparative synthesis across three focus areas:**
 1. Attractiveness of VET
 2. Transition into VET
 3. Participation and retention



Bringing policies to life: Example measures

Selected examples illustrate how countries address participation challenges:

Country	Measure	
Denmark	Skills Championships	National skills competitions to raise visibility and prestige of VET
	Junior Craftsman Apprenticeship	Early vocational orientation through practice-based learning in school
Estonia	Vocational orientation programme	Preparatory pathways with strong guidance for entry/re-entry
	Support for SEN learners	Structured support systems for learners with special needs
Spain	VET modernisation reforms	System reform to strengthen status, relevance, and visibility of VET
	PROA+ inclusion support	Targeted support for disadvantaged learners to improve retention
Croatia	Career guidance centres (CISOK)	Integrated career guidance services supporting participation and navigation
	Centres of Competence	Regional hubs linking VET provision with labour market needs
Scotland	Foundation Apprenticeships	School-based vocational pathways combining study and work experience
	Targeted bursaries for vulnerable learners	Financial support to reduce barriers for vulnerable learners

These measures show different approaches to improving attractiveness, transitions, and retention – but also highlight that impact depends on implementation conditions.

Five key findings: What shapes participation in VET?

1. Attractiveness, access, and retention are interconnected

Participation cannot be improved through isolated measures. Policies targeting image, entry, and retention need to be developed as coherent policy packages across the learner journey.

2. Participation depends on more than programme supply

Young people's choices are shaped by:

- a. The social status of VET
 - b. The quality and timing of guidance
 - c. Institutional capacity to support diverse learners
-

3. Quick policy wins exist – but are not enough

Quick wins can open doors, but they rarely transform systems alone.

Visibility campaigns, skills competitions, bursaries, and guidance tools can be introduced relatively quickly. However, their impact depends on whether they are embedded in stable funding, institutional routines, and broader reform strategies.

4. Implementation capacity is decisive

Policies are only effective if systems have:

- a. Clear roles and responsibilities
 - b. Coordination across education, employers, and services
 - c. Professional capacity (teachers, counsellors, mentors)
 - d. Sustainable funding and monitoring
-

5. Formal access is not the same as real access

Legal rights, pathways, or entitlements are not sufficient if learners face:

- a. Weak guidance or lack of awareness
- b. Institutional and administrative barriers
- c. Regional inequalities
- d. Limited support capacity

Access must be usable in practice, not only formally available.

Recommendations: How to strengthen participation in VET

1. Develop coherent policy packages across the learner journey

Align policies across:

- a. Attractiveness and awareness
- b. Transition and entry
- c. Retention and completion

Design policies as integrated systems rather than isolated measures.

2. Invest in implementation capacity from the start

Build capacity to deliver policies effectively:

- a. Strengthen teacher, mentor, and guidance competencies
- b. Fund coordination roles linking education and employers
- c. Ensure access to specialist support (e.g. inclusion, counselling)

Treat frontline capacity as part of the policy – not an add-on.

3. Ensure sustainable and equitable funding

Stabilise funding to:

- a. Scale successful initiatives beyond pilots
- b. Avoid dependence on short-term project funding
- c. Reduce regional inequalities

Funding design is implementation design.

4. Strengthen vocational orientation and guidance

Take concrete action to:

- a. Introduce early and structured vocational orientation
- b. Ensure accessible, high-quality career guidance
- c. Provide bridging programmes for vulnerable learners

Focus on informed choice and equitable access.

5. Make monitoring and evaluation actionable

Build monitoring into implementation:

- a. Track participation, completion, and dropout
- b. Monitor regional differences and equity gaps
- c. Assess guidance quality and support provision
- d. Evaluate whether measures are implemented as intended

Use evaluation for continuous improvement – not only accountability.

6. Make equity and vulnerable learners a core priority

Ensure policies explicitly address:

- a. Socioeconomic disadvantage
- b. Special educational needs
- c. Care experience
- d. Weak attachment to education

Participation policies must actively reduce inequalities, not only increase overall numbers.



VETprep

Empowering Europe's Youth through VET



Key takeaway

Effective VET policy is not the result of a single intervention. It depends on whether system design, implementation capacity, and learner support are aligned.

The central policy task is not only to create VET opportunities, but to ensure that they are visible, accessible, supported, and usable for diverse groups of young people.



Want to know more?

Contact: contact@vetprep-project.com

Read more: vetprep-project.com



VETprep – Grant Agreement No. 101177858



Funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.