

*Project “Regional Support for Inclusive Education”*

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by the European Union  
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by the Council of Europe

*An inclusive school is a school where:  
every child is welcome,  
every parent is involved,  
every teacher is valued.*

**The First Meeting of the Policy Working Group on VET**

***REPORT***

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**June, 2014**

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## Summary

**The first regional meeting of the working groups on VET** held in Turin on **16-17 June 2014** brought together Regional Inclusive PolicyNet members from seven Beneficiaries of the Joint EU/CoE Project *Regional Support for Inclusive Education* in SEE. Its objectives were to (1) *discuss the findings from the Mapping research on VET policies and practices* for social inclusion and social cohesion and a *Baseline survey on inclusive policies and practices*, and (2) *obtain feedback* from the participants about the findings and *agree on how the VET working group will use this evidence* in their further policy work.

During the meeting, several processes and studies were presented including those on the *Torino process* and how it links up to SEE perspectives of the region and the national progress against EU benchmarks on education and socio-economic development, the findings from the Mapping research on VET policies and practices for social inclusion and social cohesion conducted by the ETF and the Baseline survey on inclusive policies and practices in the SEE conducted in the framework of this project.

In the end of the meeting, the participants were able to come up with several common regional priorities in the area of VET which were highlighted through the study reports conducted at both beneficiary and regional levels. Discussions at smaller working groups produced set of specific common recommendations requiring policy actions which were largely related, but not limited, to:

- **the importance of the role of the school principal** in implementation of inclusive practices and the need to continuously professionalize this function;
- all teachers working in VET schools should receive **initial training which include theoretical and practical modules on the inclusive education practices** - essential to teacher competencies;
- the need to **update VET curricula** in terms of including aligning them between and across beneficiaries in order to prepare young professionals with skills applicable in wider regional markets;
- developing policy and practice that systematically foster a climate favourable to **children in choosing their future profession based on their abilities, needs, interests carefully blended with the market needs**, and not simply on their parents' choice;
- the need to develop policies and practice which **increase constructive and realistic participation of the community**, especially parents, in the school and vice versa;
- the need to **increase collaboration with school boards and employment offices at all levels in order to identify and create VET profiles** that respond better to market needs and the territorial development vision, through evidence-based research;
- put **increased focus on the monitoring of implementation of cross-sectorial cooperation legislation**.
- **career development, professional orientation and selection**, has to start a lot earlier and with a real purpose.
- the continuous need to **promote a common and wide understanding of what inclusive education really is**.

## Background of the meeting

South East European countries have committed themselves to make their education systems open to diversity. The Regional Support for Inclusive Education Project promotes the concept of inclusive education in South East Europe (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" and Kosovo\*<sup>1</sup>) as a reform principle that respects and caters for diversity amongst all learners, with a specific focus on those who are at higher risk of marginalisation and exclusion.

The Project established the *Inclusive PolicyNet*, a multi-composition group of key stakeholders involved in policymaking in education, which will be influencing the policies based on the successful examples from schools and teachers. It has 70 members, comprised of representatives of the Beneficiary Policy Teams - 10 representatives per Beneficiary.

The Beneficiary Policy teams held their first meetings to discuss main issues and challenges for each level and type of education (Primary, General Secondary, and VET). A summary of the Beneficiary Teams' reports was prepared and used as a framework for the first Regional Inclusive PolicyNet meeting. Many of the issues and challenges identified are common to all education levels, but there are also specific issues at each education level.

At the first *Regional PolicyNet* meeting in Sarajevo, on 6 March 2014, the working group on VET was established to identify common VET policy areas across the region. The areas identified are related to raising awareness and making VET more attractive, promoting sectorial cooperation (health, education and labour) and connections with the labour market both in curriculum design as well as in development of work-based learning. Issues related to the quality of VET include teacher training, promoting the capacities of school management, and development of teaching and learning materials.

The group also discussed how to overcome some of the key barriers such as development of selection or entry channels for disadvantaged young people into vocational schools and quality measures (support to students, curriculum and teaching and learning materials, assessments, support to teachers, school level policies and practices, education of non-teaching staff, preventing drop-out, supporting transition) and development of quality assurance in line with European Quality Assurance in VET.

The Inclusive PolicyNet will continue its work in thematic working groups. The main objectives of the working group meetings are to further develop the inclusive education policy priorities identified at each level and type of education and to start discussing policy recommendations for each of these priorities. Once the thematic working groups develop recommendations, the Inclusive PolicyNet will endorse them and agree on the implementation mechanisms.

Given that the European Training Foundation (ETF) is the leader of policy reforms in the VET sector in the SEE region, the Inclusive PolicyNet has established strategic partnership with the ETF. The policy working group on VET will build on achievements and recommendations of the ETF's research on "Mapping of VET policies and practices for social inclusion and social cohesion in the Western Balkans, Turkey and Israel". This project

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<sup>1</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

was launched in 2012 as the ETF's regional initiative to address the linkages between VET and social inclusion in SEE, Turkey and Israel. The aim of the project was to deepen the countries' understanding of the main barriers and potential opportunities for building inclusive and equitable VET systems, given the social and economic challenges facing the region. To achieve these aims, LSE Enterprise research teams in nine countries investigated the impact of VET practice and policy on social inclusion and social cohesion, taking into account the community effects of VET.

*Within the Regional Support for Inclusive Education Project* the LSE Enterprise team of researchers has carried out a baseline study to measure the nature, extent and level of awareness of inclusive education in 49 Pilot schools in the SEE region (out of which 14 are VET schools – 2 per Beneficiary).

The main findings and recommendations from these two researches *provide evidence-based suggestions* on how to enhance the role of VET and its multi-dimensional contributions to the promotion of skills, socialisation, civic values, social inclusion and social cohesion.

## Meeting Participants

The participants of the meeting comprised representatives of the working group on VET, part of the PolicyNet teams, from the seven Beneficiaries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" and Kosovo<sup>\*2</sup>). Besides them, the meeting was attended by several officials and representatives of the European Training Foundation (ETF), researchers from the London School of Economics Enterprise (LSEE) engaged in the preparation, implementation and the analysis of the data deriving from the Baseline survey on inclusive policies and practices in the SEE commissioned by the project, representatives of Network of Education Policy Centres (NEPS), the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the Council of Europe.

A full list of participants can be consulted in the relevant annex to this report.

The meeting was hosted by and at the premises of the ETF.

## Presentations and Discussions

The regional meeting of the working groups on VET lasted for two days. Its main goals were:

1. to discuss the findings from the Mapping research on VET policies and practices for social inclusion and social cohesion and a Baseline survey on inclusive policies and practices in order to look at the secondary vocational education from the wider perspective with the emphasis on the Torino process
2. to obtain feedback from the participants - through discussions in working groups - about the findings and agree on how the VET working group will use this evidence in their further policy work

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<sup>2</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

The meeting was opened by Mr Henrik Faudel, Head of Geographical Operations Department, ETF, Ms Lida Kita, Specialist in VET and Social Inclusion, ETF and Ms Vesna Atanasova, Senior Project Officer, Council of Europe. Their opening remarks emphasised the importance of Vocational Education and Training and focused on the role of the PolicyNet, as an expert platform for the exchange of good practices and experiences, in informing the necessary reforms in this sector.

### **Torino Process 2014**

Ms Evgenia Petkova, ETF Specialist in VET and Social Inclusion held a presentation on the *Torino Process 2014* discussing *VET in relation to social demand and social inclusion*. Ms Cristina Mereuta, ETF Labour Market Specialist presented *HRD monitoring and assessment tools and their relevance for linking up national progress to European benchmarks*. During the presentations it was highlighted that the national level biennial assessments in VET are currently being realized for the third time (2010, 2012 and 2014) and that a gradual improvement has been noted in the reporting. The main difference from the first round where the participating beneficiaries wanted to show how well they are doing in this sector is that now the respondents have become more critical wanting to show also areas requiring additional improvements. In addition, during 2014 one extra condition was introduced in the process: the need for each participating beneficiary to define three priorities that require additional efforts for the following assessment period.

The *Torino process* is designed to help the participating country to see where it stands in comparison to other surrounding countries and what the areas requiring additional efforts are. It is guided by four main principles: national ownership, participation as policy learning, holistic approach (VET linking economic and social demands) and evidence/knowledge-based assessment. However, it is important to know that there cannot be set a single and same goal for all the countries. It is always necessary to research the context in which the assessment is being developed. Even then, the data are not the only important output but what is done with them, i.e. the way the data are being used. The process goes through several phases in each country and then country-level reports are generated which in the end are aggregated in a single analytical framework. The 2014 framework comprises indicators and data a) on *vision and strategy*, b) *addressing economic and labour market demand*, c) *addressing social and inclusion demand*, d) *internal efficiency of the VET system*, and e) *governance and policy practices*. The current Process has set the following three policy objectives: 1. Promote social inclusion as integral part of VET policies and of national VET reforms, 2. Support – with policy analysis, expertise and capacity building measures - VET systems to provide tailored and flexible response towards the diverse needs of learners, and 3. Promote a broader understanding of disadvantage as part of diversity and the need to develop systemic responses to it within the paradigm of inclusive education.

### **ETF and CoE studies**

During the meeting the results of two studies were presented: *Mapping VET policies and practices for social inclusion and social cohesion (ETF, 2013)* and *Baseline survey on inclusive policies and practices (CoE, 2014)*. A general introduction of the methodology and the general result framework of these studies was presented by Mr William Bartlett, Senior Research Fellow, European Institute, London School of Economics (LSE). While in the ETF study 27 VET schools from nine countries were involved, the CoE study assessed the current level of implementation of inclusive education policies and practices, based on selected indicators from the dimensions of the *Index for Inclusion* (Booth and Ainscow, 2002), of 14 VET schools from seven beneficiaries. Only four schools were common in both studies. The most important findings from both studies are:

- **Primary schools are more inclusive than secondary schools.** In most of the countries the VET schools are much more inclusive than gymnasias (general high schools),
- **Smaller schools are more inclusive than bigger schools.**
- **The degree of inclusiveness of a school is different among various groups of respondents.** Therefore, school principals and teachers give higher score to the inclusiveness of the school in comparison to pupils and parents. These are things the practitioners should focus on in order to bring closer these opposing attitudes since parents are *the clients* and they cannot be excluded. It could also be concluded that both, teachers and parents gave socially desirable answers.
- **VET schools have relatively weak connections with the employers from the surrounding communities.**
- **There is a strong connection between the family backgrounds of students and enrolling in a VET school:** if parents finished studies in a VET school, their children most commonly would also enrol in a VET school too.
- **Children with developmental delays are less happy at school in comparison to other children.**
- **Often extremely low scores are used for the assertions.** Generally, the dimension which evaluates belonging and the climate in the school, involvement of parents, and involvement in extracurricular activities would obtain the lowest score in the assessment.
- **Roma children are there in the schools, but they are not really included.**
- **It is extremely important to know that the system is responsible for the needs of all pupils** and not to include only certain groups of them because it is easier that way.
- **There is different understanding of inclusive education among and within schools.**
- **Different groups of pupils do not get the same treatment.**
- **Schools do not make an effort to introduce their values to the parents.**
- **The role of the school principal in the perception of the inclusion is very important.**
- **Teachers are generally not well-trained in order to implement inclusive practices.**

Some of the key recommendations deriving from these studies include:

- Review selectivity of system
- Improve quality of buildings and equipment
- Update and innovate the curricula
- Improve teachers' skills for inclusive practice
- Strengthen links with business sector and labour market
- Include parents in school activities and governance
- Promote extra-curricular activities
- Provide more formal career guidance

### **Focus Groups in VET pilot schools**

The results of the meetings with focus groups in VET pilot schools were presented by Ms Svetlana Jurko, Platform Manager, Network of Education Policy Centers (NEPC). The meetings were carried out in 14 VET schools in seven countries. A total of 56 focus group meetings were held (4 focus groups in each schools, namely with parents, students, school staff and local community). Through focus group meetings the researchers were able to list

some of the typical barriers to inclusion in our regions, consisting of: gender stereotyping, violence in schools including bullying students with special educational needs (SEN), or those who do not attend religious classes, resistance of parents of students without SEN against inclusion of students with SEN. etc. Conversation in the focus groups also revealed a non-exhaustive list of perceptions related to the provision of education in VET schools, among which:

- **VET schools are increasingly being marginalized** in societal perceptions mainly due to the prevailing belief that only university studies are good enough for employment;
- **In mixed schools/centres, students who attend VET classes are marginalised** and arrangements for these students are done separately;
- **VET schools believe that they are not powerful enough** to do more for themselves;
- **VET schools' teachers do not treat all students equally,**
- **Assessment in VET schools is not transparent;**
- **Separate education (non-mainstream) is considered as less important;**
- **Little is done to reduce the violence in VET schools;**
- **Decisions are mostly made "from the top"**, without discussing it with the school employees, parents and students.

At the same time many schools report to have attempted to undertake some targeted inclusive education measures including the application of individual learning plans, remedial classes and additional tutorials for students with learning difficulties or at risk of dropping out, subsidising the access of students at risk of socio-economic exclusion to school and to extra-curricular activities, etc.

In the end, the presentation of the work done in focused groups concluded with a few key recommendations including as follows:

- Increase parental and community involvement in school affairs;
- Improve the image of VET schools in the community;
- Develop and enforce policies aiming at reducing school violence;
- Develop a school holistic support;
- Improve the physical infrastructure of schools;
- Provide additional training for school staff

### **Beneficiary-level research data**

Individual researchers presented their country-level research data from each of the seven Beneficiaries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" and Kosovo\*<sup>3</sup>. In 10 minutes each, the researchers presented their key findings which were followed by a series of questions and discussions. In spite of differences, in the end a set of common findings were drawn which are grouped as follows:

- **School principals are very often political appointees** and this brings about a distinct lack of professionalism in school management;
- **Curricula in our region are largely outdated!**
- **Teachers' skills for inclusive practice are not adequate;**

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- **There is a persisting missing link of VET schools with the labour market;**
- **There is a lack of inter-sectorial cooperation;**
- **There is lack of parents` involvement** in school activities and governance;
- **There is lack of formal career guidance** influencing enrolment in VET schools and lack of professional orientation and selection;
- **There is lack of opportunity for vocational (pre)qualifications.**

### **Attractive VET is inclusive VET ..... and a lot more!**

In order to keep sight of the big picture on VET and give an impulse to the discussions, Ms Elizabeth Watters, ETF senior specialist in VET policy and system development, presented a series of remarks on the purpose of VET, what makes it attractive for young people and what conditions help to make it more attractive as well as an outline of EU policy support in making VET more attractive. The latter consist of the EU Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF) for VET and the EQAVET tools to support VET quality assurance improvement. The presentation appealed for keeping the right balance between the social and the employment perspectives towards VET concluding that accessible and inclusive VET schools provide conducive environments for individuals to acquire knowledge, skills and competences for employment. In specific, in order for VET to be more attractive to young people it is necessary that:

- **VET qualifications must have currency** in the labour market.
- **VET must offer access** to other education and training opportunities.
- **VET must be inclusive, appealing, have high status and a positive image.**
- **Information** on VET must be **reliable** and **guidance** services must be **effective**.
- The **quality** and relevance of VET must be **assured**.

The presentation listed a number of actions that could be taken in order to achieve these qualities.

In addition, Mr Martiño Rubal of ETF presented *The profile of NEETs in ETF Partner Countries*. NEETS is defined as *young people who are not in education, training and employment*. The presentation focused on the characteristics of NEETS, including risk factors, as well as on the role of VET in preventing early leaving and dropout and in making young people's transition from school to the labour market smoother.

## **Group Work**

The third part of the meeting consisted of group work. The participants were divided into three smaller groups in order to discuss how the finding and results of the research studies presented during the two days could be used in order to inform further VET-related policy work. In the end, each of the three groups came up with 5-6 recommendations. A set of common recommendations from all groups is provided in the following part of this report: Outputs of the Meeting.

## **Outputs of the Meeting**

1. **Professionalisation of school management** by strengthening professional competencies of school management and other employees in the development and improvement of policy, culture and practice of inclusive education.

2. **Professionalisation of school management** by strengthening professional competencies of school management and other employees in the development and improvement of policy, culture and practice of inclusive education.
3. **Update VET curricula** by aligning them **in terms of inclusion** between and across Beneficiaries in order to prepare young professionals with skills applicable in wider regional markets.
4. **Increase cross-sectorial cooperation** by establishing collaboration with school boards and employment offices; increasing community participation; organising targeted VET fairs and forming school-business partnerships with local companies.
5. **Increase VET career opportunities** earlier in the system by establishing peer mentoring schemes, developing policy and practice that systematically foster a climate favourable to children in choosing their future profession based on their abilities, needs, interests carefully blended with the market needs, and not simply on their parents' choice.

## **Annexes**

**Annex 1: Meeting Agenda**

**Annex 2: List of Participants**

**Annex 3: Presentation *Torino Process 2014, VET in relation to Social Demand and Social Inclusion***

**Annex 4: Presentation *HRD monitoring and assessment tools and their relevance for linking up national progress to European benchmarks***

**Annex 5: Presentation *ETF and CoE studies on VET and Social Inclusion***

**Annex 6: Presentation Analysis of Focus Group Reports**

**Annex 7: Presentations Country Specific Findings**

**Annex 8: Presentation *The profile of NEETs in ETF Partner Countries***

**Annex 9: Presentation *Attractive VET is inclusive VET ..... and a lot more!***