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Biruta Sloka *Editors*

Empowering At-Risk Youth in and Through Vocational Education

A Comparative View of the Baltic
Countries and Norway

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Preface

This book presents the findings of a research study conducted in the Baltic Research Programme Project “Vocational education and workplace training enhancing social inclusion of at-risk young people” (EmpowerVET) funded by a grant from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway as part of the EEA Grants (www.empowervet.net). The research was carried out between January 2021 and June 2023.

The main research goal was to investigate the ways in which vocational education and training (VET) can enhance the social inclusion of at-risk young people, in terms of combating school dropout and supporting transitions between various (social) learning contexts, such as the school-work transition. Students of VET institutions are increasingly diverse and include students with migrant backgrounds and those with special educational needs. This calls for flexible solutions, new approaches, models, and methods to ensure student wellbeing, the development of basic skills, autonomy and self-regulation skills relevant to a successful life and career. Target groups are young people at risk of social exclusion and the system(s) of VET seeking, for their part, to prevent young people from becoming a risk group. The research was carried out in four countries—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway. These countries represent different institutional models of skills development, VET, and employment. The Baltic countries represent school-based VET systems that have been reformed by adhering to neoliberal policy agendas, whereas the process in Norway is largely shaped by the model of the Nordic welfare state with a strong component of dual training and work-based learning. This enabled us to discover the variety of inclusion and empowerment approaches offered by the VET systems and to explore policy learning opportunities. Furthermore, the models and approaches for education and skills development typical in the Nordic countries have been considered to be the ones to follow during the various periods of reconstruction when focusing on the development of skills and the welfare systems of the Baltic countries.

The study had three focus areas. First, we explored how young people at-risk of social exclusion and marginalization themselves experience and understand their opportunities, prospects and limitations in the context of VET, and in what way the institutional factors affect their prospects. Second, we analysed existing best practices, particularly those that involve innovative approaches, methods, and tools

to support social inclusion and the prevention of dropout from VET institutions, including the workplace context and the local institutions providing learning opportunities. Third, based on our findings, we have been developing and piloting innovative approaches (interventions), methods and technology-based tools for supporting both at-risk youth to develop their key skills (vocational and personal) and their VET teachers to advance their instructional approaches and practices.

We hope that this book will serve as a useful reference and interesting source of information for researchers of social integration, employment, VET policy and practice. The book could also inform policy makers and institutions working in the design and development of education, training, employment, and social cohesion. Finally, we warmly welcome VET teaching staff and other representatives of the VET schools to explore this book for know-how and inspiration on the design of inclusive and empowering educational practices.

Kaunas, Lithuania
Stavanger, Norway
Tallinn, Estonia
Riga, Latvia
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Abbreviations

AVPD	Activation of Vocational and Personal Development
BP	Best Practice
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CVET	Continuing Vocational Education and Training
CVT	Continuing Vocational Training
E&T	Education and Training
EASNIE	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
EC	European Commission
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
ECVET	European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training
EDUlab	Educational Learning Lab Approach
EHIS	Education Information System
EPS	Educational Pedagogical Service
EQAVET	European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training
EQF	European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning
ESCO	Classification of European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations
ESF	European Social Fund
EstQF	Estonian Qualification Framework
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
GE	General Education
HE	Higher Education
HRD	Human Resource Development
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPL	Individual Learning Plan
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
IVET	Initial Vocational Education and Training
KAM	Knowledge Appropriation Model

LLL	Lifelong Learning
LO	Learning Outcome
LQF	Latvian Qualification Framework
LTQF	Lithuanian Qualification Framework
NAV	Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration
NDET	Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training
NEET	Not in Education, Employment, nor Training
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NQF	National Qualification Framework
NQS	National Qualifications System
ODP	Open Data Portal
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PHARE	Poland and Hungary Aid for Economic Restructuring
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PTE	Professional Tertiary Education
R&D	Research and Development
SECs	Sector Expert Councils
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SME	Small and Medium Enterprises
SQF	Sectoral Qualification Framework
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
TVET	Technical Vocational Education and Training
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WB	World Bank
WBL	Work-Based Learning
WHE	World Health Organization

Chapter 1

Vocational Pathways in and for the Integration of At-Risk Youth: Concepts, Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology



Tarja Tikkanen, Meril Ümarik, and Krista Loogma

Abstract This chapter introduces the main parameters of the study, as well as the rationale, purpose and objectives of the book. It also presents an overview of the social and institutional context of the research topic, empowerment of at-risk VET students. We highlight the state of the art and current limitations of research on vocational integration and empowerment of at-risk youth in VET and working life. We also introduce the key concepts of our study, and the main theoretical frameworks applied, the socio-ecological approach and the resiliency or protective process approach, addressing also critical accounts to VET when it comes to students who are at-risk of social exclusion and marginalization. Further, the chapter describes our research methodology built on mixed methods design, closing with brief introductions to the book chapters.

Keywords Empowerment · VET students at-risk · Social exclusion · Resilience · Socio-ecological theory

1 Background

The topic of this book is part of the broader issue of educational inequity and current efforts to improve equity and inclusion in education. Equitable education and training systems are “expected to ensure that young people’s educational performance is decoupled from individual circumstances such as socio-economic status – the latter often captured by parental education and occupation, or household income” (European Commission 2022, 7) and inclusive education and training systems are those

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that are “responsive to the outcomes and experiences faced by specific population sub-groups [besides socio-economic status, young people that have been traditionally marginalised and/or discriminated against in education and training]” (European Commission 2022, 7). It is exactly the vulnerable students in vocational education and training (VET), at-risk of school drop-out and social exclusion that this book focuses on and that were the main target group of the international research project, *Vocational Education and Workplace Training Enhancing Social Inclusion of At-risk Young People (EmpowerVET, 2021–2023)*, which the book is based on. We investigated how VET can enhance their social inclusion and the successful completion of their education and transition into working life. Consequently, we approached the challenge of school dropout and the social exclusion of young people from the perspective of VET and the transitions between various (social) learning contexts, such as from school to work (Bruin et al. 2023; Tikkanen et al. 2024; Tütlys et al. 2022). We defined vulnerable students and youth in accordance with the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) (2022a, b), as it refers to learners at risk of exclusion—their ‘vulnerability’—“representing better [than special educational needs (SEN)] the broader vision and rights-based approach of including all learners in education.” In this book, we use the concepts of students at risk of social exclusion and vulnerable students interchangeably, seeking to avoid insensitive expressions such as ‘at-risk’ students.

Education, at the minimum upper secondary level, is a key factor affecting the employment prospects of young people and preparing them for lifelong learning (Schmid and Garrels 2022). The *European Education and Training Monitor 2022* (European Commission 2022, 7) showed that there were about 3.1 million young people in Europe in 2021, who had completed lower secondary education at best, and who were not engaged in education and training, with less than half of them in employment. Upper-secondary level education has potential to empower the vulnerable students at risk of social exclusion with regard to their prospects of entering the labour market (Kazjulja and Roosmaa 2016). Seen from the perspective of the development of the education systems, it has been suggested that future progress with upper secondary education “may require refocusing on the most disadvantaged and hardest-to-reach young people” (European Commission 2022, 30). The development of disadvantage often takes root in the early years, coupled with families’ socio-economic status, but can also be related to later developments through prejudice, discrimination, language barriers, or lack of appropriate services (p. 12). Young people of parents with low levels of education are almost six times more likely to be underachievers at age 15, compared to those with advantaged socio-economic backgrounds (p. 9). Indeed, improving the education and employment prospects and capacities of vulnerable youth is compelling, and especially so, in the countries where the socio-economic and welfare systems are weaker or less developed. In the EmpowerVET the latter continuum has been represented differently by the countries involved, as the chapters of this book will show (see Chap. 6 for a comparative view). The Baltic countries represent liberal market economies, where the VET systems are also relatively recently developed and still seeking their place in the labour markets. In contrast, the socio-economic and historical and cultural foundation of Norway

is the Nordic welfare model, with long-term policy and the practice of tripartite collaboration between the key stakeholders. Furthermore, the VET system, including workplace learning (apprenticeships) is well developed, with its roots dating back more than a hundred years (Michelsen and Høst 2018).

In the sections that follow, first we will present the EmpowerVET research goal and its objectives. Second, we will set the stage regarding vulnerable students in VET, by looking at both the scope of the challenge and presenting the challenge itself in more detail. In this section we will also highlight the challenge from the perspective of VET teachers and schools and their capacity to tackle this challenge. The next section describes the theoretical foundations of the research project, followed by a section explaining the mixed methods research design and methodology. In the final section, we will briefly outline the contents of the book chapters.

2 The Research Goal and Objectives

The main goal of the EmpowerVET research project was to investigate the ways in which VET can enhance the social inclusion of young people at-risk, both in terms of combating school dropout and promoting the transitions between various (social) learning contexts, such as the school-work transition. Funded under the Baltic Research Programme, the participating countries were Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway. The study was informed by the following three research objectives:

- (1) To explore how young people at risk of social exclusion themselves experience and understand their opportunities, prospects and limitations in the context of VET, and in what way the institutional factors affect their prospects.
- (2) To analyse the existing best practices, particularly those that involve innovative approaches, methods, and tools in support of social inclusion and the prevention of dropout from VET institutions, the workplace context and the local institutions providing learning opportunities.
- (3) To conduct an “Educational Learning Lab intervention” to pilot and evaluate innovative approaches, methods and tools to empower teachers and trainers in VET to advance their instructional approach and practices, thereby supporting at-risk youth.

During the last decade and beyond, tackling social exclusion and supporting vulnerable groups (early school leavers, unskilled or low-skilled workers, immigrants and unemployed), has been given a high priority in the European Union’s (EU) policies as well as for those in Norway. The EmpowerVET project has focused on young people at risk of social exclusion and the role of VET as part of the ecosystem supporting inclusion. This project was targeted at young people already at risk of social exclusion (Bruin et al. 2023). Additionally, we considered the system(s) of VET that seek(s), for their part, to prevent young people from becoming a risk group (Tikkanen et al. 2024; Tütlys et al. 2022). Such a dual considerations, necessitate a

broad approach to social inclusion, since the vocational and personal development of a (young) person are both strongly interlinked and mutually dependent.

3 Vulnerable Students in VET and Capacities of Teachers and Schools to Tackle the Challenge

According to Eurostat, almost half (48.7%) of all students in upper secondary education in the EU in 2021 were enrolled in vocational education and training programmes, males were slightly overrepresented (55.5%) (European Commission 2022). Supporting vulnerable students and increasing the upper secondary education completion rates present a challenge across the EU and beyond (OECD). It is particularly pronounced in VET programmes where the completion rates are lower than in general/academic programmes by about 15% on average (OECD 2023a, b). The labour market exclusion manifests in long-term youth unemployment and nonparticipation in employment, education or training or being at risk of social exclusion and marginalisation. Much has already been done to tackle the challenge, with a wide range of supportive policies and practices in place (Cedefop 2022). Reducing youth unemployment and increasing their engagement in education and working life has been high on the EU and member state policy agenda (Cedefop 2021). A range of EU-level initiatives and measures have been adopted to these ends, for example, the Europe 2010 flagship initiative “Youth on the move” (2010), “Youth Guarantee” (2013), and ‘Investing in Europe’s Youth’ (2016). The current EU’s Youth Strategy for the period 2019–2027 focuses on three areas of action: engagement, connection, and empowerment (European Commission 2018), reinforced in 2020 with the initiative “A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee”, and nomination of the year 2022 as the European Year of Youth.¹ Yet, the challenge prevails.

3.1 Vulnerable Students in VET

Students in (initial) VET are increasingly diverse, including students with migrant backgrounds and those with SEN. In the same vein, vulnerable students are a diverse group, experiencing different psychological, social, socio-economical, cultural or physiological risk factors, or a combination of them (Schmid and Garrels 2022). Over time, these factors may add to student vulnerability, increasing the probability of early school leaving (Jørstad and Nordlie 2021). Studies show that vulnerability is a “cumulative result of multiple risk factors and emphasizes the interrelated effects of various levels of influence, including the family, school, educational system, and broader economic and political context” (Jørstad and Nordlie 2021, p. 48). Vulnerable students can have cognitive, learning-related difficulties, but not necessarily.

¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=88&eventsId=1957&furtherEvents=yes>.

The faces of vulnerability are thus versatile and changing over time, also at an individual level. In the European context, three indicators of vulnerability or of being at-risk are currently monitored: the rates of young people (aged 15–29 years) not in employment, education or training (NEETs), early school leavers/school dropouts (aged 15–29 years), and ‘low-achievers’ (aged 15 years in 2018) (European Commission 2022). The last indicator is a new EU-level indicator for equity in education, using a combined measure of severe educational underachievement: it builds on low achievement in reading, mathematics and science according to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), capturing underperformance on all three proficiency scales simultaneously (p. 11). Based on Eurostat data, Table 1 shows the rates of all the three indicators for all the four countries participating in EmpowerVET. The countries differ in respect of the three indicators and also across them. Estonia is an exception with the rate of all indicators slightly above 10%. Only in Latvia are the NEETs and dropout rates below the EU2030 benchmark (target level), set to below 9% by 2030. High rates of low achieving students, in particular in Lithuania (25.6%), Norway (18.9%), and Latvia (17.3%), in terms of their employment prospects are especially alarming (Table 1). The rates for the combined indicator for PISA 2022 have not been published yet, but separate results in reading, mathematics and science show a decreasing trend in the number of underachievers in all the four countries since 2018, with the exception of a slight increase in science in Latvia (Schleicher 2023).

However, the problems with the NEET indicator are widely recognized, including the fact that not all NEET youth are excluded, and that not all socially excluded young people are revealed by the indicator (Bacher et al. 2013). Nevertheless, the proportion of NEETs is alarmingly high—between 6.3% in Norway and 11.3% in Lithuania (Table 1)—and has been increasing since 2008 (OECD 2018a, b). In most countries, NEET youth are educationally disadvantaged and have lower level of basic skills than non-NEETs. Skills determine the status of NEET, which is alarming since

Table 1 VET and student vulnerability relevant statistics and indicators from Estonia (EE), Latvia (LV), Lithuania (LT) and Norway (NO) in 2021 (%) (EU, 2022 *Education and Training [ET] facts and figures*; *ET Monitor 2022/EU*, 2022)

VET and indicators of vulnerability	EE	LV	LT	NO
NEETs (aged 15–29 years)	10.9	8.6	11.3	6.3
Early school leavers ^a /dropouts (aged 18–24 years)	10.8	6.7	4.8	13.2
Low-achievers ^b (15-year-old in 2018)	10.2	17.3	25.6	18.9
VET students (%)	40.3	40.1	25.6	51.5
Male	47.2	46.4	32.0	59.8
VET student/teacher ratio ^c	19.3	16.9	8.8	10.5

^a “Early leavers are defined as individuals aged 18–24 who have completed at most a lower secondary education and were not in further education or training during the four weeks preceding the [labour force survey \(LFS\)](#).” (Eurostat, 2022: Early leavers from education and training)

^b Low achieving 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics or science by sex (PISA/OECD) (Eurostat)

^c Source Eurostat

early skills (at the end of compulsory education) define later skills (Barth et al. 2019). Moreover, in Norway young migrants, often with lower levels of education than their native-born peers, are strongly overrepresented among NEETs: they are more than twice as likely to be NEETs as their Norwegian-born peers (16% vs. 7.5%), clearly higher than the OECD average (1.5 times) (OECD 2018a, b: 40). The situation is similar in Estonia for the Russian speaking population living in the North-East region of Estonia that is most highly represented among NEETs. In most countries, including the Baltics, women are generally more likely to be NEET (Eurostat 2017). Norway is one of the few countries where young women are not more likely than young men to be NEET (OECD 2018a, b).

In addition to parents and guardians, teachers are the ones who know their students well, not only in academic terms but also in social contexts, in terms of their social skills and relatedness to other students in the schools. Thus, VET providers have more potential than many other institutions to meet vulnerable youth and support them in addressing their challenges, especially through activating measures and through bridging school and work, and preparing students for lifelong learning (LLL). Moreover, the schooling system in the wider sense is a major channel transmitting values, norms and codes of behaviour or, in other words, socializing young people to become active citizens (Nilsson 2010). Indeed, VET can be central in and for the inclusion of diverse groups of students—a “safety net against dropout” (Lavrijsen and Nicaise 2015, p. 307) or a “vehicle for social inclusion” (Herrera et al. 2022, p. 23)—thereby also promoting the goal of education for all (Schmid and Garrels 2022). However, initial VET (IVET) may also become a source of social exclusion, due to the mismatches of provided skills and competencies, changing labour market needs and other problems of the quality of VET provision (Faldet et al. 2022a; Nevøy and Bruin 2022). Comparative studies have found that young people with low education (lower secondary at most), are in the most vulnerable situation in the labour market (Rokicka et al. 2018), similarly to those with migrant backgrounds. Schmid and Garrels (2022, p. 3) propose a holistic approach to the concept of inclusion as that transcending: “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” (Schmid and Garrels 2022, p. 3).

3.2 VET Teachers’ and Schools’ Capacities to Tackle the Challenge of Vulnerable Students and Dropout

Increasing student diversity calls for flexible solutions, novel approaches, models and methods to ensure student wellbeing, development of basic skills, autonomy and self-regulation skills relevant for successful life careers. Overall, it has been proposed that faced with the socio-economic transformation in society, what young people need from education is guidance, including choices for methodology and

life strategies (“education for choice” or “career choice education”), rather than just information (Edwards et al. 2013). The EU Education and Training (ET) Monitor 2023 (European Commission 2023) shows that national education policies and practices in schools are responding accordingly: there is a “new emphasis on well-being at school” in combatting early school leaving, “evident in widespread bullying and violence prevention measures, as well as psychosocial support services EU” (p. 6). This new trend poses new demands on the competence and work performance of vocational teachers and workplace instructors (Cort and Rolls 2010; Sirk et al. 2017). Studies in Estonia (Sirk et al. 2016) on professionalism of vocational teachers have indicated that VET teachers consider students with weak motivation and general skills, and students with special needs, as a major concern, which has added new work roles and challenged their didactic and social-pedagogical competence.

A VET teacher is a “dual profession” that requires both teaching (pedagogical) and vocational competence (Andersson and Köpsén 2015). The professional identity of VET teachers tends more often to be related to their vocational expertise, while they commonly experience a shortage of pedagogical competence. A need for the latter has become more apparent with increasing student diversity. Some studies point out the “fundamental” relevance of inclusion of vulnerable students in VET as the third “transformational” role underlining the VET teaching profession; teachers are supportive change-agents, with a “compensatory” mission in connection with student personal growth (Ryökkönen and Rätty 2022). This role comprises “encouragement and empowerment of the students toward taking more independent actions” (p. 11) and “supporting their students’ social skills and overall well-being” (p. 12), helping students to bridge their educational experiences with working life and beyond. The third role was proposed for vocational SEN teachers (Ryökkönen and Rätty 2022), which is not a common title in many countries, though. However, studies suggest that ordinary VET teachers have performed this role (of a “social worker” or had to “replace parents”) too and competences in this area are increasingly required (Cort and Rolls 2010; Loogma 2020; Sirk et al. 2016; Ümarik and Rekkor 2013). A recent study (Tikkanen et al. 2024) has showed that VET teachers in the Baltic countries are in a difficult situation, because “support to (including) vulnerable VET students in the Baltic countries rests heavily on teachers’ work, since the availability of support staff is limited” (p. 24). The study concludes that “efforts to ‘standardize’ VET teachers’ professional competence, as a measure to raise their status”, on the one hand, and “developments, expanding the concept and adding the complexity to their roles”, on the other hand, take place simultaneously in these countries (p. 24). The data of the ET Monitor 2023 (European Commission 2023) indicate that diversity and inclusion are increasingly addressed in initial teacher training as well as in their continuing professional development, and are mandatory to VET teachers in many countries, and multidisciplinary support teams at schools are becoming more common, providing support to VET teachers in their work with increasingly diverse student populations.

Social exclusion/inclusion is commonly defined primarily in relation to education and work, but the concept is more multidimensional than that (Fangen et al. 2012). The potential of VET systems and schools to deal with the problems of social exclusion, inequalities and polarization in the globalized and digitalised economies

is recognised by many scholars and experts (Piketty 2019; Wooldridge 2021; Tirole 2016; Banerjee Duflo 2019). Schmid et al. (2021) refer to studies that “emphasise the importance of the school level and indicate that the characteristics of and conditions within schools may promote or reduce dropout behaviour”, pointing out how schools “may either push out or hold on to students whose personal characteristics may put them at risk of dropping out”, push-factors being related to schools (structures, practices or conditions within the school itself), while pull-factors—to what is outside schools (p. 48). With respect to the vulnerable position that students with migrant backgrounds often find themselves in, a Nordic study has concluded how the inability of the schools to integrate newcomer students and the discourses that educational systems develop in connection with these students, is causing this situation, making all the good intentions and policies of inclusion in these countries oftentimes to fail (Helakorpi et al. 2023).

While the main reasons for high dropout rate tend to be the wrong career choice and low quality of career guidance (Espenberg et al. 2012), such school-related reasons as low level of general skills and non-motivating teaching methods used in VET, have also contributed to dropout. The apprenticeship system in VET is said to have been more effective in familiarizing students with the labour market realities than the school-based system (Nilsson 2010). In the Baltics, as in many other school-based VET systems, vocational path tends to be a second chance solution (Loogma et al. 2019). Indeed, VET tends to attract students with lower general skills and learning motivation: the comparative study by Altinok (2012), based on the OECD PISA data, showed “that pupils in vocational schools have significantly lower performance than pupils in general education schools in most countries”, pointing out how the “standard characteristics of pupils, such as gender, family education, a proxy of motivation, explain about one-third of pupils’ achievement differences between the two streams” (p. 1). In Estonia, drop-out rates from VET are particularly high during the first year of studies and are higher among male students; almost one out of five male students drop out (Valk 2016) (see Chap. 5). In Norway, the dropout rate from VET is higher compared to other OECD countries (see Chap. 2). In Norway, the first two years of VET are mostly school-based and many students struggle to find an apprenticeship place with a firm for the following, last two years (OECD 2018a, b).

VET institutions and workplace training in companies have a relevant role in integrating youth into the labour market and providing second choice solutions for those with interrupted educational paths. There are good examples in all the four EmpowerVET countries of special training programmes targeted at students without general education or retraining opportunities for the unemployed (Chaps. 2–5). In the Nordic countries special (pre-)vocational training programmes have sometimes been introduced for students with migrant backgrounds. Additionally, there is potential at the level of local community organisations, such as youth work and leisure activities/hobby education providers, to collaborate with VET schools, to contribute to the development of skills and competences of youth at risk of social exclusion and to integrate them into local life.

4 Theoretical Frameworks of the Study

The study is based on two main theoretical frameworks: the socio-ecological approach (Evans et al. 2010) and the resiliency or protective processes approach (Zimmermann 2013). Moreover, in planning, implementing and follow-up of the education intervention, the Educational Learning Lab (EDUlab) model and the Knowledge Appropriation Model (KAM) (Ley et al. 2018) were applied (see Chap. 7), to understand the processes of new knowledge sharing and introducing novel measures to empower vocational teachers and students at risk of social exclusion. At the end of this section we shall also present critics to the strongly positive views to VET, its “superiority” to general education (Nilsson 2010, p. 252), in empowering especially vulnerable youth and helping them in their school-work transition with solid skills and labor market outcomes.

4.1 *The Socio-Ecological Approach*

The project applies the “social ecology” approach as an umbrella for the theoretical framework in the project. Generally, the approach stresses that individuals learn, develop and act in a complex system of various (social) environments and structures, actors and interrelationships (Jacobson and Wilensky 2006; Evans et al. 2011). More specifically, for a student these environments or “learning framework” may include actors, such as parents, teachers, peers, various communities, and digital spaces (OECD 2018a, b) and their interactions. Systems, described in terms of social ecology, tend to be self-regulating and self-sustaining because of the interdependencies and interactions between the parts of a social ecological system (Evans et al. 2011). The more institutionally oriented social ecology framework is complemented by the bioecological model of development suggested by Bronfenbrenner (1979, cited in O’Tool et al. 2020), focusing on the “proximal processes” and thus, interactions in close, immediate environments (O’Tool et al. 2020, p. 21) of an individual’s development and learning. The agentic role of an individual is attenuated in the Bronfenbrenner’s model and developed further as a notion of ecological agency (Biesta and Tedder 2007). It is considered as a person’s capacity to change their situation in their personal “social ecology”. Furthermore, agency implies a sense of responsibility to influence people, events, and circumstances for the better. It requires the ability to frame a guiding purpose and identify actions to achieve the goal (Giddens 1984; Biesta and Tedder 2007). However, the ecological agency turns attention to the context that can enable or restrict the possibilities of exercising agency of an individual.

The social ecology approach has been the basis for socio-ecological analysis of educational trajectories of young people at risk (Loogma et al. 2023). It enables understanding of the role (e.g., restrictive and enabling) of various social environments that young people at risk have been involved in, their learning and development paths, as

well as identifying the factors and actors enabling the development of their competences and exercising of their agency. In our study, the socio-ecological approach is aligned with resiliency or the protective process approach.

4.2 The Resiliency Approach

While research often tends to focus on mapping the risk and problems, the resiliency approach emphasizes positive factors in young people's lives as the basis for positive change strategies (Zimmermann 2013). Resilience theory "focuses attention on positive contextual, social, and individual variables that interfere or disrupt developmental trajectories from risk to problem behaviors, mental distress, and poor health outcomes" (p. 381). These positive factors, also considered as "promotive factors", help to overcome the negative effects of the factors usually related to high-risk exposure (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005). There are two categories of promotive factors: assets and resources. While assets are related to individual level factors, such as self-esteem or self-efficacy, the resources present external factors, such as specific programmes or other initiatives providing support for youth (Zimmermann 2013). Thus, this approach is close to the Activation of Vocational and Personal Development (AVPD) model and the innovative methodology applied in secondary schools in many countries under the 'education for choice' programme (Edwards et al. 2013). In our study, the focus is on identifying and promoting the positive personal strategies and factors supporting the strengths of young people, but also on the broader ecosystem, including vocational institutions as part of it. Our aim has been to provide better understanding of the transitions between different levels of schooling as presenting possibilities for change and transformation, in terms of young people's self-understanding regarding educational trajectories.

4.3 The Educational Learning Lab Approach

As part of the EmpowerVET project, educational interventions were conducted in three countries following the EDUlab approach and the KAM. The EDUlab replaces the linear knowledge transmission model (research creates some new knowledge, it is then introduced into teacher training, teachers apply it in the classroom to the benefit of students) with co-creation (Ley et al. 2018). Educational innovations are expected to lead to more sustainable changes when collaboratively co-created, rigorously tested, and validated in practical settings through the joint efforts of both researchers and practitioners (Broekkamp and Van Hout-Wolters 2007).

The foundation of EDUlab is in the KAM (Ley et al. 2018). The successful co-creation and adoption of innovation relies on an effective transfer of ownership from

the realm of research to practical application and establishing meaningful interactions (Snoek et al. 2017). The process of knowledge creation is inherently collaborative, extending beyond individual boundaries to encompassing interactions in broader communities or social groups (Nonaka et al. 2006; Wenger 2004; Maier and Schmidt 2015). Through dissemination of knowledge within broader communities, it undergoes formalization and standardization (see more about the KAM in Chap. 7). The KAM was applied as an analytical tool when designing interventions in five different settings in Estonia, Lithuania and Norway.

Theoretically, EDUlab is based on the concept of boundary-crossing (Engerström et al. 1995; Akkerman and Bakker 2011) within and between different communities of practice. This approach emphasizes the idea that boundaries are in play in many learning and work processes, not only as barriers to learning, but potentially as stimulating practice (Akkerman and Bakker 2011). Effective co-creation and boundary crossing as learning is enabled by transfer of ownership from researchers to practitioners. In the EmpowerVET project, methods, tools and practices suitable for VET and workplace training settings were explored, developed and piloted as a co-creation process in cooperation with researchers, VET teachers, workplace instructors and learners.

4.4 Critical Perspectives on VET to Help Vulnerable Students to Complete Their Education and Enter the Labour Market

The perspectives in policy, practice, and research on VET are generally, and more specifically for the topic of this book—to support vulnerable students in completing their education and enter the labour market—strongly positive. VET has been championed in a ‘fundamentally’ positive light “as a suitable means of promoting economic growth” (in line with human capital theory) and “as a potentially powerful tool for fostering social inclusion” (Nilsson 2010, p. 251). It is believed to be “superior to general education from a socializing point of view, as well as in terms of promoting access to the labour market” (p. 252). Such a view is common not only in the EU (e.g., VET as “a life jacket” supporting social inclusion of young NEETs, Cedefop 2022) and the OECD countries (asserting for instance that “building strong, flexible and inclusive VET systems, where migrants and refugees can succeed results in broad benefits – not just for migrants, but also for the wider group of students with disadvantaged backgrounds”, Jeon 2019, p. 3), but also in developing countries, such as China, where policymakers “also hope to use VET to help disadvantaged (low income or low-ability) students gain employment” (Loyalka et al. 2015, p. 7). Research, however, has indicated weaknesses in VET’s suggested advantages and benefits, especially for students at risk of exclusion and marginalization. Critics have pointed out the problematics of skills outcomes after completing a VET programme, often questioning their use-value in workplaces—currently and in the longer run—also pointing out

the inclusion challenges, where VET does not seem to have succeeded according to expectations.

Neoliberally oriented VET is criticized for its narrowly instrumental mission, oriented just to the ‘production’ of human capital needed for the market, ignoring its social mission in empowering young people (and not only young) for meaningful work and life (Polesel 2017). This transforms VET into a gateway for social segregation: the pathways for vulnerable groups are very modest in terms of their career, occupational status and social participation, access to higher education or other alternatives for acquiring higher level skills are absent (Sevilla and Polesel 2020). The critique of the outcomes or competence-based VET curricula, related to empowerment of vulnerable learners, reveals fundamental weaknesses and limitations of such curricula in imparting systemic vocational knowledge (powerful knowledge) and providing solid, broad qualifications, necessary in dealing with increasingly complex and knowledge-intensive digitalized work processes and enabling responsible participation in society (Allais 2014; Young 2008; Young and Muller 2013; Wheelahan 2017, 2007). For example, a study looking at the general and vocational education and their labour-market outcomes over the lifecycle found “strong and robust support for” a tradeoff that “with technological change, gains in youth employment may be offset by less adaptability and diminished employment later in life” (Hanushek et al. 2017, p. 48).

Neoliberal policies of VET and employment are also criticized for their excessive focus on the supply side and ignorance of the necessity of policy interventions in the field of improvement of employment opportunities and quality of jobs (Keep 2017; Unwin 2017; Brown et al. 2020). This emphasises the importance of vocational and career guidance, active social dialogue in VET and providing the students facing social exclusion with transversal elements of human capital in order to empower them for sustainable integration in the global job market and to provide them learning opportunities. Learning to know, learning to do and learning to be (Brown et al. 2020), developed in the context of the labour market and work processes (overcoming the separation between knowing and doing—between academic and vocational knowledge), enable VET students to make informed decisions in the contexts of the labour market, work processes and social participation.

Another line of critics targeting VET relies on the foundation of social welfare, pronounced in the UK and Australian research (Appleby and Bathmaker 2006; Hyland 2006; Wheelahan 2007). They explore the issue of social goals in VET, alongside the challenge of learning outcomes in terms of skills for work. The argument in what Hyland (2006) refers to as a “therapeutic turn” in education, is “encouraging a ‘victim culture’ which marginalizes learners and replaces the pursuit of knowledge and understanding with the development of personal values relevant to a life of social, cultural and economic risk and uncertainty” (p. 299). However, such a therapeutic turn can be positive, to the extent it means support for VET students “in making links between occupational knowledge and skills, basic education and workplace experience” (p. 305). Correspondingly, and echoing neoliberal critics, Avis (2023) problematizes VET and its relationship to social justice, posing a question, which is

both empirical and political: “how far can VET be shifted from its occupational moorings to contribute towards a socially just society – or is it inevitably compromised by its close association with the needs of capital and employers?” (p. 455).

Indeed, good intensions of inclusion in the VET policy and practice can bring the opposite result, increased segregation and exclusion/dropout, especially concerning vulnerable students. In terms of the reasons for such outcomes, research refers to different problems and weaknesses, depending on its scope and perspective. Examples are the schools’ migrant “discourse” and incapacity to implement integration (Helakorpi et al. 2023), insufficient VET reforms and institutional change necessary for inclusion to take place (Nilsson 2010), skills erosion outcomes after attending VET programmes compared to academic programmes (Loyalka et al. 2015, p. 2), and “compromising” curriculum and learning goals to a great extent by providing adapted and flexible alternatives (“pedagogies of indifference”, Lingard 2007) to students, who have weak basic skills and are low-motivated (Nevøy and Bruin 2022).

Such findings regarding both skills and inclusion have been attributed in research to conceptual challenges: the VET concept is not unanimous but “multidimensional and can be organized in different ways” (Nilsson 2010, p. 252). This is also the case for inclusion (Faldet et al. 2022b), which is a political principle challenging to transform into effective practices on different societal and cultural premises (beyond *special needs education*—Slee 2018). Finally, VET teachers’ insufficient professional, particularly pedagogic, competence and opportunities in lifelong learning, and VET schools’ limited capacity to support students with different vulnerabilities have increasingly been referred to as concern (OECD 2021; World Bank Group 2023; Tikkanen et al. 2024).

5 Research Design and Methodology

To address the complex and multifaceted research goals of the study, the project was designed as a mixed-method study, comprising three interlinked sub-studies, in which both qualitative and quantitative methods were applied. The design was chosen for the purposes of development and progressive complementarity, so that methodological decisions during later stages of the study could be informed by the results from the earlier stages, but also to allow the results of the earlier stages to be explained and enriched by the analysis in the later stages (Greene 2007). The project was structured into three sub-studies, organized into three separate work-packages. The three sub-studies ran partially in parallel. All four partners participated in the first two sub-studies, while all but the University of Latvia participated in the third sub-study with an intervention.

The mixed methods design, comprised a qualitative study, a quantitative study based on meta-analysis of the existing comparable statistical data, and a desktop study exploring best practice in VET in different schools, across the four countries. Such an approach allowed us to combine multiple perspectives to explore and better understand the research phenomena in question (Cohen et al. 2011).

In the first phase of the study, we focused on understanding personal strategies and institutional factors in VET in supporting or hindering educational and vocational careers of young people. We combined qualitative and quantitative methodologies for this purpose. An explorative qualitative (interpretative) study was conducted, consisting of 79 semi-structured interviews in the four countries with an aim to study the experience of vulnerable young people in VET from their own perspective (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015—for more details about the methodology see Bruin et al. 2023 and the country-specific Chaps. 2–5). In all countries semi-structured interviews were carried out and covered the following topics: (1) biographical information, (2) learning at school or at the workplace, (3) social and educational support at school and in the workplace, (4) participation at school and in the workplace, (5) agency (thoughts about personal impact on school/work), and (6) future perspectives. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed by using a thematic analysis method (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). Additionally, focus group interviews were conducted with the management and staff of vocational schools (teachers, support staff) in all the four countries. The findings from the student interviews and focus-group interviews informed choices for the focus of the intervention studies, aimed to empower educators and vulnerable youth in VET institutions.

At the same time, we analysed available internationally comparable quantitative data and statistics concerning the institutional setup of the vocational education and training systems, responding to the needs of vulnerable students, including the number and ratio of vocational teachers and support staff. Since single data sources allowing comparison across all the four countries were unavailable, a selective meta-analysis across different databases, national and European, was carried out. At the level of VET system analyses, these were added to the analyses of national and international documents and reports about VET and VET teacher training (see more Tikkanen et al. 2024). This analysis enabled us to set the results of the qualitative interview study in the context related to the capacities of VET teachers and schools in tackling the challenges involving vulnerable students in the four countries.

The country specific results of the first phase of the research are provided in Chaps. 2–5.

In the second phase, we carried out a desktop study in each country separately to identify the best practice in VET in supporting inclusion of youth at risk of social exclusion in the participating countries. The data from focus group interviews with staff of vocational schools, carried out in the first phase of the study, supported the desktop study. The best practices were related to institutional contexts and school-level practices and pedagogical approaches in VET.

In the third phase, five intervention studies, following the EDUlab approach and the Knowledge Appropriation Model (Ley et al. 2018), were carried out in three countries—Estonia, Lithuania and Norway. The focus areas of the interventions were selected based on the most problematic areas identified in the interviews with students and staff of vocational schools in the first phase of the study. For example, it became clear that in Estonia mental health was an important area to tackle, while in Norway it was poor language skills of students from migrant background. A total of five interventions were introduced: (1) Designing a learning environment that supports

mental health in a VET institution (Estonia); (2) Propaedeutic work-based learning scenario for empowerment of vulnerable students in a rural VET Centre (Lithuania); (3) Introducing a flipped classroom method to help VET teachers and educators to better understand their capacities to enable pupils at risk of social exclusion to learn and enter the labour market (Lithuania); (4) Strengthening learner engagement and the school community through scaffolding and service learning practices (Lithuania); (5) The Norwegian language support for minority-language apprentices in their third and fourth year of upper secondary school (VET, Norway) (see Chap. 7).

6 An Overview of the Chapters of the Book

The book consists of an introduction and seven chapters. Each chapter puts the EmpowerVET research area in a different perspective. The chapter “*The multi-tiered support and empowerment of youth at-risk of social exclusion in VET in Norway*” gives an overview of the findings of the empirical studies on vocational and labour market integration of such youth in Norway. It explains the specific features of the profile of vulnerable students in VET in this country, the inclusion principle and practice at the core of the whole education system, and the support system available for successful completion of VET, in the context of the Nordic welfare state regime. It also describes how vulnerable students in Norway experience and voice their opportunities, prospects, and limitations in the context of VET, as well as how two VET best practice schools have succeeded in student empowerment through applying available flexible training paths in VET and by exerting effective, multi-tiered collaboration.

The chapter “*Vocational pathways to empowerment for socially vulnerable youth in Lithuania—a typical case of neoliberal reforms?*” explores the implications of the institutional, procedural and curricular reforms of VET provision for its potential to empower vulnerable youth in Lithuania. Emphasis is on the shifts of the VET policy and the reform goals between the social integration and development of human capital according to business needs and the implications of these iterations for the potential of VET schools, to facilitate vocational and labour market integration of vulnerable youth.

The chapter “*The empowerment of socially vulnerable youth in the VET system of Latvia: implications of a systemic orientation to the needs of the labour market*” discusses the implications of the systemic reforms of the last decade aimed to strengthen orientation of VET provision to labour market needs for the empowerment of socially vulnerable youth in Latvia. It explores the implications of the competence-based VET curriculum reforms (modularization), systemic approaches to labour market-relevant skills development at the sector level, introduction of the dual VET pathway, improving the capacities and potential of the VET providers and teaching staff, as well as enhanced collaboration with social partners to empower vulnerable young people for learning and employment.

The challenges and success factors of the vocational and labour market integration of the VET students at-risk of social exclusion in Estonia are discussed in the chapter

“The empowerment of socially vulnerable youth in the VET system of Estonia: challenges and success factors?”. The impact of different institutional, educational, and organizational changes in ensuring accessibility and quality of VET provision in Estonia was analysed. The ecological analysis of the socially vulnerable youth in IVET in Estonia demonstrated the interdependencies between the challenges young people faced in their previous education path and the risk factors in IVET. Furthermore, the analysis confirmed the transformative role of the context factors, particularly the role of the positive and supportive relationships and feedback for students at the dropout risk in IVET/vocational school can raise their self-confidence and help them to move on.

The chapter *“Vocational pathways to the empowerment of socially vulnerable youth in Norway and the Baltics: a comparative view”* provides a comparative analysis of the researched pathways to empowerment of vulnerable youth in the VET systems and institutions of Norway and the Baltic countries by looking into the institutional-political dimension (implications of the VET policies, reforms and change of skill formation institutions), the process (implications of the processes of VET and skill formation) and the learner dimension (the agency of vulnerable learners). It also provides some insights into the potential of policy learning between the analysed countries and beyond.

The chapter *“Educational Learning Labs for empowering educators and promoting the social inclusion of vulnerable youth in VET”* describes, compares, and discusses the implications of the five capacity building interventions implemented in selected VET schools and establishments in Estonia, Lithuania, and Norway. The interventions were aimed at developing, testing and assessing methods and tools for empowering vocational teachers and other staff at vocational schools and supporting vulnerable youth in VET. This chapter highlights some of the key messages for planning large scale interventions to introduce sustainable educational change.

The final chapter of the book, *“Conclusions, and the implications for research and practice”*, summarizes and discusses the main research findings in the light of the theories applied in the project. The findings are also triangulated based on the personal strategies of socially vulnerable VET students, the pathways of empowerment provided by the VET systems, and the capacities of VET schools. Implications and recommendations of the findings for VET research, policy and practice in the field of empowerment for vulnerable VET students are also presented.

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Chapter 2

The Multi-tiered Support and Empowerment of Youth At-Risk of Social Exclusion in VET in Norway



Tarja Tikkanen, Marieke Bruin, and Vegard Moen

Abstract In this chapter we first introduce the Norwegian concept and model for supporting the social inclusion of VET students at-risk of social exclusion with respect to combating school dropout and the promotion of transitions between various learning contexts, such as school and work, and discuss in the light of available studies, how the model works when applying the inclusion principle in practice. We explain the Norwegian definition of dropout, the support system available for the successful completion of VET. Furthermore, we describe the basis, the basics, and prospects of inclusion as a concept and principle in education, and then take a critical look at its implementation in practice with special regard to vulnerable students in VET. The second part of the chapter is based on findings from empirical studies in Norway during the EmpowerVET project. Based on individual qualitative interviews, we first describe how these students themselves experience and voice their opportunities, prospects, and limitations in the context of VET. Thereafter, we describe how two exemplary schools work in practice to support these students through their interpretation and implementation of the Norwegian principle and model for inclusion, “the best for the pupil/students” (The Education Act). In the final section of this chapter, we draw some conclusions based on the analysis and discuss the model and its implementation.

Keywords Inclusion · Diversity · School dropout · Multi-professional collaboration · Educational partnerships

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1 Introduction—Students in VET at Risk for Social Exclusion in Norway and Support Available for Completing Their Education

In addition to population ageing, the core challenge, even in today's Norway with relatively low levels of unemployment (3.9% in February 2024, Statistics Norway [SSB]), is to connect young people and the labour market. Most students manage the school-work transition successfully, but for specific groups, the challenges are sizable: those with no or low education, dropouts, young people with migrant backgrounds, young people with a disability and those with physical and mental health issues (Sletten and Hyggen 2013). In this section we will introduce the concept of vulnerable students—considered a synonym of the concept students at risk for social exclusion—in the Norwegian context, within the discussion of dropout/completing upper secondary education in VET. We will also briefly explain the Norwegian definition of dropout, which differs somewhat from the European Union (EU) definition, and describe the support available for successful completion of VET. In Norway, VET is an integral part of the formal upper secondary education system. About half of the students in upper secondary education choose VET. The support systems for VET are built on the Nordic welfare model (Halvorsrud 2017), based on a long-term tripartite collaboration between trade unions, employer organisations and the government. The composition and functions of the body for collaboration on VET is decided by the Ministry of Education and Research (The Education Act).

1.1 *Who Are Vulnerable Students in Norway?*

While the factors defining vulnerability and putting young people at risk are versatile, major characteristics of students considered at-risk for marginalization in Norway are migrant background, history of child welfare services, and psychological problems (Sletten and Hyggen 2013). During the last decade there has been a positive development: the rate of completion of upper secondary education has increased by 10 percentage points and stands at 82% in 2024 (for those who enrolled in 2017), while the rate of those using longer time than the norm to complete has diminished (Corneil 2024). Fewer boys than girls complete upper secondary education (78.4% vs. 86.3%, within 5/6 years) and VET students have lower completion rates than students in general education (69.1% vs. 73.8%) (SSB 2024). The students 'who do not or cannot benefit sufficiently from mainstream education are entitled to special needs support', with 'additional rights for children and pupils from national minorities, minority language children and pupils, and children and pupils who require alternative and supplementary communication' (Meld. St. 6 [2019–2020]). Thus, largely, the definition power, in practical terms, for vulnerability/at-risk lies in the special education system.

Box 1. VET in Norway

VET in Norway:

- (a) Main model: 2 years school + 2 years practice.
- (b) Special programme: 1 year school + 3 years practice in a company.
- (c) Vocational competence model: 3 years in school.
- (d) Cross-models between vocational and academic education programmes.

Additionally, counties (responsible for secondary education) can provide their own VET programmes (NDET [2021](#)).

VET in Norway covers 10 education programmes that lead to more than 180 different trade or craftsman certificates (NDET [2020](#)).

In Norway, vulnerable students mostly get help from within the special needs education system. If a student does not benefit sufficiently from mainstream education, the teacher can refer them to the pedagogical-psychological services (PPT) for expert assessment. The initiative can also come from parents/guardians. This assessment is the first step to the support and help process for students with special educational needs (SEN). Apprentices do not have the right to special education but have access to the PPT together with other students in primary and secondary education. However, VET students as “training candidates” (*lærekandidater*) have the right to special needs education. This is an alternative way to complete upper secondary education solely in enterprises, by those, often students at risk of social exclusion, who for various reasons do not benefit sufficiently from school-based VET (they cannot get a degree, but they get a competence certificate) (NDET [the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training] [2023](#)). Thus, the PPT is the primary gatekeeper to special needs education. PPT carries out the assessment of a student’s need for special education, resulting in an Individual Learning Plan (ILP). According to the new Education Act that entered into force August 1st, 2024 (read more Sect. 2 of this chapter), the students have the right to remain in upper secondary education until completion (Eurydice [2023](#)).

1.2 Definition and Rate of School Dropout

School dropout is an ambiguous term, which can make it difficult to make cross-country comparisons without familiarity with its different definitions (Markussen [2010](#)). The Norwegian definition of dropout from upper secondary education is different than the one used in the EU (Vogt [2017](#)). In Norway dropout is defined as not having completed upper secondary education within five years (this definition may change as a consequence of the new Education Act). Seen in comparison to an international frame of reference, the Norwegian definition of dropout may be considered as narrow; this narrow way of defining dropout has put completion

rates of Norwegian VET programmes in an unnecessary negative light (Vogt 2017). While less than one in five (17.8%) of all upper secondary students dropped out between 2017 and 2023, the rate in VET programmes was one in three (29.1%) (SSB 12.06.2024).

The EU defines dropouts “as individuals aged 18–24 who have completed at most a lower secondary education and were not in further education or training during the four weeks preceding the [labour force survey \(LFS\)](#)” (Statistics Explained, Eurostat, May 2024). Like the Norwegian definition, the notion implies that upper secondary education is completed before people transit into other fulltime activities. An important difference between the Norwegian and the EU definition is that the Norwegian definition of dropout *includes young people who still are in upper secondary education*, whilst these are not counted as early leavers in the EU definition (Vogt 2017). This is of consequence to VET. The reason is that within VET, students usually use more time to complete their education, in part due to the way that VET is organised in Norway. The 2 + 2 model comprises two years in school and two years in a workplace as an apprentice (Box 1). As pointed out by Markussen (2016, p. 39), the 2 + 2 structure in VET creates a “critical, structural hindrance” halfway through the trajectory. This transition can cause marginalisation (Sletten and Hyggen 2013). Reform 94 introduced apprenticeships in all VET programmes in Norway as the main model (Nyen and Tønder 2020). Yet, it has been a challenge for many students to find a work placement, apprenticeship (*lærekontrakt*) (in 2015 only two out of three students (NDET 2015, p. 17) undertook work placement) and the odds for dropping out are much higher among VET students, who do not get an apprenticeship placement after they apply for the first time (NDET 2021). In addition, many businesses prefer somewhat older and more mature trainees, as a result, the average age for completion in VET in Norway is 28 years (Vogt 2017). Then, as Vogt (2017) points out, considering the official definition of dropout, most qualifications in VET are obtained by exceeding the timespan when completion is expected and the most successful VET trajectories thus become invisible in dropout statistics; within the formal, narrow Norwegian definition, the graduates who obtained their qualifications by exceeding the timespan are consequently defined as dropouts, contrary to other countries in Europe.

In addition to difficulties in access to apprenticeships (workplace learning contract), high dropout rates from VET are considered as an indication of the low status of VET programmes (Hernes 2010; Johannesen 2019; Markussen et al. 2008). When it comes to working life and employers, Hiim (2020) has pointed out to the issues of vocational relevance and coherence (in terms of the actual vocations) as aspects of concern in the quality in school-based VET in Norway. While historically the dropout rate has remained rather stable and high in Norway since the school reform in 1994, major policy measures initiated to raise the status of VET (*Yrkesfagløftet*) seem to bring about positive effects, easing up the above mentioned difficulties of access to apprenticeships: in 2022, 81% of VET students received an apprentice contract (9 out of 10 in the field of construction, 7 out of 10 in the field of health and care), the highest rate since 2011 (NDET, 15.05.2023). However, fewer applicants with migrant backgrounds succeed with an apprenticeship placement (The

Norwegian Education Mirror 2022, 2023). When it comes to VET reputation, it has also been a major political goal in Norway in recent decades to ensure that VET programmes gain equal status with academic (general) programmes (Hiim 2020).

1.3 *Causes and Cost of Dropout*

Referring to the reasons for dropout more generally (see research reviews e.g. by Hernes 2010 and Lillejord et al. 2015), several Norwegian studies claim that the cause lies in the school system, therefore, the solution to the problem lies in the schools. The negative trajectory is cumulative and often starts long before upper secondary school (Lillejord et al. 2015). The available research also points to different directions—that the context of dropout is multifaceted, anchored in individual characteristics of a student, in challenges connected to family or social networks as well as contextual and structural circumstances related to the school system, the local and macro society (Bruin et al. 2023; Lillejord et al. 2015). Furthermore, the lack of teacher support and loneliness have been found to be central in the student intention of leaving upper secondary school (Bruin et al. 2023; Edvardsen et al. 2019; Frostad et al. 2015; Tvedt and Bru 2023). According to the study by Tvedt and Bru (2023), the VET completion rate among those reporting loneliness was by 10 percentage points lower than among those not reporting loneliness. Other factors are connected with the student family background, such as, for instance, the parents' income level, employment, education, ethnicity and whether the students live with their parents or not, as well as students' attitudes to school and education and their learning history starting from elementary school, their grades, absence or ambitions (Bruin et al. 2023; Bratsberg et al. 2010; Lillejord et al. 2015). While some studies have explored the significance of the various courses and the way in which the education is organised, as well as regional differences and local employment opportunities, one issue stands out as a cause for dropout: weak school results (Lillejord et al. 2015; Markussen et al. 2011; Sletten and Hyggen 2013; Tvedt and Bru 2023). Studies show that the risk of dropping out decreases when students experience positive social environments, when they feel seen by their teachers in what is experienced as a good learning environment (Bruin et al. 2023; Sletten and Hyggen 2013; Tvedt and Bru 2023).

In addition to personal and psycho-social consequences (marginalisation, “outsiderness”), dropout bears a high societal price tag. Lillejord et al. (2015) provide the following estimation, based on the calculations by Falch et al. (2009): since Norway is a high-cost country, the societal cost of dropout for each cohort of students is estimated to stand at about EUR 440 million (NOK 5 billion) annually, due to their risk of exclusion from the working life, potentially also causing negative health consequences later in their lives (p. 9). Therefore, a 10% increase in the completion rate of secondary education can save the society between around EUR 440 and 770 million (NOK 5.4 and 8.8 billion) annually (p. 9). Thus, as Lillejord et al. (2015) conclude, if it is impossible to have all students to complete secondary education, it is imperative (for the sake of societal costs too) to reduce the dropout rate as much as possible

(p. 9), and that it pays to develop and implement measures to tackle dropout and marginalisation of youth (Rasmussen et al. 2010).

1.4 Support and Measures for Successful Completion of VET in Norway

Markussen (2010) summarises four types of measures to increase the completion rate in upper secondary education common for the Nordic countries:

1. Extensive school and educational reforms,
2. Counselling and advice to reduce choosing the ‘wrong’ course,
3. More practical experience in VET, and
4. Alternative educational trajectories.

Based on more recent developments, Halvorsrud (2017) suggests an additional measure:

5. Improved in-service training and education for adults responsible for students (p. 307).

A more detailed presentation and analysis of each of these measures and their effects, in terms of school dropout seen against the Nordic welfare model that Norway represents, is provided by Halvorsrud (2017), based on a systematic literature review.

A review of the student dropout problem by Hernes (2010) underlines that the problem—indeed, while not being a new one—is not primarily that we do not know what can be done, but that what has proved to be helpful has not been sufficiently disseminated or used in the whole education system, and that the measures that can bring a good effect, known for a decade, have not been followed up or implemented properly with sufficient effort (Hernes 2010). Correspondingly, the Norwegian research review on student dropout and the measures and programmes to tackle it by Lillejord et al. (2015) concluded that the quality of the implementation makes a huge difference in the outcomes of any measure.

A basic, first level support available to all students comes along with the principle of adapted education (*tilpasset opplæring*). While not all vulnerable students are identified by teachers as having learning- and school-related difficulties, there is limited information on the scope of the challenge: the statistics on these students, albeit scarce, are only available within SEN. According to The Children Act (Barneloven § 32) children aged 15 and above can decide for themselves on matters concerning their education. This means they can also choose to refuse an offer of special needs education, and there are some indications that this happens quite frequently (Nordahl et al. 2018). The individual learning plans (ILP) within special needs education can become a flexible option with different curriculum adjustments to help vulnerable students to complete their education. Examples include the so-called basic competence (*grunnkompetanse*) adjusted curriculum, with lower requirements for learning outcomes than for ordinary students, also available within VET (Nordahl et al. 2018),

alternative educational trajectories with added workplace practice (Bruin and Ohna 2013), training candidates (*lærekandidatene*) in VET with contract-based training in an enterprise and individually adapted curriculum (NDET 2021), as well as a two-year, short-track apprenticeship programme (*praksisbrevordning*) (Schmid et al. 2020). The SEN status can be granted to students aiming towards either full competence with ordinary certificate or basic competence (Nordahl et al. 2018). A student with SEN can receive support in the form of a certain number of hours with a teacher, with an assistant, or with both, where the hours with an assistant come primarily as an addition, not instead of the hours with the teacher for SEN (NDET 2023). The latest statistics point to a strongly increased overall number of SEN hours with assistants (NDET 2023).

According to SEN statistics, in 2020–2021 about 2.5% (4700) of all students in upper secondary education received special education, increasingly being integrated in ordinary classrooms or in large schools in separate groups (NDET 2023). While this rate is clearly lower than in the lower school levels (10% in grade 10) (NDET 2021), it is clearly higher in VET programmes: 7.5% in 2018–2019 (Markussen et al. 2019). The Ministry of Education and Research (2015) rates the figure in VET higher, to 10–12%.

Vulnerability can also be caused by reduced functionality affecting about 5% of students in secondary education, but not all of them receive special needs education (Wendelborg 2017—cited in Nordahl et al. 2018, p. 145). Of them, over 50% have been diagnosed with mental disorders, about a third with developmental disability, while about 8% were diagnosed with sensory and 7% motoric difficulties (Nordahl et al. 2018). Even if inclusion is a foundational principle in all education (see Sect. 3 later in this chapter), studies show that in higher grades students with reduced functionality are commonly segregated, support provided is separated from their ordinary class (Nordahl et al. 2018). Nordahl et al. (2018) refer to other studies showing that in VET students with developmental disorders most commonly learn together with other students, in comparison to other programmes in secondary education.

The inclusion—the school for all—principle (see Sect. 3) presupposes that the follow-up of students with SEN should primarily be organized with the student included in their ordinary classrooms. While this holds for most SEN students (91%), with better learning results (Nordahl et al. 2018), 9% of them are permanently placed in separate departments for special education (NDET 2023). A study on the quality of special education in secondary schools showed that many schools and their students (including training candidates in VET), reported satisfaction with the available special education options: it is provided by qualified teachers and students are by and large satisfied with the quality of the contents, as well as the way the school and teachers meet their expectations (Markussen et al. 2019). However, when it comes to the statement that expectations from students with SEN are lower compared to mainstream students the findings showed differences across the schools. According to some teachers, learning outcomes expected from these students were sometimes too ambitious and too much geared to subject areas rather than supporting students' life-coping skills (Markussen et al. 2019). Many teachers also reported that organizing special education was a demanding task, including in terms of the fundamental

respect for differences (Markussen et al. 2019). Furthermore, there are huge differences across the counties in the ways special education regulations and measures are interpreted and implemented (Mathiesen and Vedøy 2012).

The EU indicators for youth at-risk cover dropouts (aged 18–24 years), NEETs (not in employment, education, or training, aged 15–24 years), and low achievers at the age of 15 years (defined by PISA 2018 results). According to Eurostat, the rates for Norway are as follows: 13% for dropouts, 6.3% for NEETs and 18.9% for low achievers (European Commission 2022). When it comes to NEETS, Norway has one of the lowest rates in Europe (Øydgard et al. 2024), “often ascribed to the country’s tripartite cooperation model, its low unemployment rate, and its labour market’s ability to absorb a young workforce with limited formal experience (Reegård 2021)” (quoted in Øydgard et al. 2024, p. 1). The rate has been going down since 2012, due to a success of the special measure provided by the counties, the Follow-up Service (*Oppfølgingstjeneste*), targeted at those under 24 years of age, with a goal that these youth get an offer to get back to school, work, or another competence-conducive offer (Euroguidance 2022; Follow-Up Service 2024) (the age limit applies following the new Education Act from autumn 2024). The evaluation of the special needs education system in Norway (Nordahl et al. 2018) showed that the NEET rates highlight the ongoing need to strengthen the quality and inclusion in upper secondary education.

Studies have shown that the Covid-19 pandemic increased the number of vulnerable children and youth, the shutdown period affecting especially the vulnerable youth (Barneombudet 2021). It had negative impact on the wellbeing and life quality of young people. The pandemic hit vulnerable youth harder (report from lower secondary school by Vennerød-Diesen et al. 2024) and the negative effects seem to accumulate. The study by Von Soest et al. (2022) involving Norwegian adolescents found that the pandemic adversely effected adolescents [those aged 16–19 years] with low parental education and perceived family poverty in several domains of lives more than other adolescents, especially concerning various aspects of mental health (depression and loneliness). Loneliness, also related to school dropout as earlier mentioned, continued to increase post-Covid, but the pandemic did not have an additional negative impact on that trend in Norway. Girls and younger adolescents were more affected (e.g. their depressive symptoms increased more) than boys and older adolescents, but boys reported “a greater increase in feeling lonely during the pandemic than girls” (Von Soest et al. 2022, p. 224).

Currently and increasingly in the future, vulnerable students will be supported in education by “teams around students”—collaborative teams of different professionals in Norway. This comprises multi-agency collaboration between the actors in and around the school, strengthening of existing resources at schools, or both (NDET 2019, 2022). In VET, and as a support to vulnerable students, such a cross-sectoral collaboration can incorporate health and social workers, Pedagogical-Psychological Services (PPT), the Follow-Up-Service, The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), employers, and also parents (Tikkanen et al. 2024). Consequently, the support targeted at vulnerable students is increasingly tailored to meet their individual needs, often multifaceted. To this end, an initiative, a “competence boost”, a competence development for special education and inclusive practice

(*Kompetanseløftet for spesialpedagogikk og inkluderende praksis* 2022) has been initiated by the government. Accordingly, a way to better inclusion and support practice in education for vulnerable students is now sought from strong local multi-agency, multi-professional partnerships between different stakeholders, involving special education professionals from teacher education establishments to secure tight communication and collaboration for the benefit of children and youth. This measure was adopted following a critical evaluation of the special education system by a group of experts (Nordahl et al. 2018). However, the findings from the first evaluation of the “competence boost” by Wendelborg, Gjerustad et al. (2022) do not yet speak about significant changes. The study showed that the implementation has been predominantly at a “system level”, involving primarily school owners (counties in case of upper secondary level and VET) and municipalities, and that this initiative “has possibly to a little extent involved the layer [team] around the student” (p. ix—translation by Tikkanen) and that the changes in competence and practice among those closest to the students are likely small at this early phase in the transition period of implementation.

2 Inclusion Imperative: Institutional Factors Shaping the Prospects and Opportunities of At-Risk Students in VET

The Norwegian school system, VET included, is designed to be inclusive: inclusion is a fundamental educational principle, aiming to accommodate all the students with their diverse needs. This includes the foundational view of “the best for the pupil/students” [*Det beste for eleven*] in dealings and decisions concerning the pupils/students in primary and secondary schools, including VET (The Education Act). Previously, the students had a general right to three years of upper secondary education, while students in VET would “have the right to training within the total time frame regulated by the subject curricula i.e. four, four and a half, or five years” (Eurydice 2023). The new Education Act effective from the autumn 2024, extended this right until completion of secondary education. We can say that for students, inclusion is a right, while for teachers and schools it is an imperative issue and principle of their daily practice. Special education services are provided to support students with learning disabilities or other challenges causing them not to benefit sufficiently from mainstream education, as described above, to ensure they have access to equal educational opportunities. Briefly put, inclusion in school means that all “pupils should feel that they belong” (Meld. St. 6. [2019–2020]). Inclusion in Norway is built on its obligations relating to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability, the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) and its commitment regarding “the special rights extended to indigenous people” (Meld. St. 6. [2019–2020]). The country has adopted a range of legislative measures, which collectively contribute to

fostering a more inclusive and equitable society. In this section, we first describe the basis, the basics, and prospects of inclusion as a concept and principle, and then look at its significance in educational practices with special focus on vulnerable students in VET.

2.1 The Concept of Inclusion

The idea of a common school for all (*enhetsskolen*) is deep-rooted in Norway, as described by Faldet et al. (2022). It was established over 100 years ago (Bjørnstrud 1999). Developing from the early concept of integration, inclusion was already a central concept in the new curriculum in 1997 (Strømstad et al. 2004). However, the concept of inclusion in the international research literature is far from conclusive (Faldet et al. 2022; Haug 2017), definitions vary from narrow to broad (Haug 2017). In Norway, as in many other countries, the concept is defined with reference to student diversity, aiming to protect diversity and strengthen democracy (Meld, St, 6 [2019–2020]). In the government White Paper on early intervention and inclusion in education diversity is connected to the labour market needs:

A sustainable welfare state requires more people to participate in the labour force and more people to work for longer. The government is therefore investing in education and knowledge for all. Early intervention and inclusive practices are key to ensuring that all children and young people can realise their dreams and ambitions. It is the government's goal for all children and young people to be given equal opportunities for all-round development and learning, irrespective of background and individual circumstances. We want an education system that allows everyone to feel a sense of achievement and experience the value of knowledge and community. (Meld, St, 6 [2019–2020])

Broad coverage of every student's rights is entitling them to a voice and thereby inviting them to participate, get engaged and feel included in matters and decisions concerning them. The new Education Act extended the opportunities for students, not least to vulnerable students, to complete their education, to be included using, among others, the following measures:

- The right to upper secondary education (extended from three years to) until completion,
- Students have the right to choose upper secondary education as many times as they want until the year the student turns 19 years, and
- Schools must follow up on student absences, to prevent long term absence (Eurydice/Norway 2023).

As it is the school administration at the county level in charge of upper secondary education, VET inclusive, new responsibilities were given for the County Authority (CA). They are obliged to provide a safe and good transition from primary and lower secondary to upper secondary education; to offer special support for students who lack the necessary language or academic skills in the transition to upper secondary

education, to enable their participation and completion of upper secondary education; and to make sure that those who have apprenticeships get access to counselling regarding education and career choices, social and personal matters. Also, as mentioned earlier, the Follow-up Service has been extended until the person is 24 years of age (earlier 21 years of age), especially aimed at supporting NEETs in completing their education and entering working life. The students' right to be heard and the right to self-determination are further emphasized and clarified, as well as the rules regarding the adapted learning/education and individual adaptation are clarified, emphasizing competence requirement for teachers in the subject they teach (Eurydice/Norway 2023).

2.2 *Inclusion in Practice*

Albeit the success of inclusion is hard to measure in practice, efforts to turn the inclusion principle into practice makes most students in schools in Norway happy and thriving every day. However, studies show that there are major problems in implementing—indeed, in the various implementations—of the concept in practice (Haug 2017), especially when it comes to the vulnerable students in special education. These students are too often taken out of class for individual lessons (Nordahl et al. 2018). The study by Haug (2017) concluded that “[n]o country has yet succeeded in constructing a school system that lives up to the ideals and intentions of inclusion, as defined by different international organizations” (p. 206), Norway not being an exception. In their White Paper on early intervention and inclusion in education [Meld, St, 6 (2019–2020)], the Norwegian government admits the state of the matter: the fact that “not all children and young people receive the help they need, early enough or not at all (...) suggests that the systems designed to ensure they do are not working sufficiently well everywhere.” Halvorsrud (2017) refers to several studies also showing that there is uncertainty concerning the success of the SEN system in achieving its intended effects.

Based on research literature and policy documents on inclusion, the study by Faldet et al. (2022) investigated inclusion as it appears in curricula, guiding the schools' everyday practice. They suggest that inclusion is an evolving concept. The study identified the coexistence of “consistency in the basic formulations on inclusion and equity” and “potential tensions and dilemmas, including a possible shift towards schooling with a narrower view of knowledge” in curricula, and concluded that the latter might, indeed, cause exclusion of vulnerable students (p. 171). Yet, on the other hand, the findings suggest that the current National Curriculum (LK20), with its emphasis on strengthening professional communities at schools and on student participation and democracy, has the potential for making education more inclusive, especially for vulnerable students, who were seldom mentioned in other curricula (p. 171).

On a more positive note, it is reasonable to assume that the inclusion principle and foundation has played an important role in regard to the positive trends shown

by statistics in Norway, particularly concerning students at risk of social exclusion. The country has one of the lowest NEETs rates in Europe (Øydgard et al. 2024) and the increasing rates of VET students getting access to apprenticeships indicate more positive attitudes among employers (NDET 2023); there is an increasing likelihood of students at risk getting a job opportunity through completion of some measures with adapted curriculum and increased workplace learning in practice (“*praksisbrev*”, Markussen 2014); and there is an increasing trend in VET completion rates during 2011–2021, although on a lower level than in general programmes in upper secondary education (Lunde Braatholmen 2022).

3 Student Voice: How Do Young People at Risk of Social Exclusion Experience Their Opportunities, Prospects and Limitations in the VET Context?

As a part of the EmpowerVET project, we carried out interviews with vulnerable students and their teachers in VET schools in Western Norway. The purpose was to give voice to these students in matters concerning their VET and prospects—opportunities and obstacles for them to successfully complete VET and then move on to working life. As described in Bruin et al. (2023), the methodology of this qualitative study builds on a total of 79 semi-structured individual interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015), conducted across the four different countries in EmpowerVET. Of these interviews, 17 were carried out in Norway between September 2021 and March 2022, averaging 45 min each. The interview guide was structured around the temporal aspects of the past, present, and future aiming to record the participants’ previous experiences, current situations, and future aspirations. It included the following categories of information: (1) Biographical information, (2) Learning at school/workplace, (3) Social and educational support at school/work, (4) Participation at school/ work, (5) Agency: personal impact on school/work, and (6) Future aspirations. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Ethical considerations were paramount, with a strong emphasis on the researchers’ moral responsibility towards the vulnerable participants (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). Core principles included informed consent, confidentiality, and a commitment to do no harm (Guillemin and Gillam 2004).

Below we briefly describe the Norwegian schools involved and the student recruitment process before presenting the findings.

3.1 About the Implementation of the Study

In the fall of 2021, we contacted three upper secondary schools, chosen for (1) their geographical coverage in the region, including both urban and rural areas, and

(2) the availability of a personal contact in each school due to earlier professional collaboration, which facilitated the connection. A preliminary informal conversation took place with all schools. Later, one of the schools decided not to participate due to a high-level workload.

At each of the remaining two schools, a focus group interview was conducted (read more in Sect. 4 of this chapter). The following were the participants of the interview: the head of the department, counsellors, teachers, and support personnel working with, for example, the follow-up of young people who have left school. At one school, the interview had to be conducted via the Zoom platform, the other interview was conducted physically on the school's premises. The participants were asked to facilitate the student recruitment process for the interview and to invite students who were at risk of dropping out or struggling academically to participate in the individual interviews and to provide the project information. The focus group interviewees were specifically asked not to make young people feel pressured to participate in any way.

At one of the two schools, a teacher organised the schedule for the student interviews, and all the students met at an agreed time. Seven interviews were conducted. At the other school, only the names and telephone numbers of the potential student participants were provided. However, without a teacher or another adult scheduling the interviews, many students were hard to reach, they did not return our calls or did not turn up for the interview. Eventually, 13 interviews were conducted at these two schools, involving participants who were (1) a student at school, (2) an apprentice, working in a workplace, or (3) a person who has quit school. Participants were mostly females. All interviews were audiotaped, and all participants provided their written consent. During the interviews, it was important to attune to the participants' well-being during the conversation, since sometimes participants could be in distress while talking about difficult experiences. It was pointed out by the interviewer that the participants could stop the conversation at any given point in time, but this did not happen.

Two other schools were subsequently contacted, with a slightly different set-up for upper-secondary vocational education since they were departments for adult education (courses). Students from these schools were from challenging backgrounds that put them at risk for lack of qualification and social exclusion. For example, they might be students who quit upper secondary education at an earlier age, and wanted to come back to school, or they could be students with no or little Norwegian language skills because of their refugee background. Four interviews were conducted at these two schools, resulting in a total of 17 interviews.

3.2 *Student Narratives on Experiences Supporting and Hindering Their VET Education*

In line with the methodological approach in the project (Bruin et al. 2023), a thematic analysis (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015) was carried out in each of the four countries. The thematic analysis conducted on the Norwegian data revealed three main issues emerging from the data: (1) ***Relationships***—with (i) *the family*, (ii) *teachers/supervisors*, and (iii) *peers*, (2) ***The meaning of learning*** and (3) ***Institutional issues***. Since these issues affect the students' motivation in both positive and negative ways, the students describe these dimensions as experiences that are both supporting as well as hindering their educational trajectory. This applies for both the school and workplace contexts and seems decisive in completing VET.

The following section presents the results of the analysis conducted on the Norwegian data. The results are presented under the following headings: (i) *Experiences that support students' educational trajectories in VET* and (ii) *Experiences that hinder students' educational trajectories in VET*. Some of the quotes have been previously published in the cross-country comparative study by Bruin et al. (2023), indicated with the reference below.

3.2.1 **Experiences that Support Students' Educational Trajectories in VET**

Interviewees indicate that the support of the family is an important issue, influencing motivation, making it easier to focus on a goal, and maintain that focus. Having the support of a parent “does something to you” (Janine). A stable family context is described as a supportive factor, and the interviewees focus highly on the support from their family as a decisive factor that enables them to continue and complete their education. “My foster parents are always there when I need them” (Edith). In addition, having friends at school is essential: “[...] You become happier, you can feel it in your whole body [...] people are meant to be with each other, not to spend time on their own” (Mark) (Bruin et al. 2023, p. 12).

For many participants of the interview, a definite major support is the presence of a sensitive and caring adult at school (teacher/teaching assistant/school nurse). This gives a sense of security, providing motivation. Experiencing being “seen” by the teacher “made sure that I did not drop out of school and finished that school year” (Mary) (Bruin et al. 2023, p. 11). Having teachers who are focused on finding solutions to problems and being allowed to express their needs was a new experience for Mary. “It’s a very big difference between being ignored and being heard.” She insisted that her teacher helped her enormously, “[...] because I had a person who was there for me, who listened to me, who acted upon what I said, knew and felt. Who saw me, but also saw all others, and saw us for who we were and not who they thought we were” (Mary) (Bruin et al. 2023, p. 11). Young people noted that gaining a sense of security from their teacher was a significant support. According to Elly,

“Having someone with me” is essential, “because it’s difficult to walk on your own.” She explained she needed to be able to lean on her teacher when life was difficult, “because then I can create room for something else inside me” (Bruin et al. 2023, p. 11). Several research participants had similar reflections. For example, Michael answered to the question on what would improve vocational education, by saying: “[...] it doesn’t take more than a good learning environment and teachers you can be fond of, who motivate you and lift you up.” Teachers become even more important for the students who do not have a family close by on which to rely. Andreas immigrated to Norway on his own and commented: “sometimes I need someone older than me, and then I feel that my teacher takes care of me” (Bruin et al. 2023). Andreas was in jail for a short while. While in jail, their teacher sent a supportive text message, which Andreas was allowed to read: “After I got released, I read the message many times. When I am in a bad place, I read this message and feel better” (Andreas).

When learning is a meaningful experience, young people describe it as a supportive factor. The experience of learning and doing meaningful things is a powerful motivator. The job means something, “I feel I make a difference,” Mary said. Michael explained that there was a feeling of self-worth in working at the After School Childcare. “Doing something important in a child’s life, helping them cope [...] I would like to make a difference.” Having a job that is meaningful is powerfully motivating for Michael: “I love it there [...] because I feel happy when I can make other people happy.”

3.2.2 Experiences that Hinder Students’ Educational Trajectories in VET

Experiences related to their personal background that hinder the young people’s chances to complete VET are multifaceted. For instance, these could be issues related to negative experiences from primary and lower-secondary education, unstable family situations, extensive moving around, motivational issues, and psychological problems. The experiences that hinder completion of studies are expressed in narratives concerning absenteeism and motivational problems due to feelings of not being able to cope or not learning meaningful things. These factors largely amount to narratives on social exclusion, disconnectedness, and loneliness.

Having an unstable family life makes it difficult to survive educationally. Mary talked about their parents being absent quite a lot while she was growing up. As a thirteen-year-old she was assigned the responsibility for her four younger siblings, affecting her education negatively, both during her school career but also in the workplace she currently worked: “I know that my baggage stays with me and affects me.” At the workplace, she would take on too much responsibility, stressing herself out and causing feelings of inability to cope. Mary’s experiences have caused her to consider dropping out of school twice. When she was still in upper secondary school, she was admitted to a psychiatric hospital because she “had come so far as to not want to go on living” (Mary). Being away in hospital for longer stretches of time made it especially hard for Mary to be part of the learning environment at school.

“When I was at hospital, the others in the class got to know each other even better. They became friends. So, when I came back, I was an outsider in a way. And that made it even more difficult for me,” Mary said. Moving around and changing schools a lot is described by Elly and Michael as detrimental for their learning, causing social isolation and depression, affecting motivation.

Several interviewees talked about difficult experiences from primary and lower secondary education, which stayed with them, and which affected them in a negative way in VET. The central issue in the stories was extensive bullying to the extent it may have caused posttraumatic stress. Annabel talked about “hating life”, explaining that “[in lower secondary school] I wasn’t well liked, was excluded, was very much on my own [...]. For half a year I was hardly at school” (Annabelle). Problems with reading made it difficult for Annabelle to keep up with her classmates, and it was not until the tenth grade that she was diagnosed with dyslexia: “I think that is unfortunate. Very unfortunate. Because that was why I was behind everyone else in class for many years. I never felt good enough or managed that which others could” (Annabelle).

Having no social network may cause a student to give up. Andreas was on his own, without his family after he moved to Norway. After starting VET, “I started to think whether I should drop out, there were so many problems” (Andreas). Without a social network or a supportive family, Andreas had to carry the load on his own.

Many research participants focused on the issues of loneliness and non-participation. These issues had not been detected by the teachers and the interviewees described the feelings of disconnectedness. Annabelle explained that “when we were in the workshop and all the boys got the teacher’s attention and I didn’t, I felt I didn’t get the help I needed [...] I didn’t understand the point of being there when there wasn’t anyone holding me back. So, I quit” (Annabelle). Experiencing having the lack of friends, and teachers who do not care, makes it easy to drop out: “When you walk around on your own, not knowing what to do, you become like, oh, I don’t want to try anymore” (Guro) (Bruin et al. 2023, p. 12). Mary described how the first two years in upper secondary school were difficult, due to “having a teacher who couldn’t care less about us” (Mary). Likewise, Elly explained how in upper secondary school she lacked “a person [teacher] who would understand me [...] it was difficult in a way, not to have anyone” (Elly). According to Ingrid, “it is a challenge when you have a history of teachers not having seen you at all, when they don’t believe you when you say something because you’re only a student. And when you cannot do it, it’s ‘sorry, mate’ and you’re finished” (Bruin et al. 2023, p. 10). Ingrid felt that things in upper secondary school were still not the way she had been promised: “That teachers don’t do their jobs makes my job as a student ten times harder” (Ingrid). She explained that “you’re just a part of the class, teachers don’t see each student as an individual. And if you cannot manage, it’s ‘your problem not mine’ [...] You come, you go, there is no relation in between” (Ingrid). According to Ingrid, this also affected the learning environment in class, because there was no social glue, and the group felt socially fragmented. Not being acknowledged at upper secondary school was also Janine’s experience the first time she was a student in VET before dropping out. She explained that “it always felt as if I didn’t have it, that I couldn’t learn, couldn’t develop in a way. It was just as if I couldn’t be helped. Became forgotten, in a way

[...] That was exceedingly demotivating” (Janine). Similarly, Dennis described the feeling as if being in the shadow: “That first year, my teacher had favourite students, it felt as if the teacher was entirely oblivious of the rest of us, students.”

The research participants described their feeling of disconnectedness as a motive to quit. Problems of the institutional nature may have been one cause of this. Gaining a work placement in the third year is a challenging endeavour for all candidates, and there is a competition for the available places, exemplifying the particular “critical, structural hindrance” (Markussen 2016, p. 39) in VET in Norway, mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. When students do not receive a placement, some of them choose to do a third year at school instead. However, some of them experience a difference in the way they are treated by teachers and their requirements. Ingrid explained she would get straight As in her first two years in upper-secondary “because I had good teachers who adapted their teaching to me” (Ingrid). When she did not receive a work placement, she went back to school for the third year, experiencing an educational system that cared much less about her as a person. She started to struggle academically, “you kind of become shocked when you start your third year and only manage to get Ds and fails” (Ingrid). Henrik was not able to gain a placement in his third year and went back to school. He is convinced that if he had received more attention at school, he might have been involved more socially. “I didn’t get any help halfway through my first year, when I was without friends. I was alone. I’d rather be home,” Henrik noted. Young people pointed out that when they did not see the point of continuing, the step to drop out was a small one.

A definite hindering factor in the workplace is the lack of a supervisor who provides clear guidance. Mark used to work in security services where there was a clear demarcation between the management and employees; there was no supervisor assigned to him to guide him at work, he felt his only task was to get the job done, with no regard for him as a learner or employee, often left to his own devices. In addition, there was no social interaction, due to working night shift on his own. Mark described his frustration about being treated badly and how this ultimately led to dropping out: “You were called negative. They did this and that with you, you were sent on assignments because they didn’t have staff, that’s why they sent you instead.” Mark explained how powerless he felt, and how meaningless things eventually seemed. “It wasn’t legal, or morally right, but nothing was done about it [...] I felt being used” (Bruin et al. 2023, p. 13). Mark received no guidance, no follow-up, was just an ordinary employee, only underpaid. He explained that he felt stuck, because it was not easy to find a work placement, and he wanted to leave a good impression. “As a trainee, you were used. You were cheap labour, an easy resource, because we always had an intent on making a good impression”. Mark explained that his friend, who did the same job at the time, dropped out too, and struggled with psychological problems due to his experiences at the workplace.

4 VET Schools that Succeed in Student Empowerment Exert Effective, Multi-tiered Collaboration

A Norwegian study focusing on the school level and taking mainly the perspective of migrant students, concluded that it is very important that schools provide support to the “less school-oriented young people in connecting and identifying with school, both with the social environment and with the educational content and learning methods” (Schmid et al. 2021, p. 47). In this section we will present two exemplary upper secondary schools located in a county in the western part of the country, and how they work to support (including) vulnerable students and to prevent dropouts from VET programmes. The two schools have, in various ways, worked systematically over time to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment for the students, in a broad multi-professional collaboration and partnership with external actors, i.e. exemplifying the ‘teams around students’ approach described earlier in this chapter (see Tikkanen et al. 2024). Indeed, there are a range of help- and support professionals and agencies around the vulnerable students at Norwegian VET schools (see Sect. 1.4). In the county in question, this work has been generally very successful, resulting in an increased completion rate in upper secondary education.

The data on which we have based our description of the BP cases, are taken from two aforementioned focus-group interviews with a range of actors who have been involved in this collaboration (see Sect. 2 of this chapter). Since upper secondary and vocational education are under the county level administration in Norway and since the two schools are located in one and same county, it was only natural to approach the best practice in the context and from the perspective of the administrative structures at the county level.

The county has set several priorities and initiated measures to support students and their wellbeing in all its secondary schools, all of which are also supporting the goals of EmpowerVET. The measures included a zero dropout attitude since 2015, aiming at 100% completion of secondary education of their students.

The major success factors in the BP schools, as the findings from the focus group interviews show, can be summarized as follows (in a random order):

1. The schools are adjusted to the students, not vice versa—students are being listened to and heard.
2. Systematic cooperation and exchange of information, especially in the transitional phase from primary school to secondary school.
3. Early identification and intervention—facilitation (*tilrettelegging*) much earlier than it used to be the case.
4. Multi-professional collaboration teams with a range of support functions.
5. High level of flexibility when it comes to solutions and their application.
6. A large repertoire of different measures to support vulnerable students.
7. Close follow-up of vulnerable students.
8. Solutions and support for vulnerable students comprise an individually tailored package.

9. Collaboration with and support functions from outside the school make it possible to keep the vulnerable students at school, so that they are not left outside or dropout.
10. Good routines for collaboration between different professional groups (the team around children / pupils), PPT (pedagogical-psychological service), NAV, supervisors in training, training office, programme advisers etc.
11. Good transition arrangements between primary and upper secondary school, and between secondary school and apprenticeship, although there are points for improvement here.

Subsequently, we will describe the work carried out in the two schools (called school 1 and school 2) to support students at risk of social exclusion in completing their education and safely transiting to employment in greater detail. The schools implemented the principle of inclusion in practice, building on the ‘the best for the student’ foundation. In both schools the principal was committed to follow-ups and was involved in the issues concerning the vulnerable students. The schools worked at the system, school, and individual levels (Tikkanen et al. 2024). They did not have any targeted projects of their own, but school 2 participated in a collaboration project with six other schools in the county with a particular focus on dropout issues.

4.1 Well-Organized and Well-Working In-School Collaboration

There were meeting and cooperation areas both within the school and outside the school between the multi-professional actors and instances of support, emphasizing the importance of a good structure in organizing help for vulnerable students. The school headmaster/rector, together with the multi-professional community, seemed to be an important link connecting and following up the different arenas and their collaboration.

One example of this collaboration was giving summer jobs to at-risk students by the local municipality (the summer before they started their secondary school to add to their school motivation). Furthermore, the municipality provided additional measures/social services to support the well-being of the students who were worst off, where the schools’ measures and solutions ran short. Still, at least one adviser suggested that the school should be even more proactive in looking for collaboration opportunities with the municipality for the sake of these students. To some extent the neighbouring municipalities also seemed to collaborate to better support these students (except for free choice of school).

Collaboration of the multiple professionals within the school was viewed as crucial for success. However, additional collaboration around vulnerable students outside the school meant that it was easier for the school to help these students. Collaboration appeared to be the key in supporting students at risk.

Furthermore, the schools developed local transition plans to build a systematic and better-quality practice around the transition collaboration both between schools, and across municipalities, if needed. Another example of the local plans was the “flying start” (a summer vocational guidance course) aiming at safe start of the secondary school for vulnerable students, which was one of the concrete measures in implementing the “zero-vision” of dropouts in the county.

4.2 Acknowledging and Appreciating Uniqueness of Students’ Vulnerability

The collaboration system was built on the principle of uniqueness of the situation of each vulnerable student, and functioned based on close multi-professional collaboration and exchange of information around and about the students, including (and especially) during the transition phases. Educational differentiation seemed to be an issue only to the extent that different areas of students’ challenges were handled by different professionals and different measures were applied by the school. Nevertheless, support and solutions for each student were tailor-made.

School 2 clearly had a very strong individual approach to support their vulnerable students. Indeed, as the challenges of these students are so versatile, the predominant approach to support and solutions is tailor-made to meet the needs of each individual case/a set of challenges. Since student problems and challenges usually accumulate over a period of several years of schooling prior to the secondary school (Bruin et al. 2023; Lillejord et al. 2015), teachers were highly attentive to supporting students in building their coping strategies in various situations and with various challenges.

4.3 Staff Availability and Schools’ Capacities to Accommodate Vulnerable Students

Staff availability in being able to meet the various needs of the students at risk of exclusion was an issue in the interviews: in addition to teachers and school management, there was a range of different professionals around these students (“teams around a student” (NDET 2022) mentioned in the introduction to this chapter) to support and help them health-wise, as well as with school and job placements. The interviews provided some, albeit very limited, information about staff training and capacity building or available training programmes. Some teachers pointed out that they needed more competence, particularly in the field of “social pedagogy” and special education. A quote from one of the informants at school 2 exemplifies this: “I think it is probably something we need to develop, the social-pedagogical competence that we have lacked for so many years because vocational training has not worked sufficiently preventively.” Thus, the teachers and schools, even if reasonably

well-resourced in Norway, expressed their concern about their limited capacities to meet the needs of VET students at risk, which was problematized and discussed across the four EmpowerVET countries in Tikkanen et al. (2024).

4.4 Long-Term Development of a Toolbox—Learning of Practice

Since the staff at school 1 had been working on the problem at issue for many years, they made an enormous progress methodologically and created collective competence as an active community of practice: they were able to develop a vast range of different measures and solutions to support vulnerable students and help them complete their education. “Earlier you either came to the school and studied at school or you were out” (school 2 teacher), while today the school can accommodate and support the students on a much broader basis, including to meet their psycho-social needs.

4.5 Support to Student Learning and Working with Their Expectations for Their Schooling

Continuous academic support was available to students in school 1 and 2 on a regular basis, at least at some level. Teachers in special education follow-up and support the student learning all the way through, in collaboration with their class teacher. One measure to support the learning of vulnerable students is to be flexible with the learning assessment systems and to reduce the anxiety related to academic performance. Furthermore, more flexibility has been introduced related to the time (number of years) that the students can use to complete their education. However, it appeared to be a potential challenge to combine support for students at risk and help them get realistic with their ambitions and expectations in terms of the learning goals they can achieve. A quote from a teacher at school 1 illustrates this dilemma:

There is something about the collaboration between the lower-secondary school and us when it comes to helping the students choosing realistically or choosing an adapted course of study. It is difficult, because we would like students to be able to reach their ambitions and achieve their goals, but there can be problems which mean that you should get advice about choosing certain... Make certain choices then.

Thus, for the teachers it is important to help students so that they can both take care of their ambitions and choose a study programme which is realistic in relation to their abilities and aptitudes. There is a delicate balance between these two, and it is reasonable to assume that failure in such choices can foreshadow a dropout.

4.6 Collaboration with Actors Outside the School is Invaluable

Teachers in school 1 received support from the PPT or the school psychology service, primarily in relation to writing an expert student assessment, but also support to work in more systemic way. For one of the teachers, the PPT functioned as an important support (mediator) in collaborating with the parents of students who needed extra support. Both schools also cooperated well with the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) and the teachers at school 1 stated that NAV provided them with good and relevant support. Support from the so-called youth adviser in NAV was also mentioned. School 2 focused on multilingual students and their challenges in learning the Norwegian language. They received considerable support to this end both from the language centre located at the municipality level and their refugee advisers. This collaboration was coordinated by NAV. In this school, teachers also received support from PPT and from a “follow-up team” that supports students who are at risk of dropping out. However, the teachers and school administrators faced also challenges in collaborating with NAV, as expressed in the following quote from a teacher at school 2:

The big fear is that we will get students who really shouldn't be at school, who really are only here because NAV requires them to have a “day care service” and then they are associated with a school and then they get paid their money and then they really have no development. There is no direction for what they are doing.

In this way, support from NAV may run the risk of contributing to a “learned helplessness”, i.e. the students becoming dependent on the support they receive. The same teacher commented further: “He may attend school all his life. He gets money from NAV every year. And what he does is that he comes to school and then he spends a few hours here and a few hours there, and is actually more or less exempt from being in activity at all. And then he gets money.”

4.7 Prioritizing Student Safety, Communities and Belonging—Hearing Them Out

Student safety and belonging were clearly strong priorities in these schools. Teachers worked hard in building a supportive classroom environment for all students, with a zero tolerance to bullying of any kind. Both schools were also attentive to student sensitivities regarding their preferred learning environment: they provided small group rooms for students, who were anxious in large classrooms with many students, and felt safer studying alone or in smaller groups. Much attention was paid to listening to students' voices, their opinions concerning their schooling and their choice of vocation and the place of practice/work. Collaboration with students' parents was also regarded very important, especially with students with immigration background, and poor language and communication skills.

4.8 Adapted Education, Extra-Curricular Activities, and Hybrid Learning

At school 1, students could choose to participate at the study centre or resource centre for adapted education. These centres collaborated with the PPT in organizing an inclusive learning environment for students. The importance of ensuring good transitions between these facilities and ordinary classes was emphasized.

Hybrid learning opportunities and homeschooling were some of the flexible options available to students at-risk, as necessary. For instance, these alternatives were provided in cases of school refusal or where students had difficulties with staying in class for a full day. Teachers in both schools underlined the importance of securing good transitions between the second and the third school year (see the 2 + 2 model in Box1 earlier in this chapter). After the second year most of the students start an apprenticeship in a public or private enterprise. Very few upper secondary school students complete VET without apprenticeship.

4.9 Engaging Leadership and Staff Motivation

Governance strategies, targeted projects, and specific plans at national or institutional levels are crucial for the success of the work of VET teachers and schools (Tikkanen et al. 2024). The commitment of the school rectors to addressing the issues related to students at risk was evident, with one school participating in a collaborative project focusing on dropout issues. Some specific plans for students at risk were mentioned during the interviews.

In sum, the best practices observed in the two VET schools highlight a commitment to student-centred approaches, collaboration, and tailored support. However, as the description shows, there were areas for improvement, particularly in addressing staff training needs related to students at risk of social exclusion.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

In this chapter we have first introduced the Norwegian concept and model for supporting social inclusion of VET students at-risk of social exclusion in terms of combating school dropout and promoting transitions between various learning contexts, such as school and work. We then discussed how the model worked and how to implement the inclusion principle into practice. The second part was based on the findings of empirical studies conducted in Norway in the EmpowerVET project. Based on individual qualitative interviews, we described how the vulnerable students experienced and voiced their opportunities, prospects, and limitations in the context of VET. We then described the practice at two exemplary schools in supporting these

students through their interpretation and implementation of the Norwegian principle and model for inclusion, “the best for the pupil/students” (The Education Act). In this section we drew some conclusions based on the presentation and discussed the model and its implementation.

In Norway, inclusion is the fundamental principle in all education, not an element or an aspect of or in it, making it an imperative to VET teachers, schools, and school leaders in their daily work with students. Second, and relatedly, the Norwegian concept and model for supporting social inclusion of VET students at risk of social exclusion demonstrates a range of powerful characteristics. It is comprehensive, relies on a strong value basis, it was developed over a long period of time, yet it appears dynamic and flexible, and builds on a strong collaboration internally at schools, with external stakeholders (long-term tripartite collaboration), and locally among all stakeholders. Third, to make the school-for-all principle (*enhetsskolen*) a reality, including a diverse VET student population at risk of social exclusion, the “best for the pupil/students” policy presupposes an education and training system with a range of flexible learning trajectories. Thus, there is a strong emphasis, when building the students’ individual learning paths, that the school needs to be adjusted to the students, not vice versa. Furthermore, the education system strongly promotes student democracy. Democracy and citizenship are among the three interdisciplinary topics set out in the curriculum (LK2020) and to be integrated in all subjects (see e.g. Grevle 2023), on the one hand securing student representation in decision making in matters concerning them at school, and on the other hand securing that they learn about democracy, about its values and principles. Even if there is still room for improvement in making “student codetermination” a reality at schools (Grevle 2023), integrating the topic in the curriculum allows all students to learn how to make every voice to be heard and count.

Fourth, the daily hard work and efforts of teachers and VET schools in developing inclusive practices for all and also supporting their vulnerable students, makes the school a much happier place to learn and grow for many students than without these efforts. However, the implementation of the principle and harnessing and harmonizing the entire support system to the best of every student, is not without challenges. Indeed, there is still great potential for improving the outcomes—and this is regardless of the generous resources invested in this work in Norway. According to The Norwegian Education Mirror 2022 (2023), based on the analysis by the OECD,¹ the spending in upper secondary education in Norway is 34% more per student, and the cost for upper secondary education is 44% higher than the OECD average (p. 78).

Finally, we need to be alert in respect to the students we are discussing. Caution should be exercised in respect to the use and definition of the concepts *vulnerable*, *at risk*, and *school dropout*, and, accordingly, labelling VET students as ‘vulnerable’, ‘at risk’, or ‘dropouts’, in order not to marginalize them by insensitive language and use of vague concepts. The concept of vulnerable students in Norway is defined within the context of VET, emphasizing the unique challenges faced by these students, such

¹ OECD (2022): Education at a Glance (2022): OECD Indicators. Paris: OECD Publishing. Table C1.1.

as migrant backgrounds, psychological problems, and histories with child welfare services. However, the Norwegian definition of dropout, distinct from the EU definition, underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of educational completion, particularly in VET, where students often take longer to complete their education due to the structure of the 2 + 2 model.

Adaptability and flexibility of VET is crucial in helping many students complete their education and build a foundation for their employability. Indeed, it has been a political goal in the recent “Completion reform” (*fullføringsreform*; Meld. St. 21 [2020–2021]) to add freedom and flexibility in the upper secondary education, exemplified by modular curricula to adult students in VET (Norway/Eurydice, 2024). However, adaptation and adjustment can refer to different types of flexibilities. Adjusting the form of the school, for example, through providing hybrid and modular learning opportunities, acknowledging the different life situations among the students, is likely the least problematic. Adjustments concerning the curriculum, individual learning plans (ILP entitling to SEN services) can be more problematic and indeed work against their purpose for the students in question. The crucial issue is how much flexibility is appropriate without compromising the learning and competence goals and outcomes of upper secondary education, i.e. the quality of the education outcomes. For example, in their interview-based study on the one measure based on adapted curriculum, alternative learning trajectories or courses, Bruin and Ohna (2013) asked: “[g]iven that the course does not lead to any formal qualifications, the question needs to be asked whether the course actually qualifies as ‘education’ at all” (pp. 1091–1092) and voiced the concern, regardless of the good intentions, that “[i]f the educational system does not respond to the students’ construction of new identities [referring to Biesta’s (2009) notion of subjectification] through enabling pathways towards more formal qualifications, the development of alternative courses with increased workplace practice might lead to an unintended result of further marginalisation, exclusion and social reproduction” (p. 1089). Too much flexibility may result in “educational programmes with little market value” (Nevøy and Bruin 2022, p. 130). Referring to educational provisions that do not prepare students for the contemporary globalized world, Lingard (2007, p. 246) talks about “pedagogies of indifference.” The term refers to educational provisions characterized by low intellectual demand, which may be “deeply therapeutic in their strength of care for students, but indifferent in terms of working with differences and making a difference in academic and opportunity senses” (Lingard, 2007, p. 246, in Nevøy and Bruin 2022, p. 130). The consequence may be to render students educationally disadvantaged and rob them of future opportunities (Nevøy and Bruin 2022).

In conclusion, the success of the support system for youth at risk in VET in Norway depends on several factors. Through our empirical work we have shown that schools that succeed in preventing dropouts focus on adapting to students’ needs in learning and psychosocial needs. Furthermore, they ensure that students’ voices are heard by a trusted adult/teacher and by their classmates, in a safe and encouraging learning environment, which also nurtures feelings of belonging. Systematic cooperation with external and internal stakeholders and information exchange,

particularly during primary and secondary school transitions, play an important role. Early detection of challenges allows for timely intervention with the help of multi-professional collaboration teams. Among the most important cornerstones in the inclusive education and VET system in Norway is the opportunity to tailor solutions to individual needs with close follow-up and individualized support. Furthermore, there are robust transition arrangements between educational stages, external collaboration and support functions, effective routines for multi-professional collaboration for building supportive teams around the students as needed, called for and enabled by several system-level initiatives. The “competence boost” for special education and inclusive practice (*Kompetanseløftet for spesialpedagogikk og inkluderende praksis* 2022) and the new Education Act from autumn 2024 are some of the system-level supports. These initiatives have potential to further strengthen the support system. Indeed, the final report from the evaluation of the “competence boost”, expected in 2025, will be of great value for further systemic improvements and adjustments for the benefit for all students. In sum, it is essential to ensure flexibility while maintaining adequate learning and competence goals of VET. Such an approach may prevent blocking students’ future opportunities and reduce the risk of social exclusion.

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Chapter 3

Vocational Pathway to Empowerment for At-Risk Youth in Lithuania—A Typical Case of Neoliberal Reforms?



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Abstract The focus of this chapter is on the critical analysis and review of the implications of the institutional, procedural and curricular reforms of VET provision for their potential to empower socially vulnerable youth in Lithuania. Particular attention is paid to the shifts of the VET policy and the reform goals between the social integration and development of human capital according to business needs and the implications of such double orientation for the potential of VET schools to facilitate vocational and labour market integration of socially vulnerable youth. The chapter presents the findings of the qualitative study carried out in the VET schools of Lithuania through interviewing vulnerable VET students and teaching staff. This research discloses various supportive and hindering factors which affect the empowerment of these vulnerable VET students.

Keywords Empowerment · Vulnerable students · Vocational education and training · Lithuania

1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to provide a critical analysis of the role, functions and mechanisms of the VET system in Lithuania in empowering of vulnerable young people for employment and further learning. The theoretical framework of this analysis is based on historical institutionalism and institutional development of the skill formation systems (Busemeyer and Trampush 2011; Bosh 2017; Tūtlys et al. 2022), the socio-ecological approach (Evans et al. 2010) and the resiliency or protective process approach (Zimmermann 2013). The triangulation of these theoretical approaches

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enables disclosure and understanding of the characteristics of empowerment of socially vulnerable youth in the VET system of Lithuania, which has experienced radical institutional and political transformations, by taking into consideration the evolution of social environment, structures, actors and their relationships and critical junctures that emerged during the post-communist transition and EU integration (Tütlys et al. 2022). The socio-ecological approach is used in analysing the restrictive and enabling role of the VET school and family environments of socially vulnerable young people and implications of these environments for their learning and development paths. The chapter also analyses resiliency or protective processes, which are supported and/or precluded by the institutions and which enable positive change strategies in the lives of socially vulnerable young people, as well as negative effects of the institutional and socio-economic developments contributing to the risks of social exclusion (Zimmermann 2013; Fergus and Zimmerman 2005).

The chapter starts with a brief overview of the evolution of the role and place of empowerment of vulnerable youth in VET through different historical periods since the establishment of the institutionalized VET provision at the end of nineteenth century. This overview is followed by a critical review of the policies of skill formation, VET and employment related to the empowerment of vulnerable youth since 1990. Then we explore the research discourse on the role and place of VET in empowering socially vulnerable youth for employment and learning. This section is followed by the analysis of the findings of the qualitative research on the views of the socially vulnerable VET students and teaching staff regarding VET system's capacities and actual role in empowering vulnerable students conducted in Lithuania in 2021–2022.

2 The Evolution of the Role and Place of Empowerment of Vulnerable Youth in VET in Lithuania in Modern Times

The historical development of VET institutions in Lithuania is very closely related to the social mission of VET, primarily in supporting the vulnerable groups of society, especially children and youth. Late industrialization of Lithuania under the Tsarist regime in the second half of the nineteenth century led to the domination of crafts-based apprenticeship and late introduction of the specialized vocational training institutions. The first crafts schools were established during the post-1905 revolution reforms by catholic monasteries and charity organisations and were targeted at facilitating employment of orphans and other socially excluded youth groups (Saniter and Tütlys 2016). In the period of the Republic of Lithuania 1918–1940 the first public craft schools were established only in 1926 (Šalkauskas 1937). Although the key mission of the public VET in this period was prevention of social exclusion of youth from the low income class, the lack of resources, capacities and attention from the governments to the development of these crafts schools led to the situation, where

the majority of graduates could get employment only in low-skilled occupations and precarious jobs (Saniter and Tütlys 2016).

During the period of Soviet occupation in 1940–1990, VET was a part of centralized skill formation system tuned to the requirements of planned economy and the military-industrial complex with the key mission to provide needed human resources and to educate ideologically indoctrinated workforce loyal to regime (Soltys 1997; O'Dell 1988). Empowerment of socially disadvantaged or vulnerable youth in such system became a secondary mission, accomplished through different centralized and state-controlled mechanisms of skill formation, such as the Soviet type “dual” apprenticeship executed in VET schools and state-owned enterprises and the introduction of the integrated provision of VET and general education in the 1970s. The segregationist character of enrolment in VET, defined by its centralized planning on the basis of educational attainment and grades of students in general education, significantly contributed to the development of the “second choice” image of VET as an educational pathway for many years ahead (Lietuvos Respublikos Švietimo ir mokslo ministerija 1999).

The post-communist transition reforms after 1990, mark several key changes of the VET mission in regard to the empowerment of vulnerable youth. Firstly, the post-communist VET curriculum reforms aimed to “re-animate” and enhance the agency and autonomy of a working person in the conditions of free market economy, where the principal role of VET was to help the young person in acquiring and shaping the skills (human capital), which make them competitive in the labour market (Laužackas 2005). Such orientation towards human capital development was noticeable in the reforms of the VET curricula marked with the introduction of a competence approach. Secondly, one of the key sources of empowerment became orientation of the VET provision to the labour market needs by revising VET curricula (introduction of competence-based approach) and seeking (mostly unsuccessfully) to engage social partners, especially employers, in the processes of VET and skill formation (Laužackas et al. 2004). Thirdly, EU integration and related VET reforms enhanced orientation of the VET provision to the so called lifelong learning paradigm, which was believed to become an important source of new opportunities of empowerment for different vulnerable groups (Laužackas 2005; Laužackas et al. 2009). However, the real effect of these factors to the “empowering” capacities of VET are rather fragmented and controversial, when trying to balance the neoliberal approaches to human capital development and a welfare state orientation to the “activation” of the citizens for employment, skills development and lifelong learning. These issues are analysed and discussed in the following sections.

3 Institutional Settings of VET Provision in Lithuania: Implications for Empowerment of At-Risk Youth

This section explores the implications of the VET institutional setting and related processes of VET provision to the empowerment of at-risk youth. Particular attention is paid to the development of VET institutions, and evolution of the social dialogue and legislation.

3.1 Socioeconomic Context of the Institutional Development of the VET System in the Twenty-First Century

During the first two decades after the restoration of independence of Lithuania in 1991, public VET provision in Lithuania was designed to target the issues of youth unemployment and prevention of exclusion as a kind of compensation/mitigation of the negative impacts of the transition to market economy (Laužackas 2005; Laužackas et al. 2004). The main focus of the VET after the global economic crisis of 2008–2009 was more tuned to tackle the social externalities of the liberal and neoliberal industrial and economic policy oriented to “catching up” other economies. The existing settings of dropout prevention and labour market integration through VET involved such traditional welfare state mechanisms as free access to state-funded VET, specialised VET pathways for persons with disabilities and the unemployed, and the liberal approaches oriented to the flexibility of learning and training pathways through curriculum modularisation and promotion of work-based learning (WBL) opportunities.

The period of EU accession coincided with a dynamic economic growth, which manifested in almost all sectors of economy and brought about a significant increase in the demand of skilled workforce (Tütlys et al. 2022). This factor, together with the start of a high scale emigration, can explain rather dynamic reduction of unemployment in almost all categories of skills. However, the economic growth after the EU accession in 2004 and the global economic crisis of 2008–2009 created several key long-term problems and challenges in the field of youth employment. Following the EU accession, the national economy entered in the period of fast economic growth driven by low and middle-level skill sectors. During this period, many young people abandoned training without acquiring a qualification and instead were attracted by low-skilled jobs in the growing sectors of economy, like construction. During and after the global economic crisis these young people lost their jobs, which contributed significantly to growing structural unemployment and quickly increased the rates of youth emigration. When young people left the country without general education and/or vocational qualifications, this often led to fragmented pathways skills formation and precarious employment (Kvalifikacijų ir profesinio mokymo plėtros centras 2014).

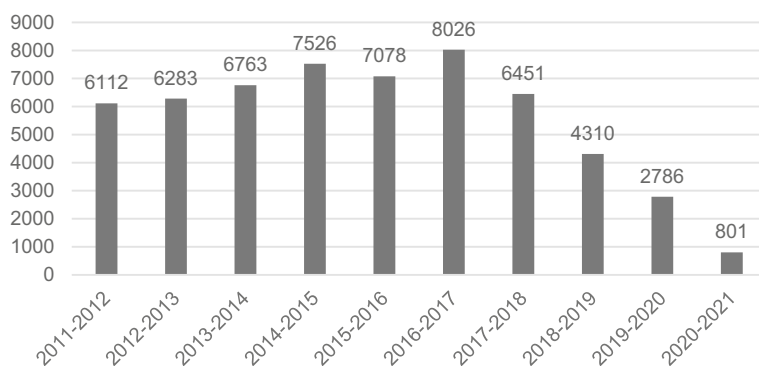


Fig. 1 Dropouts from the VET establishments in Lithuania 2011–2021. *Source* [Kiti įvairūs duomenys apie profesinio mokymo įstaigų mokinius - ŠVIS \(emokykla.lt\)](#)

The growing demand for skills in the pre-crisis economic growth period was not accompanied with a corresponding change of the employment quality and growth of wages and salaries. In sectors facing extreme shortage of workforce (construction, transport), this growth was quite moderate and was insufficient to motivate youngsters to stay and accept jobs in the local enterprises. The peak in the number of dropouts from VET programmes coincided with the peak emigration rate, indicating that emigration was a significant factor contributing to VET dropouts (see Figs. 1 and 2). According to the National Audit Office, in 2015–2016 15.38% of VET learners dropped out, in 2016–2017—19.1%, and in 2017–2018—16.7%. A larger share of dropouts was in small VET schools (up to 300 learners) (Lietuvos Respublikos Valstybės kontrolė 2020). As a result, facing skills shortages caused by emigration, companies increased the volume of work-based training, which became largely detached from the initial VET.

Emigration did not essentially solve the problems of youth unemployment. Statistical data show that in the period from 2010 onwards, employment opportunities have slightly improved mainly for the holders of the HE diplomas and post-secondary VET diplomas, while the holders of the other types and levels of VET qualifications (vocational lower secondary, vocational upper secondary) faced significant shrinking of their employment opportunities. The employment level of HE graduates significantly increased from the 35.8% in 2011 to 44% in 2020, which resulted in a growing rate of over-qualification and intensifying competition for jobs between the VET and HE graduates (STRATA 2022). The data of the Government Strategic Analysis Centre STRATA data (STRATA 2022) show that many jobs that require VET qualifications are still occupied by graduates from HE institutions (especially those from universities of applied sciences).

The global economic crisis also sharpened the problems of disparities of regional socio-economic development, resulting in the polarization of employment and career

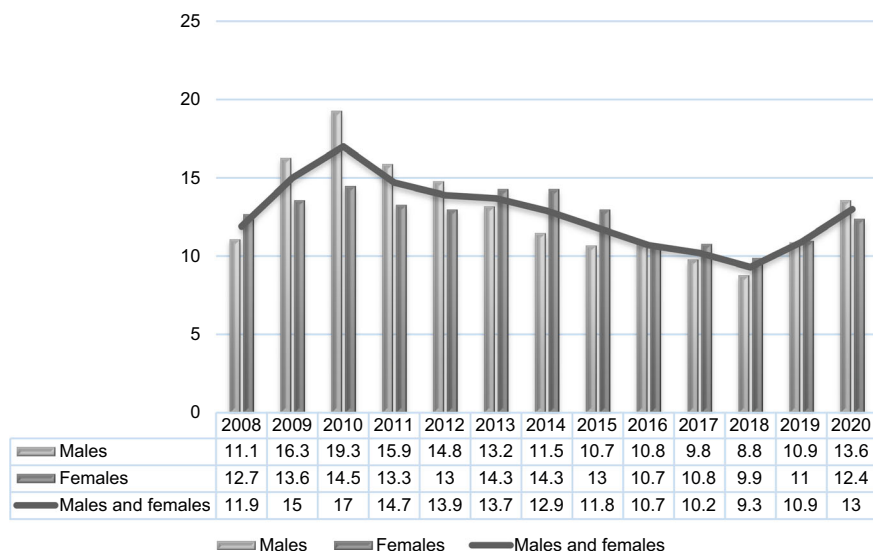


Fig. 2 Young people (15–29) neither in employment nor in education and training. *Source* Statistics Lithuania <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=fe9f1860-608b-41c1-87ac-ac54f92f5d38#/>

opportunities in the bigger cities (which recovered from the crisis faster) and struggling rural areas. It also served as an important push factor for youth emigration in these regions.

The policy response in dealing with the emerging labour market problems was based on the neoliberally designed and supply-oriented skill formation policies in 2009–2015, exemplified by efforts to develop apprenticeship and WBL and an introduction of private funding arrangements in HE (Tütlys et al. 2022). The measures to support vulnerable youth were overly focused on their fast integration in the labour market, treating employment as an automatic solution to the problems related to social risk and exclusion and largely ignoring the need to tackle other—psychological, social, and educational—risk factors (Kvalifikacijų ir profesinio mokymo plėtros centras 2018). Later, in 2016–2020, a shift to the developmental approaches of skill formation, by seeking to strengthen the links between supply and demand of skills, may be observed. It involved changing the status of public VET providers to public entities with private stakeholders, strengthening the role of employers' organizations and enterprises in the development of qualifications, centralization of the enrolment of students in VET and, partially, in HE, by linking it with the national monitoring of human capital (OECD 2021).

The introduction of the New Labour Code in 2017 was a good illustration of this policy response. It was introduced to make employment processes more flexible and to increase attractiveness of the national economy for international investors. Apprenticeship contracts, along with other forms of employment contracts, were introduced. It was expected that the new arrangements would encourage graduates,

job seekers and employees to invest in their own human capital. However, evidence of the positive effects of these arrangements for the employment of socially vulnerable youth and other vulnerable groups of society remains scarce, mainly because the implementation of apprenticeship is still in its early stages. For example, according to the 2018–2019 statistical data of the Education Management Information System (Lith. *ŠVIS*), the share of VET students involved in the apprenticeship training in VET establishments ranged from 2 to 67%, while the overall share of initial VET students in the apprenticeship training programmes reached only about 3% (*ŠVIS 2019*).

Looking at the situation of young people in the NEETs (Not in Education, Employment and Training) category, the dynamics of their share in the two decades of the twenty-first century includes two peaks of growth—one takes place in 2010 reaching 17% and then gradually decreasing up to 9.3% in 2018, with a subsequent raise to 13% in 2020 (Fig. 2). This shows a strong impact of the economic and health crisis on the rise of the share of NEETs. The reduction of the share of NEETs in the period from 2011 to 2018 was caused by multiple factors—not only the positive implications of specific policy measures, but also emigration as evidenced by the coinciding decline of the share of NEETs and the growing emigration rate.

The implications of migration (especially emigration) for labour market integration of vulnerable youth are significant. Emigration dramatically increased in the first years after the economic crisis, involving high losses of human capital ('brain drain') and fostering attempts of policy makers to encourage repatriation (Barcevičius and Gineikytė 2015; Barcevičius and Žvalionytė 2012). Structural unemployment, skills mismatches, and dissatisfaction with employment quality were the key push factors. However, the implications of emigration for the expansion of employment opportunities and employment quality for the local workforce were limited by the human resource management strategies of enterprises (especially large ones), prioritising the recruitment of workers from 'third' countries (particularly Ukraine and other former Soviet republics). Peaking in 2016, the emigration rate began to decline in 2019, when net migration changed from negative (− 30,171 in 2016) to positive (10,794 in 2019) (Statistics Lithuania, <http://www.stat.gov.lt>). This change was related to the improved economic situation at home and international turbulences, such as the 2016 Brexit vote, the 2014 revolution in Ukraine, the "migration crisis" created by the authoritarian regime of Belarus in 2021, as well as the Russian military aggression against Ukraine launched in 2022, which increased the flows of refugees and economic immigrants. Immigration from the third countries in 2016–2020 increased almost 2.4 times (Statistics Lithuania 2022), and the above-mentioned turbulences in 2021 and 2022 increased it further in a significant way (Fig. 3).

One of the implications of migration for the training and employment of socially vulnerable youth is emergence of the low-skilled 'hardship' migrants (Kureková 2011), who tend to look for the easiest accessible employment in the host countries, ignoring issues of employment quality, potential for skill development, and possibilities of collective defence of interests in industrial relations. The labour immigration of holders of VET qualifications from the third countries tends to solve the skill shortage problems of enterprises but at the same time reduces the incentives of the enterprises

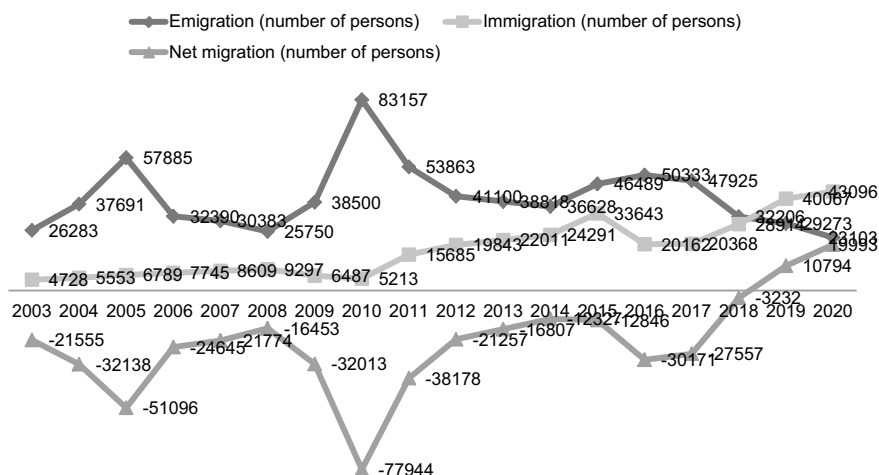


Fig. 3 Immigration, emigration and nett migration indicators in Lithuania, 2003–2020. *Source* Statistics Lithuania, www.stat.gov.lt

to invest in the local workforce and open better chances for quality employment for the local young people.

3.2 *Legal Framework of VET and Skill Formation: Implications for Empowerment of Vulnerable Youth*

Formally, the VET system of Lithuania and VET programmes are designed for people of all ages and backgrounds (Lietuvos Respublikos Konstitucija 1992). Initial vocational training is open for the youth of at least 14 years of age seeking to obtain their first qualification. Initial vocational training is implemented at basic education (ISCED 2), secondary education (ISCED 3) and post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED 4) levels. The completion of the programmes leads to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) level 2–4 qualifications. Lithuania has introduced a general obligation for young people under 16 to study according to primary and basic education programmes (Lietuvos Respublikos Konstitucija 1992; Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas 2015). A young person who does not attend school regularly is entitled to minimum support measures.

To facilitate opportunities for socially vulnerable students to study and work, it is possible to prepare an individual learning plan, to coordinate the time of theoretical training with the working time of the student, and to organise practical training at the student's workplace. A student who is enrolled in the initial vocational training programme but cannot follow the training for different reasons, can prepare and account for the course independently. Under the current legal framework, a student

who has not completed a vocational training programme receives a certificate giving the right to return to the education system and to recognize prior learning (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas 2021a, b). After completion of the VET programme module, a certificate is also issued. VET graduates who obtain the Matura Certificate may enter higher education institutions and receive additional entrance points. Advanced VET graduates with high academic achievements or graduates with work experience in line with their qualifications are awarded additional entrance points when entering higher education.

The Law on VET includes provisions stipulating financial support to the students from low-income and socially vulnerable families (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas 2021a, b). Students are provided with a scholarship and entitled to free dormitory accommodation, clothing and food. However, schools claim that such poor material support has the opposite effect—to support themselves, students find employment and no longer attend classes, which consequently, leads to dropping out of the educational process without gaining a qualification.

3.3 VET Reforms and Their Implications for the Empowerment of Socially Vulnerable Youth

According to the National Audit Office, the labour market integration of NEETs in Lithuania is challenged by the lack of a systemic approach in integration policies, insufficiently developed vocational guidance, non-systemic and fragmented assistance to the socially vulnerable learners, lack of flexibility in the development of vocational skills and key competencies, and a weak social dialogue in VET (Lietuvos Respublikos Valstybės kontrolė 2016). The National Audit Office also indicates, that one of the key challenges with the NEET prevention in VET is the lack of opportunities for WBL and practical training in the enterprises.

Strong attention of the EU policy to the fostering of apprenticeship in the field of VET and skill formation in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008–2009, played its role in promoting apprenticeship in Lithuania (Cedefop 2017). Apprenticeship and WBL in Lithuania were introduced in the Law on VET in 2007. The existing legislation provides for different types of apprenticeship, ranging from the employer-led and company-based training to the dual apprenticeships based on the contractual agreements between the learners, enterprises, and VET providers. The global economic crisis and its aftermath significantly increased structural unemployment of young people, which also fostered different stakeholders to strengthen their efforts in promoting apprenticeship. For example, labour market training centres implemented the ESF funded project “Vocational education and training in the form of apprenticeship in the labour market training centres” in 2013–2015, aimed at developing a short-term apprenticeship scheme (up to 6 months), targeted at the young unemployed persons NEETs. However, this initiative did not developed into a

sustainable practice after the end of the project. The employers' discourse on apprenticeship mainly focuses on satisfying the skills needs of enterprises, to a large extent ignoring the social and educational mission of apprenticeship and the issues of its accessibility for young people, especially those living in small towns and rural areas.

Fostering of work-based learning led to important investments in the infrastructure of the practical training at the public VET centres. A new practical training facility emerged, a sectoral practical training centre, operating within a VET centre and equipped with modern equipment from one or several sectors of economy. The main aim of these centres was to assure that diverse learners (VET and HE students, employees, the unemployed,) using the latest technologies and equipment, would gain practical skills that match the labour market reality. Between 2013 and 2016, 42 sectoral practical training centres were established with the ambition that at least 3/5 of all students of the Lithuanian VET system would spend at least half of the VET programme implementation time in such centres. Sectoral practical training centres are also considered as a measure to increase access to WBL, on the conditions of a rather passive engagement of enterprises in this field. Although a rare case in practice, legal acts permit that if a student faces difficulties in finding a practical placement in companies at the end of the training, it can be arranged at a sectoral practical training centre.

Another important reform was an introduction of the competence-based modular VET curricula fully launched in 2018. This could also play an important role in strengthening the VET potential to prevent social exclusion and youth unemployment (*Kvalifikacijų ir profesinio mokymo plėtros centras* 2018). Since 2015, modular VET programmes have been developed on the basis of the sectoral qualifications standards in all economic sectors. The methodological approach to modularisation is a kind of compromise between the flexibility of VET curriculum and the holistic approach to skill formation. A module is defined as an autonomous unit of learning, which provides a set of competencies needed for autonomous performance in the work process by integrating a wide range of knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for handling the work processes (Spöttl and Tütlys 2017).

The framework of the modular curricula has been constructed to facilitate graduate employability: the introductory module focuses on the provision of guidance and enabling orientation of the student in the occupational field and workplace, whereas the concluding module provides a set of competencies needed for the job search and (self-)employment. Development of the modules relying on competence-based sectoral qualification standards, prepared with the active involvement of employers, is another design characteristic, which should increase the employability and employment potential of VET graduates. The modules are intended for the acquisition of a partial qualification, and a person who has completed a module of the vocational training programme is issued a certificate. Modular training is expected to increase a person's opportunities to independently form their qualification and learning path,

shorten their study time, validate the acquired knowledge and competencies, facilitate learning mobility to another VET institution or even another country after a break (KPMPC 2012).¹

VET teachers also note that modularisation of curriculum has resulted in a more transparent curriculum structure for teachers and students. Where training content is divided into rigorous, occupational competence-focused modules, and learning becomes more practice oriented, modular curriculum may be more motivating for learners (Vaitkute 2023). Similar observations about the attractiveness of a unitised curriculum for learners have been made by several authors researching modularisation of VET programmes.

There are, however, a number of limitations in this model, largely related to the realisation of this model. Firstly, with the introduction of the national modular training curricula, the volume of hours of practical training at the real workplace has decreased to 110–220 h or about one third of the volume of practical training hours which was provided before. According to VET teachers, implementation of the modular VET curricula entails a risk to focus the training on the short-term demands of skills expressed by enterprises (Tütlys and Vaitkutė 2022; Vaitkute 2023). This trend is pushed not only by the domination of short-term vision of employers towards VET goals, but also by the purely instrumental perception of the training by young people from low-income families, who face the pressure to enter the labour market as early as possible, with the acquisition of the basic occupational skills without acquiring a full qualification. Modularisation provides such opportunities and thus increases the attractiveness of VET for both youth and employers. However, this kind of “attractiveness” lies in the faster access to employment, rather than the possibilities to foster employability and seek sustainable employment and career.

Concerns have also been raised about the insufficient attention to transversal competencies and foundational skills, such as numeral literacy, in the curriculum (Vaitkute 2023). The current model stresses occupational skills and, to a limited extent, encodes skills of more transversal nature, leaving them to school-level curriculum decisions. Considering this and a lack of policy-practice-research discussions about the current curriculum model, present social and economic transformations and future skills needs, the risk of impoverishing VET curriculum is real (Tütlys and Vaitkutė 2022; Vaitkutė 2023). Finally, recent studies (Krikštolaitienė et al. 2020) question whether modular curricula can succeed in shaping critical thinking skills and work-related values.

¹ KPMPC (2012).

3.4 The Development of Social Dialogue and Involvement of Social Partners in VET: Implications for Empowerment of Socially Vulnerable Youth

The design and implementation of competence-based and modularised VET, along with the introduction of sectoral qualification standards and efforts to introduce and develop WBL and apprenticeship, required a significant contribution from the stakeholders, particularly employers (Laužackas and Tütlys 2008; Laužackas et al. 2009; Tütlys and Spūdytė 2011). Attempts of the policy makers to combine/mitigate a central state regulation in the field of skill formation and VET, with a delegation of responsibilities to sectoral social partners, still presumes largely ‘top-down’ involvement of these partners in the design processes, leading to their reservations and reluctance to invest time and efforts in the development of open and transparent system of skill formation and qualifications. As a result, multipartite social partner bodies, such as sectoral professional committees, execute overly formal functions and do not have real decision-making power and capacities. The implementation of the competence-based Lithuanian National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and sectoral qualification standards framework in 2013–2019 has significantly increased the influence of the employers’ national or branch organizations in the qualifications design. The interests of employees and learners in this field are represented and defended mainly by governmental bodies and representatives of education providers rather than by representatives of trade unions.

The growing imbalance of representation of social partners has several negative implications for the openness and access to VET. The dominance of employers’ organizations in skill formation and qualifications design leads to their gradual “ownership” of the relevant social systems. This poses a real risk of shifting their focus from serving a common good (including protecting the most vulnerable groups of society) to prioritising private interests. The absence of trade union representatives in the qualifications design and VET curricula creates the risk that these will mainly be oriented to employers’ needs. Without trade union participation in the design of qualifications, the competencies needed for constructive industrial relations are unlikely to be included in the sectoral qualification standards and curricula. This can lead to the formation of an obedient workforce, lacking the competence to understand and defend their rights with respect to work conditions, remuneration, career progress and similar issues.

Another possible risk is the interest of employers to promote narrowly specialized qualifications to reduce workforce mobility in the context of extensive emigration. When trade unions and professional organizations are not involved in the design of qualifications, education and training providers and the state remain the only countervailing power to the influence of employers. When employers play the main role in the design of qualifications it is difficult to ensure that intended competencies facilitate employability and employment stability of their owners. Such situation creates significant challenges and risks to the development of the qualifications and curricula which would lead to stable employment and high-quality jobs.

One of the policy measures targeted at fostering VET social dialogue at local level has been to increase the participation of social partners in the governance and management of the VET providers. The first amendments to the Law on VET permitting public schools to change their status and enabling social partners to become their shareholders were introduced in 2002. The most recent law amendment in 2017 made all VET providers public entities obliging them to involve social partners in their governance. However, so far there has been no clear evidence that such ‘legal’ involvement of social partners in the governance and management of the VET institutions creates potential for solution of the problems of vulnerable youth in the VET system.

4 The Views of the Socially Vulnerable Students and Teaching Staff on the Empowering Effects of VET: Research Study in Lithuania

4.1 Research Methodology

A qualitative research study was carried out by conducting 22 face-to-face and online interviews with socially vulnerable VET students in the four VET centres located in Vilnius, Kaunas, Alytus and Smalininkai in the period from September 2021 to February 2022 (Table 1).

The average duration of an interview was 45–60 min. Most participants were well-disposed and willing to share their opinion and experience. The interviewer often provided additional questions to clarify the main questions or to get more in-depth and comprehensive answers. Selection and preparation for interviews with vulnerable students was carried out in close cooperation with the social pedagogues and psychologists of the VET schools to minimise the risk of negative impact of interviewing for the psychological well-being of informants. In some cases, interviewers also engaged in more comprehensive discussion with interviewees by sharing own experience, know-how or providing suggestions, recommendations, and guidance to the interviewed students by helping them to see the wider picture of their situation and to discover opportunities.

The interviews were followed by three focus group interviews with VET teachers, social pedagogues, and other members of teaching staff in the three VET centres located in Vilnius (organised online because of pandemic restrictions), Kaunas (live) and Smalininkai (live), involving 9 participants in total (6 VET teachers, 2 social pedagogues and 1 psychologist). These focus group interviews aimed to disclose the views of the teaching staff on the VET related factors, which support and preclude empowerment of socially vulnerable students in the acquisition of skills and competencies and in employment (Table 2).

4.2 Research Findings

4.2.1 Factors Which Support Empowerment of Socially Vulnerable Youth in VET

Interviews with socially vulnerable students and focus groups with VET teaching staff revealed different factors supporting the student learning and completion of training programmes.

Interviews revealed that an occupational choice presents significant challenges for students and assistance and guidance in the field of occupational choice is regarded by the students as extremely important. As evidenced by interview excerpts below,

Table 1 Characteristics of respondents

Respondents code	Location	Sex	Training programme/ profession	Year of schooling	Factor of risk/ vulnerability
Audronė	Kaunas	Female	Hairdressing	1st	Family issues, loss of a parent
Aistė	Kaunas	Female	Animal care	1st	Family issues, loss of a parent
Ramunė	Kaunas	Female	Animal care	2nd	Family issues, loss of a parent
Giedrė	Kaunas	Female	Animal care	2nd	Family issues, loss of a parent
Sigita	Vilnius	Female	Event organization	2nd	Migrant background, family issues
Liucija	Vilnius	Female	Beauty services	2nd	Orphan, family issues
Olga	Vilnius	Female	Event organization	2nd	Orphan, family issues
Dangira	Vilnius	Female	Beauty services	1st	Orphan, family issues
Živilė	Vilnius	Female	Tourism, event organization	2nd	Orphan, family issues
Arūnas	Alytus	Male	Furniture production	2nd	Health issues
Skaistė	Alytus	Female	Furniture production	2nd	Youth unemployment and dropout experience
Karina	Alytus	Female	Cooking, construction	2nd	Family issues, living without a parent
Rūta	Alytus	Female	Cooking	2nd	Intellectual health issues

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Respondents code	Location	Sex	Training programme/ profession	Year of schooling	Factor of risk/ vulnerability
Gražvydas	Alytus	Male	Furniture production	2nd	Health and family issues, living without a parent
Gintautas	Smalininkai	Male	Cooking	2nd	Dropout from general education, dependencies, living without a parent
Petras	Smalininkai	Male	Construction	1st	Orphanage, living with a brother
Vygintas	Smalininkai	Male	Construction	2nd	Orphanage
Saulius	Smalininkai	Male	Construction	1st	Orphanage, health issues
Deividas	Smalininkai	Male	Construction	2nd	Dropout from general education, family issues
Algirdas	Smalininkai	Male	Car mechanics	2nd	Family issues, living without a parent
Saulė	Smalininkai	Female	Cooking	2nd	Intensive bullying experience in the general education
Vytautas	Smalininkai	Male	Construction	1st	Orphanage, intellectual and physical development issues

in making decisions about learning and occupational choice, youngsters highly rely on parents, family members and friends, while adolescents living in the orphanages stressed VET-oriented vocational guidance received from teaching staff of the orphanage.

My brother was also enrolled and studied in this VET school and now he is working. Now I've started to attend it too, I finished 10 years in school and I enrolled here. My brother persuaded me (Lina).

I've found out about the profession from my aunt, who showed me an ad for an animal care school. So, it was very easy to choose (Ramunė).

I was told by the orphanage teacher that I had to attend this school and about the work I would have to do ... and the VET teachers and trainers have showed to me what I am doing now ... and I'm currently studying to be a chef... (Petras).

Having the ability to choose from diverse vocational qualifications is also treated as a measure to cope with uncertainties of the labour market in seeking for optimal occupational choice. Several interviewed VET students from rural areas and smaller urban centres apply the strategy of trying different occupations and acquiring several

Table 2 Composition of the focus groups

Code of the focus group	Location	Sex	Duty	Experience of working with at-risk youth
FG1	Kaunas	Female	Social pedagogue	Provision of social assistance and consulting of socially vulnerable students, working with their parents and carers, provision of career guidance services
		Female	VET teacher, group coordinator	Teaching, coordinating a group of students
		Female	VET teacher	Teaching
FG2	Vilnius	Female	Social pedagogue	Provision of social assistance and consulting of socially vulnerable students, working with their parents and carers, provision of career guidance services
		Female	Psychologist	Provision of psychological consultations and assistance to students
		Female	VET teacher, group coordinator	Teaching, coordinating a group of students
FG3	Smalininkai	Female	VET teacher	Teaching
		Female	VET teacher	Teaching
		Female	VET teacher	Teaching

qualifications in seeking to find the most suitable choice, especially in terms of rewards.

I am from Varėna district, and I only came here to study, get a profession, and then to look for a job in that professional field. I had studied other professions before but could not find a job according to my qualification (Skaistė).

Interviewer: And what qualifications do you have? A chef, a bartender, and a waitress, then a visiting care attendant and now seeking to become a carpenter. I wanted to try this occupation, because I learned to be a chef, but didn't like it very much, so I thought I would try this, maybe I would like it. I heard from the teacher that the girls also work in such jobs, she said not to worry about that. I wanted to try both (Skaistė).

The interviews disclose that socially vulnerable students use the opportunities to acquire several qualifications, not just because of the insufficiency of appropriate vocational or career guidance (trial and error way), but also to get a kind of protection and security in the unstable labour market, trying to adjust their own preferences to the limited possibilities of employment.

Regarding supporting factors related to learning and the sense of achievement in the school, the interviewed students distinguish active engagement in the VET school community, including membership in the school council, which fosters their self-confidence, development of skills and attitudes, useful for successful integration in school community, and helps to overcome loneliness:

I never felt lonely at school. I'm the coordinator of the student council unit and I coordinate the school's student council Instagram account (Aistė).

Social pedagogue and class teacher supported me in getting involved in the student council. Here I can demonstrate what I can, to learn many new things, on how to work with other students, to organize the things (Giedrė).

Students are open about the boost to their self-esteem as a result of improved learning performance and wider possibilities for self-expression compared to the general education schools.

In fact, before coming to this school I had poor (grades), but in this school my grades have changed for the better. In this school I realised that I needed to be more confident. As I used to be afraid to speak in public, I am no longer afraid now. This school made me believe in myself more, more than any other school, gymnasium. You believe in yourself more here (Aistė).

Next, students highly value attention and didactic support of the VET teachers in the learning process. They also appreciate accessibility of teachers for expressing their concerns directly.

All teachers understand us well, especially the tutors and the social pedagogue. We can always turn to them for help and advice. The teachers try to explain everything well. The same is true for practical training, because our programme is taught by a lot of practitioners working in the field of animal care, which makes their lessons and activities very interesting (Ramunė).

The interviewed students note that development of vocational competencies is the key advantage of learning at the VET school. They also distinguish vocational knowledge from 'everyday' knowledge, understand that learning at a VET school empowers them by providing vocational knowledge and skills, and enabling to personally monitor their learning progress, thus supporting their learners' autonomy.

You learn a lot of different things when you study here that you don't learn every day. You just see different tools in vocational schools, cutting tools, grinding tools, you look at them, you learn how to use them, how they work, how to cut, how to work safely with these tools to avoid injury. You are not just learning; you are being supervised by teachers and craftsmen to make sure that you get the knowledge you need and then you can use it (Arūnas).

I'm studying to become a hairdresser. I chose hairdressing because there were only two choices (the other was sports event organiser) and hairdressing was the most interesting choice for a girl because you can learn and develop. I don't know, but when you study hairdressing, you can watch how the person next to you improves, and you can watch yourself improving, when you don't know anything at first, then you do the tasks, you get the grades, the teachers tell you the result, you get the average score and see your advancement (Audronė).

Practical and WBL experience is considered to be more interesting, enjoyable, more diverse and more engaging compared to theoretical learning. Interviews unveil the potential of this practice-oriented learning for increased students' learning motivation. It appears that students also value practical learning for the pragmatic reasons (application of acquired knowledge and skills), as well as because it provides more space for independent learning.

What I'm learning practically can be useful ... just by watching something (in the book) you don't learn that way ... I like it better when they show something practically rather than theoretically... I'm more interested in learning on my own, ... but it would be better to be shown practically, ... then there will be fewer mistakes ...(Petras).

Previous work experience (local or abroad) also emerges as a supporting factor, which shapes the attitude of socially vulnerable young people to work and fosters capacities of the critical evaluation of labour market opportunities.

When I went abroad, one job was very difficult, another was better, the pay was good, I had saved up £600, I learned to save and plan my money. I went abroad to work, the country is different, but the money there didn't bring me happiness. I can earn it here too ...(Vygintas).

Volunteering activities are also specified by some students as an important source of learning and a significant factor in occupational choice. Students notice the benefits of volunteering to their personal development and for the acquisition of different skills.

I volunteered for 2 or 3 years – performances all over the place, and from the first one in the city I knew I wanted to do events. I tried to volunteer everywhere, to perform everywhere. There was one manager who said: "Kids, there are such and such events this month, we need this and that". I was the first one to raise my hand if I needed to show up or help. We worked in this way a few months, and then the manager herself would automatically call me if she needed my help. "We are going to an old people's shelter today; we need you to be there with us and talk to them." Of course, I agree. I would agree to anything to have more activities, to make more friends, to improve myself (Sigita).

Several students also notice positive influence of learning at the VET centre to prepare to defend their rights in employment relations. Students at the VET centre acquire knowledge about the labour market and employment realities, risks, employment quality and labour relations:

I've been trying to get my friends to go to work for some companies, I've offered a place in a few, but one of my friends can't do it because of his health. Others are afraid to go because they don't know what to expect at the company, so you need to support each other when working. It is important not to allow employers to exploit us, because these days these things happen (Arūnas).

Interviewer: But maybe it's more fun to go with a friend to work in a company?

Yes, yes, there is less bullying at work in such cases, as we learned in the last lessons about psychology, stress at work and workload. Yesterday we talked about how your employer gives you a lot of work and you can't get anything done in time (Arūnas).

Working students are in favour of being employed during their studies and indicate encouragement and support for their learning from the side of employers and colleagues.

My employer also tries to give me what I ask for if it is related to my studies. When I said I was studying and could (come to work) when my lectures finished, he said - of course, of course. He understands that I am a young person who wants to achieve more in life, so I will have to work as well as study. I am happy to have a boss like that, he is always there to help, to advise if necessary (Dangira).

Some students value work as a source of development of hard-working attitudes:

I think work is the most important thing in life because you get skills for work. My understanding of work came when I started working for a farmer when I was 16. He showed me how to work and earn money and how hard it is to do it ... I think it's good to work hard ... (Gintautas).

VET teaching staff also distinguish a wide scale of educational factors contributing to empowerment of socially vulnerable VET students. These factors include the role and contribution of the group coordinators/headmasters, applying different propaedeutic measures and interventions which facilitate learning and working motivation of socially vulnerable students, and implementing targeted pedagogical interventions to develop key skills and competencies. Diverse support was also provided to socially vulnerable students facing additional difficulties and limitations during the Covid-19 lockdown. One more factor is the possibility of learning and training in other countries.

VET schools also apply additional vocational propaedeutic measures and interventions which facilitate vocational learning and employment/working motivation of socially vulnerable students, elaborate targeted pedagogical interventions to develop key skills and competencies, especially in the field of entrepreneurship and citizenship:

FG 2: Currently we prepare two programmes of non-formal education for the introduction of selected occupations – metalworker and cook – to these students. We want to provide these kids with more knowledge, skills, and opportunities. To help them to accept themselves as they are, to know their capabilities and to have willingness to adapt.

FG3: We could mention here the programme of fostering entrepreneurship skills of our students developed by us. We have established an annual plan of measures with activities to enhance development of entrepreneurship skills in our programmes... Another programme is dedicated to the development of citizenship and national identity, designed for general education. These activities are carried out together with the student council, which initiates and organises various events, dedicated to different topics of civil society, memorable dates etc.

Cooperation and teamwork between social pedagogues and VET teachers in integrating socially vulnerable students is very important for effective didactic support to these students, especially the consultations and support provided by social pedagogues to the group tutors.

FG1: There is quite intensive cooperation between social pedagogues and VET teachers, because we work with students who have very different life experiences – emotional, social, etc. Social-pedagogical support is available to students provided by different teachers. If a group coordinator is not capable to provide such help, then I discuss the problems with the group coordinator. I keep constant and regular contact with all group coordinators, which helps to identify the problem easily, where I need to intervene as social pedagogue.

4.2.2 The Factors that May Hinder Learning and Graduation of Socially Vulnerable VET Students

The interviews with socially vulnerable students and focus groups with VET teaching staff disclosed a wide range of factors, which hinder the learning of these students and completion of their training programmes. Among the factors related to personal background and life experiences of these students, the following factors related to their family situation can be distinguished: (1) growing up in a one-parent family and related experiences; (2) growing up in an orphanage; and (3) growing up without parents but with senior brothers and sisters or other close relatives. Informants also indicated the factors related to specific conditions and problems, such as alcohol dependence, delinquencies of parents, emigration of parents, and health issues.

Teaching staff members claim that one of the biggest factors of the social risk and deprivation of socially vulnerable VET students is poverty, which has far-reaching negative implications for student socialization, as well as to their attitudes towards learning and work. Poverty in the families creates multiple limitations and obstacles to learning and largely deprives young people of realisation of their capabilities. The phenomenon of “an impoverished kid” (*užskurdintas vaikas*, in Lithuanian), when children accept their poor living conditions as a normal order of things, is still a major problem faced by VET schools in rural areas. Poverty also creates obstacles for the online learning, which became evident during the Covid-19 lockdown.

FG2: So, we need to establish a good relationship with parents or carers to solve the problems of absenteeism, learning etc. However, when a person reaches 18 years of age parents and guardians stop taking care of them and leave everything to the young person to decide. Communication with parents is one of our key problems, because they are very reluctant to communicate and want to turn away from the problems of their kids in the school. It is very difficult to invite them for a talk, to establish durable relationship, only a few parents take care of their kids studies. The way a young person is educated in the family also matters very much here: if they are educated as free persons or they are under strict control or being ignored. We have students who come to study for 2 years – 11th and 12th year of schooling, still very dependent on parents.

Teachers also notice an increasing number of students from single-parent households and claim that such students very often have lower motivation to study and insufficient (self)discipline in learning, which becomes a serious obstacle in the training and learning process. Living with one parent often involves various economic limitations and the pressure for the young family members to become economically active as soon as possible, thus making VET as one of the most feasible and rational choices of transition to the labour market. Such young people usually experience hired work very early and take over duties to economically sustain themselves and to help the family.

For orphaned students, the socialization experience in the orphanages includes a sense of being abandoned mixed with the feeling of the safety and care from the staff. Although some of these interviewed students report positive attitudes to learning and work, the encounters with the world of work in the orphanages are more complicated and contradictory (interviews with Olga, Živilė, Liucija, Dangira,

Petras). VET teachers and social pedagogues report that students with the orphanage background often lack life skills, and positive work and learning attitudes. In some cases, even when the orphans have stepparents, the stepparents care about them only until they reach the age of majority. Once the orphaned students move to live in the VET school's dormitory, the care of and even interest in these youngsters cease. Teachers, however, notice a similar lack of attention, interest, engagement and support to learning even from the parents of students once these reach the age of majority.

Alcohol dependence, delinquencies of parents as well as their emigration are also important factors of social risk:

When I was 6 years old, my father left us, my mother started drinking, a few years ago she became completely dependent on alcohol ..., I have a younger brother, I don't need help from my grandmother, I deal with my life problems myself. I shut myself off in my world and live that way (Gintautas).

Some interviewed students have had serious health issues, which create many obstacles for learning and work (interviews with Rūta, Vytautas, Lina).

Yes, but I can't do much, I can't lift heavy things. I had an epilepsy seizure at school, I went to the canteen for lunch, someone leaned on the shoulder, and I fell on the tiled floor, I lost consciousness, they took me to the hospital, I was hospitalised, and then the epilepsy started (Karina).

Socially vulnerable students who live in rural areas and towns also face the lack of choices and scarce social capital in seeking access to learning and employment opportunities (interviews with Skaistė, Liucija, Gražvydas). Thus, they experience multiple transitions from one educational establishment to another (especially in rural areas and small towns) accompanied by educational failures at schools.

I went to three schools before: one was a pro-gymnasium school with programmes up to 8th grade, one was a secondary school with programmes up to 10th grade, and then I moved to a vocational school with programmes for 11th grade, which I graduated from, and then I moved to Vilnius, where I completed grade 12 by way of distance learning (Liucija).

Since in the town of Varėna, I had no other choice for training, and I didn't really want to go for study to other cities. For this reason, I graduated from the training programme of care attendant in Druskininkai, where I had some acquaintances and contacts, because when you don't have acquaintances, it's not so easy to find a job (Skaistė).

Referring to the factors hindering learning and graduation, we noticed that interviewed students mainly pointed to negative learning experience in the general education schools and did not notice any significant/critical factors related to learning in VET schools (interviews with Deividas, Ramunė, Skaistė, Živilė). For example, students indicated that in the general education schools they experienced a lack of attention and support of teachers in the learning process and tried to compensate this lack of support by seeking assistance from their parents, siblings, and friends.

I used to attend the gymnasium, and it was very difficult there because teachers explained everything in a complicated way, and I had a lot of problems with my lessons. Since I wanted to move to this vocational school, I did so. I am doing much better here than in the gymnasium (Ramunė).

Students also indicated that in the general education schools they felt lonely and isolated, and experienced bullying, distrust in their capabilities from schoolmates and teachers, which they overcame in VET schools.

In high school, other students used to make fun of me. Now that I'm in vocational school, I sometimes meet these former classmates. I don't feel any resentment anymore, the attitude of my former friends has also changed for the better, we communicate normally (Saulè).

The teachers had less confidence in me at the pro-gymnasium than they do now at the vocational school. Maybe because I was younger and shy. But now I try hard to go out there, encouraged by both teachers and classmates, to do what I am asked to do and what I like (Liucija).

One of the key obstacles and problems of learning students face in VET schools has been transition to online education during the Covid-19 lockdown. This problem was recognized by the VET teaching staff, by outlining the lack of necessary conditions for online learning and indicating interventions by VET schools in supporting students at risk in this transition.

FG1: The Covid-19 lockdown was a serious issue for the vulnerable students, especially those who started their studies in the online format. We had to look for different ways to support them – starting from the help with providing computers, ending with the provision of consultations on the organization of learning and training, psychological support, etc. Some of these students really lacked suitable conditions for learning.

VET schools also face difficulties in motivating at risk students to use psychological and pedagogical support offered to them. Often these students do not use such assistance or use it irregularly due to their internal constraints or other reasons.

FG2: Kids are not very keen to go to the psychologist and to talk to her. We try to suggest and to persuade them, but often in vain. Those who are motivated to solve their problems go and work with the psychologist, but once such motivation is absent, students do not use this service. Class mentors notice psychological problems and direct such students to talk to the psychologist, but very often after the first consultation such students never appear there again.

When discussing the VET policy responses to these problems, teachers indicate fragmentation and unsustainability of the national policies related to the integration of socially vulnerable youth. They are especially concerned about the negative implications of the dependence of these measures on the EU funding and domination of the short-term project-based implementation logic for their sustainability and continuity.

FG3: In connection with the training and integration of socially vulnerable students, funding is available, which creates preconditions for motivated teachers to improve and advance in this field, to achieve some significant results here. However, if the EU funding for such projects ceases, it will also mean the end of development in this field. There is a lack of continuity and stability of state policy in this field, there is constant jumping from one project to another. Projects create impulses but they are momentary and not sustainable. There is also a lack of relationship and interconnectedness between these projects and initiatives. VET reforms have to be more meaningful, not just follow the political agenda priorities. We need to keep and sustain our own training styles and paradigms instead of jumping from one to another. What was developed in the past is not necessarily bad.

When referring to specific reforms in the field of VET curriculum design and provision of training, VET teachers question the potential of the recently introduced competence-based modular VET curricula to provide the competencies that would empower socially vulnerable students. VET teachers note misalignment of the modular curricula to the specificities of the skills needs in the regional labour market. Some teachers are very critical about the outcomes of the modularization of VET curricula—fast delivery and narrowly specialized qualifications which are not fit for the regional labour market dominated by SMEs and sole proprietorships. The narrow orientation of VET curricula to concrete work functions and vocational competencies is considered to contribute to the lack of relevance and attractiveness of VET and even to dropout from VET.

FG3: The VET curricula are not just shortened but also split into very narrow specializations. In our region we need a broader VET curricula, like the waiter-bartender, who can work in the local cafeteria as both a waiter and a bartender. Employers in the bigger cities require narrower specialisation and fast “delivery” of specialists, e. g. to train the waiter in 30 hours or the bartender in 40 hours. The problem is that big employers from the large cities make too much influence on the structure and content of VET curricula.

Interviewed teachers were open about the drawbacks of the current curriculum model, its relevance to empowering vulnerable students and unpreparedness of teachers to implement it. For example, the development of key competencies within modules of VET programmes poses a challenge due to a lack of competent teaching staff, where VET teachers, in particular senior teachers, lack the English language skills. Teachers also have doubts if modular VET curricula allows to provide systemic vocational knowledge. Considering increasing demand for systemic knowledge and understating in handling digitalized and networked work processes, this can have negative implications for the future employment and further (continuing) training of graduates:

FG3: Why should not we provide the basic knowledge of economics and business to our students in a separate unit? How can you get a systemic basic understanding of economics if you are taught by a person who has no decent understanding of it having background in engineering or other qualification? Each teacher should work in the area where they are experts, according to their profile, why do we need to mix it up? If a teacher is universal, he/she can provide this knowledge anyway (also when teaching subjects), no modular training is needed here. We need to look wider and in a more systemic way to VET curriculum.

Teachers indicate that the expected flexibility of learning pathways, considered as an important factor for employability and lifelong learning, has not yet become a reality. Although credentials awarded after each module and the possibility to recognise them at a later stage have been named as a positive characteristic, it is still a rare practice. On the other hand, teachers also question the meaningfulness of separate modules for holistic development of a VET learner.

Interviewed VET students note insufficient quality of the training infrastructure but are mostly concerned about the insufficient volume and quality of the WBL, which undermines their preparation for employment. They also expressed a need for more support from the VET teachers and trainers in the provision of practical training.

I think I still have too little experience, ... I would like to do more practical training, but there is no place in the regions to do it ... we are learning using old cars (car repair), there are no newer ones ... it would be nice to have the latest automotive technology in school ... but nothing is done...(Algirdas).

We need from the school to give us more practical than theoretical training and I would recommend ... a couple of months dedicated to learning theoretical subjects and then the rest of the time for practical training, not like now, ... the same thing repeatedly ...(Petras).

VET teachers are also sceptic about the potential of implementation of the dual apprenticeship in empowering socially vulnerable VET students. They indicate that this process lacks essential institutional arrangements and conditions, such as even and balanced involvement of stakeholders, economically strong and socially responsible businesses, which are largely missing in the rural areas and small towns. The delegation of responsibilities for VET schools to organize apprenticeships cannot fix these shortages.

FG3: In Lithuania we can find very good examples of strong and long-term cooperation between VET schools and enterprises, especially in the big VET schools, which are able to cooperate with larger companies. Here, in our region there is a real gap in this. We do not have big or strong companies here, just a lot of sole proprietorships and self-employed people.

When it comes to the transition of socially vulnerable students to the labour market, VET teaching staff point to systemic problems and challenges in the relationship between work and learning, which pose different risks and threats for training and graduation of VET students, including their employment in the low-skilled/unskilled jobs during the training and overly formally implemented apprenticeship and WBL with very reserved engagement of employers. When stressing the negative implications of employment of students in the unskilled jobs during their studies, teachers claim that such precarious employment is defined by the necessities imposed by their social and economic situation (poverty). It works as a “negative” nudging of dropping out from the VET programmes with very rare cases of return of such young people to training.

FG2: In most cases, socially vulnerable students in the 11th-12th grades are already employed. Then you ask them why they do not attend their lessons and the answer is straightforward: my parents cannot provide us with money to cover the necessary expenses, therefore I must work. Of course, their jobs do not reflect their training programme, these are unskilled and low-skilled jobs. Then we seek to motivate such students to continue their training. In some cases, we succeed with such motivation and the students complete training programme, but we also have other stories related to dropout of such students.

Insufficiency of different resources (including human resources) in the VET schools to provide educational, psychological, and other support for socially vulnerable students can also be noted, especially when considering increasing numbers of such students and the overall increase of the social polarization problems. As a result, teachers face growing workload in terms of providing such support, which raises their concern about their capacities to assume such growing workload with increasing number of socially vulnerable students, especially when this support requires specific

competencies (e.g., diagnosing of student-related learning difficulties and impediments). The lack of human resources results in growing workload for headmasters and teachers, and VET schools have to rely on their personal willingness to cope with such challenges.

FG3: The main concern is the sufficiency of my capacities – to what extent I will be able to help them in the future. The number of socially vulnerable students is growing in the group but still everything relies on the individual approach of a teacher, there are no systemic, institutional or methodical measures and solutions on how to support such students in their learning. We do not have a special pedagogue, or an assistant teacher to help these students to learn, or an expert teacher who could support our teachers in concrete pedagogical situations, like preparation and adjustment of learning tasks.

VET teachers believe that in working with socially vulnerable students they need to strengthen their skills and competencies. However, they find the amount and quality of accessible continuing professional development courses not suitable and sufficient to deal with the challenges in the VET practice, including training of socially vulnerable youth.

FG2: As young pedagogues, we need more practice and practical know-how on how to work with socially vulnerable students, which pedagogical approaches and techniques are the most suitable and effective. For example, I recently took part in the training about aggression management which I liked very much, because practical advice was provided on how to behave in the situations when we face aggressive behaviour of students.

FG3: VET teachers also need the knowledge of psychology, because they often face difficulties in seeking optimal compromise between the different rights of students (students know these rights very well and fiercely defend them) and the obligations to train the students. The mental health of students is getting worse, especially after the lockdown. They do not speak, they are much more introvert, so the know-how on how to deal with such cases is very much needed.

These findings disclose a need of different adjustments and amendments of existing policies and practices of VET curriculum design and pedagogy when seeking empowerment of socially vulnerable learners in VET.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The empowerment of socially vulnerable youth through vocational education and training is a highly complex, multidimensional and dynamically changing process. It can only be understood by considering historical, institutional, socio-economic and educational aspects and their interdependencies. In this chapter we have sought to provide a holistic and systemic view of the empowerment of socially vulnerable youth in the VET system of Lithuania by taking into consideration all the above mentioned factors, including institutional and socioeconomic specificities of the skill formation system and society in this country, as well as taking into consideration the agency of learners, VET providers and other stakeholders (Fig. 4). We will subsequently discuss the key implications arising from our findings.

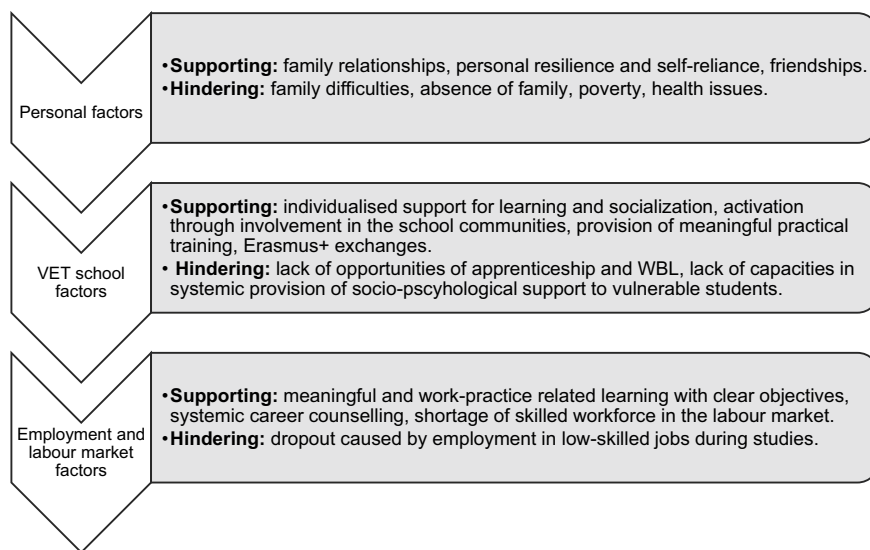


Fig. 4 Factors which support and hinder empowerment of socially vulnerable VET students in Lithuania

Referring to the context of institutional development of skill formation and VET systems and their implications for the empowerment processes and practices taking place in the VET schools, enterprises and elsewhere, several key points can be noted. The strategic development of the VET provision is targeted at predominantly economic goals related to the development of human capital for the competitiveness of the national economy and fostering of graduate employability. This makes the orientation to skills needed for the economy a clear priority of the policies and practices compared to the aspects of accessibility, equal possibilities, or assistance to vulnerable social groups. The alignment of the VET system with the labour market needs is expected to foster employability and thus, to increase the empowering potential of VET. Such orientation favours implementation of the competence-based curricula, modularization, promotion of WBL (Vaitkutė 2023) and increasing the role of the individual choices and responsibility in the field of skill formation and employment. The VET policy has led to the change of the legal status of public VET providers with stronger involvement of different stakeholders, especially employers, in the local decision making. Although the VET system still seeks to sustain its mission to create educational opportunities and to provide access to education, training and skill formation for all citizens, this mission lacks clear vision regarding the direction of the actions and responsibilities of stakeholders. Different measures of VET reforms illustrate such duality of making VET provision more effective and competitive and oriented to the business needs and at the same time seeking to create opportunities for the development of capabilities of all citizens. As an example of such duality, implementation of the sectoral practical training centres in public VET centres can

be mentioned, targeted to expand the accessibility of high-quality practical training and WBL. However, as our research has revealed, this overly formal approach aimed at building capabilities of vulnerable youth leaves their realization to the teaching staff of VET schools without providing necessary capacities for teachers. As a result, this creates objective obstacles for at-risk students in seeking to realize these capabilities (e.g., difficult access to WBL, obstacles in following online lessons during the Covid-19 lockdown, dropping out from VET programmes due to employment in unskilled jobs, etc.).

Looking at the current trends of VET curriculum design in the school-based VET systems implementing competence-based curriculum reforms, there is a typical strong distinction between general and occupation-related training, delegating academic study and learning only to higher education and development of technical skills only to VET (Brown et al. 2020). This distinction supports and strengthens social inequalities and exclusion on the basis of skills, largely ignoring the fact that knowing and doing are integral to all forms of work (Brown et al. 2020), while learning to know in VET has a very important empowering effect on learners through enabling and fostering reflective practices in the work processes, as well as by providing knowledge and skills important not just for work, but also for the “human flourishing” (Briggs and Reiss 2021). One of the reasons for failure to develop holistic and empowering VET content is the lack of clear agreement about VET mission and uncertainty about the place of transversal competencies in the curriculum (Vaitkutė 2023). This signals the need for a practice-policy-research dialogue concerning epistemological and methodological principles of the curriculum.

Our research has also disclosed controversial implications of the domination of the instrumental concept of VET focused on economic objectives (Bonvin 2019) for the empowerment of the socially vulnerable youth. Interviews with students disclose that they value work and education which provide them with the capability to lead a “valuable life” (Bonvin 2019). Students also seek for meaningful work, not just for employment and income. In terms of the labour market, the increasing precarity of the offered jobs and decreasing stability of employment leave several key options for the new entrants: (1) developing own pattern of employability by addressing the requirements of employers and investing in the relevant skills, (2) voluntary work by expecting to get employed because of resulting employability, or, (3) taking available low quality and precarious jobs which underuse or do not require competencies and qualifications (Dujarier 2021). Interviews have disclosed that socially vulnerable VET students take all these options. Students from large cities tend to declare proactive ideas on how to shape their own employability and develop professional skills and competencies in their first year of studies by working or in the voluntary activities. Students from smaller towns and rural areas share their concern about the insufficiency of practical training and scarce contacts resulting from their work practice in the chosen occupations during training. Other students tend to take the situation in the labour market as it is and accept any available employment opportunities.

The findings of the interviews with socially vulnerable VET students and focus groups with teaching staff disclose several key factors of empowerment through

creating capabilities by the VET pathway. In many cases at-risk students have a freedom to choose a VET programme or curriculum that they have a reason to value (because these programmes fit to their callings, preferences, life plans etc.). However, a rather strong impact of socio-economic restrictions, especially poverty, can also be noticed in choosing the VET pathway, which leads to faster employment and contribution to sustaining families—this is rather typical for rural areas and smaller towns. The existing supporting personal background factors of socially vulnerable students are very poor and fragmented (e.g., guidance of parents, siblings and other relatives), which requires more support from the state institutions and other stakeholders to compensate for this shortage.

Differently from the findings in other studies (Bonvin 2019), previous negative schooling experiences acquired in general education, seem not to have a destructive impact for desire to learn in VET programmes. Contrastingly, socially vulnerable VET students often claim to experience a strong motivating and liberating effect of training, helping to acquire self-trust and motivation for studying.

Alternative costs of engagement in VET programmes seem to be a serious factor which precludes and challenges the empowering effect of studying in VET for students with low-income background. Employment in the precarious and unskilled jobs during the training speeds up dropout from VET programmes without receiving a qualification and a VET diploma. The critical question is how to empower such students to move from precarious and unskilled employment to skilled jobs according to the qualifications they hold. On the one side, there are significant socio-economic factors pushing socially vulnerable youth to accessible precarious employment (poverty, precarious life conditions). On the other side, these factors are resisted mainly by the efforts of VET teachers and students themselves, not assisted by the systemic and strategic actions from the side of government and social partners. This challenge can be dealt with by substantially increasing the financial support to vulnerable VET students to compensate for the alternative costs of engagement in VET (Bonvin 2019) and expanding accessibility of the apprenticeship training for such students. In terms of apprenticeship training, a certain affirmative action of employers is needed.

Unequal access to high-quality practical work-based learning appears as an important risk factor to successful employment. It was particularly stressed by the students from rural areas and small towns, where there is lower offer of such training workplaces in the local enterprises and not all VET centres are equipped with modern equipment. A meaningful workplace learning experience offering school-to-work transition situations is one of the key success factors in enacting curriculum (Vaitkutė 2023). Many interviewed vulnerable students see it as the key factor empowering their employability and readiness for autonomous performance at work. Therefore, the obstacles in accessing such learning opportunities are an important source of concern and stress. The sectoral practical training centres provide a hands-on practical learning solution, however usually they are located in bigger cities and accessibility for the students from rural areas is rather limited. Recent government initiatives in increasing accessibility of the sectoral practical training centres for VET students

from other regions by funding travel and subsistence costs seems to address this issue.

Enabling socially vulnerable VET students and trainees to voice their concerns and aspirations is considered as an important factor of empowerment both by the students and teachers. This is achieved by engaging students at risk in the student councils and other school communities. These structures allow VET students to voice their opinions about training and learning practices, school community, cultural life and the level of self-expression of students, but at the same time they have no significant role in deciding about the content of VET curriculum.

Powell and McGrath (2019) notice negative effects of the narrow employability orientation for the capacities of VET systems to empower learners for employment, explaining these effects by the overly focus on the individual responsibility for employment and ignorance of objective limitations to employment deriving from the existing labour market structures. In such cases, VET systems often fail by not treating vulnerable young people as active agents with diverse skills, which can be applied in the wide range of jobs and workplaces and create important limiting preconditions for the further professional development (Powell and McGrath 2019). Socially vulnerable students experience difficulties in finding jobs which fit their acquired qualification and offer decent job quality. They feel trapped in “survivalist” and precarious jobs, lack social capital and support in the school-to-work transition. All of this reduces the value of learning for them and negatively influences their future careers. This is echoed by the findings of our study, disclosing negative implications of the narrowly specialized VET curricula on employment prospects and students’ decisions to pursue other VET programmes in cases of failure to get employed with the initial qualification.

Wheelahan (2017) pays attention to the weakness of the competence-based VET in empowering learners through educational and occupational pathways. The findings of our research disclose that VET schools apply a wide range of measures and interventions, which support learning and employment of socially vulnerable students, and they are acknowledged by the students. These actions represent an educational pathway to empowerment. At the same time, an occupational pathway to empowerment emerges, the main mechanism of which is fast employment of a learner. Underpinning the logic of empowerment either through an educational or through an occupational pathway, strongly follows human capital approach and employability agenda, prioritising the matching of human capital of young people with the skills needs in the labour market.

In the educational pathway, the key challenge is sustainability of the support provided by VET schools. It is endangered by the lack of human and financial resources, know-how (Vaitkutė 2023) and reliance mainly on the efforts, contributions, and dedication of the VET teaching staff in supporting students at risk. Reliance on the supportive role and agency of VET teachers and other staff appears hardly sustainable because of the lack of capacities, competencies and know-how needed for the provision of effective didactic support to socially vulnerable students (see Table 3). Mechanisms of agency in the educational pathway strongly rely on the engagement and caring attitude of teachers and lack of the systemic-institutional

Table 3 Educational and occupational pathways of empowerment of socially vulnerable youth through VET

	Empowerment through educational pathway	Empowerment through occupational pathway
Underpinning logics	Education treated by the students and their families as a factor opening access to employment and independent life Ensuring the compatibility between the VET curricula and the labour market needs through a strong orientation to competence requirements of the work processes by following qualification standards. Such curricula model is expected to foster employability and employment of socially vulnerable youth, to enhance quality and attractiveness of VET	Fast employment is regarded as the main (and only) factor of empowerment and socio-economic integration of vulnerable youth Integration of socially vulnerable youth in the labour market is treated as a shared responsibility of young people themselves, their families, VET providers and state institutions, while social partners (especially enterprises) do not intervene actively. This can be explained by the employers' mentality—expecting “oven ready” skilled workers from the VET, reductionist view to investment in human capital and corporate social responsibility Promotion of the work-based learning and apprenticeship by the national policy makers as an effective measure of employment and employability
Mechanisms of agency and their functioning	The VET school is a central agent in educational empowerment of socially vulnerable students with strong and caring engagement of the teaching staff Flexibility of learning pathways through curriculum modularization is expected to strengthen learner agency Rather a wide range of didactic instruments (curricular propaedeutic interventions, individualised pedagogical/didactic support, persuasion and guidance to potential dropouts) A lack of a systemic approach in applying the instruments and shortage of capacities of VET providers	Employment of vulnerable young people in the low-skilled jobs during their studies in VET, providing them with resources for living and work experience as a factor of socialization. This also creates serious obstacles for the quality of studies and stimulates dropout Sporadic efforts of teaching staff and VET schools to establish employment support for socially vulnerable youth through vocational guidance and contacts with employers Lack of systemic engagement of employers in the skill formation of socially vulnerable youth make them more dependent on the precarious employment and exploitation in the employment relations

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

	Empowerment through educational pathway	Empowerment through occupational pathway
Division of roles and responsibilities for empowerment	The key role played by VET teachers, group coordinators, social pedagogues, and psychologists Strong cooperation between the teachers and pedagogical assistance staff	Key roles played by the VET schools and VET teachers Support provided by the employers of vulnerable VET students to combine work and studying
Implications for empowerment to complete educational pathway and to get employed according to the acquired qualification	The fragility of empowerment through educational pathway is endangered by the unfavourable socio-economic conditions (e.g., poverty, precarious employment of socially vulnerable students during studies, lack of attention and support from their parents or foster-parents) and lack of capacities of the VET schools Tension between the employability development logics dominating national policy and the efforts towards development of capabilities of socially vulnerable students by the VET teachers	The fragility and fragmentation of empowerment through occupational pathway because of poor access to WBL and practical training, slow progress in apprenticeship and “hidden apprenticeship” practices, where employers hire VET students leading to dropout and non-completion of training programmes, which makes young people more vulnerable in the labour market and dependent on a single employer
Under-used potential and improvement possibilities	Insufficient investment in the capacity building of the VET teaching and support staff Fostering agency and involvement of socially vulnerable students in the educational processes (e.g., through involvement in the school communities and self-governance bodies)	Insufficient use of the potential provided by the sectoral practical training centres, development of social dialogue between the VET providers, businesses in the field, municipalities, employment service, public welfare organisations, facilitating the building of the credit of trust of employers for the vulnerable young people, as future employees and citizens Slow progress in terms of apprenticeship placements

approach. The fragmentation of the occupational pathway mechanisms is manifested through employment of vulnerable VET students in the unskilled jobs, sporadic intermediation of the education sector with the labour market in the matters of vocational guidance, practical training and employment and the lack of engagement of employers in the empowerment initiatives and processes.

Our analysis leads to the conclusion that policy makers and social partners treat the empowering of socially vulnerable VET students more like formal provision of opportunities, rather than an active and holistic intervention with real transformational potential, helping to transform socially vulnerable VET students into “agential” workers (Wheelahan 2017). This is one of the key reasons why the implemented VET reforms and policy interventions tend to have very modest or no significant effect for the empowerment of socially vulnerable students.

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Chapter 4

The Empowerment of Socially Vulnerable Youth in the VET System of Latvia: Implications of a Systemic Orientation to the Needs of the Labour Market



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Abstract The reduction in the Latvian population has created an urgent need to increase retention in the labour market, of not only high skilled entrepreneurs and competitive employees, but also to ensure that most of the VET students obtain a qualification relevant to the labour market. This also refers to vocational students at risk of dropping out due to a variety of reasons, including their unfavourable socio-economic backgrounds. In Latvia, after the EU accession it was a political decision to invest major funds in the development of VET, to increase the number of vocational students, as compared to the number of students in general education. According to the evaluation of the OECD and Cedefop, the progress is slow but steady. The success of the policy was determined by a set of factors, that included the modernisation of the curricula, successful introduction of the competence-based approach and work-based learning, as well as improving the overall competence of teachers and their well-being, to promote their individualised work with students and to avoid burn-out due to heavy workloads. Alongside these factors, massive investment in the VET institutions' infrastructure and equipment, and co-operation with employers, has improved the prestige and attractiveness of VET. This has created the pre-conditions for retaining maximum numbers of students in the education system, including the students at risk of dropping out, especially due to disadvantaged socio-economic conditions.

Keywords Vocational education and training · Normative regulations for vocational education · Socially vulnerable students · Work-based learning · Supervision

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1 Introduction

This chapter explores the empowerment of vulnerable learners in the VET system of Latvia. The chapter reviews the development of the VET system in Latvia, today's situation and future perspectives. Very significant changes in the social structure are expected over the next few decades. The government of Latvia is supporting student involvement in VET as the aim is to increase the share of students in vocational education against the share of students in secondary education. According to the National Development Plan for 2027 the Parliament of Republic of Latvia has accepted that in 2027 the share of students in vocational education has to reach 50% (NAP 2020) in comparison to 40.07% in 2021 (FM 2023). The share of vocational education students involved in work-based learning (WBL) needs to be raised too (Cabinet of Ministers 2022; FM 2023). Also, support for socially vulnerable students and students with special needs must be addressed. Research related to socially vulnerable students in vocational education (Bruin et al. 2023; Daukilas et al. 2024; Sloka et al. 2023) is gaining increased attention of the academic community, since the awareness that it is crucial to educate socially and economically active members of society by the VET system is growing among VET providers and the society at large. The beginning of these changes is now reflected in the reports on the development of the society (Bičevskis 2021; Susskind 2020, 2023) and technology (Barrat 2013; Bostrom 2014; Bubeck et al. 2023; Zimmerman 2000; Shulman 2021). The most vulnerable groups of the society and risk groups face particularly high challenges in adapting to change.

One needs to be aware that the societies are transforming. Existing working relationships will be complemented and replaced by mutual fulfilment of responsibilities in local communities supported by EU projects such as “Smart Villages”, “New European Bauhaus.” The **European Parliament**'s briefing (2021) stated the establishment of a *pact for smart villages aimed at improving the quality of life in rural areas*. The new tasks of vocational training are expected in two related directions. Firstly, the emergence of small local communities will require an increasing number of mid-level specialists who can address the internal technical and domestic problems of community actors. These specialists will need a broad base of basic knowledge and the ability to fulfil the various tasks required by the situation. Secondly, life within the local community will require a combination of good face to face communication skills within that community, in a direct, physical space with communication skills in a virtual space, using different solutions to build globalised communications. Addressing challenges successfully requires an individualised flexible approach, with a particular focus on socially vulnerable groups of learners. The expected changes in the education system and throughout the social relations system attach great importance to studying socially vulnerable learners in the VET system. This chapter discusses how general VET policy reforms in Latvia have contributed to addressing the needs of the socially vulnerable VET students—not only by mitigating challenges but also substantially empowering these students and giving them the opportunity to enter the labour market. We will explain the role of and opportunities for vulnerable young people in the field of VET in Latvia and the impact of

institutional settings on the provision of opportunities for these students, and we will share the research results of a qualitative study carried out in Latvia. The research carried out in Latvia in 2021–2022 was targeted at studying the opinions of socially vulnerable VET students and teaching staff regarding the role of the VET system in supporting vulnerable students. At the end of the chapter, conclusions regarding VET policy measures in Latvia and the future perspectives aimed at creating the foundation for future-oriented VET development, meaningful for the new generation, including socially vulnerable students, will be provided.

2 The VET Policy Reform and a Revised Legal Framework to Empower VET Students in the Labour Market Context

Research in the EmpowerVET project has revealed a highly important social and inclusion role of VET (Tūtlys et al. 2022). This role is constantly changing, including in Latvia, where VET from its relatively limited social role increasingly develops toward becoming a significant factor of employment and labour market participation.

2.1 Post-communist Transition and EU Accession Reforms of VET Provision in Latvia: Implications of Institutional Settings for Empowerment of Socially Vulnerable Youth

After the restoration of independence of the Republic of Latvia in 1991, competition and the free market were recognised as the main driving forces of the economy. Neoliberal politics fundamentally changed the whole set of objectives and tasks of the vocational education system. Political support for socially vulnerable youth weakened (Lice and Sloka 2019). Teachers, however, largely continued to work, guided by the principles of mainstream morality, and provided most of the necessary help to all those in need (Lanka and Mūrnieks 2006; Saeima (Parliament of Republic of Latvia) 1999; Saeima (Parliament of Republic of Latvia) 2010; IKVD 2021; Latviešu literārās valodas vārdnīca, 1972; Lavendels et al. 2012).

The situation improved after Latvia's accession to the EU. The education system received substantial help from the EU, including socially vulnerable groups, to improve the situation of young people. Both the material base of educational establishments was improved and comprehensive methodological assistance for teaching and support staff was provided (Buligina and Sloka 2016). The functioning of the VET system, including assistance to socially vulnerable young people, was highly dependent on the regular evaluation and accreditation of VET providers. Experts who evaluated the quality of education provided valuable recommendations for the

coordinated fulfilment of all educational tasks, including the formation of inclusive education.

Another important development of VET provision in the period of post-communist and EU accession reforms was related to the social dialogue on VET (Buligina and Sloka 2016). Here the introduction of the branch expert councils—multilateral sectoral bodies of social partners, representing employer organisations, enterprises, trade unions, professional bodies, education and training providers and governmental institutions—played a crucial role in enhancing and developing a social dialogue among all stakeholders of the VET system.

All these developments gradually led to the implementation of ambitious systemic VET reforms launched in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

2.2 Systemic VET Reforms Targeting Excellence, Flexibility of VET Provision and Meeting Skills Needs of the Labour Market

In the 2010s and the early 2020s the targeted national VET reform policy in Latvia started to bear fruit. There is a trend towards VET excellence with an interpretation that true excellence is inclusive, allowing everyone to reach the maximum of their inherent potential. The concept is clearly visible in the Education Development Guidelines 2021–2027 (Cabinet of Ministers 2021a, b). The trend has also manifested in the legal developments, with the Amendments of the Law on VET in 2022 (Saeima 2022a, b), reflecting the results of the comprehensive VET content reform of the last decade.

The essence of the current VET reform in Latvia is to strengthen the excellence and flexibility of the VET in the lifelong learning perspective in Latvia, to enable every individual in the society to realise their potential and minimise the barriers created by various objective and subjective circumstances that may be encountered in their private or academic/professional life paths (Lice and Sloka 2019). Thus, for example, documents certifying the acquired education and documents certifying vocational qualifications are set apart, providing the opportunity for the learner to obtain at least a vocational qualification, if they fail the general education exams, or vice versa. This norm has changed the current approach; when evaluating the learning outcomes, the achievements are assessed, instead of identifying deficiencies. This allows the vocational education system to be more flexible and focus on the needs and abilities of everyone, also responding faster to sector needs in the labour market. Graduates of the VET programmes will be able to receive both the above documents or only one of them depending on the achieved results. Formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes and the recognition of qualifications are designed to ensure their comparison between different VET institutions, as well as between countries, through a mechanism of gradual accumulation of learning outcomes for

awarding of qualification.. It is also important that lifelong learning opportunities have been expanded by combining formal and non-formal learning.

The right to offer qualifications referenced to Level 5 of the Latvian Qualifications Framework, in the form of continuing vocational training and professional development programmes granted to certain VET institutions, is another way how to respond faster to sector needs in the labour market. For this reason, the terms ‘related profession’ and ‘specialisation’ have been introduced and defined, creating a common understanding of similar professional qualifications that can be acquired at a VET institution.

This means that, if necessary, every adult would have the opportunity to improve their general and vocational skills, as well as to be upskilled, to change their way of life or profession.

A transition from the accreditation of VET schools and VET programmes to institutional accreditation is envisaged to reduce the administrative burden (Cabinet of Ministers, Republic of Latvia 2022). Possibilities will be provided for VET schools to implement parts of VET curricula as continuing VET or in-service training programmes without additional licencing in seeking to reduce bureaucracy.

Another important novelty is the processing of graduate career monitoring data, as well as insuring students against accidents throughout the VET programme. Data on such monitoring are available at the Official Statistics Portal of Republic of Latvia (OSP 2021) and the Open Data Portal (ODP 2021). The information on the graduates of vocational education (monitoring of graduates), is collected in accordance with the “Regulations of the State Education Information System” No. 276 of June 25, 2019 (Cabinet of Ministers 2019). Such monitoring is planned and realised annually and the obtained are publicly available.

Within the VET curriculum reform, Latvia continues to ensure a transition from subject-based to learning outcomes-based VET content, as well as to introduce a modular approach in the implementation of VET programmes (Lice and Sloka 2019). This development diminishes the risk of dropping out or leaving the education system without any usable result. The professional standards identify parts of a qualification that are recognizable in the labour market. This enables to acquire a ‘micro-qualification’ for the acquired knowledge and skills. Furthermore, to enable the learner to return to the education system, an opportunity to be admitted to VET basic education or VET secondary education programmes through assessing their competencies was provided, to further strengthen an individual approach by promoting participation in VET (CEDEFOP 2015). These measures contribute to improved social inclusion of VET learners, offering them better opportunities to be either part of the study process or labour market activities, thus reducing the dropout rates and the number of NEETs.

The aforementioned VET curriculum reform has been decisive for the major VET policy shift and improvement of the VET prestige among learners and parents—noticed also by international institutions (CEDEFOP 2013a, b, 2023a). Measures and activities to prevent dropout in vocational education, the importance of WBL and co-operation with social partners were also provided for. The main contribution to the VET curriculum reform has been the implementation of ESF-supported

project “*Developing the Sectoral Qualifications System and Increasing the Efficiency and Quality of Vocational Education*” (2016–2022) (CEDEFOP 2023b). This project ensures the revision of the VET curricula in accordance with the Latvian Qualifications Framework, and updating of the existing and developing new professional standards and professional qualification requirements. The European Commission’s Education and Training Monitor in Latvia has recognised that **the attractiveness of VET in Latvia is improving** (EC 2023). In 2021, four out of 10 pupils (i.e. 43.3%) in medium level of education took part in vocational programmes, an increase of 4.0% from 2020. The employment rate of VET graduates also improved, from 70.2% in 2020 to 75.2% in 2022 (EU average: 76.4%). Moreover, the total number of VET upper-secondary and post-secondary students increased to 24,120 and 3477 respectively in 2021 (compared to 23,295 and 3280 in 2020) (EC 2023).

In addition, the content of professional qualification exams was revised. As a result, a modular approach to educational programmes was introduced, and new tools for the implementation of the competence-based curricula were developed. The introduction of modular vocational education curricula is expected to significantly reduce the time needed to respond to the demands of the labour market. The content of the developed modular vocational education curricula will be flexible, and the implementation will be ensured in vocational basic education, pre-secondary vocational education, vocational secondary education, vocational continuing education and professional development programmes.

It is important that the learning-outcomes approach has been legally reinforced, thus introducing the possibility of accumulating, transferring and recognising learning outcomes, thus ensuring flexible learning anywhere and anytime. The possibility of receiving nationally recognised certificates on the acquisition of a part of a qualification supports the students encountering some problems either in relation to learning itself or due to some social or personal circumstances.

All this has contributed to further development and improvement of the sectoral qualifications system linked to the systemization of the VET curriculum design and development of the VET provision processes starting from the development of the national system of qualifications, implementation of the modular VET curricula, and then moving to capacity development of the VET schools, implementation of the WBL and modern competence assessment and award systems (Table 1).

The ESF projects have made a major contribution to the development of VET curricula, providing better opportunities for employers to define the expected competences, and paving the way for the individualization of the learning process and the recognition of the acquired skills by everyone in the professional context.

Support for WBL is also planned for the 2021–2027 planning period, and it is expected to be provided from 2024.

The Cabinet of Ministers prepared the regulations envisaged for the EU Cohesion Policy 2021–2027 specific objective 4.2.2 “Improve the quality, inclusiveness, efficiency and relevance of education and training systems in the labour market, including through the validation of non-formal and informal learning to support the acquisition of basic competences, including entrepreneurship and digital skills, and promoting the introduction of dual learning systems and apprenticeships” (Cabinet

Table 1 Reforms of the national qualifications system and VET in Latvia in 2013–2023

Development of the national qualifications system	• Latvian qualifications framework (LQF) with 8 levels and 15 sectoral qualifications frameworks • 162 occupational standards/occupational qualification requirements for LQF levels 2–4 • 40 occupational standards of LQF level 5
VET curriculum design and development	• Developed modular VET curricula for 206 vocational qualifications
Capacity development of VET schools	• 139 items of training simulation equipment were purchased for VET schools • 31 digital educational materials were developed and purchased • an online learning platform for the teaching staff skola.lv was developed • Investment in the human resources of VET schools: ESF project “Effective management of vocational education institutions and improvement of staff competencies” in 2020–2022: 278 different training and seminar events, 12,674 certificates of professional competence development was issued to 5941 persons; training course “Effective manager” providing support to 1237 persons, including directors, deputies, administration representatives; methodological material “Practical guide for working with adults in vocational education institutions” was developed • 22 human resources development plans and 24 development strategies were developed • 9533 people improved their competencies, including 3619 people improved general skills and professional skills • The pedagogical competence for work-based learning environment was developed for 1439 persons, 900 VET teachers completed a course for the development of modular educational programmes • 78 internship groups for VET teachers in Latvia and 21 group in other EU countries were organized for 795 persons, as well as mentoring for 208 new educators was provided • Training on the assessment and examination of the quality of vocational education was organized, including training of accreditation examination experts and commission members, involving 262 persons
Development of work-based learning	• Implementation of the ESF funded project “To increase number of qualified VET students through participation in work-based learning and practice in enterprise” seeking to promote the introduction of WBL in 2017 – About 40 educational institutions adopted more than 500 training programmes for WBL – More than 3500 companies were involved and more than 4000 students received training on WBL basis, according to the Cohesion policy funds management information system – In six months after the acquisition of the qualification via WBL, 69.15% of the graduates were employed
Competence assessment and award of qualifications	• Examination tasks for 206 competence-based vocational qualifications were prepared • 220 Europass certificate supplements were prepared

(Sources VISC 2017; VISC 2020a, b, c, VISC 2023, VIIS 2023)

of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia [2021b](#)). These regulations define the rules for the implementation of activity 4.2.2.9, “Individualization of the educational process and intersectoral cooperation for the excellence of professional education” in order to promote specific targeted projects, including the development of a systematic coordination mechanism for the improvement of the VET curricula and to ensure the cooperation of vocational education institutions and sectors in this area, identifying current skills in the labour market and introducing new skills in the VET curricula related to sustainability, digital and green economy. In the future, cooperation of vocational education institutions and industries for the development of skill mastery in vocational education will be facilitated, national skill mastery competitions and participation in international skill mastery competitions will be promoted to support talent development and transfer to more systemic sustainable developments. In this regard the role of Sector Expert Councils (SECs) still needs to be strengthened and the capacity of the National Centre for Education for coordinating uniform approaches to WBL by VET institutions must be built.

In order to strengthen the capacity of VET institutions for excellence, innovation and inclusion, an improved financing model for vocational education is planned to be implemented by 2026. It promotes a base funding approach to ensure better alignment with the actual costs of implementing educational programmes. The performance-based approach in accordance with the needs of the labour market will be strengthened, including with reference to strategic specialization. The upgraded financing model is intended to promote the availability of vocational education for everyone, ensuring a full-fledged and high-quality educational process for obtaining a full qualification or part of it. As a result, the human resource capacity and material and technical support of the educational institution will become more adequate for the training of qualified specialists. It will also be better coordinated with the needs of employers and the requirements of the economic sectors. The Conceptual Report on the financing model for vocational education has been approved by the Government of Latvia (Cabinet of Ministers [2022](#)).

The Amendments to the Law on VET also address broader VET policy issues, without a direct impact on at-risk VET learners (Saeima [2022b](#)). At the same time the systemic impact of the new norms has a beneficial effect on all the target groups involved in VET. Thus, the scope of the Law on VET has been expanded to cover all levels of the Latvian Qualifications Framework (LQF), including professional higher education. The levels of professional qualifications between the LQF and European Qualifications Framework (EQF) are equivalent, increasing comparability and transparency of VET. The functions and rights of the SECs have been revised and the coordination of the SECs activities was awarded additional financing from the state budget. It is also important to reduce the administrative burdens for the staff of VET institutions leaving more time and space for work with students. In this respect the new norms imply a transition from accreditation of programmes to accreditation of an educational institution. Educational institutions will also be able to implement parts of licensed VET programmes as another type of programmes—continuing VET or in-service training programmes—without additional licensing. All these measures are directed towards strengthening the capacity of the VET systems and

providers in Latvia to empower the VET students in the context of the labour market developments and for their personal and professional development in the lifelong learning perspective.

Regarding more specific support to vulnerable students—certain norms regarding additional material (financial) support to students from socially disadvantaged background have been implemented. The procedure for awarding scholarships and their amount is determined by Regulation No. 740 “Regulations on Scholarships” (Cabinet of Ministers 2004). The Regulations stipulate that a learner who is in a full-time vocational basic education programme, vocational education or vocational secondary education programme at a vocational education institution may receive a monthly scholarship from the scholarship fund. Currently, a new regulation has entered into force (amendment to Regulation No. 740—Cabinet of Ministers 2021b) stipulating improved conditions for awarding VET student scholarships. Previously, vocational education institutions could set different criteria for determining the amount of a scholarship and the procedure for awarding it. The revised rules provide clear and uniform criteria for all. The revised Regulations No. 740 are valid from January 1, 2021 and clearly define the criteria for awarding the minimum, increased and one-time scholarship, as well as the cases when the scholarship is not awarded (Cabinet of Ministers, Republic of Latvia 2021a). Regulation No. 740 also sets the criteria for an increased scholarship (up to 150 euros). The criteria are related to the learner’s academic performance, as well as activity in the public life of the vocational education institution, including participation in subject skill competition, professional competition, sports competition, and other events. A vocational education institution may award a one-time scholarship from the scholarship fund to a learner once a semester, which does not exceed 150 euros, provided an application is filed by the legal representative of an adult or minor learner justifying the necessary additional expenses and supporting documents or a document certifying the status of an orphan, a statement regarding the amount of social assistance received or other documents are enclosed.

Vocational education institutions actively participate in different international activities where they often achieve international success (EC 2022; OECD 2020). Such activities usually are additional motivation for greater involvement in vocational education.

2.3 Specific Policy Measures Targeting Empowerment of Vulnerable Learners in VET

To address the issue of working with socially vulnerable young people at risk, measures are being implemented that promote the creation of a sustainable collaboration system between the municipality, educational institutions, teachers, support staff and the parents or representatives of students. Teachers are given the opportunity to improve professionally and strengthen their skills in working with students. A unified database has been created, which ensures regular exchange of information at

the level of the state, municipality and educational institution about students who are identified as being at risk of dropping out of school, the preventive measures taken and their results. It provides comprehensive statistics, as well as allows long-term evaluation of the effectiveness of the measures. Initiatives of youth NGOs are also supported in order to raise the problem of school dropouts among young people, engage learners with the help of peers and involve them in activities. Measures are aimed at early diagnosis of problems and solutions. Individual support to learners who might stop studying due to the lack of financial resources, for example, expenses for transport, meals, accommodation, etc. are compensated through local governments. However, the focus is not the provision of temporary financial assistance, but the creation of a sustainable comprehensive mechanism that creates a supportive and inclusive environment for every learner.

Within the targeted national level project “PUMPURS” a methodology has been proposed of how to better support administrations, teachers and other staff of VET institutions in their work with socially vulnerable students. To ensure that all potential institutions are informed about the support measures in working with socially vulnerable youth, introductory seminars are being provided for employees of educational institutions. Their purpose is to provide basic information about the creation of a prevention system which addresses early school leaving risks. These seminars promote understanding of the specifics of the early school leaving problem and risk groups, actualize the role of educational institutions in mitigating early school leaving risks and the importance of inter-institutional cooperation, and inform about the individual support measures of the early school leaving risk group, development and implementation of the individual support plan, preparation of documentation.

Also, under the PUMPURS project professional competence development programmes have been specially designed. They are intended for educators and municipal youth affairs specialists and youth workers. The purpose of the programmes is to improve the competence and efficiency of pedagogues of general and vocational education institutions to promote the participation of learners in the pedagogical process. These programmes help create an understanding of the unity of the education (upbringing) and learning process. They promote cooperation with learners and their parents (persons exercising custody or guardianship) and the ability to create a supportive learning environment. They also improve skills in individual and group counseling, help recognize problem situations (including cases of peer violence) and seek appropriate solutions, as well as offer support materials for educators/ teachers. Professional competence development programmes are provided in all regions of Latvia (Riga region, Riga, Vidzeme, Latgale, Kurzeme, Zemgale). Here are few descriptors of such programmes (Box 1).

Box 1. Descriptors of the Professional Development Programmes for Teachers. (PUMPURS Project, <http://www.pumpurs.lv/>)

The objective of the “*Individual and group counselling-type vocational activity in education*” programme for the development of professional competence

offered teachers in general and vocational education to improve their understanding of counselling in the educational environment, its basic principles and specific tasks, to promote educational counselling skills in day-to-day work by reducing or preventing early school leaving.

As a result of the acquisition of the programme for the development of professional competence, teachers demonstrated:

- knowledge of counselling in the educational environment and its basic principles;
- skills in assessing and conducting motivating interviews in the prevention or reduction of early school leaving;
- skills to assess and apply the best practices and techniques for preventing or reducing early school leaving;
- skills in reflecting and self-training.

The objective of the “*Supporting Training Environment—Resource in Education*” programme for the development of vocational competency was to promote the understanding of the supportive learning environment as an essential resource in education in the 21st century by teachers in general and vocational education institutions in order to promote interaction with learners, thereby reducing or eliminating the risks of early school leaving. After the completion of the vocational competence development programme, educators of general education and vocational education institutions shall demonstrate knowledge and understanding of:

- the nature of the supportive learning environment in reducing early school leaving, as a resource;
- the ability to assess problems associated with the risks of early school leaving by demonstrating competence in their solutions;
- communication skills in cooperation with colleagues;
- planning the conditions for the supporting learning environment, taking into account the basic needs of the learners and providing them with support as a learning environment resource.

In addition to the availability of targeted training courses for working with socially vulnerable youth, teachers also get support with supervision—consultancy support to help educators and support staff to cope with the challenges of professional activity. The purpose of the supervision is to improve the professional competence of educators and support staff in identifying the risks of early school leaving, to increase self-efficacy in working with students exposed to the risks of early school leaving, as well as to promote their awareness of their own resources to reduce the risks of burnout syndrome.

3 Supporting and Hindering Empowerment in VET from the Vulnerable VET Student Perspective

This section provides an overview of the qualitative research on the individual resilience strategies of the vulnerable VET students conducted in the selected VET schools in three regions of Latvia—Latgale, Vidzeme region and Riga, in the period from October 2021 to April 2022.

3.1 Research Methodology

A total of 20 interviews were carried out with VET students from the socially vulnerable groups studying in three VET schools located in the city suburbs. Teachers recommended the students to be interviewed. The characteristics of the research population are provided in Table 2.

Table 2 The characteristics of the research population

Code Name	Location	Sex	Curriculum/profession	School year
Artūrs	Ogre	Male	Hospitality specialist	2
Kaspars	Ogre	Male	Cook	3
Cyntia	Ogre	Female	Designer	2
Veronika	Ogre	Female	Cook	3
Jelena	Ogre	Female	Interior designer	3
Ariana	Ogre	Female	Advertising design specialist	2
Amanda	Ogre	Female	Video operator	2
Edgars	Ogre	Male	Forest technician	3
Agnes	Ogre	Female	Video operator	3
Aina	Ogre	Female	Multimedia design specialist	3
Janis	Daugavpils	Male	Motor mechanic	2
Natalya	Daugavpils	Female	Interior designer	2
Simona	Daugavpils	Female	Interior designer	3
Reince	Daugavpils	Male	Car diagnostics specialist	3
Raimonds	Daugavpils	Male	Car diagnostics specialist	3
Aleksandrs	Riga	Male	Electrician	1
Laima	Riga	Female	Customer service officer	3
Roberts	Riga	Male	Customer service officer	3
Eduards	Riga	Male	Programming technician	3
Dzintra	Riga	Female	Business division, logistics	3

The interviews were followed by three focus groups involving VET teachers, educators, support staff, administrative staff of six VET schools (Latgale, Vidzeme, Kurzeme Zemgale regions, Riga and Pieriga region) (Table 2). Focus group discussions were held online due to pandemic restrictions, with a total of 12 participants involved. The aim of these focus groups was to shed light on sensitive situations of socially vulnerable VET students, the reasons for their status from the perspective of VET teachers, the advantages and disadvantages of VET school activities and pedagogical initiatives (interventions) in helping young people at risk. The participants discussed what teachers do to help socially vulnerable VET students (the role of personality and motivation of teachers), what support they need when dealing with these young people, and the extent to which and how the various policy measures and practices are useful to education and training providers in order to provide appropriate skills, knowledge and contribute to the sustainable integration of vulnerable students into the labour market. Finally, teachers assessed public VET and employment policies and measures (instruments) and their recommendations to improve the training and employment of vulnerable young people in the future (Table 3).

Research Results

Interviews with socially vulnerable VET students and focus groups with VET educators, support staff, and administrative staff identified the factors which support and hinder learning, completion of studies and employment of these VET students, and the factors that may hinder their learning in VET.

The design of the interview questionnaire and methodological guidelines, methods of analysis of data, as well as research ethics standards are described in the introduction of this book.

Table 3 Participants of the focus groups

Focus group code	Location	Sex	Responsibilities
FG1	Latgale region	Female	Educator
		Female	Administrative staff, coordinator
FG1	Vidzeme region	Female	Educator
		Female	Support staff, coordinator
FG2	Kurzeme region	Female	Administrative staff, coordinator
		Female	Educator
FG2	Zemgale region	Female	Support staff, coordinator
		Female	Educator
FG3	Riga	Female	Educator
		Female	Administrative staff, coordinator
FG3	Pieriga region (after the 2021 regional reform Vidzeme region)	Female	Educator
		Female	Support staff, coordinator

3.2 Research Findings: Factors Which Support and Hinder Learning, Completion of Studies and Employment of Socially Vulnerable VET Students

Interviews with vulnerable students have disclosed various factors which support and hinder their empowerment in VET in terms of participation in learning, completion of studies (graduation) and employment, as presented below.

3.2.1 Supporting Factors: Stable Family Background, Supportive Family Relations and Previous School Network (Teachers, Friends)

The need to belong and recognition of vulnerable students are first realised through communication with people close to them. For most, it is their family, so the main support for young people is initially formed in the family. Most of the interview participants, including those with family issues (single parent family, material problems, etc.), talked about the positive impact of family support. The interviewed students indicated a broad range of support which they receive from their family members, starting from the material support and ending with vocational guidance and dealing with education pathways:

Mom is important to me. Brother is the least [important], let him finish school. Dad, he's not with us. He passed away. That's what I've been thinking about all along, too. These are the people who have motivated and continue to motivate (Kaspars).

I have a very small family – I live with my dad. There is a question of whether we have good relationship. But I am very lucky – he really understands me. And absolutely everything that happens in my life, I can be open, tell him and he knows everything. My dad supports me ... is very friendly to me. There has never been a problem with him. I love him very much. And that must be the most important thing (Cyntia).

It could be dad on my part of the family because he's a very big support for me, despite not being able to do anything (in terms of material support) (Veronika).

Support from my mom. Dad, brother and sister's support. Family (Reince).

When my real mum didn't have the opportunity to help me, my sister taught me a lot of the kind of girl things that I didn't know how to deal with. My dad supports me in everything. For example, he's trying to support me financially, but he's only getting a pension (Aina).

My family support my every choice. They would have supported me no matter what I chose.... My mum will always support me, of course. My dad was the one who suggested the place to me (in the school) because his stepfather's son also studied here. Because he knew what was here, how the lessons were conducted, so I came here too..... My mum and dad are divorced. But okay, my dad supports me too, it's okay now. But yeah, I'll say most of all it's mum and mum's sister who support me (Edgars).

The interviewees often mentioned not only family but also other people from their surroundings who had a significant place in young people's lives. These people made an important contribution so young people could feel a sense of belonging to their environment and maintain relationships with their peers. However, some vulnerable

students indicated that school friendships were rather fragile, fragmented, difficult to sustain, so they also appreciate friendships outside the school:

School friends – they’re, unfortunately, not the friends who will stay for life. Because, for example, this might still be the case in the primary school. Yet now, in VET school, regardless of how good a friendship we’d have, we will most likely go our separate ways when we graduate. And so. But right now, friendship for me is, first of all, support and mutual understanding (Cyntia).

I have friends not from my school, pretty good friends. For example, there are some who studied with me for the first 9 years. And we’re in contact now, too. Those new friends who are not from school are friends too. ... For example, we have a youth leisure centre. There’s something interesting or new going on there all the time. And you can meet a lot of young people there like me (Artūrs).

My friends support me. We often talk to them about our future plans. And they always support me and I support them (Edgars).

I don’t have good friends at school. In general, I’ll say this – I have very few friends. But those friends I have, they are, I’ll say, real friends. And they’re mostly from outside of school. None of those friends study at our VET school. They attend other schools. And we only meet on holiday. And they are the ones who are more supportive as well. And when we met, we discuss exactly the school stuff. And how we are doing at school. And then we just think about something else (Jelena).

Sometimes, in addition to their family, young people receive significant support in choosing a path of life from their teachers in general education:

We had a cool primary school teacher. She raised us as her children. And despite supposedly having to go to another teacher after the fourth grade, we stayed with our own teacher. And she always said – when we were doing something that was creative – she told me I was very good at it. And she always called me asking to do something like that. And I guess that’s where it all went from (Cyntia).

Research findings indicate that family relationships, even when they are fragile and fragmented, are highly appreciated by vulnerable learners as critically important sources of support and resilience.

3.2.2 Supporting Factor: Relationships with Teachers/Supervisors/Peers/Co-workers

Interviews have revealed a central role of teachers in providing learning support to vulnerable students, creating an effect of ‘rehabilitation’ of learning capacities in VET after the experience of learning failures and difficulties in general education. Students noted that in the VET schools they enjoyed much more accessible and broader teacher guidance and explanations in the process of learning compared to learning in general education establishments:

I didn’t give up on maths, it was at the basic school. It’s just to say that the teacher couldn’t explain better. Or, I don’t know, just some kind of learning obstacles existed. But, here, when I came to VET, for me, maths goes very, very well.... Educators are such that, if you don’t understand, they’ll explain to you several times. But at the basic school this wasn’t the case,

they explained to you once and that's all, for example. But in VET, for me, educators all the time ask if you understand, ... I'm such a person, that if I don't understand, I ask [for teacher's help] until the teacher asks me a question themselves. I try to clear it myself, so I can understand everything (Veronika).

Students are very positive about the help they receive from teachers. They notice excessive workload that teachers dedicate to assist them:

I love relationships with people most at school, I guess, including adults and teachers. It's interesting to listen to them – what they are saying, what they think, and how they analyse life as a whole. ... Our teacher is very cool, she and I are also lucky. She understands me. I can write to her at any moment – even during her holidays or when she's on sick leave. I can write without a problem. She'd help me and support me. ... Answer all the questions and even sometimes work on her holidays. She'd help. Reply to the letters, too (Cynthia).

Teachers also help vulnerable students to address both learning and various other challenges, including future planning, for which students are grateful. Students very often emphasise personal attention of teachers to their problems and situations, for example:

[Teacher] assists in household matters and in learning matters (Kaspars).

For example, our class head teacher N.A. Yes, I think she understands what students think and who will do what at some point. And concerning the future – I think, yes. N.A. suggested to me that with my knowledge I could go somewhere further and study to become a history teacher, for example (Janis).

I get most support from my class educator. She'd always listen to me and help me as she can. And teacher I. – she is an assistant or something, I can't remember what she is exactly. Support staff. ... Support with household issues too. If a teacher, like a classroom educator, sees anything (wrong), she'd come over and ask if it's okay. If I say yes, then she won't ask those questions. If I say no, then she'd try to help if she can (Simona).

I think the most supportive ones would be teachers because they're always willing to help you in some way in life situations. For example, a class head teacher helps me in many life situations and I think teachers are the ones who come forward a lot and listen to you. Teachers are willing to know your problem, what happens to you, what you do, ask a lot of different questions if there is anything unclear, ask whether you're in trouble (Artūrs).

Vulnerable VET students are also encouraged and supported by their teachers to be active in social participation and in the school community:

I'm supported by mentors a lot too. The educators are always interested in me. And even when I participated as candidate in the elections of student self-government, they were supporting me. And said I'd earned it. In dorms, my mentor is very forthcoming. Also in self-government, when we were arranging events, a lot of teachers said very good things about us (Aina).

Studies in a VET school allow vulnerable students to continue their socialisation started in other educational institutions. Together with knowledge and skills, which ensure the basis of information and acquisition of the qualification requested by the labour market, preparation for life in society and personal development takes place in a VET school. It is important that the school environment provides an opportunity to build the foundations of trust and friendship in relationships. Successful relationships

with their peers are particularly important for young people at risk. Students confirm that friends at school and trust-based relationship in the context of learning at the VET school are central elements of their empowerment:

I feel very safe. cosy and being encouraged at school. It's very good to be at school, to see friends. And learn ... (Kaspars).

I only befriended my course mates at school,. There are, of course, loyal friends you can rely upon, you can tell secrets. Yes, I can count on them, I can tell them secrets because I know they will never reveal them or anything else. Fun, of course, very responsive, helpful. If you don't understand something in the subject, they will always help you, explain how it must be done (Veronika).

We get together in such a way that we, the students of the second year, can contact the students of the third or fourth year. And they can say something interesting they have learned that we don't know yet ...(Artūrs).

I have a lot of friends. I live in a dorm.... My friends and I go to play volleyball.... We also meet at school, prepare a meal together in the dorm. It's lots of fun with friends.... We try different recipes. The school has access to the kitchen, it is very good in the dorm. We're having fun (Natalya).

I don't have many friends. I used to think I had a lot of friends. But as they say, I grew up and realised that friends were the same closest ones who would always listen and help you. I have two good friends who are always with me when it's really difficult or a good moment and who'd listen and help.... We're very friendly with the course mates in class, we always help each other. And it's not like we're arguing. In these three years the classmates haven't quarrelled once yet (Simona).

Friends for me are one of the most important needs. Because friends can help you move forward. And that's what my friends do. Sometimes when you're tired, a friend can help you in a way. So, I think, yes, this friendship is very important to me (Edgars).

Students also notice and understand objective limitations of the teachers and schools to help them in the specific matters, including job search and employment:

I think with a job search, no school will help. You have to look for a job yourself and to find a place where you want to work (Janis).

The research findings show that teachers (both VET and general education teachers) are central figures who provide support and empower vulnerable students in the areas of education and socialisation.

3.2.3 Supporting Factor: Meaningful Work Practice-Oriented Learning

Students in vocational education are in most cases satisfied with current opportunities of practical training:

I love work practice. But on the other hand, I also love being in school. Because I can't choose what I like more, school or practice.... I don't have any difficult assignments from school. It's mostly easy.... For me, it's all taught well enough to help my future work (Kaspars).

I'm still thinking of going to maybe university or some kind of thing. ... Education is important to me because it's supposedly going to encourage me, maybe for some kind of

job, or I'll get some kind of experience out of it.... I'm better at theory, of course. Success in the practical training is also noticeable. In general terms, everything really satisfies me.... I spend my time more on learning because I know I have to take exams, I have to improve my future life (Cyntia).

I think more of the theory in the school, like teachers asking us a lot Many subjects are difficult to understand ... harder than practical work. I like practical training more because I can work and prove myself (Artūrs).

Students also understand the significance of practical training and practical know-how for their performance in the real work situations:

It's good if you know the theory, but there has to be a practical understanding, too. It can't be that in theory you know what needs to be done, but at real work something can go differently and unplanned. Theory could be completely different from real things at workplace, so practical training is required (Janis).

Students value the possibility to acquire both general education and VET skills and at the same time to make additional efforts to develop skills in the areas which they consider important or prospective:

We're given as much [knowledge and skills] as we can acquire because we have a secondary school programme combined with VET. But I also see the need to learn more in some vocational areas, especially using IT software. We've already been taught a lot in this area, but I'm also learning it in my spare time, too. Well, I'm helping a friend in working with PC... I have designed a logo for someone, but what I need is more advanced level of skills (Aina).

Practical training is considered by the research participants both as an attractive element of learning and as an important opportunity for continuous professional and personal development.

3.2.4 Supporting Factor: Feeling Motivated and Acknowledged

Interviews with students show that most of them have gained self-confidence in their capacities and are able to make their own plans for the future. It is important to provide sufficient support, especially for socially vulnerable young people, so that students maintain their motivation and continue their efforts:

Learning is self-development, so I never had any objective problem in motivating myself to learn....I can achieve everything. All you have to do is to wish, nothing gets in the way (Cyntia).

You had to rely more on yourself. On yourself (Veronika).

The main motivation is to go up and not to give up and do the things that need to be done (Janis).

Some students plan to use the acquired knowledge and skills by getting employed or self-employed in a chosen occupational area after their graduation from the VET school, for example:

I love the profession and what I'm learning. For now, I don't think anything needs to change. The aim is to finish school and start working (Kaspars).

I just want to find my place. I want to be a business owner (Reince).

I'd like to establish some kind of group of people in the future who would make interior designs for people. I'd like to build my own business, especially in the field of interior design. For example, to have a lot of colleagues and to create designs together, designs for spaces (Natalya).

Satisfying economic needs often emerges as an important part of the future project:

You need money to be successful, I think.... I come from a very needy family. A lot of people tell me it's wrong to think that way, but money matters to me.... And I want to make my dad happy, buy him some sort of a car, maybe vintage, some sort. Yeah, help him with the bills. And then my goal is to live in Riga.... For me, the goal is to buy my own apartment. Yes, the goal, logically, is to make others happy. With my work (Aina).

Sometimes students discover the new fields of activities, which are more attractive for them in terms of career and professional interests:

I'd like to try something else, too.... I'm interested in the field of IT now. Because IT software is now developing very rapidly, yes. Even very fast. I guess it's better to go there (Raimonds).

Interviews also show a desire among many students not to stop, but to continue their education. The established motivation to go forward, to build ambitious goals in their lives is a very important achievement in working with young people in the risk group. Currently, vocational education in general successfully fulfils the objectives of motivation and personality development of students. However, continued support is highly desirable, including after leaving school, for young people's plans to come to fruition.

Some interviewed students declared their plans to pursue higher education studies after graduation of the VET school:

I'm thinking of achieving my goal, I should try my way.... Most of all, it's up to me, I'll say so.... All the support that's being given, that's absolutely enough.... Yes, I totally believe everything is up to me.... Well, of course, maybe sometimes, as in today's world, money is important. But I think with my work I can achieve anything I want.... What I really want to accomplish, in terms of education, it's to study well enough to be able to teach others as well. Because one of my goals is to be a teacher. First, you have to finish this school and seek higher education ... It's a form of self-development for both a teacher and learners so it's always fun to teach and learn (Edgars).

After finishing the VET school, I would like to go to the Art Academy of Latvia and study in the field of design. And beyond that, I don't know more. But I want my business.

For me, too, the dream is to go to the university, to study.... I mean more of that idea, those professions that you can study for..... For example, graphic design. I want to pursue art design.... I believe I should start a kind of magazine or a diary where I could write down all my thoughts. Because there is chaos and there are plenty of goals and there are plenty of plans. But what should I start from? I should start a diary where I could plan everything.... And to structure (Jelena).

Higher education studies are treated by students as a possibility to realise their professional vocation (a case of planning a career in teaching), or to launch freelancing or own business career (a case of art studies).

3.2.5 Supporting Factor: Gaining Work Experience, Volunteer Work

Work experience for the students was a small but important element of their personal development. Students also welcome opportunities to familiarise themselves with their chosen profession and with the working environment. These young people also desire more opportunities to engage more profoundly in the work environment, to acquire communication and teamwork skills, to have different employment options:

I'd have more work experience working in the countryside, because I come myself, so to say, from a small farm of a rural family...." I've always loved working with animals, in nature. I like it a lot (Edgars).

We have a small farm – I've had enough work at home. You get to prepare the tractors, help in other work activities. Well, there's experience at home (Raimonds).

Overall, all that work was about helping other people. And I like to understand that I don't just do it for nothing (Cyntia).

Informal, small jobs like helping someone else closer to us.... It was a good experience now because I realised, I could do something and I needed to (Janis).

I worked in the summer. Officially. Well, it's positive. It gave important practical lessons about my future profession (Reince).

Students also appreciate the possibilities to develop their key skills and abilities in the real work environment. The interviews show that work experience creates good opportunities to address the shortages of key skills:

It was very difficult for me to communicate. And that's what the work in the park was there was a lot of communication with people there. And it's a very big advantage for me. It helped me open up. The work helped (Jelena).

I worked at R. (hotel) in Riga during my first study year when we had internship. As far as I am concerned, the company was very good, people were responsive, open to communication – everything what I want. At least they explain to you if you don't understand what you must do and show you everything, explain what it's better not to do. And, well, yes, such fun people (Veronika).

I loved working with people, you can negotiate with them at the checkout, suggest something (Natalya).

3.2.6 Hindering Factor: Lack of Relationships with Teachers/ Supervisors/Peers/Co-workers During Covid-19

The pandemic made the situation of socially vulnerable young people much worse. The already not very easy communication with teachers and peers was made difficult. The interviewees noted:

Then, when it was remotely, it was the hardest thing to understand the subject material of your profession. Because it's always easier with the help of a teacher. As they say, face-to-face, next door, you can call her at any moment and ask her to help you. But from home, she had to write and wait for a reply (Simona).

School friends... That's what I miss most from school. Now there is a pandemic, there is no contact with people (Aina).

Students notice exceptional effects of learning at school with the direct availability of support of teachers when compared to learning experience at home:

Now, at the time of COVID, when you must sit at home and study at home, you understand that learning at school is better than staying at home at your computer. It's easier to learn (in the classroom) than just sitting in front of a computer screen. In school, teachers usually explain a lot, which you cannot get from a computer (Kaspars).

This illustrates the challenges and risks of learning faced by vulnerable students during the Covid-19 pandemics, especially when the students lack of information search and analysis skills.

3.2.7 Hindering Factors: Social Exclusion, Loneliness, Psychological Problems

In the interviews, some young people confessed to feeling lonely. Some of them have to deal with their problems without serious help from outside, others suffer from psychological problems, loneliness. These factors can be a major cause of hardship for young people in the risk group.

Yes, there are moments like that. They come so suddenly, as they say, as the mood. There's a feeling sometimes that you're alone now. The same as with friends. You don't see each other for a long time and you immediately feel lonely (Simona).

I think there's a number of things, like feeling sad or lonely. Did I make it up myself. Because I often tend to think in a pessimistic way. But I also feel lonely when I'm not at school. At home. But it's not my dad's fault, we just live in the countryside It's not as frequently anymore as it used to be. I'm trying to be grateful for everything now (Aina).

Loneliness is regarded by vulnerable learners as a kind of subjective mood, which they have to face and overcome. Similarly, some students also have to cope with the negative memories from their past:

There were some very unpleasant memories for me – years like that. And all sorts of events that forced me to spend almost the whole 9th grade in hospital, and so on. But that's something I try not to think about any more because it's in the past. And now I'm just trying to do things not to start it again, but move on with something nice. Not trying to get rid of that nasty feeling all the time (Edgars).

These findings implicitly indicate the need of more psychological support for vulnerable learners at schools.

3.2.8 Hindering Factors: Feeling of Insecurity, Low Self-Esteem

Feeling insecure about the future poses additional challenge for young people in the risk group. Often there is no real basis for fears about the future, but the failures and adverse environment negatively affect young people's self-assessment, reinforce doubts about the chances of achieving their goals:

A kind of fear that I won't be able to do anything with my life (Reince).

I'm concerned a little bit of poor chances to get access to higher education, I'm very keen to get a state funded place. I think it requires to have money to succeed in getting the place at the university. But you also need to have the goals you're aiming for. Because if you don't have a goal and you don't think about your future, I think you don't know what you want to do ... (Aina).

I wouldn't say I miss the support. I may miss the belief in myself. In my abilities. Now I think, I don't know, I'm not sure if I can (Jelena).

The insecurity and previous problems of vulnerable young people make these students seek help from their parents and teachers.

Maybe it's that many times I don't feel confident about myself. ... well, I think I'll go to my parents, to my mum, rather, and I know they're going to help me solve this issue, what needs to be done, how to do it better, how to do it right.... Yes, I think at school the class head teacher is very understanding and forthcoming, I think our teacher could be asked (Artūrs).

3.2.9 Hindering Factor: Poverty, Working in Addition to School, Financial Responsibilities to the Family

Young people's living conditions are often complicated so they cannot focus on learning, but on different family problems and unsettled living conditions. For example, difficulties arise because of the need to help their family members with different disabilities:

I spend a lot of time travelling to and from school by bus because I have what I have in the home environment. I have family problems. My dad has Level 1 disability and has nobody to look after him. I don't have a mum either. And that's why I don't live in dorms. I'd rather go home because I know I can at least see what he's doing. And I can help somehow. We have to deal with it ourselves (Veronika).

Financial difficulties are a major challenge for many vulnerable young people. Difficult living conditions make them focus on the opportunities to earn. This can become an important obstacle for studying, but at the same time a source of motivation to complete the VET programme in order to get employment:

I previously trained in these two courses to become a forest operator at OT school. I started having problems in my family, my mum got sick and I had to go to work. I worked a year. Then I had the opportunity to get funds from my older sister and then I had the opportunity to start studying again (Edgars).

The last quotation indicates the understanding by the student of the importance of completion of vocational education for the future, as well as the ability to use opportunities of flexible learning (modular training) provided by the VET system.

4 Conclusions

Empowerment of vulnerable VET students in Latvia takes place in the conditions of neoliberal and labour-market oriented reforms of the VET system combined with the strategic initiatives directed to increasing the potential of VET schools in supporting vulnerable learners. This approach is well aligned with the EU strategic priorities regarding the roles of VET provision. From the point of view of policy design, policy makers are making attempts to combine the strong orientation of VET reforms to market needs and fostering of the public image of VET as an attractive learning pathway with sustaining the traditional social mission of VET in empowering of the vulnerable social groups, especially vulnerable youth. Therefore, in parallel to the policy interventions directed to the orientation of VET curriculum design to the skills needs in the sectors of economy (implementation of the sectoral approaches to the design of qualifications and modular VET curricula), investments in the infrastructure of VET and development of WBL pathways, there systemic and national-level interventions are made in the capacity building of teaching staff to deal with the issues of vulnerable learners (PUMPURS project). Such policy choice of strengthening social orientation of VET through capacity building of teaching staff in dealing with the problems of social exclusion and vulnerability, makes teachers take central roles in this area. In principle, it fits well with the current role and place of VET teaching staff in assisting vulnerable students (confirmed by the interviews of students).

There is still a question, whether strengthening of individualised pedagogical-psychological support to teaching staff is sufficient in enabling vulnerable students to enjoy the opportunities provided by the flexible and market-oriented VET system. Interviews with students have disclosed, that the factors which hinder their participation in learning are complex and involve not only educational or psychological, but also complex socio-economic problems, such as poverty, deprivation of material resources and social capital. Therefore, empowerment of such students also requires stronger integration of the VET provision with the solid measures of the social support policy, which could enable more active, profound and autonomous participation of vulnerable students in planning and implementing their own learning and career pathways.

Moreover, while appreciating the considerable empowering potential of VET for their personal and professional development, many vulnerable students relate their future life and career projects with the acquisition of higher education. This requires maintaining and strengthening the factors of VET curriculum design and provision of VET, which enhance permeability of general education, VET and higher education curricula. This also becomes an important empowerment factor, when looking at the changing skills needs in the conditions of digitalization of work processes.

Digitalization, automation and robotics, and increasing use of artificial intelligence create new requirements for the entire education system and society. Particular attention should be paid to vulnerable social groups that include socially vulnerable youth. Overcoming future challenges requires additional help in setting and changing life goals in the changing circumstances (Schulman and Bostrom 2021). Social and

psychological assistance, mental health improvement and the availability of opportunities to upgrade professional skills should be expanded through municipal and state support using programmes such as the PUMPURS project and others.

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Chapter 5

Social Ecology of Youth in Drop Out Risk from Initial Vocational Education: The Case of Estonia



Krista Loogma, Inna Bentsalo, Meril Ümarik, and Terje Väljataga

Abstract This chapter presents the Estonian case to analyse the social ecology of the development of students in the case of the risk of dropping out from IVET (Initial Vocational Education and Training). The persistence of the interrelated problems, such as early school-leaving and drop out from vocational education, leaving education without qualifications, being vulnerable in the labour market and the risk of social exclusion, refer to the existence of a “wicked” or complex set of interrelated problems that are approached from the perspective of social ecology. Two key aspects of social ecology are discussed: the main institutional developments of the Estonian VET system with a specific emphasis on the institutional and macro-contextual factors that could affect vulnerable youth groups in VET, and the micro-level empirical research to better understand the proximal processes of learning and development of students that risk drop-out. The sample of students interviewed consisted of 20 students (14 female and 6 male) aged between 16 and 22 years, from different vocational schools and regions in Estonia and studying different specialities. The empirical analysis identified three clusters of students, representing three separate ecologies of vulnerable students. The ecologies reflect the different experiences in getting help, or not, in the surrounding environment, in the case of emerging problems, and the consequences of their self-agency capacities and their perspectives for their future life.

Keywords Institutional developments · Vocational education · Vocational students at risk of dropping out · Social ecology · Ecological agency

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1 Introduction

The problems of dropping out from school in the early years and the threat to become socially excluded have been in the centre of the EU social and education policy for a long time. Despite the EU's and member states' focus on addressing social exclusion and supporting at-risk groups over the past decade, however, the issues of high dropout rates from IVET (Initial Vocational Education and Training) and a high level of NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) youth persist.

In Estonia, approximately 3% of graduates do not pursue further studies after completing compulsory education of nine grades. Among those who do continue, about 20% do not complete the next educational level within the subsequent four years (HTM 2018). The trend can lead to the substantial share of the population without vocational or professional qualifications and therefore, put young people in a vulnerable situation in the labour market (HTM 2020; Novosel et al. 2012). In Estonia, the problem of adults without professional qualifications is concerning, especially in the context of the labour market dynamics and economic changes. In 2018, approximately 29% of adults aged 25–64 had no qualifications, making them more vulnerable during economic crises and labour market changes (HTM 2018). To solve this issue, the Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Estonia has implemented lifelong learning initiatives aimed at helping adults acquire new skills and qualifications in order to remain competitive in the labour market (HTM 2020).

The rate of early leavers from education and training in EU countries has steadily decreased from 13.8% in 2010 to 9.7% in 2021, with progress stagnating since 2016 and notable disparities among countries, regions, genders, and specific population groups (Psifidou et al. 2022). This trend was further impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which amplified the existing disparities (Lauristin et al. 2020). Men are generally over-represented within vulnerable cohorts (The Estonian lifelong learning strategy 2020, Eurostat 2022). Despite the strategic goal set in the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy for 2020 to reduce this rate to less than 9%, it has remained consistently higher in recent years, approximately 10.8% (HTM 2018). Recent data indicates that the rate of early leaving in the EU further declined to 10% in 2022, with the goal of reducing it to below 9% by 2030 (Eurostat 2022). The rate was higher for men (11%) compared to women (8%). The same problem can also be identified in several other EU countries, especially those with school-based VET systems (Psifidou et al. 2022). Countries with the lowest early leaving rates include Croatia (2%), Ireland, Slovenia, and Greece (each 4%), while Romania (16%), Spain (14%), and Hungary, Germany, and Italy (each 12%) had the highest rates (Eurostat 2022).

Previous studies have concluded that the main causes of social exclusion among young people vary to a great extent, including low motivation, negative learning and life experiences, low skill levels, no future prospects or unrealistic future expectations (Goldman-Mellor et al. 2016; Ose and Jensen 2017; Beck 2015). In this context social exclusion refers to the process by which people are systematically blocked from a

variety of rights, opportunities and resources that are normally available to members of society and that are key to social integration (Levitas et al. 2007). This chapter addresses the terms of “school dropout” and “social exclusion” as situations in which individuals can find themselves isolated or excluded from the basic structures of society.

Between 2013 and 2017, the primary reasons for dropping out of vocational education in Estonia included academic difficulties, absenteeism, employment or economic factors, vocational unsuitability, health issues, and various other reasons, leading to social exclusion and disadvantages (Jaggo 2019). The experience of anxiety and depressive symptoms among young people has increased (Fernandes et al. 2022). A recent study by Bentsalo et al. (2024) examining the factors contributing to dropout rates among Estonian vocational school students identified several key issues, including insufficient academic motivation, lack of interest in the chosen field of study, adverse relationships, and communication difficulties within the school environment. Additionally, the study highlighted an increasing prevalence of mental health issues among the youth. Therefore, a student’s well-being in vocational education and training (VET) can be significantly affected by their mental and emotional health, because stress, anxiety, or depression can interfere with learning. Student well-being is an integral part of the learning process (Bücker et al. 2018), being closely related to their educational outcomes and prospects, as evidenced by the link between academic completion, social exclusion, and unemployment. Poor student well-being can affect academic achievement, and a lack of well-being resilience can limit the student’s ability to learn and engage effectively, with potential consequences for their persistence and achievement (Turner et al. 2017). However, learning difficulties and educational disadvantages tend to accumulate in the course of life (Shoon and Evans 2020). The problem of getting into a risk situation and social exclusion is challenging because of its complexity. Complex problems have sometimes been identified by using the metaphor “wicked problems” (e.g., Jackson 2020). The metaphor refers to the involvement into a social ecology, many institutions and actors having different roles and interests, their complex interrelationships and, importantly, the self regulation ability. The complexity makes complex or wicked problems difficult to solve centrally, for example, at the policy level (Weaver-Hightower 2008). Complex issues such as those in healthcare and education are examples of wicked problems (Jackson 2023). Education involves complex issues, as an individual’s learning and development in the interconnected and interdependent world takes place in very diverse contexts that extend far beyond their immediate environment (family, friends, schools) encompassing macro-level cultural and socioeconomic institutions (Jackson and Wilensky 2006; O’Toole et al. 2020).

Thus, by the definition, complex/wicked problems are characterized by specific characteristic, they do not have simple and unequivocal solutions, because they involve a number of social multilevel institutions, their dynamics, interactions, feedback loops, and at the same time, individual agents with different aims, abilities and contextual conditions. Political processes, historical-cultural circumstances, power relations, and social economic changes also make up a part of these problems. This

complexity can form self-regulating and self-organizing ecologies (Evans et al. 2020; Jackson 2023) that are difficult to break up.

The persistence (despite the strategies and policy interventions) of the interrelated problems of early school leaving and drop out from education in early stages of education, leaving education without qualification, vulnerable position in the labour market and risk of social exclusion refer to the existence of a “wicked” or complex of interrelated problems. The co-existence of certain, often multilevel (unfortunate) circumstances may form so-called vicious circles of lagging behind that can be difficult to break up for young people. The kind of complex and interrelated problems can be explained by using a social ecology approach. According to social ecology, institutions, and individuals at all levels of social regulation (macro, meso, micro and others) can be part of complex problems (such as social exclusion). This may impact learning and development of an individual and thus, can be part of problem of social inclusion/exclusion (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

Macro environment/context comprises institutional settings that may have indirect, yet important impact on the young people’s life pathways shaping their opportunities and everyday experiences (Lörinc et al. 2020). The macro environment incorporates broader cultural, political, socio-economic, and regulatory institutional arrangements in a society. Historical-cultural beliefs, values, social stratification, and policy environments (including social policies, laws, and regulations), can significantly influence the educational development and life pathways of young people, particularly in terms of education and the labour market. Socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and gender can interact with cultural factors, impacting experiences within individual microsystems (e.g., family, friends, and relatives) and mesosystems, such as educational institutions (Lörinc et al. 2020).

We suggest that the problems of NEETs and youth at risk in IVET and in a broader sense, problems of the social exclusion of youth, can be treated as complex problems that create the self-sustaining vicious circles of exclusion. Unfortunate circumstances and situations can initiate a self-perpetuating cycle of exclusion from an early age. This can escalate into cumulative disadvantages and social inequalities that persist across various domains, affecting both skills development and educational attainment over time (Schoon and Evans 2023). Additionally, such circumstances may contribute to lower participation rates in adult education and lifelong learning, as noted by Reiska (2018) and others. Moreover, these challenges can also lead to unfavorable outcomes in the labour market, including lower income and occupational positions.

Therefore, it is highly important to understand the problems of youth at risk of dropping out from IVET and the factors that impact their situation in wider social and personal context better. Sometimes, vicious circles are impossible to break out of without empowerment and external help. Therefore, it is equally important to understand what kind of systematic or personalized help can support and empower individuals to break the vicious circle they may be part of. As argued by Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova (2023), the empowering role of education has a subjective side, first of all, agency, to gain control over the circumstances and objective side, such as available opportunity structures (Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova 2023, p. 141).

We approach the problem of students at risk of dropping out from initial vocational education and training (IVET) in Estonia from a socio-ecological perspective to better understand the complex influencing factors and the functioning of the social ecology of their learning and development. The socio-ecological approach allows us to examine risk factors, traditionally described in individual terms (such as low academic achievements and motivation problems), in relation to broader structural and institutional factors, providing a more holistic understanding of the processes and mechanisms contributing to becoming at risk (Lörinc et al. 2020, p. 413).

The chapter focuses on the learning and development of students in the situation of risk of dropping out from IVET from the social ecology perspective. It presents a comprehensive discussion of two key aspects of the social ecology:

- (1) The major institutional developments in VET in Estonia following the restoration of the country's independence in 1991, with a specific emphasis on the institutional and macro-contextual factors that could affect vulnerable youth groups in VET.
- (2) Empirical research to understand better the proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner 1973, cited in O'Tool et al. 2020) taking place in the micro- and meso-context of the development students that risk drop-out from IVET in Estonia and what personal and school-related/pedagogical factors can have empowering effect on the at-risk youth in IVET.

2 Institutional Developments. Implications for Vulnerable Groups of Youth in VET

This section of the chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the developments that took place after the restoration of independence in the VET institutional framework in Estonia. These aspects of the macro context, that in one or another way may impact the situation of vulnerable or risk youth in VET, are related to historical-cultural factors, political and strategic changes and directions (e.g. VET reform, including the development of a legal framework for VET, Estonian Qualification Framework and VET curriculum reform), involvement of social partners (employers, trade unions, professional associations), transition to the inclusive VET, and the institutional setup of the support structure available for vulnerable students.

2.1 Historical Context: The Neo-Liberal Policy Direction and Emergence of Social Stratification in Education After the Regime Change

By the end of the Soviet period, in the 1980s, upper secondary education had become profoundly unequal. There were differences in the quality of education between

“elite” gymnasiums, “ordinary” high schools, and vocational schools. From the viewpoint of skills development, the gap between general and vocational education was the most significant divide. As a result, the vocational pathway was seen as inferior, and had a negative, determining influence on student progress (Loogma et al. 2019). By the end of the Soviet era, in the late 1980s only one per cent of graduates from vocational secondary education had access to universities (Helemäe et al. 2000). As a long-lasting consequence of the historical past, even today vocational education still discursively correlates with lower academic results of the graduates from basic (compulsory) education. There is public understanding that vocational track is a “second chance” for students and can lead to educational “dead end” (Loogma et al. 2019).

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of independence in 1991 was a radical and complex regime change. Estonia adopted the most liberal and radical way of transitioning to the market economy, so called shock therapy which was based on an expectation that Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand of the market’ would be a universal solution to the emerging social economic problems. The economic transformation after Estonia regained independence in August 1991 involved a complex set of restructuring programmes, particularly privatization of property, which also included restitution, land reform, the restructuring of markets, and a rapid reorientation from Eastern to Western markets (Loogma 2004). Privatization was followed by de-industrialization, many large enterprises were reformed into SMEs. Employment in industry and agriculture declined, whilst the service sector grew rapidly. The transformation revealed the need for new qualifications, skills, and competencies, although there was no clear vision or understanding of what kind of occupational profiles the newly founded companies would need (Eamets and Phillips 2000). There was also increased labour movement between sectors, especially from the declining industry and agriculture to the emerging service sector. As a result of rapid restructuring in the economy, the traditional ties between vocational education and the labour market were almost broken. Emerging SMEs were unable to co-operate with training providers in the early years of transition (Loogma 2004). As a result, the main way for reskilling the workforce was workbased learning (Loogma 2004). However, the transformation did not bring about changes in VET in the 1990s when dramatic changes occurred within the labour market.

Furthermore, public discourse regarding the winners and losers in the transformation period reflected how educational attainment was related to individual success or failure (Loogma et al. 2019). Individuals with HE diploma were considerably more likely to be ‘winners’ primarily because of the cultural capital they possessed and their capacity to transform this into social and economic capital within the new social context. Workers with a vocational education background, by contrast, were more likely to become ‘losers’ (Õun 2002; Saar 2002). Social stratification became explicitly linked to HE qualifications, which became a symbolic currency and success factor in the new Estonian market system (Pavelson and Korotam 2001). Importantly, the structural conflict which historically developed between general (academic) and vocational track after completing basic/compulsory education that emerged in 1960s persists to this day and is one of the reasons why academically less talented and

vulnerable students (e.g. with learning difficulties) tend to head to the vocational track (Loogma et al. 2019).

Subsequent crises demonstrated that general/key competencies and social capital acquired in HE, were the determining factor for success in the labour market.

The adoption of the neo-liberal approach to education fitted with the overall transition strategy which was based on the introduction of liberal market economy. The shock therapy transition strategy formed grounds for further development of the neo-liberal approach in education and later, Estonia's education and training model followed the neo-liberal market-centered model where education and training was oriented to the direct needs of labour market and employers and adult training was seen as the responsibility of private actors (Saar and Ure 2013).

From the Soviet VET system to the school-based system. Policy learning

In 1997, the first Development Plan for VET (Cedefop 2017) was drawn up by a partnership involving the state, employers, and other social partners, such as labour unions and professional organisations. Social partner participation in VET was regulated by national legislation and partnership agreements. At the national level, the chamber of commerce (*Eesti Kaubandus-Tööstuskoda*), the employers' confederation (*Eesti Tööandjate Keskliit*) and the confederation of trade unions (*Eesti Ametiühingute Keskliit*) represented social partners. At the local level, social partners participated in VET school advisory boards (*kutseõppeasutuse nõunike kogu*), established under the Vocational Educational Institutions Act. The board comprised at least seven members in total. Advisory bodies were serving as links between VET schools and society, advising the school and its management on planning, and organising educational and economic activities. This continued to be the case after the establishment of the legislative framework for VET. An important milestone in the reform process was the adoption of the Professions Act in 2000, which provided the legal foundation for the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

Additionally, an informal agreement to co-operate in the development of VET was signed by the social partners (Loogma 2004). Due to a shortage of resources, including expert knowledge, time, and finances, the future policy direction for the development of VET was influenced by external institutional actors such as international donors and development organizations, for example, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB), the European Union, and others (Grootings 2009). During the early 1990s, the horizontal policy learning and the adoption of best practices from other systems took place (Toots and Loogma 2015; Loogma 2016). For example, bilateral development programmes with Denmark, Germany and Finland made possible by the EU Phare programme dominated, yet many of these had a relatively narrow focus (being directed at the training of vocational teachers, the adoption of new vocational curricula in commerce, banking, electronics, computer graphics and other fields, or finding partner schools from abroad, for instance). Later, particularly after joining the Lisbon strategy and the EU VET policy framework, the EU's education policy for education and training became the most prominent factor for determining the VET policy.

In the process of transformation of the VET system different periods of changes can be distinguished (Loogma 2020).

The liberal adjustment period in VET

The period in the early 1990s was characterised by the transformation of the basic ideological principles underpinning education policy. In 1995, the first legislative act regulating the activities of VET schools was developed (*Kutseõppeasutuse seadus*). At the same time the process of restructuring the VET schools' network to adjust to the demand of the new emerging economic structure began (Loogma 2010). During a very short period, the VET system in Estonia moved from the highly centralised 'distorted dual' Soviet system into a school-based system—the antithesis of the Soviet model (Loogma 2010).

In the second half of the 1990s as accession negotiations with the EU proceeded, policy-learning in the education sector became more coordinated. The initial desire to learn from the best education policy and practice from abroad was replaced by the aspiration for EU membership, and thus policy transfer from the EU slowly became dominant (Toots and Loogma 2015), particularly in relation to VET and HE.

Joining the EU common educational framework for VET. Europeanisation of VET policy in Estonia

In the pre-accession period, liberal adjustment manifested in extensive standardisation in education, particularly in VET and HE. The ratification of the Lisbon Strategy marked a new era in institutional development in education, and Estonia joined the Copenhagen Declaration for the development of VET policy in 2002, prior to joining the EU in 2004. For Estonian VET, the EU strategy toward a uniform, transparent vocational educational framework, set by the Copenhagen Declaration, provided the impetus for intense Europeanization (Loogma 2016). It involved the process of the construction, diffusion and institutionalisation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ways of “doing things” and shared beliefs and norms, which were first defined and consolidated in the making of EU decisions and then incorporated into the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies (Radaelli 2000).

The Europeanization of education in Estonia in this period manifested in the process of integration with EU structures and joining the EU education strategies (Lisbon Strategy, Bologna Process) as well as a relatively uncritical transfer of EU education initiatives. This became the driving force behind changes in education in Estonia taking place in the twenty-first century (Loogma 2016).

The ratification of the EU Lisbon Strategy and participation in the Copenhagen Process changed the methods of policy learning and gave rise to new domestic institutions (Toots and Loogma 2015). In this period, the Estonian Qualifications Authority was founded and a 5-level Estonian qualification framework (EstQF) was established. Whilst one of the main aims of the EstQF was to coordinate skills supply and demand, it also provided a strong impetus for standardisation, particularly for VET and HE as well as a mechanism for implementing EU guidelines with respect

to education. The standardisation was most influential within VET and HE as those sectors of education were most affected by Europeanization.

Alignment to the EU VET policy. Towards the market-directed and socially oriented and inclusive VET policy: Inclusion of vulnerable target groups

After Estonia had become part of the European Union in May 2004 the EU VET policy gave input for two important developments: increasing flexibility and better access for vulnerable groups and transition to the learning outcome approach in VET.

In this period, several flexible new forms of vocational training targeting vulnerable groups (students without basic/comprehensive education, prisoners, learners with special needs) were ratified. The ratification of several new types of flexible education and training curricula for the inclusion of disadvantaged groups marked an important shift in VET policy preferences. In addition to the emphasis on the economic and labour market related functions of VET a shift occurred towards greater social responsibility (Loogma 2016). During the same period, new standards for vocational education and training were ratified and implemented, including the VET standard and the Professional Standard for vocational teachers. The Occupational Qualifications Act, adopted in 2008, provided the legal basis for the transition to an 8-level qualification system (HTM Vocational education 2008). From 2009 onwards, the introduction of the learning outcome approach in VET curriculum development began, with the process nearing completion by 2013 (HTM Vocational education system development plan 2009–2013). The Vocational Education Institutions Act and the Vocational Education Standard were updated to establish the legal framework for the changes in VET quality standards recommended by the Bruges Communiqué (European Commission 2010). These reforms aimed to enhance the quality and relevance of VET, aligning it with European standards and improving the employability of graduates (European Commission 2010; CEDEFOP 2017). Additionally, the continuous professional development of VET teachers was emphasized to ensure the effective implementation of these standards.

Period of global crises

The economic crisis of 2008 caused the rise in unemployment, reaching its peak in 2010. The crisis showed that individuals with HE coped better during periods of economic difficulty and so promoted an increased interest in generic skills and key competencies (Loogma et al. 2019). Individuals with backgrounds in basic and vocational secondary education (without higher education) were most affected by unemployment due to their limited labour market mobility. In 2009, only 54% of VET graduates secured employment within six months of graduation. While the overall employment rate improved in the post-economic crisis period, those with general upper secondary education and/or higher education succeeded to secure alternative employment compared to individuals with only basic and/or vocational education after the basic education (HTM 2015). The economic crisis also exacerbated the wage gap in the labour market, with the salaries of managers and professionals continuing to increase, while the earnings of workers in elementary jobs and skilled agricultural workers decreased (Saar and Helemäe 2011). It emphasized the need

for people to acquire general skills and key competencies to successfully navigate in the evolving job market. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic increased the gap between well performing students and those who had learning difficulties/tended to lag behind (Lauristin et al. 2020). The crisis also showed the need for more flexibility in implementing the standards of the Estonian Qualification System and the primary importance of key skills, particularly the need for self-directed, independent learning (Loogma and Sirk 2021).

The EU policy framework in this period addressed two significant policy goals with respect to education, particularly VET and HE. Firstly, the goals, principles and instruments ensuring access to (vocational) education for vulnerable groups had a considerable influence on the domestic regulative and formal education institutions mirroring in the design of national VET curricula for vulnerable groups at the lower levels of the qualification system. Secondly, tools were developed to popularize VET as the main mechanism for overcoming disparities between general and vocational education at a secondary level. Raising the status of vocational education has become the central aim during the entire European cooperation process. However, in the Estonian context, despite extensive efforts the trend of 70% of lower secondary school graduates moving into the gymnasium, i.e. to the academic track to obtain general education and access to university, persists.

In 2013, the 8-level EU common EQF and outcome-based curricula for skills development was introduced by law in Estonia for VET and HE. This change simultaneously marked a transition to a learner-centered and outcome-based model in education provision and skills formation.

Education strategies addressing the problem of vulnerable youth

The adoption of the comprehensive Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 marked the next stage in the development of VET policy. This strategy regarded all parts of the education and training system (primary and secondary education, VET, HE and adult education) as a strategic whole. Where previously there were separate development plans for general, vocational, HE and adult education, all education sectors were now integrated into a common strategic framework that saw education and thus, skills formation as an integrated process continuing throughout peoples' lives. In the strategy two main goals particularly addressed the support of vulnerable groups in education: the adoption of a student-centered approach and promoting equal opportunities and increasing participation in lifelong learning (The Estonian lifelong learning strategy 2020).

Furthermore, the Estonian Strategic Plan for Education 2035 (Education Strategy 2021–2035) acknowledges various needs of learners and even more widely addresses the learner-centered way of learning, empowering, and supporting different types of learners, considering their gender, special needs, and social cohesion. Furthermore, the objective to integrate general and vocational education at the level of secondary education can be seen as an attempt to overcome the institutional divide between general and vocational education, which used to be a mechanism directing academically less capable students to the VET track after the compulsory education.

Thus, VET action plans in the early 2000s and education strategies in later periods strongly addressed the support to vulnerable youth groups and, on the other hand, emphasised the need to raise the reputation of vocational education. However, the historical negative association of the forced choice of vocational education pathway after compulsory education (originating from the Soviet period) has become the persistent trend. This association became institutionalized at cultural-cognitive level (Scott 2008), causing a relatively bigger proportion of vulnerable youth to move into the IVET after compulsory/basic education (Loogma et al. 2019).

2.2 Support Services Provided at Vocational Schools in Order to Prevent School Drop-Out

In 2013, to support students and reduce dropout rates, Estonia established the obligation for schools to ensure the availability of support services, including career counseling, study assistance and special education, social pedagogy and psychology training provided for in the Vocational Education Institutions Act. The analysis (Praxis 2018) has shown that the approach of vocational education institutions to the provision and organization of support services can be very different. Some educational institutions have a well-planned and systematically managed system of support services, while others deal with the organization of services individually as needed. The statistical data on the presence of support specialists in vocational education institutions in the Education Information System (EHIS) do not fully reflect the actual situation of how student support is provided in schools (Praxis 2018).

Support services are provided by career and study support specialists. Not all vocational education institutions in Estonia offer on-site career counseling, special pedagogy, psychological or learning support services. Some schools refer students to Support Service Centers outside of school or other service providers. In some vocational schools, such services are part of the duties of teachers or other staff. Various staff positions in the school are often associated with the provision of support services, where class head teachers and teachers play a central role. The support network often includes dormitory staff, study programme leaders, library staff, school nurses, and student mentors. Official statistics, however, do not reflect these roles, at least not as part of the support system. Since the responsibilities of teachers also include other work tasks and teachers often lack relevant qualifications, this is not always the most effective way to support students (Haaristo and Kirss 2018).

Another measure implemented to prevent school dropouts in vocational schools in Estonia include “Vocational Choice Training”, lasting half or one year. Its primary task is to support each learner in making a career choice through collaboration with non-school partners and companies. This is an opportunity for those who are uncertain about their educational choices to continue their education. The aim is to support young people with a low level of education or those who belong to social risk groups

so they would continue their education or train their readiness for transition to the labour market after completing basic education (9-year compulsory education).

Another option that has proved to prevent school dropout is work-based training, which offers greater flexibility in addressing the diverse needs of students and enterprises. Work-based training is defined as a form of VET in which learning in the workplace makes up two thirds of the total study programme.

3 Conceptual Framework: The Social Ecology Approach and Ecological Agency

3.1 The Social Ecology Approach

Social ecology is treated not as an established and consistent theory, but rather as a methodological approach to analyse complex phenomena (e.g. Weaver-Hightower 2008; Evans et al. 2014; Evans 2020). The two main analytical directions can be distinguished in the applications of social ecological analysis. In Bronfenbrenner's well-known ecological system theory (1979), the individual is the primary unit of analysis and the focus is on the development of the individual within the framework of interdependencies/interrelations in and between various multilevel (both, closer and distant) environments. The model consists of five levels of social activities/regulations:

- (1) Microsystem as an individual's close social environment such as family, schoolteachers, classmates.
- (2) Mesosystem as interconnections between micro-environments.
- (3) Exosystem is indirectly influencing social institutional settings (labour markets, local politics, neighborhoods, media, social services) that mediate influences of the macro system to close environments.
- (4) Macrosystem is the most distant layer of social regulations, including historical and cultural values and beliefs, economic and education systems, laws, social policy etc.
- (5) Chronosystem that includes changes over time in various subsystems.

Subsystems, actors and their interactions shape the opportunities and experiences of individuals (Lörinc et al. 2019). Development and learning of individuals are not just "nested" into the multilevel context. The environment has an impact through and with the individuals' participation processes and interactions (O'Tool 2020). Bronfenbrenner emphasised the "proximal processes" as the primary mechanism of development, referring to the positive relationships and interactions in the close environment of an individual at the micro and mesosystem levels in the close social and educational context over time (Guy-Evans 2024).

Another cluster of applications of socio-ecological approach is related rather to the macro-level analysis, analysis of organisations and various social groups (Evans

et al. 2014), as well as policy analysis (Weaver-Hightower 2008). Both directions share the idea of dynamic and multilevel interdependencies and interactions between individuals and the changing context, enabling an ecology to work and self-sustain. Several different conceptual frameworks for application of this interdisciplinary analysis have been utilized, as the aims and contexts of the explored phenomena vary widely.

The social ecology approach has been applied for research across different areas and for different phenomena in many contexts (Jackson and Barnett 2020), including the analysis of organisations and communities/social groups or the analysis of a learner in the lifespan context (Evans et al. 2014). For example, the social ecology approach or metaphor (Weaver-Hightower 2008) has been adopted for the research in various fields, such as adult and workplace learning (Evans et al. 2014; Evans 2020; Schoon and Evans 2023), learning organisations, agency development and reflection (Raffo et al. 2015), social learning and development of the theory of mind (Mizokawa and Komiya 2014), experiential learning), skills formation (Tütlys et al. 2022), learning and practice in higher education (Jackson 2020), policy analysis (Weaver-Hightower 2008; Raffo et al. 2015) and other fields. The social ecology approach is useful to understand the complexity of phenomena, that are influenced by multilevel and multifaceted dynamic factors and interdependencies/fuzziness of interrelations (Evans et al. 2014, p. 367) between factors of different environments (Evans 2020; Mizokawa and Komiya 2014). The approach has been applied for several studies that are conducted specifically to better understand learning, development and practices in various contexts and uncover factors that impact directly or indirectly the learning and development in certain practices (Jackson and Barnett 2020). The social ecology approach in education can be considered useful as it demands analysis beyond the policy construction and beyond the educators in classrooms (Weaver-Hightower 2008).

Generally, by social ecology we understand social associations that function in the interplay of multilevel structures, institutions, individual actors and their interrelations, and interactions. Thus, political processes, historical-cultural circumstances, power relations, socio-economic changes, and social relationships can form self-regulating and self-sustaining ecologies (Weaver-Hightower 2008; Evans et al. 2014). The analysis of any social ecology can include the following categories of elements of ecology: involved actors and their relationships (cooperation, competition, predation, symbiosis), environments, structures/institutions, and processes and changes that allow the process and ecology to work (Weaver-Hightower 2008). In the case of research of the ecology of socially vulnerable youth in IVET, as a close environment (micro- and meso- environment), we consider mainly the vocational school, basic school, pre-vocational school, and out of school social environment and work environment when students participate in practical training and/or work in addition to their studies.

Within self-organisational dynamics, that functions without the central control/regulation, individuals and groups have possibilities to exercise *agency* and therefore influence the all dynamics of an ecology through interdependencies (Weaver-Hightower 2008). The understanding of human development as contextualised by

Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory coincides with the contextualised understanding of agency that makes the concept of agency significant for social ecological analysis. The meaning of the concept of social ecology in this chapter is both methodological and theoretical. The social ecology approach provides a methodology for understanding and researching the problem of vulnerable youth within the wider macro environment. Meanwhile the concept of close/proximal environment in connection with ecological agency provides the foundation for analytical framework of the research.

3.2 *Ecological Agency*

When conceptualising agency as ecological (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Biesta and Tedder 2007), agency is treated not as an individual capacity, but rather as bounded, as something that people do and that must be achieved in and through engagement with a particular environment (contexts-for-action). Education and labour market institutions, families, friends and other actors and institutions interact in the generation of learning ecologies that can be experienced as transformative, adaptive, or reproducing social inequalities (Evans 2020).

The ecological agency approach also suggests that agency should be understood in a three-dimensional way, that is, as a composition of influences from the *past experience*, orientations towards the *future* and the quality of engagement with the *present* (Biesta and Tedder 2007). Ecological agency emphasises the interdependence of the context/external and personal conditions in development of agency. The specific combination of personality-related social factors, learning, available resources, and structural factors (such as families and community background) and their interrelations determine the development and exercise of an agency (Biesta and Tedder 2007). The concept focuses on the ways in which agency is achieved in a particular context-for-action, within a particular 'ecology' (Biesta and Tedder 2007). Treating agency as being achieved does also mean that the competences related to the agency, such as self-confidence, self-regulation, goal-determination and others can develop and should be supported in an environment to meet challenges and overcome them. Overcoming these difficulties can lead to the growth of agentic capacities, which in turn, have the potential to help vulnerable students move forward in their lives, education, and work, thereby avoiding exclusion. Growth of the agentic capacities is influenced by the support students receive from family members, teachers, peers or their perception of being supported.

4 The Empirical Research of Youth at Risk of Dropping Out from Initial Vocational Education¹

The aim of the empirical research of socially vulnerable youth in VET is to better understand the process of learning and development of IVET students from the viewpoint of social ecology. At the centre of the study is an individual IVET student at risk and their experience in various institutional settings and personal networks.

The empirical research focuses on the following questions:

1. How do socially vulnerable students perceive the roles of different micro-level actors and institutions in their learning and development?
2. What interrelated factors and various interdependencies at the micro-level (including family, schools, and external environments) impact the learning and development of socially vulnerable youth in IVET?
3. How do schools, teachers, and other actors, along with their interrelations at the micro-level, support or restrict the development of students' agentic capacities?

4.1 Research Methodology

In our analyses we use data from the international research project EmpowerVET to improve the social inclusion of vulnerable youth through initial vocational education and workplace training. The research included 20 students studying in the Estonian Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET) programme, focusing primarily on young individuals who are at risk of dropping out of IVET.

The recruitment process for participants in this study was facilitated by referrals from school representatives, which included vocational school educators and other IVET staff. The involvement of vocational school teachers and staff in the recommendation process was instrumental, as these individuals possessed valuable insights into the academic and social dynamics of the students under consideration. This approach broadened the scope of the study to encompass the viewpoints of individuals who may have shared common experiences or challenges with their peers and, as such, offered a nuanced perspective on the research focus.

The study used a sampling strategy that combined elements of purposive and snowball sampling to identify and select participants for semi-structured interviews, as explained by Bryman (2016). This methodological approach was chosen to include participants who not only fit the research objectives, but also potentially met the study criteria, thereby allowing for the exploration of diverse perspectives and experiences of the target population (Bryman 2016).

The participants included 14 female and 6 male students aged 16–24. These students were selected from six different Estonian vocational education institutions, representing different professional fields of study. The distribution of these professions was as follows: hairdressing (2), construction (3), information technology (4),

¹ The empirical part of the Chapter is based partly on the publication: Loogma et al. (2023).

trade (2), culinary arts (2), customer service (1), business management (2), art and design (3), landscaping and cleaning (1).

Ethical considerations included central principles of informed consent, ensuring the confidentiality of participant information and strict adherence to applicable data protection legislation. In addition, the ethical aspects of the research protocol underwent strict control and approval by the Ethical Board Council of Tallinn University, thereby ensuring the highest standards of ethical behavior throughout the study.

The research methodology used individual interviews as the primary data collection technique, using the Zoom platform to conduct these interviews. All interviews were conducted in Estonian. Each individual interview session lasted between 50 and 60 min, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives. The topics of these interviews covered various aspects of the participants' lives, including explorations of their family background, their educational experiences, professional endeavors, social involvement, support networks, and their future. The recordings of these interviews were transcribed verbatim. This practice of verbatim transcription was intended to preserve the integrity of the participants' narratives and facilitate accurate analysis of the qualitative data.

A strictly systematic approach was followed in the data analysis. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, systematized, and coded for analysis. To comply with the principle of anonymity and confidentiality, an important step was to replace the names of all participants with pseudonyms, thereby protecting their identities. The methodological framework used for data analysis was inspired by the model explained by Braun and Clarke (2012), which emphasizes a systematic and comprehensive approach to thematic analysis. This approach involves several distinct steps, each contributing to a nuanced understanding of the qualitative data. These steps were data exploration, generation of source codes to mark the distinguishing features. The process then moved to searching for themes, organizing related codes to identify patterns. Themes were reviewed and clarified, followed by their definition and naming. Such thematic analysis of the data was used as a basis for subsequent steps, providing the necessary context to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data set (Braun and Clarke 2012).

During the later phase of the analysis, we identified patterns of learning ecologies based on the adopted triangle model of Eraut (2004) and Evans et al. (2014, p. 360). This model examines the mutual relationships between:

- the challenges students encounter in various institutional and informal environments;
- the support and feedback they may receive, or lack thereof in specific contexts;
- and the development of agentic capacities, such as self-confidence, motivation, purposiveness, perseverance, initiative and other related traits.

This model aligns with the concept of ecological agency, which involves the development of agentic orientations within “temporal-relational contexts” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, p. 1004). These orientations may change as students move between different environments, such as from one school to another or from school to work, where they encounter challenges requiring learning and adaptation in specific

contexts. Therefore, challenges in different contexts may require different levels of support and feedback, which can influence the development of agentic capacities.

4.2 Research Findings: Challenges and Advantages for At-Risk Students in Vocational Schools

Below we present the findings of our analysis of the main challenges students are facing while studying at vocational schools.

The results of the survey reveal a common tendency among students who have chosen their study programme in IVET not out of personal interest, but rather on the recommendation of parents or friends. Low motivation towards the selected specialty emerged as a concern among students. The results suggest that students' choice to study a particular speciality may be driven by external influences, such as parental recommendations, rather than genuine personal interest. Although this dynamic potentially meets external expectations, it can lead to internal frustration in students because the decision-making process lacks autonomy and alignment with their internal motivation. Many students say that they are not interested in the study field, but their aim is to get a secondary education diploma. As one student, Ken, explained, *"Let's say that I'm interested in the profession I'm studying, but whether I'll go for the job in future, it's a bit doubtful. my parents suggested me to go to that vocational school"* (Ken, student) Similarly, another student, Anna, shared her experience:

I'm studying to be an IT specialist and I'm in my second year now...this is my third school. I left high school, then I went to Adult High School, but after some time I left that school, as well and now I'm here in vocational school.... I originally went to study a completely different field at the beginning, but then I had to change. And now I have chosen IT. I am interested in IT just a little. But my main idea is to get a secondary education. (Anna)

In addition, several students began to understand the speciality during their internship, and it was different from their imagination. It can also be argued that the students may not have had a sufficient overview of the speciality they study or had a different idea of that. It may also be possible that they did not get enough information about the speciality. Elle, one such student, shared her experience:

...Well, I'm currently studying in the field of commerce. I liked it at first, when I started to study, but now in my second year of study I'm not sure about it anymore. I'll still finish it, in the sense that I am thinking that I can always learn something else or do something else, but I don't think it's my future profession... I thought it was a profession I could try to study, but now the first internship, for example, has to be done in a shop, so I'm a shop assistant...my idea of that field was something else... (Elle)

The research results reveal that young people consider their relationships as the main factor affecting their success in vocational education. These relationships include those with family, teachers, peers at school, and supervisors and co-workers at work. They impact how young people feel about their belonging, motivation,

and their self-esteem. Parents play an important role in supporting their children's education and providing a stable home environment that foster academic achievement. These relationships might affect the student's well-being and performance at school. According to the interviewees, they view their homes as safe places where they can seek support from family members when needed. Marek emphasized the importance of the family, stating, "*Currently, my family holds great importance to me...My mother has been a mental support for me*" (Marek, student). Similarly, Meelis highlighted the role of his parents: "*...The most important people in my life are my mother and father. The principled ones support me the most*" (Meelis, student).

Even in cases where students come from single-parent households, have parents working abroad, or live alone, they express a sense of safety and the availability of someone to turn to in times of need. Furthermore, if they do not receive support from their parents, they can often rely on siblings or grandparents for assistance. Anna described her family support network as follows:

My mother, she always wants to help a lot, she asks and does all kinds of things for me. But my sister, she's like my emotional support, she understands me, it's hard for her in school, too. Talking with my family helps me to keep me grounded and find peace in a way. (Anna)

Kai, another student, shared her experience:

For years my grandfather was supporting me, but he passed away. I don't get along with my mother at all, we are very distant, if I need anything or she needs anything, we communicate, but that's it. Then I also have two grandmothers, one grandmother lives nearby, I go to help her sometimes and then we talk. (Kai)

On the other hand, although the level of connection with a family member who does not reside with the rest of the family is either minimal or nonexistent, it may impact students' well being and the image of themselves. Poor communication or conflict within the family can create stress, anxiety for the student, which can make it difficult for them to concentrate and perform well in school. For instance, Elli's father left the family when she was born. She says that she doesn't feel like dealing with him: "*I did not have this support before and do not need it now.*" Markus also mentioned that his father was "*with a problematic background*", thus his mother had to work a lot to take care of the family.

Students' previous educational experiences can have various effects on their current situations. The research data emphasise the importance of having a supportive and positive network of relationships when studying in the primary and secondary school. The feedback received from young people shows how big the role not only family members, but also friends and teachers from the previous school play in shaping students' educational decisions and experiences. Some students maintain strong and trusting relationships with teachers from their previous school, and they often turn to these former educators when they encounter difficulties. One of the students shares her experience:

I developed such a good relationship with the head teacher of my parallel class that I attended most of my class head teacher's lessons in the parallel class. She was like another mother to

me, that if I had any concerns, I told her, she knew where to refer me immediately or who to ask or what to do next. (Sintia)

Despite some interviewees experiencing loneliness and having a limited circle of friends, they still held their previous school friends in high regard as significant individuals in their lives, someone they could confide in and converse with. As one interviewee, Liis, expressed, "*Those old friends are like family for me, old friends are better than new ones.*" Notably, there are discernible differences in how young people perceive their experiences in general academic upper-secondary schools compared to vocational schools. Among interviewed students, there were several students who reported enduring prolonged episodes of school bullying that extended over multiple years without receiving any assistance or intervention. Meelis, for example, recounted how the bullying he experienced in primary school had a lasting impact on his life. He reveals that these traumatic experiences made it safer to stay at home and he needed support. This experience also strongly influenced his self-esteem.

From the fourth grade, boys from a parallel class came over to our class, and all this school bullying started from them, they bullied me, it lasted for two years until it was finally resolved. After that, nobody noticed me or paid any attention and I did my own thing, but a year later they started making fun of me because I was too thin. By the end of the eighth grade, I couldn't stand it anymore and started lifting weights, doing more sports in the ninth grade and then the mocking stopped (Meelis).

Students highlighted the difficulty of seeking help and often feeling isolated in addressing challenges at school. Similarly, a number of students reported early struggles in elementary school, citing reasons like bullying, insufficient teacher support, and overly stressful coursework. Markus shared his experience:

I was bullied from the first grade...in the fourth grade I already went to a psychologist...my teacher labelled me as the worst boy in the class. (Markus)

Another student, Anna, reported enduring anxiety and depression because of being bullied during her time in primary school that led to mental health issues. Her sense of loneliness, isolation, and depression began during her basic school years and ultimately led to her missing classes, which subsequently resulted in her dropping out and being excluded from certain social circles. Anna reflected:

It was loneliness. It is important that I would have at least one friend who would listen to me and would notice me. I felt that nobody listened. At a certain point, school became secondary in my life. (Anna)

These experiences underline the significant and long-lasting impacts of bullying on students' mental and emotional well-being. Additionally, Anna had already interrupted her studies in both the gymnasium and adult gymnasium. Unfortunately, even in her present vocational school, she did not receive any support from the school staff. Adding to her difficulties, the school lacks a psychologist to whom she could turn for assistance. She openly acknowledged she experienced significant levels of anxiety and emotional stress, contributing factors to her regular absences from classes. This lack of psychological support in her school increased her challenges in dealing with these issues.

Low self-esteem and untreated mental health problems were identified as significant barriers hindering learning in vocational schools. The findings highlight a lack of support from teachers and staff as students experienced feelings of isolation and inadequate coping with their challenges. Some students reported they felt anxiety and had other mental health issues which were not adequately addressed by the school. Some teachers were even rude or made inappropriate comments. Anna explained:

Maybe it sounds strange, but teachers could talk or treat with greater respect. Some comments that they always made really bothered me, they said you were old enough and blah blah blah... to act a certain way. Look, I'm 19 and theoretically I should have already finished school, but yes...that also tends to drag me down even more. People are different and they should respect that. I understand that sometimes teachers can be more upset, but sometimes they really make unnecessary comments. (Anna)

The study also revealed that a significant proportion of participating students had a history of anxiety disorders.

Experiences how students perceive teachers' support in vocational schools can vary widely. There are instances where students perceive their teachers as very supportive and cases where teachers were less supportive. In addition to the teachers, young people also identify other members of the school staff who played significant supportive roles in their lives. Ene (student) mentioned the school cook as a person she could confide in and discuss her problems and issues. Similarly, Karen (student), highlighted the importance of a person in the administration of the dormitory who had a profound impact on her life. She described the administrator as someone who was attentive to the students' well-being and openly addressed problems as they arose. Karen emphasised that the openness and supportive nature of people was a strong motivator in her life. In fact, this was mentioned by several students. For instance, Elen explained:

We have a person who washes dishes in the vocational school, everyone always goes to tell her their secrets, because she is such a lovely and very reliable person and, well, the hairdressing teachers are certainly very nice too, but I just know them so little and I can't make friends with them that much. (Elen)

These examples underscore the diverse network of individuals within the school community who can contribute to students' well-being and motivation.

The process of securing an apprenticeship training can also be an obstacle or hindering factor that students experience in the vocational school. Students are usually responsible for securing placements on their own, and some acknowledged that more support was needed in this area. In addition, when students get an internship, they are often offered a job, and as a result, going to work can start to affect their school attendance and academic performance. However, it is important to ensure that students can balance their work and academic commitments effectively, and that their employment does not interfere with their studies or put them at risk of dropping out.

In conclusion, these findings highlight the "complex web" of challenges and supports that shape students' educational journeys in IVET. Addressing early problems and providing adequate support during internship training are important steps in creating a supportive learning environment that may promote students' success

and reduce the risk of dropout and social exclusion. In addition, the next sub-chapter outlines students' experiences through a socio-ecological perspective, highlighting the complex interplay of challenges and supports that influence their educational journey in IVET. The social ecological lens allows to examine interdependencies of influencing factors at the micro and meso levels and their impact on the risk of school dropout, as well as on the life and learning paths of students.

4.3 The Analysis of Student Experience from the Social Ecological Point of View

As a result of empirical analysis, we identified three clusters of students, representing three different ecologies of learning and development of at-risk students with the emphasis on the development of their agentic capacities. The ecologies also reflect different experiences of getting help or getting no help in school(s) in the case of emerging problems and the consequences on further learning and development, including the visions/perspectives for the future life.

First, some students are convinced and confident they can solve the challenges and problems they encounter at school and work themselves and they don't need any help (from teachers or other staff in schools). However, they still have supportive relationships outside the school to rely on. Students rely on such supportive relationships when they are interested, motivated and goal-determined in their studies and future (career) prospects. The story of the interviewee called Rain, who studied cooking, can be interpreted as a case of transformative ecology as it refers to the rise of agentic capacities and at the same time, favorable prospects for the future. Rain is an example of the type of a student who exercises agency by making purposeful choices and who chose IVET and had a rather clear vision for his future work. Rain studied in a vocational school after basic school, which was his purposeful choice. In the basic school he had difficulties with math. He described teachers as angry and rigid, labelling students. Teacher of mathematics put him in the low performance group. Even if he had courage to ask for help, he didn't get help and felt that the teacher liked to help well-performing students much more. He explained: „... *help [from teachers] was varying ... for example, some teachers try to show how [to do correctly]; another teacher however, tries to show quickly to move on to her favorite students.*” Despite this negative experience he succeeded in finishing basic school to move on to vocational school to study cooking he liked and was interested in. Another challenge he faced in the course of practical training was in a restaurant. At the beginning, the work was very difficult; however he proudly coped well. He praised himself: “...*there were small rooms, ... the meal was very complicated (many components) ...however, four weeks was enough to make things clear for myself ...I learned to perform everything well.*” In addition to cooking the student is interested in military activities (as a hobby), taking part in military training with his brothers. He has few friends, however, considers relationships with brothers and training mates

as close ones. In meeting those challenges he was finally convinced that he could cope well even without external help by learning by himself *“I can cope by myself and don’t need external help”*.

Secondly, another type of ecology refers rather to an adaptive type of ecology. Meelis’ story demonstrates the case when the basic school environment was restrictive and isolating, whereas at vocational school, on the contrary, the student experienced a rather positive and supportive environment, raising his self-confidence and well-being. Even though Meelis overcame the trauma experienced at the basic school, and argued that he would finish the school, he still felt he could not change things around him. He hesitated in setting more ambitious goals for the future arguing that he was lazy, trying to cope with making as little efforts as possible and being afraid of failing at work. Meelis was bullied in the basic school which lasted from 4th grade to 8th grade. Even teachers tried to handle the problem. His mother supported the student when he did not want to attend school anymore. The bullying eventually stopped and he was acknowledged by others after he had taken regular sport—weight lifting. Even though he found a way to avoid bullying, he was upset: *“I didn’t like that I was accepted by others only when I started to exercise.”* Meelis also had difficulties with maths. However, he felt very successful and confident at vocational school as the marks were better and, importantly, he got positive feedback from teachers. At the beginning he had challenges in maths in the vocational school, but he overcame them and became the best in the class in maths and earned positive feedback from teachers: *“... I am doing well in maths; the teacher prizes me... and... in speciality lessons I am doing well, the teacher asked to help him.”*

The *third* type of ecology demonstrates how an ecology may work to reproduce exclusion. Heli is a 2nd year student in a vocational school, in the speciality of construction finisher. Even though she chose this field rather by accident (schoolmates studied it and her father was working in the field) she likes the field. She has some friends outside of school and rather good family relationships. In the primary school she experienced a lot of school bullying. Later, in the 5th grade she moved to a small school in the countryside where she experienced very good relationships, recalling the school as very cool even though she had to repeat a class once. She was rather active at this school and was also a member of the student union at the basic school. After the basic school, she left two vocational schools because of conflicts with teachers and her laziness in her studies. Currently she is a student in a third school. She has complicated relationships with some of the teachers and with her group mates. She gets a feeling that she does not have sufficient energy and motivation to do all the tasks at school and thinks of leaving the school again to go to work. Even though she gets support from her teacher and her brother, she feels lazy and not good at dealing with (time) pressure and therefore, she knows that it is better to make a fresh start. She is rather confused about her future prospects.

5 Conclusions and Discussion

Social ecology of vulnerable students in IVET mirrors the complex interrelationships of actors and contexts involved in the proximal processes that occur at the micro and meso levels. The results indicate that the learning and development of socially vulnerable young people are directly influenced by interrelationships and interdependencies between family members, teachers and peers, in the vocational school and sometimes even more by peers of the basic school that precedes the vocational school. As a consequence of these interdependencies the students face challenges and risk factors that can have an impact on their situation also in a wider social and personal context, such as career prospects or health. The main challenges are as follows: (1) the choice of a vocational speciality, which sometimes can be made rather indiscriminately, e.g. following the advice of close relatives or friends or accidentally, not thinking over their own interests; (2) relationships with parents, peers, teachers in previous (compulsory) school and in the current vocational school; and (3) help and support that students get. The challenges reveal also the main mechanisms of how the ecology of students at risk functions. Besides the micro and meso environments and actors the socio-economic position of the family, which refers to the impact of macro level conditions, can be considered as part of the ecology manifesting in the limitations of the choices students can make after the compulsory education.

The three types of social ecology of students at risk were distinguished. The cases indicate how the social ecology of students at risk functions in a particular context depending on the possibilities of development of agentic capacities (e.g. self-confidence) and getting support for that. The first one, transformative ecology, refers to rather favourable circumstances for the development of agentic capacities and at the same time, favourable prospects for the future and coming out from the risk situation. The second case is labelled as an adaptive type of ecology demonstrating that there could be a possibility to break up the ecology of risk while getting enough support and understanding in school after the traumatic relationships from the previous school. This case also refers to the ecological nature of an agency, meaning that some environments are more supportive for exercising and developing agency. The third case is reproductive, demonstrating how an ecology may work to reproduce exclusion, being related to the health problems too. Given the different contexts the students learn, the individualized support is necessary to break up the reproductive social ecology of risk situation.

The environment for the emergence and support of agentic capacities of students varies from context to context. Some students who experience little support at the school can have possibilities for self-expression and get support while working. Some students, on the contrary, feel supported and safe in the vocational school, but have difficulties and fears of going to work. Even though students feel the growth in terms of self confidence in vocational school, it does not mean that they feel to have sufficient power or will to influence the surrounding environments and they prefer to hold back and not to express their opinions.

Despite having supportive family relationships, the family may not be able to provide sufficient support to eliminate the risks related to the impact of other actors and environments. The experience of students at the basic school, may be affected by the family background. The choice to move to study into the vocational track after the basic school in many cases is suggested by members of the family. The physical proximity to a school is also taken into consideration. Some students struggle with serious problems at the basic school, related to a combination of bad relationships with peers (particularly those related to school bullying) and teachers, learning difficulties and feeling of isolation and little support at school. The situation may even lead to mental health problems that in turn can result in disengagement, absenteeism and learning difficulties. The feeling of disengagement and learning difficulties refer to the dissatisfaction of some of basic psychological needs (needs for relatedness and competence) that lead to the lack of motivation (Gagne and Deci 2005). The problems encountered at the basic school and their consequences tend to be carried forward to vocational school through decrease of agentic capacities and low self-confidence of students. This finding elaborates on the results of the research in the context of lifelong learning, stating, that the disadvantages in the earlier stages of education tend to carry on and accumulate in the further life (e.g. Saar et al. 2013).

Another mechanism of getting into a risk situation is related to health problems of students. No matter whether the health problems can be caused by traumas in earlier periods of life or not, the problems, such as anxiety, stress and others if not treated properly, can restrict the normal learning and development of students in IVET and in later life.

Some risks are related to the social economic circumstances of the families of students. The need to earn money may put pressure on students to go to work as soon as possible; this, in turn, can result in the interruption of studies.

However, in some cases students appreciate the transition from basic to vocational school. Vocational school seems to be a more suitable environment for them allowing more flexibility in studies, and teachers and peers are more supportive and caring. In those cases, the vocational school may support the agentic capacities of students who had negative experience at the basic school mainly through the positive feedback and support in the case of learning difficulties, creation of positive climate and paying attention to students' concerns. Positive experience at the vocational school can help to break up the wicked cycle of reproducing risks and possibly lead to adaptive and/or transformative ecologies of learning and development of students.

Thus, as a result of concurrency of many unfortunate circumstances, such as little support from families, poor learning results, school bullying and negative labelling by teachers at basic school, the agentic capacities such as self-esteem and confidence of the socially vulnerable young people decrease. Those situations may have long lasting consequences on students' lives, reproducing the risks and raising the likelihood of social exclusion. However, despite the previous negative experiences by students, vocational education still has possibilities to change the reproductive ecology to adaptive or transformative one that would enable students to move in an ambitious way.

The results of the interviews with the students highlight concerns about the mental health of young people. To raise the students' awareness and provide them with preventive measures, it is essential that the topic of mental health can be given greater emphasis in the curricula. Incorporating mental health education into curricula may not only help to solve the identified problem but could also be in line with the broader societal need to promote the holistic well-being of young people. By integrating holistic mental health modules, educational institutions can help create a supportive and informed environment. This in turn provides students with the knowledge and skills needed to identify early signs of mental health problems and take preventative action. Furthermore, a well-constructed curriculum can facilitate open discussions, promote empathy, and encourage a supportive community that recognizes the importance of mental well-being.

Even the proximal processes (O'Tool et al. 2020), taking place mainly in micro- and meso- level learning environments have an indirect and stronger impact on the development of socially vulnerable youth, the students' stories also referred to the macro-level social mechanisms that often are part of the ecology of youth at risk of dropping out. Students in their stories refer to two macro mechanisms having an impact on their situations, namely, the families' social and economic background and rather limited possibilities to support students. Students' stories manifest the historically developed selectivity of the educational system that leads more vulnerable young people to the vocational track after compulsory education, which, according to social belief, is of a rather inferior standing.

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Chapter 6

Vocational Pathways to the Empowerment of Socially Vulnerable Youth in Norway and the Baltics: A Comparative View



Vidmantas Tūtlys

Abstract This chapter provides a comparative analysis of the researched pathways to empowerment of socially vulnerable youth in the VET systems and institutions of Norway and the Baltic countries by looking into the institutional-political dimension (implications of the VET policies, reforms and change of skill formation institutions), the processes (implications of the processes of VET and skill formation), and the learner dimension (the agency of learners at risk). It also provides tentative insights into the potential of policy learning between the analysed countries and beyond this group.

Keywords Empowerment • Vocational education and training • Vulnerable VET students • Socially vulnerable youth • Agency • VET reforms • Baltic countries • Norway

1 Introduction

The theoretical framework for the comparative analysis of the pathways of empowerment of socially vulnerable youth in the VET systems and institutions of Norway and the Baltic countries refers to the theories of the skill ecosystem (Buchanan et al. 2017), the historical institutionalism theory of institutional change (Thelen and Conran 2014) and the institutional development typologies of VET identified by the Cedefop's study on VET development in Europe (Cedefop 2020). The concept of the skill ecosystem is very helpful in comparing the institutional pathways and patterns of empowerment of vulnerable students in VET, because it reveals the key dimensions of the agency of institutional actors of skill formation and deployment, and where the empowerment happens or not. Buchanan et al. (2017) indicate six key dimensions of

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the skill ecosystem: (1) learners, employees, and employers (enterprises) act as local actors of the skill ecosystem; (2) an enterprise, a sector, and a region define distinct organizational forms of skill formation and deployment; (3) a social dialogue and trust building at the local, sectoral and regional levels based on the partnerships of actors involved in skill formation and deployment; (4) agency of the civil society in the skill formation and development; (5) institutional settings of skill formation at the national and global levels dealing with governance, provision and quality assurance institutions, systems of qualifications, funding arrangements, and skills intelligence; (6) policies stipulating demand and supply of skills and covering skill formation (general education, VET, HE, adult education and LLL), employment and industrial development.

The analysis of skill ecosystems allows us to understand the institutional aspects of empowerment of vulnerable learners by referring both to the broad context related to the above-mentioned dimensions, as well as to the implications of the institutional change of skill formation (Buchanan et al. 2017; Bosh 2017). Critical junctures of the skill formation and the resulting institutional development pathways shape specific institutional preconditions and choices of actions in the empowerment of vulnerable youth in the countries. For example, post-communist transition reforms and the EU accession significantly impacted the balance between the neoliberal market orientation and modern welfare state provisions in the VET policies of the Baltic countries.

The analysis of the changes of institutional models of VET provision also offers fruitful insights about the institutional dimension of the empowerment of vulnerable VET students. The typology of the institutional VET models suggested by the recent study of Cedefop (2020) suggests pluralistic and distinctive models of VET. The pluralistic model of VET is characterized by strong integration of VET in the wider education and training system, which facilitates it, enables and promotes transferability and permeability of training pathways in higher education studies and lifelong learning (Cedefop 2020). The distinctive pathway of VET is oriented to the specific goals of education and training rather than narrowly focused on satisfying skills needs in the labour market and such orientation is regarded as an important precondition of the socio-economic empowerment of vulnerable youth by enabling their employability (Cedefop 2020). Historically, important features of such pluralistic model have been typical for the VET systems of the Baltic countries and Norway. This brings to the fore the institutional VET pathway where vocational education and training is provided together with general secondary education. This model has much stronger positions in Norway today, whereas in the Baltic countries it is challenged by the neoliberal orientation of VET to labour market needs and the implemented competence-based VET curriculum reforms, which are more favourable for the distinctive pathway of VET provision (see Chaps. 2–5).

This chapter compares the VET pathways of empowerment of vulnerable youth in the Baltic countries and Norway. This is performed in two stages. Firstly, the institutional-political dimension of empowerment of vulnerable VET students is compared by referring to the institutional change in the VET and skill formation in these countries. Afterwards, the comparison focuses on the analysis of the agency of

VET providers and learners in the processes of empowerment taking place in VET, by seeking to understand the relationships between the institutional development of VET provision and the agency of involved stakeholders.

From the methodological point of view the comparison of the VET pathways of empowerment of vulnerable youth in the countries applies different research methods and approaches. The comparison of institutional-political dimension of empowerment of vulnerable VET students by referring to the institutional change in the VET and skill formation is based on the systemic and critical review of the scientific literature and policy documents. The comparative analysis of the agency of VET providers and learners in the processes of empowerment taking place in VET is based on the critical review of applied empowerment practices in the VET schools, as well as analysing the findings of the focus groups and interviews with VET teachers, trainers and other pedagogical staff in the countries. The analysis of the agency of vulnerable VET students refers to the findings of the qualitative study by interviewing this group of informants in the Baltic countries and Norway in the EmpowerVET project.

2 Institutional Development of the Empowerment of Socially Vulnerable Youth in the VET Systems of the Baltic Countries and Norway

The institutional pathways of skill formation systems in the Baltic countries and Norway rather differently define and structure empowerment of socially vulnerable VET students in these countries. The development of the skill formation system institutions in all Baltic countries has followed the model of transitional neoliberalism, whereas the skill formation in Norway shares the features of collective skill formation with some elements of neoliberal approach. This is why the comparative analysis of institutional development of empowerment will target all Baltic countries as a group sharing the same basic qualities. The differences between the Baltic countries from the one side, and Norway from the other side are very important for understanding the specificities of skill formation institutions in empowering socially vulnerable young people, as well as in understanding the policy choices in this field.

2.1 Baltic Countries: Empowerment of Vulnerable Youth in the Transitional Neoliberalism of Skill Formation

The skill formation institutions of the Baltic countries are defined as an emerging neoliberal model of skill formation originating from the post-communist transition

(Tütlys et al. 2022a; b). As a result, one can expect that the institutional and methodological approaches to the vocational training and employment of the socially vulnerable youth would be defined by the priority of the human resource management interests of the companies and reliance on the operation of market forces in the employment relations. However, these phenomena are also largely shaped and influenced by the social and institutional development factors, as well as by specificities of the national policies in skill formation.

What are the typical features of the Baltic neoliberalism in the field of skill formation and the implications of these features for the empowerment of vulnerable youth studying in the VET systems?

Martinaitis (2010) distinguishes the reorientation of the focus of skill formation from the industry specific skills typical for the former Soviet system to the general skills resulting from the sharp transition to the market economy. This change was accompanied by the relocation of the main responsibility for skill formation from the state to individuals, expansion of the higher education provision and decline in the provision and image of VET in society in the first decades after the reestablishment of the independence of the Baltic countries (Martinaitis 2010).

After the collapse of communism, the VET provision experienced several key institutional changes: (1) the collapse of the Soviet dual model of VET provision where the VET schools tightly cooperated with state enterprises in training workforce for state-planned and owned economy and (2) decentralisation of the governance of the VET system by delegating more decision making rights to VET schools. These changes were directed at the alignment of skill formation systems due to skills mismatches brought by the profound restructuring of economy in terms of the decline of industry and growth of services provision, as well as the decline of big factories and growth of SMEs (Kogan 2008; Kogan et al. 2008, 2011, 2012; Tütlys et al. 2022a, b, c).

The post-communist transition brought significant changes to the economic, social and education mission of VET (see Fig. 1). The state-led centralized VET provision during the Soviet period aimed to prepare the required quantity of duely skilled workforce for the planned economy. The key social mission of VET in the Soviet period was to contribute to the realization and maintaining of the legally imposed obligatory/full employment by providing the skills needed for the workplaces of planned economy as well as retraining redundant workforce with outdated skills (Laužackas 2005; Soltys 1997). The key educational mission of VET in the Soviet period was strongly related to the indoctrination of the official communist ideology ensuring the shaping of the loyal masses of population in the post-totalitarian society (Havel 1991). The empowerment of vulnerable youth was not explicitly present in the mission, because of the formal/official 'absence' of socially vulnerable groups in the 'classless' society, dominant agency of state-led education, economic planning and employment systems, and the absence of freedom of choice and agency of learners.

A transition to the market economy and democratic society brought significant changes in the VET mission. The economic mission of training of competitive workforce according to the skills needs of the market economy became one of the dominant missions (Laužackas 2005). The social mission of VET focused on the support to

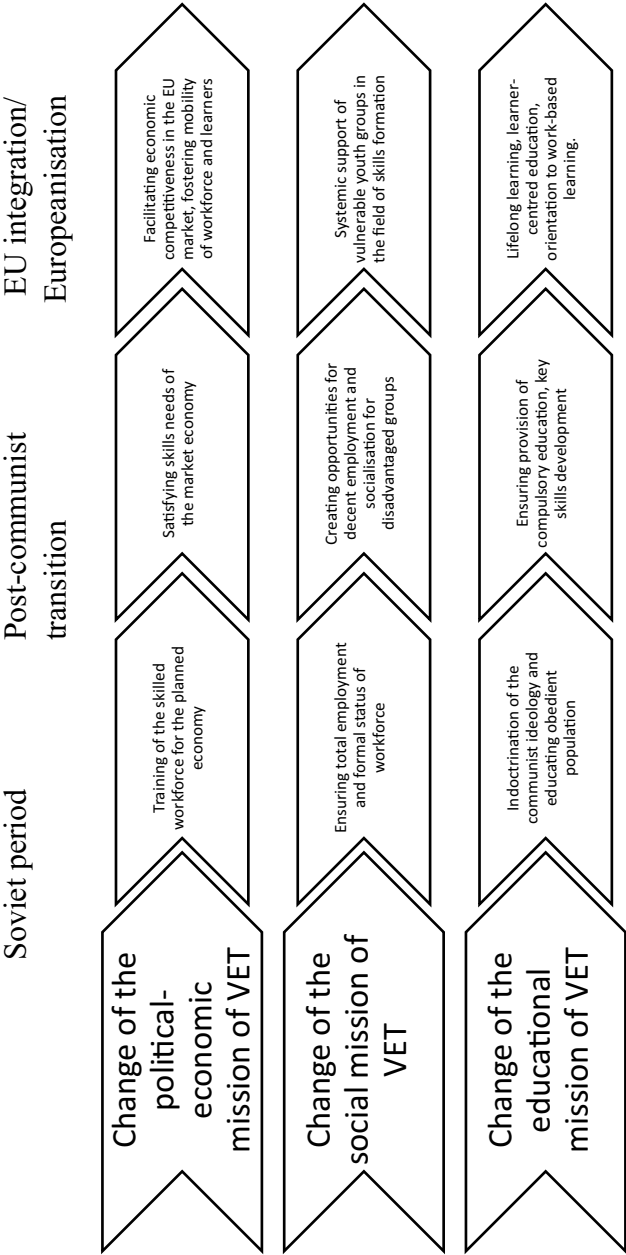


Fig.1 The changing status of VET in the Baltic countries: from the Soviet period to the EU integration

emerging groups of socially disadvantaged population in developing and adjusting their skills to the needs of labour market. Social restructuring of the post-communist societies in the Baltic countries was accompanied by the changing status of educational choices and pathways. When higher education was becoming the key educational pathway of emerging upper and middle classes, VET gradually became a kind of a shelter for socially disadvantaged and poor groups (Loogma et al. 2019). One of the key missions of VET became supporting the youth experiencing educational difficulties in the general education. This mission was also reinforced by the legacy of the segregational role of VET in the Soviet period, where the under-achieving graduates from the general basic education were forcefully directed to the VET schools (Laužackas 2005). A radical transition to the market economy by applying shock therapy of economic reforms in the Baltic countries significantly increased social inequalities and exclusion, increasing the demand for educational and social support pathways and settings (West 2013). It led to the growing importance of the social mission of VET in supporting skill formation and employability of the disadvantaged groups of population (especially youth). The educational mission of VET became more strongly related to the provision of compulsory education (enabled by the integrated provision of general and vocational education) and development of key skills (Laužackas 2005).

The EU accession and Europeanization of skill formation and VET in the Baltic countries strengthened the economic orientation of VET provision to the improvement of competitiveness of human capital, as well as to fostering mobility of learners and working people (Tütlys et al. 2022a, b, c). The improvement of the quality of VET and its attractiveness was one of key strategies implemented with the help of EU investments in the infrastructure of the VET schools, competence-based curriculum reforms and the development of competencies of the VET teaching staff. Supporting the training and competence development of vulnerable youth also became more systemic and strongly linked to the implementation of the EU strategies and agendas of skill formation and employment after the global economic crisis of 2008–2009, for example, the implementation of the Youth Guarantees. Looking from the point of view of the educational mission of VET, the main priorities in empowering the vulnerable groups of youth in VET were ensuring closer links of VET provision with a real work processes in terms of competence-based curriculum reforms and efforts to develop work-based learning (WBL) and apprenticeship, combined with the implementation of lifelong learning pathways and approaches in VET, in terms of integration of the initial and continuing VET, development of the national systems of qualifications and NQFs (Bohlinger and Tütlys 2022).

2.2 Norway—A Hybrid Model of VET Between the Market and Welfare State Orientations

The institutional development pathway of skill formation and VET systems in Norway significantly differs from the one in the Baltic countries. It presents by itself the evolution of the hybrid model of VET in the context of Nordic welfare state model containing elements of the school-based, statist, collective and liberal systems (Høst et al. 2013). The institutional model of the Norwegian VET system in the last decades has been influenced by different political-economic orientations. First, there are the liberal ideas of providing enterprises with a lot of space and freedom in skill formation, which ensures sustainability of the engagement of economic actors in VET. Secondly, there is a strong influence of the statist school tradition with expanding comprehensive education to the new groups of learners, ensuring a strong role of rights-based accessibility of general and vocational education and training. The integration of upper secondary education with apprenticeship-based VET in the 1994 Reform also aimed to raise the working class via unitary schooling (Høst 2015). VET provision in Norway is also marked by a strong apprenticeship tradition and the status of apprenticeship as a core pathway of VET, as it is evidenced by the introduction of 2 + 2 training model in 1994 (Markussen 2016; Vogt 2017). These developments, which aimed to combine the accessibility of VET with the maximisation of the orientation to the market needs, generated tensions in the Norwegian ‘dual’ VET model in coping with dropout problems. Dropout problems and problem-based approaches to youth are a recurring theme in several Norwegian studies connected to vocational subjects. Studies by Johansson (2019), Hernes (2010), and Markussen et al. (2011) confirm this situation. Volckmar (2014) emphasizes that the large dropout rate from vocational fields of study in upper secondary education in Norway is perceived by all political parties as the biggest challenge in education in Norway. The leading political parties therefore advocate in their programmes for a so-called school-based vocational training, and this is one of the then conservative government’s areas of focus. The aim is to raise the status of the vocational subjects and to combat an unacceptably high dropout rate. This problem is also addressed in the White Paper of 2019 (Kunnskapsdepartementet 2019), which states that one reason for low completion rates in VET is student dependence on gaining a workplace contract to complete their upper secondary education (p. 105).

What are then the key similarities and differences of the current institutional settings of VET in the Baltic countries and Norway which empower vulnerable students? The answer to this question is provided in the next section of the chapter.

3 Institutional Settings of VET in the Baltic Countries and Norway as the Factor of Empowerment of Vulnerable Youth

The implications of institutional settings of VET for the empowerment of vulnerable students in the Baltic countries and Norway are examined by comparing three aspects: the governance structure of VET provision, social dialogue on VET, and skill formation policies and reforms (see Table 1). The comparison of the governance structure of VET provision enables us to evaluate the implications of the governance structures and processes for the access of vulnerable youth to VET, as well as for the development of the mechanisms and processes of educational, economic, socio-psychological, and other support to vulnerable youth in the VET system. The comparison of social dialogue on VET is important in seeking to understand the role of social stakeholders and partners in VET in creating and maintaining the empowerment potential of VET, especially in connection with the access to WBL and decent employment opportunities for the graduates. Finally, the comparison of the VET development policies and strategies enables us to evaluate the place of empowerment of vulnerable students in the hierarchies of the political and strategic goals of VET provision and development.

Comparing institutional development of the VET governance structures in the Baltic countries and Norway, shared goals of making VET provision more responsive to the skills needs of the changing market economy through optimization of the network of the VET provision, investments in the VET infrastructure and more active engagement of employers in VET (Baltic countries), as well as by stronger institutionalization of WBL and apprenticeship (all compared countries) can be observed. However, there are significant differences regarding the implications of these developments for the empowerment of vulnerable youth in education and employment, which are closely related to the institutional pathways of VET development (see Table 1).

In the case of the Baltic countries, the neoliberal trend of change in seeking to strengthen market orientation of the school-based VET provision makes this orientation to the market needs a priority compared to the social mission of VET, including support and empowerment of socially disadvantaged groups in VET. The implications of this development for the institutionalization of empowerment of vulnerable youth in VET are the fragmentation of the empowerment and support policies and initiatives at the national level (with the exception of the impact of implementation of the EU policies and programmes, for example, the Youth Guarantees programmes, or the implementation of the ESF funded “Pumpurs” project in Latvia), and orientation to the employment-focused empowerment with key responsibilities shared by learners and teachers. The institutional development of VET provision in Norway is strongly based on the institutional settings of the Nordic welfare state model with rights-based access to VET and systemic provision of support to vulnerable students with involvement of state, regions, social partners, and VET providers at different levels. Market-oriented and liberalization-driven VET reforms, for example,

Table 1 The governance structure of VET provision and empowerment of vulnerable youth in the Baltic countries and Norway

Estonia	Adjustment of the institutional structure of the school-based VET to the market requirements and skills needs by trying to engage employers in the VET provision: introduction of apprenticeship training in 2007. Establishment of institutional provision of social and financial assistance for socially vulnerable VET students to guarantee equal access to education, implementation of prevention measures, basic and special study allowances, free lunchtime meals, reimbursement of public transport, etc.
Latvia	Optimization of the network of the public VET providers in seeking to improve quality and public image of VET, establishment of VET Competence Centres, as sources of excellence and pedagogical-methodological know-how in the VET provision, delegation of the responsibility for the empowerment of the vulnerable learners to the VET centres
Lithuania	Efforts of decentralization of VET provision and enhancing engagement of stakeholders in the management of VET providers: the optimization of the network of VET schools, transforming the state-led VET schools into public entities by involving labour market stakeholders in their management, and establishment of the sectoral practical training centres. Delegation of the main responsibility for the provision of support and enhancing empowerment of vulnerable students to the VET centres
Norway	A hybrid model containing elements of the school-based, statist, collective and liberal systems (Høst 2015). The statist school tradition with expanding comprehensive education to the new groups of learners and ensuring a strong role of rights-based accessibility of general and vocational education and training. A strong apprenticeship tradition and the status of apprenticeship as a core pathway of VET (2 + 2: two years in school, two years in a workplace)

the introduction of the ‘dual’ 2 + 2 model of the VET provision (see Chap. 2 of this book) create some disturbances or problems in the empowerment of vulnerable students (dropout from VET after the first 2 years of study), but do not significantly weaken either empowerment orientation, or potential of empowerment of vulnerable youth in the VET system.

This difference is especially noticeable when comparing the implications of social dialogue in VET for potential empowerment of vulnerable youth in these countries (see Table 2). Social dialogue in VET is weak and fragmented in the Baltic countries, or dominated by employers (Estonia). This significantly limits the achievement of the ambitious institutional reforms of the VET provision supported by the EU on the one hand and reduces the empowerment to the level of interventions in the public VET schools or student–teacher relationship on the other hand. This can also partially explain a strong reliance of the empowerment-oriented policy interventions in these countries on the teacher’s agency and the focus of these policies on the capacity building of teachers in the field of support of vulnerable students (e.g., PUMPURS project in Latvia). In the case of Norway, a well established and balanced social dialogue and stakeholder involvement in VET (as a part of welfare-state based skill formation) enable fruitful partnerships between social partners and VET providers

at different levels and significantly improve the targeting of support to vulnerable students.

The comparison of the orientation of VET and skill formation policies with regard to the empowerment of vulnerable youth in the analysed countries reveals many more country-specific nuances (see Table 3). Strongly ‘neoliberally’ oriented reforms are typical for Lithuania. The VET policies in Lithuania demonstrate employability orientation to empowerment by implementing qualifications and VET curricula reforms as well as strengthening the WBL components. However, these reforms pay much less attention to the pedagogical and psychological aspects of empowerment of vulnerable youth in VET and are highly dependent on the EU policy agenda and funding. VET policies and qualifications in Latvia and Estonia are marked by a more systemic approach to strengthening the potential of VET and qualification systems in empowering vulnerable youth. Latvians seek to balance market-oriented and social-policy-oriented goals of VET reforms by balancing between strong focus on the economically and market-oriented reforms of competence-based qualifications, VET curricula, and apprenticeships. These reforms strongly focus on the accessibility of VET and strengthening capacities of VET in terms of pedagogical and psychosocial support to vulnerable students. Estonian policies on qualifications and VET seek to respond to the needs of empowerment of vulnerable youth by introducing new types of accessible VET curricula and introducing specific levels of competence-based qualifications for vulnerable groups of VET students. In Norway, the VET

Table 2 Social dialogue on VET and empowerment of vulnerable youth in the Baltic countries and Norway

Estonia	Employer dominated and oriented social dialogue in VET, with employers’ organisations and private bodies playing strategically important roles in defining the policy and practices related to the VET provision and qualifications
Latvia	Fragmented social dialogue on VET and skills in the context of the implementation of ambitious reforms in VET and qualifications based on the idea of sectoral development of skill formation (sector experts councils on skills and VET, development of sectoral qualifications frameworks)
Lithuania	Low and incoherent engagement of social partners in skill formation and VET, with more active engagement of employers and their bodies in the design of qualifications and assessment of competencies, rather marginal engagement of social partners in the organization and provision of training, especially WBL
Norway	Efforts to enhance engagement and cooperation of different stakeholders and pedagogical staff in providing systemic and well targeted support to vulnerable VET students. Effective use of social dialogue at the levels of regions and sectors of economy in creating empowerment potential of VET: flexible alternatives/pathways to complete VET and county follow-up services designed to follow-up NEETs between 15 and 24 years in collaboration with different authorities, such as the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) and PPT (pedagogical psychological services)

policy strongly focuses on the empowerment of vulnerable groups through the unification of schooling—integration of upper secondary education with apprenticeship-based VET. This policy is also marked by efforts of strengthening and making more accessible both school-based and practical training parts of VET.

What are the differences or common characteristics between the countries in the institutional and policy approaches to empowerment of vulnerable youth in VET?

The institutional and political pathways of empowerment of vulnerable VET students in the Baltic countries are rather similar because these countries shared the same historical transformations and institutional changes in the skill formation and VET systems since 1990–1991 when they regained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Tütlys et al. 2022a, b, c). The market-oriented skill formation of vulnerable youth in the VET systems of the Baltic countries shares some important characteristics:

Table 3 VET reforms and empowerment of vulnerable youth in the Baltic countries and Norway

Estonia	Targeting of the VET reforms to dealing with the problems of social exclusion after the EU accession in 2004: the VET curriculum reform implemented by the Action Plan 2005–2009 introducing new types of VET curricula which enabled access to VET for many specific vulnerable groups, including young people. The implementation of the competence-based NQF also considered the needs of vulnerable learners: levels 2 and 3 of EstQF were designed mainly for vulnerable groups of IVET students
Latvia	Seeking to balance market-oriented and social-policy oriented goals of VET reforms with the help of EU policy guidelines and support. In addition to strong focus on the economically and market-oriented reforms of competence-based qualifications, VET curricula, and apprenticeships, there is a strong concern about the accessibility of VET, capacities of VET in terms of pedagogical and psychosocial support to vulnerable students (the ESF funded PUMPURS project in strengthening teaching staff capacities)
Lithuania	Reforms of the school-based VET system driven by the employability agenda and focusing on the implementation of the flexible competence-based VET curricula, but struggling with strengthening the WBL components by implementing apprenticeship as an alternative learning pathway to school-based VET. The lack of policy attention to the pedagogical and psychological aspects of empowerment of vulnerable youth in VET and high dependency of the empowering policy actions on the EU policy agenda and funding (Youth Guarantees, etc.). Limited implications of reforms for the empowerment of vulnerable VET students: modest reduction of dropout rate after the implementation of the modular VET curricula
Norway	The integration of upper secondary education with apprenticeship-based VET in the 1994 Reform aimed to raise the working class via unitary schooling, presenting some challenges and difficulties in the transition of vulnerable students from the school-based part to the apprenticeship part of the VET provision Efforts of strengthening both the school-based part (theoretical training and subjects) and the practical training part of VET (improving the schemes of apprenticeship and making them more accessible for learners) Dropout prevention is one of the key priorities of VET reforms

1. Employment is regarded as the key target of empowerment and social integration, often downplaying the quality of jobs and focusing on the satisfaction of the skills demand in the labour market. Exploiting the opportunities provided by the labour market is regarded as the path to effective socio-economic integration of vulnerable youth and their empowerment. This is a derivative of the neoliberal developmental (skill matching) priorities of the VET policy, where social integration is regarded as an effect of skill matching and employment contributing to economic growth.
2. Europeanization has led to a more systemic approach to VET development through the implementation of lifelong learning processes and qualification systems, and also attempts to improve permeability and accessibility of different education and skill formation pathways. The EU integration also raised the issue of making VET more open and responsive to the needs of vulnerable groups by offering different compensatory temporary means and social-pedagogical and employment interventions (Youth Guarantees). Although this resulted in an immediate positive impact of these processes on the integration and empowerment of vulnerable youth, the sustainability of this effect was questionable. The EU supported VET reforms in the Baltic countries prioritized the goal of making school-based VET more responsive to skills needs in the labour market mainly through learning outcomes-competence based design of qualifications and curricula and the implementation of the WBL and apprenticeship pathways in the school-based VET provision. These key reform areas had limited implications for the empowerment and integration of vulnerable students. The implementation of the competence-based VET curricula and modularization has faced a lack of culture of student-centred training and insufficient capabilities (financial, social, psychological, methodological) of vulnerable students to manage their learning processes in VET.

The introduction of WBL and apprenticeship was marked by narrow orientation of the implemented apprenticeship schemes to the current skills shortages in the enterprises, lack of readiness of employers to assume the stakeholder responsibility of the dual training, as well as the lack of systemic support from the “skill formation ecosystem” to the participants of the apprenticeship schemes (e.g., in Lithuania, the VET centre has the biggest responsibility on organising apprenticeships). WBL and apprenticeship are rather marginal and fragmented pathways of VET in the market-oriented but school-based VET provision, besides, accessibility of WBL to vulnerable youth depends on the implementation of different EU supported projects and programmes.

3. VET systems of the Baltic countries also share the difficulties in sustaining educational power and potential of the school-based VET provision despite formally present integration of the VET and general education provision. There is a noticeable lack of teaching and pedagogical support staff and the shortage of other resources needed for the systemic provision of pedagogical, social and psychological support to vulnerable students (reliance on VET teachers as key providers of such support). The social and especially pedagogical support to at-risk VET

students remains highly fragmented and insufficient. This creates significant challenges in seeking to prevent their dropping-out and entering the labour market without proper skills and qualifications.

4. There is also a noticeable persistent polarization of the skill acquisition opportunities in the VET system caused by the regional socio-economic disparities between urban and rural areas or sectoral differences. These disparities become important obstacles in accessing high-quality vocational education and training for the vulnerable youth with limited resources and mobility.
5. Finally, VET systems of the Baltic countries still struggle with the persistent challenge of negative selection, where VET is regarded as a second chance option of skill formation for the “disadvantaged” learners leading to the employment in the secondary labour market. This challenge limits the empowerment potential of VET to rather modest and minimal thresholds of empowerment in terms of employment and further education opportunities.

Unlike in the Baltic countries, the potential of the VET system and institutions to empower at-risk youth in Norway is strengthened by the established and functional institutional and societal mechanisms, including welfare-state orientation in the education provision. On the other hand, the effects are hampered and weakened by the lack of responsiveness and flexibility of existing institutional settings to the specific needs of the vulnerable groups and sometimes low resilience of different at-risk groups in coping with their problems. The tension and challenge of ensuring accessibility of dual training and apprenticeship in the enterprises for all learners clearly indicate socio-economic limitations originating from the skills needs and reservedness of enterprises to engage in VET even in the systems with long traditions of WBL. This leads to the idea of rethinking the approaches and modes of accessibility of WBL for vulnerable learners, by expanding access to learning areas with imitated work processes, implementation of the different preparatory schemes of WBL, designed according to the specific needs of vulnerable learners and needs and possibilities of the enterprises. For example, implementation of the two-year short track VET programmes with curricula adjusted locally rather than following the national curriculum of the longer programmes, (Schmid et al. 2020), and more actively engaging the NGO sector and social businesses in the provision of WBL.

The institutional settings and pathways of empowerment of vulnerable VET students analysed above are not unique to the Baltic countries and Norway, but have equivalents in some other countries. Clearly, the institutional model of VET provision and empowerment of vulnerable learners of the Baltic shares similarities with other so called post-communist countries of the Central and Eastern Europe (Tütlys et al. 2022a, b, c), as well as VET provision in the Southern Europe (Italy, Spain, Greece), in terms of the development of school-based and market oriented public VET provision and strong market and employability orientation in the empowerment approaches (Tacconi et al. 2021). Therefore, these approaches and systems appeal as objects for policy transfer in the former socialist-communist regions outside Europe, like Ukraine, Southern Caucasus and Central Asian countries (Tütlys et al., 2024).

VET provision and empowerment of vulnerable learners in Norway share basic characteristics of the Nordic welfare state model countries (Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, Finland) and collective skill formation systems typical for Germany, Austria, Switzerland (German speaking cantons) and the Netherlands (Busemeyer and Trampusch 2012).

The above analysis of the implications of the institutional settings and institutional development of VET for the empowerment of vulnerable students, provides only partial picture of the empowerment process. One of the key issues raised by this analysis involves the agency of VET providers and learners in the context of institutional development. We shall discuss this issue next.

4 Agency of VET Providers and Vulnerable Students in Empowerment in the Baltic Countries and Norway

The agency of VET providers is explored by analysing different cases of empowerment interventions and measures implemented by VET schools in the four countries. The selection of cases for analysis was based on the following key criteria:

- (1) Interventions and measures are initiated and implemented by VET providers (possibly, in cooperation with various social partners).
- (2) Measures and interventions are targeted at the empowerment of vulnerable VET students through provision of support and assistance in the areas of learning, employment, and social and civic participation of vulnerable learners.

We discuss the empowerment interventions by VET schools in the Baltic countries and Norway below.

4.1 Cases of Empowerment Interventions by VET Schools in Lithuania

We have identified different initiatives and interventions by VET schools in supporting vulnerable students. One of these initiatives is related to the empowerment of at-risk VET students by involving them into school communities, both live and in an online format. This practice is typical for VET schools operating in bigger cities (Kaunas and Vilnius in this case). Interviews with vulnerable VET students and their teachers in the VET schools in Kaunas and Vilnius revealed effective practices of engaging at-risk VET students in the life of school communities, such as participation in the activities of the students' councils and involvement in the development and maintenance of the online social networks and communities of the VET centres. Such practice seems to be very effective in raising the self-awareness and self-confidence of students at risk and creates additional area for

the development of both professional and key skills. Socially vulnerable students (sometimes with the support and guidance of social pedagogues) participate in the activities of the students' councils by assuming different obligations and engaging in concrete activities. The Covid-19 disruption of education provision also created conditions for the development of online communities and networks of students and teachers for training purposes. Students are also actively engaged and contribute to the development and maintenance of such communities.

Some interviews showed that participation of vulnerable students in such online networks and communities served as important support for their learning process during the pandemics and very significantly compensated the lack of live contacts with their peers and teachers in this period. The students' councils in the general education and VET perform various important functions, such as engaging students in decision making processes concerning activities of the school and educational processes, defending the interests of students, and organising their cultural life and leisure. By engaging students in different activities of the school community, these councils extend their curriculum by facilitating their vocational and civic engagement competence development. While in the case of general education, the participation in these councils quite often is treated as a source of prestige and demonstration of exceptional status of involved students, thus fostering the elitism and meritocracy ideals, in case of VET schools these councils are more treated as arenas of socialization and social integration for the vulnerable students. Teachers and peers play a crucial role in opening the door for such students to engage in the students' councils and other school communities. They also recruit newly arriving vulnerable students to take part in the students' council by providing them with a credit of trust.

Mentorship and scaffolding in assisting vulnerable students is another measure used in the VET school of a regional centre in Lithuania. Systemic mentorship for young people from vulnerable groups is organized by the VET centre and includes class head teacher's support from the first year of study, regular meetings and support from the school social pedagogue, scaffolding practices by practice teachers (vocational teachers, masters, etc.), and mentorship practices offered by peers. The effective implementation and organisation of such support requires from the VET teachers and management to address student diversity. Mentorship and scaffolding allow to ensure sufficiently smooth integration of young people into the school community, develop skills and competences necessary for the labour market and their employability, and develop self-confidence and self-esteem through regular consultations with the school social pedagogue. Vocational teachers ensure scaffolding for all students, however, more specifically they work with students from vulnerable groups. For example, some students have some special needs, such as related to autism spectrum disorders. However, the VET school involves other students and teachers to support and engage these young people. From the very beginning of the school year, class head teachers have meetings with parents or relatives of these young people, they try to better understand their situation and provide the necessary support accordingly. Special attention is paid to the cooperation with enterprises which would be willing to employ students from all groups, including those with disabilities.

In the rural regions of the country where the labour market is not active, the lack of social skills and autonomy among socially excluded young people makes it quite difficult for them to get a good, stable, adequately paid job. Recognising this, for example, the community of a VET school from one small town (of village type) has taken initiative to help pupils find jobs during the initial phase of their adaptation to the labour market. In their developed apprenticeship model, both schoolteachers and apprentices working in the employers' companies coordinate the placement of apprentices in the companies, considering the situation of the demand for jobs and qualifications. The school also takes responsibility for the quality of the vocational training by orienting its content to the specific requirements of employers in the region. The two-year short-track apprenticeship scheme in Norway (*praksis-brevordning*) is similar to this approach (Schmid et al. 2020). Due to the shortage of skilled workers, the above-mentioned school has become one of the sources of supply of skilled workers for employers. The school, while valuing its reputation and its mission in this region, also remains the key educational and cultural centre. The school community thus supports the vitality of the region's economic life, recognising that citizenship begins with empowering the people of one's village, town or region to act meaningfully. School mediation activities are not formalized, and the management and administration of the activities is often carried out in the context of various projects.

A large proportion of vocational teachers in Lithuania work not only in schools (on a part-time basis), but also in companies in the region, so they have up-to-date knowledge of job vacancies on the market and the specifics of the content of the job.¹ Vocational teachers work purposefully with families/children at risk of social exclusion while the children are still in school. As a result, mutually beneficial relationships based on empathy, openness, trust and compassion are established. In this way, the school fulfils the functions of vocational information and guidance, thus creating sufficient streams of pupils for the labour market-relevant vocational training programmes implemented at school. The school takes responsibility for the young worker's competence by a recommendation (letter, testimonial) for the student/apprentice. The school also develops projects with content focused on activities aimed at reducing risk of marginalisation of young people (development of students' employability skills; development of artistic expression tools to enhance the creativity, productive independence, and critical perception of the labour market of socially excluded teenagers).

¹ This is very different from Norway, where practically all teachers in VET work fulltime (Tikkanen et al. 2024). Schools implementing the apprenticeship model of vocational training in Norway tend to choose as master trainers those who have not only professional, but also didactic-pedagogical competences and are therefore sufficiently sensitive (empathetic) to socially marginalised adolescents.

4.2 Cases of Empowerment Interventions by VET Schools in Latvia

We have identified rather similar initiatives and interventions in assisting vulnerable students in Latvia. One VET centre has implemented a school system for identifying the needs of the students at risk and for communicating these needs to all relevant colleagues or services by the appointed group mentors, working only with the socially vulnerable students and taking care about provision of needed psychological, pedagogical, social, economic, and other support needed for successful learning. Such a system prevents the risk that the student would be frustrated, not knowing who to address in a difficult situation, especially if there are several types of problems, e.g. academic, social etc. The VET institution perceives risks as conditions in the student's environment or personality which hinder a successful learning process and can lead to early school leaving. The group mentor can identify these risks by evaluating the student's learning activity, behaviour, family situation, communication and collaboration with classmates and teachers. Following the risk assessment, individual support measures may be developed for the student and the necessary preventive/support/intervention measures may be applied according to the identified situation. To implement a systemic approach and monitoring of the interventions, the group mentors, according to the assessed risks, draw up an individual early leaving risk management/reduction plan. In practice, the group mentor conducts individual interviews with the student, parents or legal representatives of the student, in order to fix the situation. Individual plans are approved by the school director and the group mentor implements the monitoring of the plan.

Local interventions related to capacity building and competence development of the teaching staff working with vulnerable students in Latvia are supported with the projects implemented on the national level. As a result of the ESF PUMPURS project, the national teacher training and competence-development programme was developed targeting provision of competencies needed to handle the risks faced by the vulnerable students in different areas, including: (1) social environment and health (pregnancy, sickness of family members or the student, etc.), (2) learning risks and problems (mobbing, dyslexia, inability to follow the study content, school absences, debts and inability to catch up with the learning material, etc.), (3) economic risks, including difficulty in accessing the training site, complicated transport logistics (especially in more remote regional schools), and (4) family risks (long absences of parents abroad, need to look after their siblings; parents' problems with alcohol, domestic violence, insufficient support or understanding from parents). The project addresses the training needs of the staff by offering participation in the existing professional development courses created within the framework of various projects, inviting teachers and staff to participate in various events related to the problems of early leaving and risks, organizing internal discussions on specific problems of risk groups, making the best and most efficient use of programmes (TV and radio) dedicated to youth problems and including them in the educational process. Counselling/

consultancy support is available for teachers and support staff (teachers, psychologists, social workers, teacher's assistants, special education teachers, sign language interpreters, ergo-therapists and others).

VET schools in Latvia also apply different intermediation interventions helping vulnerable students to find employment or to get additional income. These assistance measures include involvement of socially vulnerable students in WBL, offering to academically successful vulnerable students, especially in more remote affiliations of the school, to become the subject teachers' assistants, introducing the system that allows to provide material support to students by compensation for public transport tickets, accommodation expenses, and food costs, reimbursement of costs of purchasing personal training equipment or personal use items. Engagement of vulnerable students in the students' councils and involving them in the Erasmus + student mobility programmes are also widely practiced interventions in Latvia.

Ambitious and systemic reforms of VET implemented after the EU accession (especially in the second decade of this century) in Latvia established important institutional preconditions and processes targeted at solving social exclusion problems. However, it does not mean that this solution has been achieved. Interviews with vulnerable students rather clearly disclose that there is a lack of broader social, financial and psychological support to vulnerable VET students, just like in Lithuania and to a lesser extent in Estonia. The implementation of the PUMPURS project provides evidence that educational and labour market integration of vulnerable adolescents and provision of pedagogical support to them is an integral part of the VET policy (absent in Lithuania). However, the real impact of this policy intervention, as well as possible shortages or adverse effects will only be visible in years to come.

4.3 The Case of Empowerment Interventions by the VET School in Estonia

In Estonia, different project activities are available, targeted at empowering vulnerable VET students for the future participation in the changing world of work. One such project is the CODE programme executed in one vocational school targeting socially vulnerable youth, including NEETs. The CODE (Competence Opportunities for Digital Employment) project is a 3-year international project where partners develop curricula designed for socially vulnerable and NEET youth. In addition to vocational training, these curricula contain a variety of supporting components (learning, communication, work skills, entrepreneurship, etc.). In January 2020, the first vocational elective year course started at Tartu Art School, one of the Estonian vocational schools, within the CODE, where the participants gained a broad-based knowledge of the possibilities of digital design and practice, self-analysis and teamwork skills. Graduates from this school receive a 2nd level professional certificate and can work or study further in design specialties (or another specialty). The

CODE programme also involves support for the students with mental health problems. Participation in this programme enables the school administration to address the issue in a systemic and comprehensive way, facilitates planning of (sufficient) human resources or taskforce at school, involves collaboration with local governments, employers, youth, cultural, and environmental organisations to support and encourage personal and professional development of young people at risk. It includes the information systems for differentiation of students at-risk according to the types of problems or challenges they face, and for data accumulation and analysis for evaluation monitoring and subsequent improvements of work for vulnerable students—during the studies and after completing the studies and entering the world of work or continuing studies at a higher level. The students who participated in the CODE project received a scholarship which could be used to cover accommodation and living expenses (students who participated in at least 75% of the courses received scholarships). Mentors and teachers in the CODE programme always supported students, if the student didn't show up to lessons or courses, they immediately contacted the student and asked why they were absent. If students had problems, they felt that their problems were taken seriously. The CODE students were able to work for companies as part of the project, and the best ideas were also adopted by the companies. It was a part of the study process. The real project case of the company motivated them and it also developed individual talents, who after finishing the CODE project received jobs in this field or continued their studies in this field.

4.4 The Case of Empowerment Interventions by VET Schools in Norway

In Norway, practices of holistic and systemic empowerment of the vulnerable youth in VET by the joined efforts of various VET stakeholders—VET schools (an integral part of upper-secondary education and schools), social partners, regional and sectoral stakeholders—were identified. The involvement of schools in sustainable partnerships for assistance and empowerment of vulnerable students through collaboration programmes and projects, is very typical for the collective skill formation model and the Nordic welfare state approach. The welfare of all students (“school-for-all”) is the foundation, including psycho-social and physical healthcare service provision, social welfare services and support, provision of temporary employment opportunities, career guidance, and helping in the transition between educational pathways and other services. Such a comprehensive support system addresses the individual situation of each vulnerable student and functions on the basis of close multi-professional collaborative partnership and exchange of information around and about the students, also in the transition phases (*overgangfaser*). Differentiation seems to be an issue only to the extent that different areas of students' challenges are treated by different professionals and using different measures at the school. Nevertheless, support and solutions for each student at risk in Norway are typically

tailor-made. At least at some level, continuous academic support is available to these students. Teachers in special education follow up and support the students' learning all the way through, in collaboration with their contact teacher (*kontaktlærer*).

One measure to support the learning of these students in Norway was to introduce more flexibility to the learning assessment systems (*vurdering*) in order to reduce the performance fear/angst among students. Furthermore, more flexibility to the time (number of years) that the students can use to complete their education was introduced nationally (Completion Reform—*fullføringsreformen*). Teachers working with vulnerable students get support from the Pedagogical-Psychological Services, primarily in relation to writing an expert assessment of the challenges of each student, leading to an individualised learning plan, allowing access to special education services. Schools cooperate with and are supported by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). One function to the NAV support is the so-called youth advisers. The effectiveness of such holistic welfare measures in empowering youth highly depends on the focus of these measures to training and competence development, so that the situation where the student is engaged in the school and training only because of financial and social support can be avoided (see Chap. 2 of this book).

One of the key roles of teachers in such a support system is to assist students in building their coping strategies (*mestringfølelse*) and self-confidence. Correspondingly, teachers are very concerned about supporting students' motivation and acknowledging (*anerkjenne*) them in the place they are in their lives. Much attention is being paid at the schools in Norway to hearing the students, listening to students' own voices, and their opinions and views concerning their schooling and their choice of vocation and the practice/workplace. To this end, collaboration with students' parents is also important, especially the students with migration background and poor language/communication skills. Hybrid learning opportunities and homeschooling are among the flexible choices that schools offer to their students at risk, as needed. One example of such situations, often an early warning sign of a potential future dropout, is school refusal (*skolevegring*) by a student and difficulties in remaining in classes for an entire day. The transition between school and workplace training is particularly critical with regard to dropout. VET schools, with their collaborators, perform systematic work and are genuinely devoted to making the transition a success.

Even if schools work well and systematically with the students when they are at school, there seems to be a potential to follow up of the students. This is a challenge particularly after students start their apprenticeship in the third school year. This applies to all students, but especially to those with a minority background where language is an issue. Teachers underline the importance of creating good border-crossings between the year 2 and year 3 of training, within the 2 + 2 model, in which after the second year most of the students start an apprenticeship in a private or public enterprise. A minority of the students complete VET without having obtained an apprenticeship, predominantly, due to shortage of work placements.

4.5 *Comparison of the VET School Interventions in Empowering Vulnerable Students in the Baltic Countries and Norway*

What are the similarities between and specificities of the above-described VET school intervention cases? This question can be answered by comparing the mechanisms of impact on empowerment, engagement of actors in implementing interventions and provided institutional support, links of these school interventions to the national VET policies, their implications and sustainability. An overview of the outcomes of the comparison is provided in Table 4.

The specifics of each analysed country showed in Table 4 reveals that the initiatives and interventions by VET schools to empower vulnerable students in the Baltic countries are more isolated and detached from both national policies and regional/sectoral settings of institutions and stakeholders, compared to Norway. While the initiatives and interventions by the VET schools in the Baltic countries are mainly implemented in a kind of isolation from the external institutional networks of support, in Norway these initiatives strongly rely on a broad network of cooperation of the schools with different social partners—municipalities, enterprises, NGOs and others. Despite the fact that the initiatives and measures of empowerment in the Baltic countries in some cases are supported by the EU funding or can rely on the financial and expertise support from the EU programmes, the sustainability and impact of the interventions in the Baltic countries are much more dependent on the disposition and capacities of the VET establishments and especially of their teaching staff. Meanwhile, the interventions in Norway more strongly rely on the social dialogue and concerted efforts of different stakeholders, including social partners, what makes them potentially more sustainable.

5 Agency of Vulnerable VET Students

This study has disclosed many similar factors which support empowerment and participation of vulnerable VET students in learning and employment. Examples of these factors include supportive family relationships, pedagogical support from teachers and trainers, and acceptance and engagement of the students in the school communities (see Table 5). Students in the Baltic countries also tend to distinguish supportive factors related to the pedagogical, curricula and institutional aspects of the VET provision, such as flexibility of learning provided by the modular curricula (Estonia), or possibilities to participate in the Erasmus + exchange programmes (Latvia and Lithuania).

Looking to the factors which hinder participation of students in VET, we have identified some important differences between the Baltic countries and Norway (Table 5). Poverty and economic deprivations of the families emerge as the major impeding factors from the interviews held in the Baltic countries, especially in the schools

Table 4 Comparison of pedagogical interventions by the VET schools in the Baltic countries and Norway

Objects of interventions	Impact mechanisms	Engaged actors and institutional support	Links to the policies	Implications and sustainability
Lithuania: school communities and self-governance of students; mentorship and scaffolding for the youth from vulnerable groups; vocational school mediation activities in the labour market	Socialisation of vulnerable students in the school communities, individualized support in learning and employment; mobilization of the resources of VET schools in identifying and coping with dropout, etc.	Mostly VET schools and teaching staff; specific role of VET teachers and group supervisors, limited/ fragmented engagement of social partners Collaboration with local governments, employers, youth, cultural, environmental organisations to support and encourage personal and professional development of vulnerable young persons	Weak and fragmented links between the initiatives/ interventions by VET schools and policies	Positive implications at the level of individual students and cases of support, lack of institutional preconditions for systemic upscaling and sustainability
Latvia: internal control system of the school for identifying the needs of the vulnerable students and for communicating these needs to relevant services; availability of group mentors for vulnerable students; training of VET teachers and pedagogical staff working with vulnerable students (ESF funded project); individual mediation in WBL and employment; self-governance bodies of students	Managing social risk and vulnerability of students by VET schools, provision of targeted pedagogical and psychological support, socialisation of vulnerable VET students in the school communities, investment in the capacities of VET teaching staff to support vulnerable students (ESF funded PUMPURS project)		Weak and fragmented links between the initiatives/ interventions by VET schools and policies Efforts to develop capacities of the teaching staff to deal with vulnerable students through national projects supported by the EU (ESF)	Efforts to ensure and strengthen sustainability and implications of the initiatives and interventions by VET schools by the implementation of the national capacity building projects, like PUMPURS project of teacher training funded by the ESF

(continued)

Table 4 (continued)

Objects of interventions	Impact mechanisms	Engaged actors and institutional support	Links to the policies	Implications and sustainability
Estonia: VET curriculum innovation project providing access to the development of digital skills project CODE (Competence Opportunities for Digital Employment)	Coping with digital divide and developing of vocational digital skills and competencies to enhance employability of vulnerable students in the conditions of 'digitalised' economy		Implementation of the policy instruments promoted on the national and EU levels, including modularisation, tracking of students, promotion of WBL, support to students and teaching staff	Limited by the scope and volume of the project implementation
Norway: systemic cooperation between the VET schools, counties, municipalities and social partners in identifying and preventing social, economic, psychological and educational risks of vulnerable students; creation of individualised tailor-made solutions of empowerment in the schools; engagement of multi-professional communities in supporting students; planning transition between the schools and from the school to employment	Effective subsidiarity-based combination of the interventions by the VET schools and the institutional support networks on the regional and national levels, enabling implementation of wide range of tailor-made interventions Focus of support to the critical points in the educational pathways, such as the transitions between the levels of education	Social dialogue and partnerships involving a wide range of stakeholders: VET schools, parents, counties, municipalities, employers, NGOs etc	Strong link with the national policies and the coordinating/ monitoring role played by the state (e.g., interventions by The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration [NAV]). The governmental bodies intervene with their support (including financial, capacity building) as needed, thus enabling targeted distribution of support and its combination with the contributions of social partners	High empowering impact for the vulnerable students, scaled-up to the national level, potentially effectively sustainable

Table 5 Factors which support empowerment and participation of vulnerable students in learning and employment in the Baltic countries and Norway

Lithuania	Latvia	Estonia	Norway
Supportive family relationships Individualized pedagogical and psychological support from teachers, supervisors and peers in VET schools (much more present in VET than in the general education establishments) Meaningful and work-practice related learning with clear objectives, systemic career counselling Active engagement of the VET students in the students' council activities Possibilities to develop skills and to socialize in the international student exchange programmes (Erasmus+)	Supportive family relationships Personalized socio-pedagogical support from an educational institution by providing a support person (class educator—<i>grupas audzinātājs</i>) who deals with different learning and life problems of students Possibilities to develop skills and to socialize in the European student mobility programmes (Erasmus+)	Stable family background and supportive family relations Flexible VET curricula, which enables meaningful learning and development of key skills Career counselling delivered by psychologists Mentoring of vulnerable students (to help students build resilience and prepare them for new independence and responsibilities by helping and prepare them for living on their own)	Emotional support from the family and friends Meaningful learning in the VET school, feeling the relevance of learning and seeking for results Pedagogical and psychological support from the teachers Feeling accepted in the workplaces during the apprenticeship training and WBL

located in towns and rural areas. Another specific hindering factor emerging from the interviews with the vulnerable students in the Baltic countries, is the difficulty in getting access to real workplaces for practical training during the studies. These factors are related to still weak institutional relationships and weak social dialogue between the VET providers and social partners, especially at the regional, sectoral and local levels. A combination of these factors leads vulnerable students to the resiliency strategies and solutions with a rather marginal role played by training and skill formation, such as employment in the low-skilled and unskilled jobs during the training and subsequent dropout from the VET.

Despite the challenges (Table 6), the majority of interviewed students from the Baltic countries tend to stress the empowering effect of VET in contrast to the lack of such empowerment in the general education school, as well as indicate the meaningfulness of vocational learning for their future education and career pathways. Some students in Estonia indicate the lack of support from the VET school and significant difficulties in orientation in the VET environment that impede their empowerment for learning and employment.

These findings indicate that while many of the vulnerable students' challenges are shared between the Baltics and Norway, the potential of the VET in the Baltic countries to empower them is weakened by the insufficient links between the VET provision and social welfare support typical for Norway and other Nordic countries. The VET reforms in the Baltics targeting improvement of its quality and attractiveness by implementing flexible, competence-based VET curricula or fostering provision of WBL would hardly strengthen the empowering potential of VET for vulnerable students unless coupled with proper attention to the social welfare provision and pedagogical capacities of the VET schools.

6 Conclusions

Specificities of institutional settings of skill formation systems and VET provision in the countries help to understand different factors, which support and hinder empowerment of VET students and learners reported by the research participants. Unsurprisingly, the analysis of political and institutional approaches of dealing with vulnerable youth in VET has disclosed important differences between the Baltic countries and Norway. The empowerment and social integration of socially vulnerable youth in the VET systems of the Baltic countries are strongly influenced by a combination of the market orientation and priorities of fostering employability, provision of the equal access to the school-based public VET system and efforts in providing systemic support to socially vulnerable young people by referring to the EU strategies of skill formation and employment (Tütlys et al. 2022a, b, c). As a result, and due to the shortage of auxiliary teaching staff capacities, institutional accessibility of training and support for employment at the national level often is not accompanied with sufficient social, pedagogical, and psychological support. Very often it leads to the stronger self-reliance of vulnerable students (assuming higher personal

Table 6 Factors which hinder empowerment and participation of vulnerable students in learning and employment in the Baltic countries and Norway

Lithuania	Latvia	Estonia	Norway
Unsupportive family relationships Lack of support from teachers (experienced in the general education) Learning detached from work practice Insufficient volume of practical training Loneliness at school Complex pathways of education and acquisition of vocational qualifications defined by the regional differences of labour market and accessibility of VET in the regions (challenge in the rural areas and smaller towns) Poverty and employment in the low-skilled jobs often leading to dropout	Difficult family situation Feeling of loneliness and isolation Lack of support from the teaching staff Poverty in the low-income families, especially in the rural areas, economic necessity to support family by involving in low-skilled or unskilled jobs during studies	Low interest in the study field; previous experience of school bullying, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety and problems with mental health Lack of support of teaching staff in VET schools; lack of creativity in the curriculum Higher interest in getting a general education diploma rather than a VET qualification Difficulties in searching for places for practical training (this responsibility is delegated to students) Employment in low-skilled jobs during studies	Unstable and unsupportive family situation Bullying experience in the previous stages of education. Poor learning outcomes from previous education Negative cultural and relational experiences from studying in VET school Stronger interest in getting a general education diploma than a VET qualification Learning irrelevant for the work practice Psycho-social challenges and problems: isolation, feeling excluded, bullying experience in the VET establishment; loneliness and feeling left alone and unsupported in the workplace learning settings, lack of support from peers, supervisors and co-workers during the practical training

responsibility for creating prospects for their future), as well as on support from their families, relatives and friends in the learning and employment contexts. It also often forces VET students to get into the labour market before completing their studies by taking unskilled and low-skilled job positions and compromising graduation from the VET school. Vulnerable VET students in the Baltics also rely on the individual pedagogical, psychological, and other support provided by the teachers and auxiliary teaching staff in the schools. Here the dedication of teachers in keeping relationships with such students and supporting them has been emphasised by students and plays a

crucial role. Precarisation of the learners in VET, experienced by the socially vulnerable and precarious groups, also changes the work of teachers by introducing more functions related to social work and care, as well as the provision of the basic underpinning knowledge of general education, necessary to deal with increasing gaps of basic education, which preclude acquisition of vocational skills and competencies (Ümarik and Rekkor 2013; Sirk et al. 2019). The combination of socio-economic vulnerability of families and the lack of vocational/career orientation becomes an important factor of dropout from VET schools (Espenberg et al. 2012; Jaggo 2019; Paabort 2017, 2019).

EU policies together with the EU structural support play a central, if not crucial role in implementing different training and employment measures for socially vulnerable youth in the Baltic countries. The implementation of these policies enable local policy makers and VET providers to design tailor-made solutions and measures of identification of skills and training needs, organizing training opportunities and arrangements of competence assessment, as well as to implement measures of vocational and career guidance. However, the implementation, scaling-up and sustainability of such policy measures, especially their accessibility to the vulnerable young people, usually suffers from the short-term and reduced-scale orientation, imposed by the logic of project management and funding, as well as from the lack of sustainable stakeholder engagement. These circumstances seriously compromise the potential and impact of empowerment measures and initiatives. Fragmentation and deterioration of the student support services in the VET schools is another challenge in empowering vulnerable students (Haaristo and Kirss 2018).

Although the legislation in the Baltic countries follows the neoliberal approach by delegating responsibility for the provision of support for vulnerable students to the VET establishments, this delegation of responsibility is often not accompanied with the provision of needed resources and capacities. The legislation stipulating access to VET often tends to deal with the problems of exclusion by widening the ‘lower end’ training opportunities for the most disadvantaged learners (e.g., introducing training pathways and tracks leading to the lowest level qualifications) but lacks ambition to change the situation by introducing more inclusive and empowering education and training pathways.

In the case of Norway, the VET provision is supported by the well-established and strong social welfare mechanisms, which reduces the need of the support for vulnerable students from their families, relatives, and friends in the processes of learning and employment. However, and interestingly, the availability of this systemic support may at the same time also weaken the development of their independence/autonomy and readiness to assume personal responsibility for their learning and employment. This observation supports the view of youth transitions tending “to be highly chaotic, often involving nonlinear and fragmented movements between dependence and independence” (Bynner 2005 referred to in Paulsen and Berg 2016, pp. 125–126). Paulsen and Berg (2016), in their study from Norway, refer to this with the concept of “interdependency” to illustrate the case of youth transitioning out of the child welfare service that they “are neither independent nor dependent ... [but] embedded in meaningful relationships and communities”, but in further

need of social support, which may continue to be provided by formal sources or informal support network (Paulsen and Berg 2016, p, 126). In the same vein, the presence of well-established institutional mechanisms of pedagogical, psychological, and socio-economic support to vulnerable students, strengthened with solid social dialogue about skill formation in the regions and sectors of economy, make the role of VET teachers less critical for empowerment compared to the same situation in the Baltic countries. This is noticeable in the interviews of Norwegian and to some extent Estonian students, where they are more critical than their counterparts from Lithuania and Latvia about the sufficiency and relevance of support received from the VET teachers and trainers, at least some of the Norwegian students seemingly quite well aware of their rights.

This is where the main potential for policy learning between the Baltic countries and Norway in the field of empowerment of vulnerable youth in VET lies and should be focused on when building well targeted and sustainable public welfare mechanisms integrated with the VET provision.

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Chapter 7

Educational Learning Labs for Empowering Educators and Promoting the Social Inclusion of Vulnerable Youth in VET



**Meril Ümarik, Terje Väljataga, Vegard Moen, Vidmantas Tütlys,
Marieke Bruin, Inna Bentsalo, and Krista Loogma**

Abstract This chapter discusses the results of the final stage of the EmpowerVET project research—the five educational interventions conducted in Estonia, Norway and Lithuania. These educational intervention studies were targeted at VET teaching staff and have followed the Educational Learning Lab Model characterized by the co-creation between researchers and vocational teachers and workplace training instructors, aimed to promote ownership of the changes, adoption, and sustainability of pedagogical innovations. The results of the five intervention studies have enabled us to make conclusions and suggest some critical points to consider when planning and implementing future educational interventions.

Keywords Intervention study · Educational Learning Lab · Knowledge Appropriation Model · Vulnerable students

1 Introduction

Although VET functions as a safety net for enhancing the labour market changes for low-ability and low motivated students (Eichhorst et al. 2015) and supporting social inclusion of young people from less privileged backgrounds (CEDEFOP 2016), the

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dropout from vocational education itself is a consistent problem in many countries (CEDEFOP 2016). Most often the studies focusing on dropout reasons tend to emphasize the student-connected factors over factors related to the school or the placement company context (Krötz and Deutscher 2022; Böhn and Deutscher 2021). Our study focuses on vocational school and workplace context and aims to empower both educators/trainers and vulnerable students. To this end, educational interventions have been conducted in different countries. The research has shown that often school-level changes alone will not bring the expected impact. In recent years, research has demonstrated that co-construction of knowledge and practices, such as school-university partnerships in the form of Educational Learning Labs (EDUlab), could lead to more efficient and sustainable adoption of innovations in educational systems.

This chapter discusses our experience when piloting interventions in partnership with universities and staff of vocational schools. As the third phase of the EmpowerVET project, a total of five interventions were introduced in Estonia, Lithuania and Norway, aimed to develop, test and assess methods and tools for successful inclusion of socially vulnerable youth and to give a boost to the professional development and agency of vocational teachers and workplace instructors. These interventions followed the principles of the EDUlab model valuing co-design and were aimed at exploring the bottlenecks and good practice identified in the previous stages of the research project (see country specific Chaps. 3–6). In Estonia, the intervention study focused on empowering the staff of VET schools to design a learning environment that supports mental health in a vocational educational institution. In Lithuania, a total of three different interventions were carried out in VET centers focusing on piloting: (a) a propaedeutic work-based learning (WBL) scenario for empowerment of vulnerable students in the rural VET center; (b) strengthening learner engagement and the school community through scaffolding and service learning practices; and (c) piloting a flipped classroom method to help vocational teachers and educators to better understand their capacities to enable students at risk of social exclusion to learn and enter employment. In Norway, a pilot was introduced on the Norwegian language support for minority-language apprentices in their third and fourth year of upper secondary school (during their two years in WBL).

The interventions were introduced between October 2022 and April 2023 (until November 2023 in Norway) by applying the EDUlab model. EDUlab refers to an environment, in which through the partnership between a school and a university (in some cases also industry, policy makers and other stakeholders) new ideas and concepts are co-created, tested and empirically validated to address various challenges in educational systems (Callaghan and Herselman 2015). By applying the Knowledge Appropriation Model (KAM) in the design of the intervention studies and collecting data at the beginning and at the end of the intervention period, we aimed to evaluate how the changes introduced have been adopted by stakeholders and whether a sustainable school-level effect could be expected leading to empowerment of vulnerable vocational learners. The main research questions of our study were as follows: How is new knowledge of empowering practices appropriated during the EDUlab interventions? What are the key factors enabling a sustainable change

resulting from the application of this knowledge in the communities of VET practitioners? What are the key lessons of the EDUlab interventions for designing and implementing future empowering practices in VET?

2 The Knowledge Appropriation Model

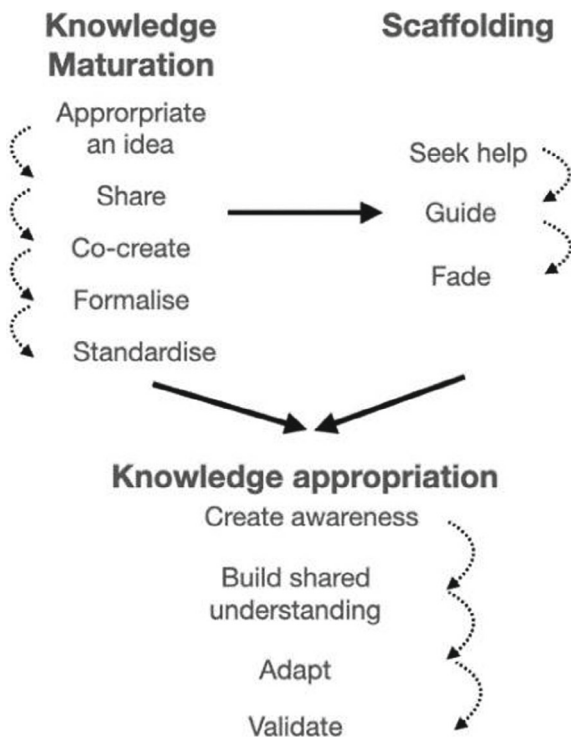
Our intervention studies are anchored in the KAM, a framework that emphasizes co-creation practices by combining knowledge creation with professional learning (Ley et al. 2018). This integration of two theoretical frameworks, knowledge creation and workplace learning, places a spotlight on the dynamic interaction between individual knowledge and collective knowledge (Paavola and Hakkarainen 2014). In essence, the model puts emphasis on the interactive and experiential nature of knowledge development within the professional context, where collaborative learning and mentorship contribute significantly to individual employee growth and the application of new insights in practical work settings.

Knowledge creation in organizations (Nonaka et al. 2006) is tied to workplace learning practices involving the acquisition and application of knowledge in actual work practices (Ellstrom 2010) and encompassing active participation and reflection on the applied insights (May and Finch 2009). Individuals engage in the generation of new knowledge through collaborative efforts with or alongside colleagues (Engeström 2001), extending beyond individual boundaries into broader communities of interaction (Wenger 2004; Maier and Schmidt 2014). Within this dynamic context, individuals not only contribute to the collective knowledge pool but also enhance their personal expertise through guided experiences with experts, more experienced peers or indirectly, by knowledge artifacts (Billett 2002). These mentors play a crucial role in helping individuals internalize cultural tools and practices (Rogoff 1995; Vygotsky 1978). Focusing on the interplay of transformative learning processes across organizational, community, group, and individual levels during the adoption of innovation, the model provides insights into how these processes facilitate the assimilation of novel ideas, practices, or technologies and examines their impact on knowledge appropriation by individuals.

Thus, the KAM (Maier and Schmidt 2014) consists of knowledge creation practices, which culminate in the transformation and maturation of knowledge—termed Knowledge Maturation Practices (Fig. 1, left side), and with the support of Scaffolding Practices (Fig. 1, right side) into Knowledge Appropriation (Fig. 1, middle section). Originating from individual experiences, knowledge undergoes a process of sharing within communities, progressing into more refined forms capable of guiding learning within organizations. Within the model's left circle, knowledge maturation practices encompass:

- Appropriation of an idea: an individual takes on and commits to an idea or an experience.

Fig. 1 The KAM connecting knowledge co-creation and maturing (left) and learning to implement co-created knowledge together with scaffolding (right) modified from Ley et al. (2020)



- **Sharing:** the idea or experience is shared with a group of individuals, rendering it accessible to them.
- **Co-creation:** a group works together to cohesively generate a solution or a shared creation.
- **Formalization:** the idea or solution undergoes a transformation to facilitate broader sharing.
- **Standardization:** a standard, norm, or guideline is formulated to encourage wider adoption and implementation across institutions within a specific field.

The model's left segment depicts the progression of knowledge creation, encompassing the generation, dissemination, and enhancement of materials for novel teaching and learning methodologies, and rendering them accessible and applicable for a community of educators.

Concurrently, the model elucidates the practical application of this knowledge in real-world work settings through scaffolding practices. This involves how the materials find utility in both formal and informal (teacher) training activities. Scaffolding practices, depicted in the model's right circle, encompass:

- **Seeking help:** an individual actively seeks support from a more proficient peer or a collective, often driven by encountering a challenge.

- **Guiding:** a more proficient peer or group offers counsel and steers the individual toward a potential solution.
- **Fading:** as the learner acquires proficiency, the level of support from the more proficient peer diminishes, aligning with the learner's increased competence.

Moreover, the processes of knowledge creation and learning rely on shared practices that enable the effective, enduring, and widespread integration of innovations, termed as knowledge appropriation practices. The Knowledge Appropriation Practices within the model's middle circle comprise:

- **Creation of awareness:** Disseminating information about novel knowledge, solutions, or experiences with potential relevance in specific situations. Examples of raising awareness in the context of innovative teaching practices may involve teachers and trainers participating in formal training sessions on a new methodology or engaging in conversations about it during informal breaks with colleagues.
- **Building shared understanding:** This occurs through negotiation and grounding among peers, facilitated by scaffolding, as they collaboratively generate and maintain a collective comprehension of the issue at hand. In the knowledge maturation model, negotiation serves as an effort to transfer or apply specific knowledge to different contexts, making it a vital process for advancing knowledge to the next stage of maturation. Tangible artifacts, co-created or referenced during discussions, often support this negotiation. These discussions establish a shared understanding of certain terms, fostering a common language among participants.
- **Adaptation:** Implementing solutions in unfamiliar situations requires adapting them to the specific local context. This involves the process of de-contextualizing and re-contextualizing knowledge, as well as exploring the conditions necessary for the successful implementation and adaptation of the solution. When introducing new teaching methods, it is typically essential to tailor them to local circumstances, considering factors such as students' age or unique conditions within the school or training place environment.
- **Validation:** Implementing new solutions entails inherent risks, necessitating the establishment of validation mechanisms within the appropriation process. This validation can be achieved through various means, such as accumulating experiences, gaining social support or approval, or obtaining authorization from relevant authorities. Validation processes can take place through informal discussions within a community of teachers or by systematically gathering formal evidence regarding the success and impact of a specific new method.

In our case, the KAM served as both a theoretical framework for constructing intervention studies within vocational and workplace institutions and as an analytical framework to examine knowledge appropriation in school-university partnerships, anticipating sustainable effects at organizational level.

3 The Educational Learning Lab Approach

The success of educational innovations depends on the collaborative efforts of researchers and practitioners working together to bridge the existing research-practice gap in education (Broekkamp and Van Hout-Wolters 2007). This collaborative approach is essential to ensure that innovations are not only created but also thoroughly tested and scientifically validated in practical educational settings. To foster change within a school system, it is necessary to actively engage multi professional teams, such as teachers, school leaders, support staff, educational researchers, and, on occasion, policymakers. The collective expertise of these diverse stakeholders can contribute to a comprehensive and well-rounded approach, ensuring that the proposed innovations align with the actual practical needs and challenges faced by educators (Schenke et al. 2016).

The EDUlab model provides a platform for fostering collaboration among various stakeholders. By bringing together researchers, practitioners, and other relevant contributors, this model has the potential to guide educational systems toward more sustainable, scalable, and evidence-based transformations. The EDUlab seeks to revolutionize conventional “knowledge transfer” methods in education. The aim is to shift from a linear approach to one that fosters an exploratory process of research-to-innovation-to-practice knowledge construction in educational innovation (Ruiz-Calleja et al. 2017). Theoretically, the EDUlab is grounded in the principles of social learning and knowledge creation, dynamic theories pertaining to the adoption of innovation, and the professional development of teachers facilitated through boundary crossing and inquiry into student learning (Ley et al. 2018).

Effective collaboration among different stakeholders, however, is challenging and demands boundary crossing, where professionals transcend their traditional roles. An example is teachers actively participating in research (Akkerman and Bruining 2016). This boundary crossing is pivotal for mutual learning and understanding, contributing to the holistic development and implementation of educational innovations.

Furthermore, the successful co-creation and adoption of innovations depends on several key factors. Firstly, it relies on the transfer of ownership from the research realm to practical application. This ensures that the innovations are not only theoretically sound but also practically feasible and relevant. Secondly, effective dialogues among stakeholders are crucial to foster open communication, understanding, and alignment of goals. Finally, the creation of meaningful interactions among stakeholders further strengthens the collaborative efforts, facilitating a more seamless transition from research concepts to practical implementation. Snoek et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of these elements in creating a conducive environment for the successful integration of innovative practices in education.

The process of scaling the implementation of educational innovations within EDUlabs is orchestrated through a comprehensive series of training sessions. These training sessions serve a dual purpose: not only do they equip participants with a repertoire of appropriate methods, tools, and resources, but they also aim to deepen participants’ understanding of the value that innovation brings to the educational

landscape. The provision of support during these training sessions is a collaborative effort that may involve university researchers, school specialists (such as educational technologists), or more experienced colleagues and peers (Ley et al. 2020).

The training modules are built around the co-creation activities occurring within teacher-researcher collaborations. This collaborative approach allows for the implementation of innovative practices and simultaneous monitoring of the impact these innovations have on educational outcomes. The emphasis is on fostering an environment where teachers and researchers collaborate closely, engaging in mutual learning and sharing insights. Moreover, the envisioned outcome extends beyond the formal training sessions. An active teacher-researcher learning and teaching community is anticipated to persist, aiming to perpetuate the development of the proposed methods. This community is poised not only to sustain the momentum generated during the training but also to propel the study beyond its initial boundaries, contributing to an ongoing cycle of research, innovation, and practical application (Ley et al. 2020). This iterative process ensures that the benefits of the innovation continue to evolve and remain relevant within the dynamic landscape of education.

The community demonstrates its dedication to continual growth and regeneration through a variety of initiatives, such as:

- (a) Establishing local labs within schools to streamline training, support, and mentoring related to innovation: in the pursuit of fostering innovation, the community not only establishes local labs within schools but also tailors these spaces to serve as hubs for collaborative learning, creating an environment conducive to experimentation and the exchange of ideas.
- (b) Building a network of teacher trainers and mentors proficient in providing additional training and offering local support to teachers: regular professional development sessions and collaborative forums are organized to enhance the skills of these mentors, ensuring they remain at the forefront of innovative teaching methods. This network becomes a vibrant community, facilitating continuous knowledge exchange.
- (c) Actively recruiting more teachers interested in innovation to involve them in training and community activities: recognizing that the heart of innovation lies within the passion of educators, the community actively engages in a recruitment drive. Recruited teachers are seamlessly integrated into training programmes and community activities, allowing them to share their unique perspectives and experiences. The recruitment process is not a one-time event but an ongoing effort to infuse fresh ideas and perspectives into the educational ecosystem.
- (d) Organizing events and actively participating in shaping education policy: to extend its influence beyond the immediate community, the community actively involves itself in shaping education policy at local, regional, and national levels. By collaborating with policymakers, the community becomes a catalyst for systemic change, ensuring that the principles of innovation are embedded in the broader educational framework.
- (e) Offering resources and facilities for the students of teacher training courses to gain practical, hands-on experience of the innovative method: going beyond

theoretical knowledge, the community places a strong emphasis on practical, hands-on experience for teacher training students. This approach not only prepares future educators for the challenges of the evolving educational landscape, but also contributes to the continuous refinement of innovative teaching methods (Ley et al. 2020).

4 Research Methodology

The intervention studies, carried out across three countries, were strategically designed to follow the logic of the EDUlabs and to guide participants through the stages outlined in the KAM: knowledge maturation practices, scaffolding practices, and knowledge appropriation practices (Ley et al. 2018). For instance, throughout the intervention, participants were actively engaged in defining problems and proposing solutions, with experts serving as facilitators for reflection, group discussions, and the sharing of best practices. Additionally, experts shared theoretical frameworks and posed critical questions to help participants in reflecting on their own practices and implementing positive strategies at the classroom level. Some of the tasks given to the participants involved collaborating with colleagues who were not participating in the intervention study, encouraging them to share their knowledge and implement new approaches in teaching practices. Five intervention studies were carried out in three countries: Estonia (1 study), Lithuania (3 studies) and Norway (1 study). The intervention period lasted from October 2022 to April 2023 (November 2023 in case of Norway) and varied depending on a specific case.

The intervention in Estonia focused on designing a learning environment that supports mental health in a vocational education institution. The target group of the intervention was the staff of VET schools (teachers, staff of the support unit, dormitory staff etc.) and 20 participants from different VET schools in Estonia. The EDUlab was organised from January 2023 to April 2023 with five face-to-face sessions with experts and some independent individual and group tasks in between. During the face-to-face sessions the emphasis was placed on group discussions and sharing with colleagues, and co-creation of strategies and methods. The intervention study was initiated by the university experts.

The first intervention in Lithuania focused on a propaedeutic WBL scenario for empowerment of vulnerable students in a rural VET centre. Four VET teachers were involved in the organisation of practical training and four vulnerable students from one VET center in Lithuania. The EDUlab was organised from October 2022 to April 2023. During the intervention study, a learning scenario was co-created and piloted.

The second intervention study in Lithuania dealt with strengthening learner engagement and the school community through scaffolding and service-learning practices. Three VET teachers, three vulnerable students (orphans) and two students with special educational needs (SEN) from one VET center participated in the intervention study. The EDUlab ran from October 2022 to March 2023, which was co-created and piloted with students.

The third intervention study in Lithuania initiated by experts focused on empowering socially vulnerable students by designing and piloting flipped-classroom scenarios. The target group was vocational teachers working with such students (mainly SEN learners), social pedagogues and psychologists from one vocational center. The EDUlab was organized from October 2022 to April 2023 with five intervention sessions with experts. During the sessions, group discussions and sharing with colleagues, co-creation of flipped classroom learning scenarios and piloting was in focus.

The intervention in Norway focused on the Norwegian language support for minority-language apprentices/teacher candidates in their third and fourth year of upper secondary school, i.e. during their apprenticeship (workplace learning). The target group for the intervention was 20 minority language apprentices, 3 language teachers and workplace supervisors. The EDUlab ran from January 2023 to November 2023. Two schools participated in the intervention study, which was developed at a county level.

For data collection, semi-structured individual and focus-group interviews were conducted with teachers and trainers participating in the interventions in the beginning and at the end of the intervention period. The interview guide was created and piloted based on a survey tool that followed the KAM (Ley et al. 2020). Given the limited number of participants, particularly in certain interventions, a qualitative approach was favoured for both data collection and analysis instead of the survey tool. The chosen qualitative approach aimed to yield a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences (Mason 2002), co-created knowledge appropriation and identified potential barriers to the adoption of new approaches. Semi-structured interviews, conducted across various countries, adhered to a consistent framework, although the questions were tailored based on the specific focus of the intervention (co-creation and application of innovation).

The semi-structured interviews conducted in the beginning of the intervention mapped participants' prior knowledge and motivation, including their perceived support from colleagues and management. Towards the end of the intervention, the interviews delved into aspects such as the participants' ability to adapt and apply the newfound knowledge and methods, their capacity to share it with colleagues and the broader community, as well as their perceived support, confidence, and motivation to persist with the new approaches.

Utilizing the deductive content analysis approach, each national team examined the interview data, guided by the KAM, and crafted individual reports for each intervention case. In the subsequent stage, a comparative analysis was conducted across various facets of the KAM, identifying, and comparing emerging categories throughout the entire dataset. In what follows is the presentation of the five intervention cases with special emphasis on how different elements of the KAM have been considered and how successfully the intervention can be evaluated in terms of adoption and sustainability.

5 Research Results

5.1 *Case 1: Designing a Learning Environment that Supports Mental Health in a Vocational Educational Institution (Estonia)*

The logic of the intervention study

This intervention focused on empowering educators in VET institutions, so they would be able to create supportive environments in VET institutions. The importance of the mental health related topics has derived from the qualitative study and interviews with Estonian students in the vocational education programmes at risk of dropping out (see Chap. 5). Mental health problems affect the well-being of students and the good relations between students and teachers are crucial for students coping at school (Bruin et al. 2023; Cerda-Navarro et al. 2017). The issue of mental health has also rapidly spread in public discourses in Estonian media lately. It has not, however, gained enough attention in the context of vocational education in Estonia, and vocational teachers lack competence on how to create the learning environment that supports students' general wellbeing and mental health.

The group participating in the intervention consisted of social pedagogues, vocational teachers, and other staff from different VET schools. During the intervention different strategies and methods were co-created on how to design a supportive environment in a classroom and in an organization. Two educational psychologists, as experts, took the role of being facilitators of reflection, group discussions and sharing of good practice. Moreover, experts also shared some of the theoretical frames (e.g. Self-Determination Theory) to support participants in their reflections on their own behavior and to introduce positive classroom strategies. The central topics of the co-design sessions were defined and known to the participants, but were open to change according to the participants' needs and experience. Topics of the co-design sessions covered: (1) mental health, risk and protective factors; (2) social-emotional development of adolescents; (3) emotions and coping with them; and (4) self-management skills in the work of a vocational teacher.

The learning platform eDidaktikum (www.eDidaktikum.ee) was used as a space for assignments and interaction between the sessions, but also for storing materials and sharing it with colleagues. In general, this platform has been designed for educators to provide space for professional development and reflection and is widely used in the teacher education programmes in Tallinn University. After the end of the intervention, the group of active participants planned further informal collaboration and regular meetings. The eDidaktikum space will be available in the future to share their material and work tools.

When designing an intervention, the main principles of the EDUlab model were applied:

First, the intervention followed *the logic of co-design*—the experts (with the background in psychology, one of them practicing clinical psychology) took the role of

being facilitators and raised the issues of practical relevance in their own work. The reflections and discussions in smaller groups provided participants an opportunity to make sense of the experience from the introduced practice that was later shared in bigger groups. The idea was to create an empowering and safe environment for sharing experience and designing work tools.

Secondly, the elements of the *KAM* were introduced into the intervention design. Home-assignments were designed to reflect and apply new knowledge, involve colleagues not participating in the training, and discuss the issues with the group. In each group meeting participants had a small assignment. For example, the first assignment after the opening session was to discuss the topic with a colleague not participating in the intervention study and to map their opinions on the topic. The second assignment focused on supporting basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) in different contexts. The participants were asked to choose one aspect that would be challenging enough for them and plan 3–5 steps to test it on a weekly basis. The participants reflected on their experience in writing in order to notice any change in their own thinking patterns. In the following session, they reflected on the experience in smaller groups and then in a large group, facilitated by experts. Similarly, after the session, they received a new assignment related to the topic enabling them to apply the new knowledge. As their final assignment, the participants reflected on how to create a sustainable change at their own school so that the well-being of both students and staff members would be supported. They were involving other colleagues into the discussion to plan concrete future steps for change.

Third, in order to monitor the effectiveness of the approach, the *data collection* took place on the 1st and 5th co-design sessions in the format of short focus-group interviews. The interview covered predefined topics covering the elements of the *KAM*. The interviews lasted 35–45 min.

We analyzed the intervention based on the *KAM* elements. First, how knowledge maturation took place, how scaffolding practices were supported and, finally, what can be said in terms of knowledge appropriation that is key for sustainability of any educational change.

What can be said about knowledge maturation: acknowledging and sharing the idea, co-creating solutions, formalizing and standardizing for the dissemination among a wider community?

The participating group of teachers and other staff from VET schools had *different levels of prior knowledge and skills* dealing with mental health issues. Some participants attended some additional courses related to mental health issues and trained other colleagues on the issue themselves; others rather lacked any previous knowledge.

All participants were highly motivated to take part in the intervention. The main motivation to participate in the training was to obtain better knowledge and practical skills that could be applied in their teaching practice, and learn how to create a supportive learning space in their own classrooms. They also expected to get ideas on how to change their colleagues' mindsets regarding students with special needs. They

hoped to get an opportunity to analyze concrete situations and were also interested in learning about the latest research on the topic. Moreover, equally motivating was to hear the experience of colleagues from other schools.

According to the participants, mental health issues are becoming more noticeable at vocational schools. Every year an increasing number of students with psychological issues enter the schools. The problems usually transpire during the first school year. The schools acknowledge the mental health issues, that they are a serious and extensive problem that needs to be dealt with and that the school staff needs training to acquire knowledge and skills on the issue.

However, educators need more awareness in connection with the issue of mental health, as argued by one of the teachers:

We should listen to explanations (about conduct disorder, anxiety disorder) as to how they [students] can learn. The role of a teacher is to create a good and open relationship: I help those who don't dare to ask for an individual study programme. Even if they have a psychiatrist's certificate, no one knows about it. The student is already on medication and something like that. I see the role of a teacher who has established a relationship of trust with a student as very important.

In the context where teachers are challenged with the need to create or build group harmony in the classroom, with students of different ages in the same classroom (for example 16-year-olds and 53-year-olds), the students at risk not always get the required attention. Often students need individual learning paths, but teachers simply run out of session time. According to some participants, even when there are discussions with other colleagues on mental health issues, the majority seems to ignore the topic. In some other schools the topic concerning mental health problems of youth is acknowledged and actively dealt with in the school. However, the problem is that there is just one support specialist and usually when they hear about the problem it is already very serious.

According to the participants, there are teachers in vocational schools, who are reluctant to devote time to professional development and want to continue with their old routine. They do not acknowledge that there are mental issues and problems among students and staff. They rather think that students are just lazy. As argued by one participant, they claim *"We don't have children with special needs, but we have uneducable children, all they need is a good beating. But then we say that this is today's society, children need to be approached in a different way. And this is what is needed, perhaps like supporting your employees, teachers and also parents—how to be helpful and supportive to them."*

Since the training was voluntary for teachers, we assume that the most motivated and aware of the importance of mental health issues and of support for the well-being of students enrolled in the training. Participants themselves pointed out that in some schools, particularly among the representatives of older generation and Russian speaking families, mental health was still a taboo topic. They were very eager to talk about various problems they face at vocational schools, for example, students' relationships with each other and within groups, student behavior at the student dormitories, problems with parents, everyday coping (students who have never cleaned their

rooms, washed their dishes or even made a sandwich for themselves), problems faced by students' families (in some cases family obligations preventing students from studying and the Child Protection Association requesting school to move students to the dormitory), poor learning skills of adult learners in the context of apprenticeship learning, activities outside school which cause the student to miss studies (desire to earn money), and addiction (alcohol, narcotics) problems. Vocational teachers participating in the session expected from the training the opportunity to discuss and find solutions from their colleagues' experience.

Support from colleagues and management varied across schools. Different degrees of collegiality and cooperation among the staff are characteristic to schools. In some schools there is a support center that also provides advice to teachers in case of problems with students. In other smaller schools less institutionalized cooperation practices among teachers and other staff prevail. In some schools there is little cooperation among teachers.

Similarly, *the management support* as outlined by participants at the beginning of the training tends to vary from school to school. In one of the schools the management is perceived to be very supportive, teachers and other staff get training or seek to participate in the courses themselves. The participants agreed that it was necessary to have shared values among colleagues in a vocational school (building a value-sharing team which understands the mental health issue) to make change at a school level.

During the co-design sessions, participants discussed their experience and problems. At the end of the intervention several participants mentioned that they were inspired and became aware of a more complex picture of what affects mental health. Many of the participants pointed out the value of getting to know colleagues from other vocational schools sharing their experience. As argued by one of the participants: *"It's important to see and hear the experience of other schools. It's so important to hear what the students of other schools are like, how we see things, how similar the the school environment was. It's been so valuable."*

We can argue that the intervention created an honest and safe space for co-learning and learning from each other, supported by the trainers. Based on the interviews, at the end of the training the participants could see that *"the co-creation process was supported to a greater extent when several people from the same school participated in the training."* One of the participants noted:

We already have several people from the same school, which is a strong basis for this co-creation, it is not like one person suddenly comes and starts doing something there. If there are several people, it creates more trust. I believe others will come up with their ideas as well.

In this case it was also made it easier to share the work in their own school environment and among colleagues.

As part of the home assignments during the intervention, the participants were *asked to share the knowledge with the colleagues who were not participating in training*, asking about their opinion and experience. Therefore, other colleagues and managers were also made aware of the topic. Some shared it more widely, for example, during everyday activities and communication and in the school briefing

hour, while others—within small groups of people. As one teacher explained: “*There was interest, really [in the topic of mental health] ...while I talked because of our first homework with four colleagues, my two co-students each interviewed four colleagues, so after the first homework twelve people were enlightened.*” Similarly, another school team created a questionnaire to map and get an understanding of the teachers’ attitude and opinion on the issue.

On the contrary, some participating teachers *hesitated to share new knowledge* in their school or discussed it in very small groups. Especially in the school with the staff, which was predominantly of older generation, it was not easy to share the topic of inclusion. Personal reasons, generational differences were perceived as the main reason for not being interested in the topic as argued by one of the teachers:

In my opinion, this also demonstrates that those people who have been in the same place, the same job for a very long time, are in a certain comfort zone and every innovation initially causes protest.

Some teachers experienced strong resistance and ignorance while trying to share the ideas with colleagues in their schools. Some also realised that young people/students were not interested in the topic of mental health either.

When discussing the *future prospects* at the end of the training, several participants said they had concrete plans to share the knowledge with other colleagues in other formats, for example at the teachers’ summer camp or teacher round-tables. They noted the importance of reaching out to other colleagues and the management, because otherwise it was not possible to implement change in school:

The teacher must be aware and healthy, then they can pass the knowledge on. The teacher will not be ready to see the problems of the students until the teacher is unstable, nervous or burdened.

In order to reach the student, one must first discuss the topic with teachers.

On the other hand, *the importance of the management to create a supportive climate* was reiterated. “*I have gained a lot from the training, but I’m starting to lose hope for my school*”, one of the teachers said. They further added that training helped to acquire a more complete picture, “*..but how much I can do as a person or influence it if I am not a leader. The leader can do the most.*” In response, many others shared their problems with the management and the school climate that was not supportive for teachers. “*No one has asked me how I was doing the entire year,*” mentioned another participant, “*First an oxygen mask for yourself, then for others. The leader’s first duty is to take care of the teachers, because they carry all the burden. If they feel good about themselves, if cooperation works and there is trust... but that all of this is lacking.*” Compared to the first meeting, by the end of the intervention period teachers were more critical towards their school management. This can be related to the fact that they were becoming more aware of the mental health issue as they were made to think about it in the context of the school environment as part of their home assignment.

Although the participants managed to share some of the ideas and tools they gained during the intervention, in most cases these have not yet taken any specific

format yet. The participants claimed that they had good ideas that supported their self-confidence as a teacher and their competence dealing with students' mental health issues. One of the participants has already prepared some material to be shared with other teachers in their school. The material was also made accessible to colleagues from other schools involved in the intervention. Some teachers revealed their plans to prepare some material for both the school staff and students (e.g. a digital tool for students about the mental health risks associated with adolescence). *"To make them aware that it's normal, that you haven't gone crazy, so that they also know,"* the teacher explained. It was agreed to distribute the material among teachers too.

What can be said about scaffolding practices—how the ideas were tested in the school context and what guidance was received from co-design sessions?

As discussed in the focus-group interviews in the last co-design session, most of the participants did not manage to carry out large scale implementation of the intervention ideas, but mainly implemented them at an individual level, for example, applying the ideas from the three pillars of the self-determination theory introduced at the training in their classroom setting. Teachers reflected and tried to improve their own practice in the light of these ideas. They also acknowledged the need to pay attention to the teachers' own mental health. One of the participants conducted training for gymnasium (upper secondary level) teachers on SEN. The teacher managed to incorporate some of the ideas from the intervention, more specifically about the self-determination theory, into the course. The teacher did not manage to implement the ideas in the school as much as she would have liked, due to the time constraints: *"Actually, I have implemented in practice less than I would have liked, but this is an impetus for the future."* In addition to teachers, she emphasized the importance of educating learners about the functioning of their body, how the brain works, and how learning happens. The teacher plans to prepare study material and lesson plans on the topic.

Participants discussed several *plans* and ways to proceed in connection with the topic in their schools. In one case the teacher planned to continue studies on the mental health topic in the Erasmus programme abroad. In another case, there was an idea to establish a learning circle in school to share new knowledge from various training sessions for teachers. Another teacher intended to improve an already existing good practice in their school—an adaptation camp for new students.

Face-to-face meetings enabled participants to share experience in a safe environment in smaller groups and to discuss any issues that arose. The second interview revealed that the participants were much more open in connection with the problems in their school and with the management. According to the participants, the training was very useful. It gave some ideas on how to introduce the topic to the colleagues who are of an older generation and not so aware of the real situation related to mental health problems. For some of the participants the knowledge and ideas (specifically from the self-determination theory) were new. Teachers argued that when they started the training they thought the self-determination theory applied to students, but later realized that it applied for all. The sessions made them think about how to build a supportive space in their vocational training institution. One of the participants

taking the role of the lead-teacher noted that she tried to share her knowledge with fellow teachers needing support: “*I have to help my colleagues and at the same time my students.*” For her, advising and listening to colleagues is everyday practice: “*I apply my social pedagogue skills on a daily basis.*”

What can be said about the knowledge appropriation and sustainability of change?

For a change to be sustainable, building *shared understanding* in the organization is needed. The core group of the participants noted that they had a mission to build understanding in their school and promote awareness of mental health issues in their school. The task was not without some challenges. As mentioned earlier in the school, where colleagues are of an older generation, it was challenging to convince them that the topic was important and needed attention:

I am young in the group, so somehow doing my homework we could talk about the importance of mental health, but I had to think a lot about how to talk, because the group actually consists of the representatives of an old generation who would not understand the topic or would not understand why this topic should be dealt with in school.

Students can be involved in building a shared understanding. Students also raised the importance of the topic of mental health. In one of the schools, the students asked why they hardly talked about mental health issues. The teacher of that school shared noted:

I don't know what students are talking about, but the student who asked about mental health has special needs. After all, they attend youth centers and other interest groups, so maybe this topic has been discussed there, we don't know.

This demonstrates that the topic is valid in a broader sense in the society and students expect to get more information about it. The participants also attempted to involve students to get feedback about the most urgent issues.

In one school the management was very active in involving the participants of the training in holding workshops on mental health. “*The management was more active than the teachers. Now we must think about how to involve teachers as well,*” one of the participants explained. This case also indicates that it is easier to share knowledge and build a shared understanding in the school when there is a team participating in a training not only one member of the institution and when the management is considering the issue to be of strategic importance.

The general understanding shared by the participants was that *the management should also be involved* in the co-design sessions as only teachers and support staff participated in the intervention. A similar co-design inspired training should be organized targeted at the leadership. The strategic role of the school leaders in creating a supportive school environment and shared understanding was emphasised:

In general, the management doesn't prohibit us from doing things, but the question is whether everybody is on the same page and understands in the same way. But soon there will be no choice and the management will have to focus on this topic as they have to monitor both students' and teachers' mental health.

Based on the motivation of the core-group of the training we can say that the *ideas will continue to spread and will be applied to practice*. The participants were highly motivated to adapt the ideas from the training in their current and future teaching practice. However, they also acknowledged their role to share the ideas with other colleagues and the management. As part of their home assignment, they needed to envisage concrete steps on how to promote a supportive environment in their schools. The training for mid-level managers (head-teachers) was seen as a concrete step. One of the participants was asked by the management to conduct training for other teachers on mental health. Three participants from the same school shared that in their school the subject of mental health was incorporated into all curricula, therefore constant professional development on the issue was needed. At the final session, participants were highly motivated to take part in the follow-up training in the future. They created their own informal community to come together to discuss and share their experiences. Participants regarded themselves as the core group were ready to promote the ideas acquired during the training in their school, involve and train other colleagues to build a more supportive environment both for students and school staff. Regarding the long-term effects of the training, additional follow-up interviews about the progress should be collected in the longitudinal perspective in the future.

5.2 Case 2: Strengthening Learner Engagement and the School Community Through Scaffolding and Service-Learning Practices (Lithuania)

The logic of the intervention study

This intervention aimed to support VET institutions to look for ways and opportunities for the empowerment of the students at risk of social exclusion through their more active involvement in the activities of the communities of educational institutions. The school community was to be strengthened through engagement of all learners and practicing scaffolding among peers. The idea was to organise several service-learning practices: (i) to organise an exhibition about support for dogs and dog shelters; (ii) to organise support, create toys for dogs, collect food and distribute them to dog shelters.

The intervention was based on a *co-creative approach, involving senior students*. They acted as mentors and provided scaffolding for students from vulnerable groups. The objectives of the intervention were to engage learners into the learning process, to strengthen collaboration and teamwork, to strengthen the community through service-learning activities and to practice scaffolding and peer learning among students.

The main measure for *supporting the co-creation process* was regular consultations between the researchers and VET teachers in the school. The whole process was organized in several steps. The first step involved preparation for an intervention. The

first meeting with the vocational centre was organized in October 2022. The group of the Empower VET team met with eight representatives of the school. Two were initiated during this meeting. One of the ideas was to develop a scenario involving a flipped classroom approach and the second idea was based on a strong community idea, inclusiveness, and support for teachers. During the meeting the main challenges related to working with young people at risk were discussed. After the discussion it was agreed that the school will develop one or two pilot interventions which address the following challenges:

- How to engage all learners, including vulnerable learners?
- How does a strong community support teachers in their work with vulnerable students?

After the first round of training on a flipped classroom, the VET center did not get interested in this and it was decided to focus more on community building activities and sharing responsibilities between teachers and learners. During the second meeting, a short discussion was conducted with the school representatives to clarify the expectations of the school and the research team. The second meeting was online and focused on discussing intervention plans and the timeline. The third meeting was conducted to get feedback about the intervention process, an interview was conducted with two teachers and one representative of the school administration.

What can be said about knowledge maturation practices: acknowledging and sharing the idea, co-creating solutions, formalizing and standardizing for the dissemination among a wider community?

Before the intervention, teachers were not confident about their knowledge and competence in working with students with special needs, for example with autistic children. As one participant explained:

Every year we organize two joint training sessions on inclusive education, and how to work with special needs. Such steps have not been taken for the first year. We know that the number of children with special needs will increase, so we need teachers to have a solid foundation under their feet so that they know how to behave.

The main motivation for teachers to participate in the intervention was to support vulnerable students and especially those with special needs. *Teachers acknowledged that new approaches were needed* as, after the pandemics, more and more learners experience emotional disorders and lack of engagement in the learning process. The skill needs are visible, as argued by one of the teachers:

I think it's not a big challenge to work with socially vulnerable students. But with autistic children – it's totally a new issue. I think we lack the knowledge of how to integrate children with special needs. It's easier to integrate those with physical disabilities, but we do not know exactly how to work with students who have other special needs and disabilities...

As a result of the intervention, the VET center identified that their knowledge and strength was in their community. Furthermore, they acknowledged that more activities and new knowledge was needed on how to engage all learners, including students from vulnerable groups. VET centers have activities to engage students, but mostly

talented students get more involved anyway, so more engagement of students who experience exclusion is needed. Thus, *co-design and knowledge sharing* was based on the identification of existing practices and finding ways together with researchers how these existing practices/projects/initiatives on community strengthening could be enhanced or implemented in a slightly different way to have a better engagement and inclusion of all learners.

In terms of *knowledge formalization and standardization* we can conclude that the knowledge gained during the intervention was not somehow formalized, but it was shared with other departments within the VET center. One of the teachers noted that their teacher community would continue with the practices:

This event (the project for dog shelters) is traditional but viewed from a different angle. Children with special needs are also very gifted children. We've included everyone. We're excited to try a different angle. I think we will continue the practice in the future.

The two interventions were evaluated as successful and this encouraged the team to plan other similar activities. Moreover, it triggered plans for additional training for vocational teachers on inclusive VET.

The collaboration of teachers and students can be highlighted as a *benefit of the intervention*. The intervention stimulated the co-creation of new knowledge of learner's engagement and scaffolding activities which can be implemented not only by teachers, but also collaboratively between teachers and students. This was also emphasized by the VET centre team, and they were surprised that senior and academically stronger students were so supportive and willing to scaffold their peers from vulnerable groups. It was a challenge to engage learners who are detached, less motivated, but joint efforts were successful according to the participants.

What can be said about scaffolding practices?

The co-created knowledge was used in the second intervention, aimed to support animal shelters. Many pedagogical solutions were made to implement the intervention: scaffolding, teamwork, creative work, service-learning activities, and peer learning. As described by one of the participants, scaffolding and teamwork was especially prominent:

We integrated the students into the project and grouped the senior and younger students. The seniors were mentors. They guided and scaffolded younger students to work on this project. I really liked it that the younger students were with the senior ones. The seniors did not overshadow the youngsters, they tried to involve them in the process. Several younger students were from orphanages, and they were more detached. We also had an autistic boy. It was wonderful to see that all the barriers were broken. He is no longer alone, he has learned more to work in a team. The result of the project is posters, toys, and collected support for animal shelters. They distributed everything to animal shelters and students also had a chance to visit them, to play with dogs.

During the intervention period, the *support was ensured by the school administration and teachers to each other*. The researchers were more observers and consultants of the process, less facilitators. Most of the solutions were developed by teachers and students in a co-creative manner. "*We get a lot of help from our own school too. From the same resources that we have, whatever we can,*" the school staff commented.

What can be said about the appropriation of co-created knowledge and sustainability?

Building shared understanding requires time. At first the intervention ideas were communicated to teachers and to students. Both groups were rather skeptical. However, support, discussion between the participants and consultations with researchers helped to design interventions in such a way that they were feasible to implement. *"I thought it would take us a long time. The most interesting thing was with the senior students, because they did everything on their own. There was skepticism, especially on the part of the students, but it was replaced by the new experience,"* one of the teachers remembered.

The initial attitude of teachers was skeptical as they were not sure whether this intervention would work and whether all students would be willing to participate. Luckily, after the intervention, their skepticism decreased, and teachers were happy to work on other projects because they could see benefits for learners during the intervention. One participant told:

The teacher, to be honest, says, well, you've raised not very realistic goals. I didn't know if the students would join. But sometime later, they got involved. There was such a psychological effect. Students could see that if he/she can, so can I.

The adoption of change requires sense-making and seeing the value of the new approach. The biggest value from the intervention is that it brought new lessons to the school. As the interview participants reflected, there were two major lessons learnt: first, that there are educational/pedagogical solutions not tried out before in overcoming barriers and ensuring inclusion and, secondly, that learners should be considered also as co-partners, co-creators of the educational process.

Participating teachers concluded:

The intervention revealed several positive aspects. The initiative helped to engage learners and also helped students to overcome some of the learning barriers. In fact, the project revealed the students' other side. Especially those who were quiet and calm. A common goal, a non-routine project help engage students. There are learners who are struggling to read, but when they practiced, there were quite decent, smoothly reading students. This is one way to show that students can.

The interventions were based on incremental (small) innovations, but they required from teachers additional preparations, more planning of their work and more knowledge sharing with their colleagues. Overall, the innovation was adopted positively and was an inspiration for new projects in the VET center.

To sum up, *as a result of the co-design and implementation process the teachers* overcame their initial skeptical attitude and saw that even small solutions can make a change. The intervention strengthened the community of the school and revealed new approaches in the educational process and initiatives.

5.3 Case 3: Empowering Socially Vulnerable Students by Applying a Flipped-Classroom Method (Lithuania)

The logic of the intervention study

The aim of the intervention was to help vocational teachers and educators to better understand their capacities in enabling socially vulnerable students to learn and enter employment. The focus was on introducing a flipped classroom method to vocational teachers in one vocational center in Lithuania. The intervention encompassed two groups of vocational teachers and support staff dedicated to educating learners with SEN in distinct programmes: a VET programme for cooks and for construction workers. Throughout the intervention, vocational teachers and support staff were introduced to the flipped classroom methodology, and efforts were made to integrate this approach into their instructional practices. In pursuit of this objective, participants collaboratively developed a flipped classroom learning plan, following the template provided.

Prior to the intervention, participants were tasked with thoughtful considerations, encompassing various aspects of the flipped classroom approach, for example, to identify a suitable topic for a lesson, to determine the skills and knowledge that learners must acquire, to specify the intended learning outcomes to be achieved by learners and to identify specific learning outcome(s) to be addressed through the flipped classroom approach. Both students' home and classroom activities, methods and resources had to be considered.

The process of co-creation was facilitated through five intervention sessions. The participants in the intervention underwent training on the flipped classroom method, they prepared a learning plan and had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss concerns and promises associated with the flipped classroom method. Subsequently, the participants became actively involved in the planning phase of the intervention. This included the preparation of learning materials tailored for home-based learning and the organization of classroom-based learning activities. To support communication and collaboration, several tools were used, including online platform My Diary, email correspondence, a dedicated Facebook group, an online repository of learning materials, and access to recorded lessons.

What can be said about knowledge maturation—acknowledging and sharing the idea, co-creating solutions, formalizing and standardizing for the dissemination among a wider community?

The participants of the intervention were experienced in working with SEN learners (they worked with such learners for more than a decade) and had some prior knowledge and experience in integrating and using digital tools in their classroom practices. However, the flipped classroom method was new for them. A social pedagogue noted:

Undoubtedly, we try to use various Internet tools, as this often engages children, but they should not be very time-consuming tasks (reading, movies), they get bored very quickly. I don't think I have mastered the flipped classroom method well yet, it needs more time.

The *primary motivation for participating* in the intervention stems from a perceived need for training methods that can effectively enhance learners' motivation. Especially in the context of inclusive education where more and more students have SEN, new approaches are sought, as outlined by a participating vocational teacher:

We are motivated to participate in this kind of experiment. Every year we welcome more and more students with special educational needs. Therefore, it is very important for each of us to learn, gain new knowledge and practical experience while working with such students.

The flipped classroom approach was considered by teachers as supporting students' self-regulation skills:

The solutions presented by you make training and learning more flexible and effective. Students develop important independent learning skills and take more responsibility for their own learning. Teachers can cooperate more closely with students in the educational process, get to know them better and provide better support in learning and employment.

For vulnerable students the individualized approaches tend to work the best. Therefore, the flipped classroom method was considered as suitable for tailoring learning material, organizing learning according to each individual learning pace, and providing room for discussions on what they have learnt and what remains unclear.

The intervention involved *five co-creation sessions*. The participants working in the same programme developed a flipped classroom learning plan. During the first two sessions the participants received training about the flipped training methods, a template for preparing a learning plan and had the opportunity to ask questions, discuss their doubts, and reflect on their regular practices and what flipped classroom method may change and promise to them. Though at the beginning the participants had some doubts about the appropriateness of the method for their learners, discussions with researchers and colleagues encouraged them to pilot it as part of the intervention.

The *co-design sessions provide a room for reflection and for discussions* of the potential and possibilities for application in teams with colleagues:

At the beginning of the test, we discussed the Flipped Classroom teaching method, its features, advantages, and challenges ahead in detail. We had a lot of discussions not only about the teaching/learning material, but also about presenting it to the students, considering the abilities of each one. After that, we discussed in detail how the lessons went.

Teachers collaborated to prepare a flipped classroom learning plan and learning materials, and video recordings for students. Students were given the task to watch the recorded video lessons at home, and the topics were discussed in the classroom.

Additionally, the flipped-classroom approach, its main features, advantages and challenges were *shared and discussed with other colleagues* from other vocational programmes e.g. with the teachers from the methodical groups of the builder-finisher, business, mechanics, and transport area training programmes. Teachers were able to assess if the approach was suitable in the context of all subjects.

What can be said about scaffolding practices?

During the co-design sessions participants had the opportunity to *discuss and reflect on their experience* on how flipped classrooms could be adapted and adopted in teaching students with SEN. During the process, the support staff (a special pedagogue and a psychologist) were involved to provide support, counselling, advice, and recommendations for the participating teachers. The possibility to get support was highly appreciated by the participants:

Learning, freely available information, discussions, and sharing of experiences are very important. It is necessary to apply and prepare training material.

Thus, the intervention served as an opportunity for vocational teachers to better understand their learners and to learn from peers.

The new knowledge about flipped classroom methods made participants rethink pedagogical processes in terms of how to rearrange learning at home and in the classroom. For this reason, they had to prepare and adjust learning materials for their students, to think of the tasks and assignments, and to use techniques for formative assessment of learning at home. The participants noted that they lacked knowledge about training material appropriation for their student learning at home.

What can be said about the appropriation of co-created knowledge?

The co-creation was supported through intervention sessions. It also contributed to making sense of the methods, *creating shared understanding of its meaning*, possibilities and usefulness. It also provided room for critical reflection about the subjects (topics) for which the flipped classroom method is appropriate.

Every innovation needs *adaptation* when put into practice. After the intervention, the participants were reflecting more convincingly about the benefit of the intervention, challenges and what they would do differently. It revealed that not all students analyzed the learning materials at home and did their homework well enough:

Therefore, in the classroom it was necessary not only to check and consolidate knowledge, but also to additionally explain what was unclear, considering everyone's abilities.

Regarding the *adoption of this approach*, it can be said that the participants expressed positive feelings and readiness to apply the approach in the future, not only with SEN students, but also with other target groups. Moreover, some areas for further development became visible, for example the potential to use more interactive tools and online sources. The participants understood that their capacities in teaching methods had been improved due to the intervention.

5.4 Case 4: Propaedeutic WBL Scenario for Empowerment of Vulnerable Students in a Rural VET Centre (Lithuania)

The logic of the intervention study

This intervention focuses on the *problem of the lack of meaningful and effective opportunities of practical training and work-based learning in the rural VET centers*. The interviews with vulnerable students and teaching staff in the previous stage of the research project disclosed, that students from rural areas noticed important shortages of meaningful and employment related opportunities of practical training and especially WBL in the enterprises due to very limited availability of the workplaces for learning and insufficient infrastructure of practical training in the VET center. The intervention focused on developing a learning scenario of propaedeutic WBL intervention in the field of construction finishing which was tested in one rural VET center in the northern part of Lithuania.

The motivation for the study draws on the fact that socially vulnerable students experience various difficulties that reduce their motivation to learn and often lead to their dropping out of school. Most of such students prefer practical, work-based learning that provides specific skills, and learning theoretical knowledge in a traditional classroom environment is difficult for them due to various negative schooling experiences. Therefore, it is important to develop appropriate means of practical training at the workplace and via WBL.

The designed scenario consisting of the development and application of selected work process-based training tools aimed at strengthening the learning motivation of students from vulnerable groups. The following principles were taken into account when designing the intervention: (1) Provision of theoretical knowledge and training of practical skills under conditions of real and/or simulated work process (real workplace); (2) Active involvement of learners in learning, encouraging their self-expression at work and independent search for necessary information and knowledge; and (3) Identification and application of psychological tools for the development of students' self-confidence and social skills in the work process.

The main objectives of the scenario were to activate the interest of learners in the professional activity of a construction finisher, its prospects, and opportunities for professional development. Secondly, it aimed to strengthen the learning motivation of students from social risk groups and their resilience by overcoming various learning obstacles and problems. Moreover, it aimed to optimize the learning process to develop the competencies required for skilled work faster and more effectively.

The main measure for *supporting the co-creation process* was regular consultations between the researchers and VET teachers in the school. The first meeting was online, but after that researchers visited the school and explained the logic behind the intervention to the whole team of the VET teaching staff and school management (in total about 40 staff). After these discussions and ongoing online consultations, a learning scenario was collaboratively drafted.

Following this phase, a smaller team comprising three VET teachers and a representative from the school administration piloted the prepared scenario. This team played a pivotal role in the selection of students for participation in the experimental scenario, additionally formalizing agreements for practical training with a locally selected construction company. The testing of scenarios was monitored, researchers provided consultations during regular weekly online meetings with the team of the VET center. During these meetings the representatives of the VET center reported on the progress by indicating the challenges, difficulties, and problems. Meanwhile, the researchers provided their feedback and suggestions on how to tackle the challenges and problems.

What can be said about the knowledge maturation process—acknowledging and sharing the idea, co-creating solutions, formalizing and standardizing for the dissemination among wider community?

The VET teachers participating in the intervention were quite familiar with the problems in focus—the lack of relevant practical training opportunities in the rural areas. Moreover, the teachers and students were aware about the WBL opportunities as the school participated in the Erasmus + exchange project related to WBL and practical training in the enterprises. During the first discussion, the participants indicated a range of different factors, which limit access of vulnerable students to meaningful practical training, starting from the mismatches between the content of training modules with the skills needs of local enterprises, too narrow scope of the vocational skills and competencies needed and trained in the enterprises compared to the content of training modules, the lack of self-trust and readiness of vulnerable students to engage in the apprenticeship schemes, and others.

At the same time, there was a *shared understanding that a broader implementation of WBL is highly important* for the empowerment of vulnerable students. This led to the idea of developing a propaedeutic practical training scenario, as a potential breakthrough for more dynamic and effective use of WBL and apprenticeship in empowering at-risk VET students.

As stated by one of the teachers:

Our experience shows that work-based learning will be most effective and of the highest quality when it is conducted jointly by a company and an educational institution. Students also need teachers' feedback and explanations, but the master's recommendations and training are also very important.

Another participant noted:

Employers' surveys always state that although students spend many hours on practical training in vocational schools, it is insufficient, because much more can be learned through practice at a real workplace. Therefore, work-based learning is one of the most important forms of vocational training. However, it is not always easy to get the interest of young people from risk groups in such training, so this experiment was very useful.

The *propaedeutic WBL scenario* was co-created by a team of researchers and VET teachers from the school and the testing of the scenario was supported by the management of the VET school. Consultations with the researchers provided the information on the possible methodical approaches and solutions to the problems and challenges. These consultations worked as co-creation of knowledge emerging during the common discussions of the outlined problems. Moreover, discussions and exchanges between the participating VET teachers and researchers permitted a rather dynamic and effective exchange of know-how in the testing of learning scenarios.

For example, one of the key problems faced in testing the scenarios was an unexpected dropout of the selected students, when they did not appear at the workplace in the second stage of training. After the first stage, when, together with VET teacher, the students observed the workplaces and video-recorded the work processes with subsequent discussions with workers on site, it was expected that these visits provided enough motivation for the continuation and participation in the second stage, where students had to play the role of auxiliary workers under supervision of skilled construction finishers. However, students did not appear at the workplace on the agreed day and time, which disrupted the pilot. When asked at school why it happened, students could not formulate clear answers. This problem was discussed during the online meeting between VET teachers and researchers. Several possible reasons for dropout of the students were suggested, including: (1) fear of new responsibility imposed by the contract of apprenticeship, lack of readiness to start real work experience (these were the students in the first year of study); (2) insufficiently clear and comprehensive guidance and communication with students by explaining the intervention and their roles in it; and (3) untimely (too early) introduction of the students to the WBL environment, which is not familiar to them and causes uncertainty.

After suggesting these possible causes the team of teachers and researchers suggested some measures on how to relaunch the intervention by: (1) providing additional guidance and consultations to students on the implemented measure and work process of constructor-finisher; (2) extending the stage of the observation of the work processes and more gradual and slow introduction of students to real WBL activities; and (3) signing a new practical training contract with the enterprise by planning a more gradual transition to the execution of learning and working tasks at the real workplaces. These measures were implemented after signing new apprenticeship contracts with the same employer and students, and this time the training went much more smoothly.

What can be said about scaffolding practices: implementation of the intervention ideas in the local context?

The co-creation and application of knowledge within the intervention comprised the following delineated processes:

First, the *acquisition, sharing, and development of know-how*. The initial phase involved the acquisition, sharing, and development of know-how during the design of the learning scenario. This collaboration occurred between researchers and VET teachers. Researchers contributed theoretical and methodological know-how, particularly focusing on inclusive vocational didactics related to WBL. VET teachers played a crucial role in contextualizing this know-how within the local institutional and educational context. They considered the imposed limitations, such as the duration of company visits, the scheduling of work shadowing sessions, and motivating companies to participate in the activity.

The second process involved the *creation of practical-methodical knowledge for implementing* the propaedeutic WBL measure, specifically tailored to vulnerable students. This knowledge primarily encompassed methodical and organizational know-how, emerging as solutions were sought for the challenges and problems encountered, such as the case of student dropout described earlier.

The piloting of the developed learning scenario was executed by the team of VET teachers in a very autonomous way. Teachers and the school administration sought to solve problems and challenges on their own. Weekly online meetings with the researchers were dedicated for the open discussion of the problems and challenges, but in most cases the team of VET teachers already had the solutions and just needed to discuss and get approval from researchers. The acquired skills and know-how mainly concerned the peculiarities of the organization of the propaedeutic WBL measures and the application of digital technologies for the acquisition of attractive vocational knowledge and understanding of the work processes by the students.

What can be said about the appropriation of co-created knowledge and sustainability of the intervention?

The process of *establishing a shared understanding of the intervention* idea with the VET teachers did not encounter specific challenges or problems. This can be attributed to a matching understanding of the targeted problem and the perceived role of propaedeutic WBL measures in empowering vulnerable students for both learning and work. The building of shared understanding transpired seamlessly through the contextualization of methodological ideas related to propaedeutic WBL proposed by the researchers by considering the conditions of the specific VET center and its environment contributed by VET teachers.

During the intervention period the *VET teachers adapted the following educational /didactic ideas*:

First, the propaedeutic WBL measures by combining observation of the work processes were gradually replaced with the execution of work-tasks to “feel” how the work process works effectively in enhancing motivation of vulnerable students for learning both at the school and at the workplace. For example, when discussing with skilled workers about the choice of materials for the plastering and painting of walls, the students became aware of the importance of “theoretical” vocational knowledge in making informed decisions.

Second, the transition from observing work processes to actively participating in simple work tasks was designed to be gradual. This method allowed students to spend more time observing work procedures and engaging in consultations with skilled workers. Students were made aware of the availability of learning support at workplaces, provided by both VET teachers and practical training supervisors.

Third, the interest and motivation of students to use digital technologies in their everyday life can be effectively applied for the acquisition of fundamental vocational knowledge and reflective understanding of the work processes.

The participants, in general, embraced the intervention idea, recognizing its utility and relevance for their teaching practices. However, due to the short period of the initial intervention, which necessitated revisions in response to initial challenges and dropout incidents, the intervention will continue. Notably, the VET school has proactively responded by formulating and initiating an internal project “Work-based learning—new possibility for me.” This collaborative project involves the continued implementation of the intervention in cooperation with university researchers. The aim is to test the measure more comprehensively, coupled with its subsequent dissemination and broader adoption in other VET establishments.

Regarding the *sustainability of the intervention ideas* we can conclude that VET teachers were confident that the methodical and organizational know-how on propaedeutic WBL measures for vulnerable students would be useful for the future training activities, especially when taking into consideration the growing numbers of vulnerable students and increasing attention of the local employers in developing of WBL and apprenticeship schemes. Such measures can also be adapted for other vocational programmes and sectors. However, it is important to consider specific skills requirements of enterprises of each sector and their potential implications for propaedeutic WBL.

5.5 Case 5: The Norwegian Language Support for Minority-Language Apprentices in Their Third and Fourth Year of Upper Secondary School (Norway)

The logic of the intervention study

There are three stages of upper secondary education in Norway. Students in vocational education programmes often spend two years in school and another two years working as apprentices in a company. Every student in the same educational programme takes the same subjects throughout their first year (Vg1). Students specialize in a programme field within their education programme in the second year (Vg2). Additionally, students work as apprentices in the workplace during their final two years (Vg3), usually in a public or private enterprise. In Norway, there has been a significant dropout among vocational students with a minority language background, particularly in the third year of study. This indicates the need for more competence

in the Norwegian language. The enhancement of the Norwegian language training has long been a targeted objective, particularly through collaborative efforts with companies delivering such training.

In order to improve the Norwegian language instruction in Vg3, a pilot project was started in one of the Norwegian counties, located on Norway's west coast. In the autumn 2022, the educational department of the county made an offer to the apprentices speaking minority languages who require assistance with their Norwegian language skills. Three new language teachers were hired; one was assigned to a school in the county's southern part and others in its northern part. There were also workplace supervisors and 20 minority language apprentices involved in the project. *The goal of the intervention was to encourage the usage and practice of the vocation-specific language in workplace communication.* The intervention took place between December 2022 and November 2023. Priorities were given to building engineering, health, and early childhood education apprenticeships. As the project was initiated at the county level (which administers education at the upper-secondary level), and, compared to interventions in the other two countries, the university partner had a lesser role in the co-design process, but rather monitored the process of the intervention and evaluated the sustainability of the pilot.

During the intervention, *the co-development of a teaching plan for the Norwegian language training* was conducted in a company. This co-creation process involved active participation from the company's language teachers, supervisors, instructors, and the county. The co-creation process was supported, but the county/school owner and project managers did not systematically follow up on the co-creation process. As part of the intervention, a digital learning application was created, featuring the relevant workplace-related vocabulary and concepts. This application served as a resource for apprentices, enabling them to look up unfamiliar words and expressions.

The three appointed language teachers worked independently and in collaboration with the management at their schools. To ensure effective coordination, language teachers from the north and south of the county held collaborative meetings every two weeks via the Teams platform throughout the project.

One of the main concerns in the intervention was how the language teachers served as a facilitators to help build the knowledge in the project and transfer it between various actors and arenas. Similarly, the key question was the durability of the knowledge generated: to what degree the intervention would succeed in generating sustainable knowledge, that is, in institutionalizing the newly acquired knowledge? The county government launched the intervention as a "top-down" effort. Therefore, ensuring that ownership of the innovation would be developed to a sufficient degree in the local context (the 2–3 schools) would be vital for sustainability.

What can be said about the knowledge maturation process—acknowledging and sharing the idea, co-creating solutions, formalizing and standardizing for the dissemination among the wider community?

The intervention was initiated as a “top-down” initiative by the county administration, involving collaboration between the school owner and the Norwegian EmpowerVET team. As accompanying researchers, the Norwegian EmpowerVET team was invited to engage in the ongoing dialogue and follow-up discussions with the parties involved.

The participants involved in the intervention brought extensive experience and a high level of expertise to the initiative. All three language teachers possessed a wealth of knowledge and had been actively engaged in the Norwegian language training, especially involving minority students, accumulating a combined work experience of 35 years. Furthermore, each of the three Norwegian teachers had a background in assessing the adapted Norwegian language training, thus having ample opportunities to refine their skills through collaborative efforts with colleagues.

The teachers were highly motivated and experienced a need for further development, therefore, the intervention represented a new arena for their professional development. As one of the teachers argued:

I heard about the project; it is an inspiring project. Working with language learning is an exciting job, so it is an important job. It can help apprentices, and many still need Norwegian [language improvement]...., otherwise they drop out. It is helpful, exciting, and challenging.

In terms of *support from the colleagues*, a noteworthy aspect common to all three Norwegian teachers, who had backgrounds from two distinct upper secondary schools, is that within the intervention, they operated somewhat independently without much support from colleagues. The Norwegian initiative was conceptualized and implemented at the county level. It was intended for the language teachers to work both independently and in conjunction with their school's management, once the project was launched. The intention behind this kind of implementation was to allow the two subprojects to evolve separately, while also assisting the main project in eventually being self-sustaining. This was also demonstrated to the three language teachers when they were hired. However, the selected model might have made them feel isolated at work, as they were placed between the management at the school level and the county municipal level.

The post-intervention interviews underscore that *all three teachers highly value the new experiences gained* through language teaching and training for students with a minority language background. Notably, the interviews highlight the significance of cultural competence as a crucial factor for success in the workplace.

A challenge encountered during the intervention was the departure of the initially appointed language teacher from one of the schools in the middle of the project. A new language teacher assumed the role and a transitional period was established to facilitate the transfer of the knowledge that had been developed. To ensure a smooth transition and continuity, both the departing and incoming language teachers were present during the first focus group interview. The joint presence of both teachers during the interview, where experiences with the project were discussed, significantly contributed to effective knowledge transfer and continuity within the intervention.

What can be said about scaffolding practices?

During any piloting, support from the peers and possibility to reflect on the experience are crucial. In this case it can be concluded that scaffolding was not supported enough. Language teachers experienced isolation and lacked support from their colleagues. The teachers acknowledged that, notwithstanding their expertise, stronger collaborative sharing with other colleagues could bring additional benefits. Recognizing the potential advantages of collaboration, the teachers expressed their willingness to engage in more shared endeavors with their peers:

I need to have [support]. I am entirely isolated, so I have some contact with those at the school that I am at or that I am affiliated with. However, I am only there a little because the apprentices I teach are in a different place than this.

The language instructors also appear overworked and unsupervised. They were sandwiched between the county, as the project owner, and the school principal where they worked, who oversaw the language instructors' formal employer responsibilities. Consequently, they most likely felt overburdened with responsibilities.

What can be said about the success and sustainability of the intervention project?

The overall impression is that *the language teachers perceive the project as meaningful*, recognizing the benefits of providing academic and cultural support to minority language students. An additional beneficial dimension of the intervention is the collaboration between language teachers and supervisors/instructors in the companies. This collaboration has given rise to a “three-part collaboration” involving the teachers, apprentices, and the supervisors and instructors responsible for overseeing the apprentices in the companies. This multifaceted collaboration underscores a holistic and integrated approach to supporting apprentices, combining academic and workplace-related components, and is seen as a positive and impactful aspect of the intervention. Bringing together many stakeholders and involving them in cooperative boundary-crossing (Akkerman and Bruining 2016) between various professional arenas, was one of the project goals. With the assistance of the language teachers acting as a facilitators, we have observed how knowledge was created in the project and transmitted between various arenas and actors in this case. Improving and deepening cultural awareness in the workplace was in the focus of the intervention, along with the improvement of the Norwegian language proficiency. Moreover, learning about the Norwegian work culture was crucial for apprentices. For instance, they learned about being punctual at work and remaining in the office for lunch breaks. According to our data, the apprentices frequently found themselves in a problematic intermediate situation. They were neither employees nor students. Managing this conundrum proved to be difficult, when one's command of the Norwegian language was limited. The language instructors also helped promote greater comprehension in this case. During the interviews, language teachers noted that they felt the project had significance and that it would be advantageous to further monitor the academic and cultural progress of minority language pupils.

The key question is the *durability of the knowledge generated*—to what extent the intervention succeeded in producing sustainable knowledge, that is, in institutionalizing the newly acquired information. In the previously mentioned scenario, the intervention began as a “top-down” initiative from the county administration and was progressively institutionalized in the surrounding schools and local community. Our conclusion is that institutionalizing the newly acquired information did take place, but that there is still much room for improvement. The ongoing collaboration and engagement with local stakeholders would play a pivotal role in achieving the sustainability of the pilot.

6 Discussion

The five cases of interventions implemented in vocational education and workplace learning establishments aimed to support socially vulnerable youth and empower educators. These interventions followed the EDUlab approach and the KAM with the special focus on enabling knowledge maturation, scaffolding and knowledge appropriation practices (Ley et al. 2018). In some of the cases, the model was followed in a more comprehensive way (e.g. case 1), while case 5 was rather inspired by the KAM when developing their intervention pilot. These cases also differed in terms of the coverage of schools, e.g. cases 1 and 5 involved stakeholders from several VET schools, whereas cases 2, 3, and 4 focused on implementing change in individual vocational training centers. While case 5 was a top-down initiated pilot and the team of researchers had mainly the role of monitoring the process, in other cases the team of researchers had a stronger role as experts and facilitators of the co-design and implementation process. The main research questions steering analyses of our cases were: How is the new knowledge of empowering practices appropriated during the EDUlab interventions? What are the key factors enabling sustainable change from application of this knowledge in the communities of VET practitioners? What are the key lessons of the EDUlab interventions for designing and implementing future empowering practices in VET?

We can conclude that several aspects of the KAM are crucial for ensuring adoption of educational innovations and creating sustainable changes. Our cases proved that collaborative approaches and co-design led methods were supporting the sense-making of the changes and creating ownership of the change implemented. Making sense of the changes is a prerequisite for adoption of any educational changes (Spillane et al. 2002). Long-term interventions involving several co-design sessions are valuable in this sense. It is normal that teachers perceive and adopt changes at different speeds (Rogers 2003), and as one of our cases also has demonstrated, skeptical attitudes towards changes can grow into supportive attitudes. Any adoption of change is a lengthy process and not all stakeholders are affected by it to the same degree; there are always innovators, but also laggards in every social system, any organization or any group (Rogers 2003).

It can also be concluded that to achieve change at a school level, it is crucial that a bigger team of teachers or other stakeholders is involved in the training/intervention. Moreover, the role of leadership is crucial to change management and for creating collaborative learning cultures at vocational establishments. As previous studies have demonstrated, in educational institutions, where educators perceive a supportive environment for collaboration, innovation, and concerted efforts, teachers are more likely to take on the role of a leader of the professional learning communities (Oppi et al. 2022).

In addition, based on our cases, the importance of scaffolding should not be undermined. While collaboration in the design phase is important, it is equally important to provide support and guidance during the integration of new methods, tools etc. into one's teaching and training practice. Creating a safe and supportive space to reflect on one's experience and share it with colleagues can even strengthen ownership of change. Even though our intervention studies did not last long, we could detect some knowledge sharing among colleagues not participating in the interventions.

In terms of sustainability of change, we can conclude that our interventions received in general a very positive feedback, improved awareness and competence of vocational teachers and other staff, created new tested tools and approaches, and increased collaboration. The increased collaboration and professional learning communities built among the school stakeholders can be seen as key for future follow-up activities. Participating in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) offers teachers an environment conducive to collaborative work and learning with colleagues, it contributes to both their personal professional development and that of their peers, potentially leading to the enhancement of teaching practices and empowerment of students (Huijboom et al. 2020). In order to identify the implications of our interventions in a longer perspective, some follow-up data could be gathered after the interventions.

We can conclude that the EDUlab approach and the KAM are effective tools to structure co-design-based intervention and support adoption of educational changes among vocational teachers and other staff. We could also see that in our cases, the introduction of the KAM took different variations (see the table summarizing the key elements of the KAM as implemented in our EDUlab interventions in Annex 1) as well as key lessons were learned from these interventions to consider when designing the empowering educational practices in VET in the future.

The comparison of the intervention cases in terms how different elements of the KAM were implemented discloses several common/cross-cutting factors, which can be seen as enabling sustainable changes and adoption of empowering practices and application of the innovative pedagogical know-how:

- (1) Genuine motivation of the participants of the interventions to develop their capacities for the empowerment of vulnerable young people. Teaching staff were motivated to participate in the development of empowering pedagogical innovations and practices, at the same time seeking to acquire and apply new know-how and skills in this field.

- (2) Holistic approaches to pedagogical interventions and innovations with broad contextualization of the empowering pedagogy by seeking to see the full picture of the tackled problems of vulnerability (e.g. by taking into consideration personal-psychological, social, economic, labour market, legal, environmental, and other factors).
- (3) Trusting the capacities and willingness of the vulnerable learners themselves, treating them as real agents and even co-creators of empowering pedagogical interventions and not just as passive target groups.
- (4) Usage of digital and online learning technologies in implementing pedagogical interventions.

At the same time, the comparison of EDUlab interventions enables distinguishing some common key lessons that can be considered to design empowering educational practices in VET institutions.

- (1) It is important to facilitate engagement of the broadest possible range of the VET school community in the design and implementation of the empowering pedagogical interventions, even if the initiatives of such interventions come from separate teachers or trainers. Development of the shared understanding/ making sense of the new idea or approach amongst the engaged participants (including learners themselves) is crucially important.
- (2) Empowering of vulnerable learners in VET requires long-term orientation (rather than quick fix solutions), patience and determination in overcoming often occurring pessimism and resistance about the relevance and potential effectiveness of the pedagogical ideas or their implementation feasibility.
- (3) A lot of attention should be paid to the sense-making of empowering pedagogical ideas for the vulnerable students, their families, VET teaching staff and other involved stakeholders. This is a necessary precondition for sustainable and successful implementation of empowering pedagogical intervention.
- (4) Success and sustainability of new empowering pedagogical interventions to a great extent depend on the availability of supportive collaboration and networks, which should involve both the VET school community, as well as families, employers, municipalities, NGOs, and other interest groups.

Annex 1: Comparison of the Executed EDUlab Interventions

The focus of the intervention	Key elements of the KAM as implemented in our EDUlab interventions/ Factors expected to enable appropriation of empowering practices	Key lessons learned from educational learning lab interventions for designing the empowering educational practices in VET
Case 1: designing a learning environment that supports mental health in a vocational educational institution (Estonia)	Involvement of educational psychologists as facilitators of reflection, group discussions and sharing of good practice in development of supporting learning environments Applying solid theoretical framework (e.g. self-determination theory) to support participants to reflect on their own behavior and introduce positive classroom strategies Using e-learning platform (www.eDidaktikum.ee) for assignments, interaction, storing materials and sharing with colleagues Genuine motivation of participants of intervention: know-how on creation of supportive learning space in seeking to improve their teaching practice, getting ideas on how to change colleagues' mindsets regarding students with special needs Targeting a broad range of socio-pedagogical-psychological problems faced in teaching vulnerable students in VET, leading to the provision of holistic and complex picture of what affects mental health of vulnerable students	Involvement of the school management in the co-design sessions is important, participation of only teachers and support staff in the intervention deprives it from important resources and strategic support Involvement of several people from the same school in intervention sessions supports reflection of the new knowledge and communication back to the school environment Introduction of mental health protection issues in the teaching practices, curricula, making it an object of constant professional development of teachers is needed

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The focus of the intervention	Key elements of the KAM as implemented in our EDUlab interventions/ Factors expected to enable appropriation of empowering practices	Key lessons learned from educational learning lab interventions for designing the empowering educational practices in VET
Case 2: strengthening learner engagement and the VET school community through scaffolding and service-learning practices (Lithuania)	Co-creative approach by involving older students, acting as mentors, and providing scaffolding for students from vulnerable groups Supporting the co-creation process with constant consultations between the researchers and VET teachers in the school The genuine motivation of teaching staff to participate related to supporting vulnerable students, also considering the challenges and problems faced by students caused by the experience of the pandemic situation Reliance on the know-how resources of the community of VET teaching staff, as well as recognizing the demand of knowledge and skills on how to engage all learners, including students from vulnerable groups Incremental approach in the co-design of the new pedagogical know-how by referring to the existing practices and finding ways together with researchers how these practices/projects/ initiatives could be enhanced or implemented in the ways strengthening engagement and inclusion of all learners Identifying educational / pedagogical potential of involvement of senior and academically stronger students in the scaffolding activities implemented collaboratively between teachers and students	Importance of patience in overcoming the skepticism of teachers and students about the effectiveness of suggested pedagogical intervention Attention to the sense-making and seeing the value of the new pedagogical approach by the teachers and vulnerable learners themselves, seeking to bring the new and significant things with intervention Consideration of vulnerable learners as co-partners, co-creators of the educational process

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The focus of the intervention	Key elements of the KAM as implemented in our EDULab interventions/ Factors expected to enable appropriation of empowering practices	Key lessons learned from educational learning lab interventions for designing the empowering educational practices in VET
Case 3: empowering socially vulnerable VET students by designing and piloting flipped-classroom scenarios (Lithuania)	Applying a holistic and structured approach to the application of flipped classroom methods for the learning support of vulnerable students in VET, which includes curriculum design, organization of learning processes, methods of learning and resources needed Genuine motivation of participants of intervention is perceived as a need for training methods that can effectively enhance vulnerable learners' motivation for learning Collaborative work of teachers in preparing a flipped classroom learning plan and learning materials, video recordings for students	Implementation and adjustment of the pedagogical innovations supporting vulnerable students require profound and critical reflection of teachers Implementation of the flipped classroom approach in the training of vulnerable students is a long-term process requiring patience in looking for impact, especially with regard to meaningful and motivated engagement of these students in learning

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The focus of the intervention	Key elements of the KAM as implemented in our EDUlab interventions/ Factors expected to enable appropriation of empowering practices	Key lessons learned from educational learning lab interventions for designing the empowering educational practices in VET
Case 4: propaedeutic work-based learning scenario for empowerment of vulnerable students in the rural VET centre (Lithuania)	The holistic approach to applying WBL for empowerment of vulnerable youth: reference to combination of the provision of theoretical knowledge and practical skills under conditions of real and/or simulated work process, active involvement of vulnerable learners in WBL (encouraging their self-expression at work) and applying psychological tools for the development of students' self-confidence and social skills in the work process Regular consultations between the experts/researchers and VET teaching staff in implementing intervention Shared understanding that broader implementation of work-based learning is highly important for the empowerment of vulnerable students leading to the idea of a propaedeutic practical training scenario Active role of VET teachers in contextualizing theoretical know-how of applying WBL for empowerment of vulnerable youth within the local institutional and educational context by considering imposed limitations Creation of "practical-methodical" knowledge for implementing the propaedeutic WBL measure, specifically tailored for vulnerable students Autonomy of teachers in piloting and adjusting their co-developed WBL scenario	Importance of establishing a shared understanding of the intervention idea with the VET teachers, including a matching understanding of the targeted problem and the perceived role of propaedeutic WBL measures in empowering vulnerable students for both learning and work Adaptation and acceptance of didactic ideas in applying propaedeutic WBL for empowerment of vulnerable learners, such as the importance of active observation of the real work processes, gradual transition from observing the work processes to participation in the execution of these processes Making vulnerable students aware of the availability of learning support at workplaces, provided by both VET teachers and practical training supervisors Applying the interest and motivation of students in using digital technologies in their everyday life can be beneficial for the acquisition of fundamental vocational knowledge and reflective understanding of work processes Determination for the follow-up of the intervention by initiating an internal project (work-based learning—new possibility for me)

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The focus of the intervention	Key elements of the KAM as implemented in our EDULab interventions/ Factors expected to enable appropriation of empowering practices	Key lessons learned from educational learning lab interventions for designing the empowering educational practices in VET
Case 5: the Norwegian language support for minority-language apprentices/teacher candidates in their third and fourth year of upper secondary school (Norway)	Initiation of the intervention as a top-down initiative by the county administration, involving collaboration with the school owner and researchers from the project Co-development of a teaching plan for the Norwegian language training with active participation of companies, language teachers, supervisors, instructors, and the county Creation of a digital learning application, featuring relevant workplace-related vocabulary and concepts Genuine motivation of teachers related to their perceived need for further professional development and improvement of teaching performance The intervention intended for the language teachers to work both independently and in conjunction with their school's management in seeking self-sustainability of the intervention project Scaffolding of the intervention was not supported enough—language teachers experienced isolation and lacked support from their colleagues	Importance of the multifaceted collaboration between language teachers and supervisors/instructors in the companies in implementing such pedagogical interventions, also by involving the teachers, apprentices, and the supervisors and instructors responsible for overseeing the apprentices in the companies Importance of the holistic and integrated approach to supporting apprentices, combining academic and workplace-related components Language teaching should target improving and deepening cultural awareness in the workplace, better understanding of the local work culture, which allows vulnerable minority learners to manage problem situations caused by their status Ongoing collaboration and engagement with local stakeholders play a pivotal role in achieving the sustainability of the pilot of the pedagogical intervention implemented in the top-down way

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Chapter 8

Conclusions, and the Implications for Research and Practice



Vidmantas Tütlys, Tarja Tikkanen, Meril Ümarik, and Biruta Sloka

Abstract This chapter outlines and discusses the main research findings by triangulating them based on the personal strategies of socially vulnerable VET students, the pathways of empowerment provided by the VET systems and the capacities of VET schools. It also provides insights into their implications for VET research and practice, as well as suggestions for future research in the field of empowerment for vulnerable VET students.

Keywords Resilience · Empowerment · Vocational education and training · Agency · VET research · VET policy

1 Introduction

The main goal of this book has been to present and discuss the research on the empowerment of vulnerable youth in the VET systems of four countries, which represent at least two different socio-economic structures and institutional models of skill formation—the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and Norway. The empowerment of vulnerable youth in VET is explored both with respect to the agency of the VET (system, school, teachers) in enhancing social inclusion of socially vulnerable young people and the agency and personal strategies of the young

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people themselves in designing and implementing their pathways of education and employment. In this chapter we first summarize and discuss the key findings of this study. Subsequently, we draw main conclusions from the findings and present implications for VET policy and practice as well as for future research.

2 The Role and Place of Institutions and Institutional Settings of VET in Empowering Vulnerable Students

The Baltic countries and Norway represent different socio-economic and institutional models of skill formation and VET, which also has implications for the agency of the VET systems in the empowerment of at-risk youth. Since the restoration of independence of the Baltic countries, the institutional development of the VET systems, labour market structures and social welfare mechanisms have shaped three main pathways of development of the skill formation and vocational education of at-risk youth in the these countries (Tütlys et al. 2022):

- (1) a market-oriented approach to dealing with social exclusion of vulnerable youth, based on fostering immediate employability according to momentary skills needs in the economy;
- (2) a state/public assistance approach, based on ensuring equal access to VET and employment services by the state the;
- (3) an approach of systemic support to socially vulnerable young people in developing their capabilities.

Referring to the vocational aspects of empowerment of vulnerable youth, one of the main features of such empowerment in the Baltic countries is the provision of training relevant for the labour market through the implementation of competence-based curricula and development of WBL approaches. The development of the VET system after the EU accession (by investments in the infrastructure, teacher training etc.) targeted both the improvement of the VET quality and attractiveness of the VET pathway for young people and retaining VET pathways accessible for socially vulnerable learners (see Chaps. 3–5 of this book). The development of VET and its integration in the lifelong learning pathways, by fostering the links between initial VET, higher education, continuing VET and adult education, and the introduction of the different types of qualifications have been regarded by the policy makers both as measures of dealing with the negative image of VET and a second chance education, and as instruments for empowerment of vulnerable youth. Achievement of this goal is still work in progress due to lack of pedagogical resources and capacities of the VET schools to provide proper support to these students, as well as because of still rather marginal and fragmented social and economic support to vulnerable groups of society in the Baltic countries.

Such institutional context tends to foster stronger self-reliance of at-risk students (assuming higher personal responsibility for their future), as well as reliance on support from their families, relatives and friends in the learning and employment

contexts. It also forces vulnerable VET students to seek a fast entry into the labour market, often before completing their studies and taking unskilled and low-skilled jobs, which seriously compromises the quality of their studies and chances of graduation from the VET school. Vulnerable VET students in the Baltics also rely on the individual pedagogical, psychological, and other support provided by their teachers and auxiliary teaching staff in the schools. Such students often receive personalized pedagogical, psychological, and social support provided by the VET teaching staff and other support professionals, but mainly based on the personal dedication of teaching professionals and lacking systemic financial, human resources and methodical support from the state and social partners (see Chaps. 3–5). The trend of precarisation of the learners in VET (increasing share of vulnerable students with precarious background) also changes the work of teachers by introducing more functions related to social work and care, as well as provision of the basic underpinning knowledge of general education necessary to deal with increasing gaps in primary and lower-secondary education, which preclude acquisition of vocational skills and competencies (Rekkor et al. 2013; Loogma et al. 2019; Tikkanen et al. 2024). The combination of socio-economic precariousness of families and lack of vocational and career guidance becomes an important factor of dropout from the VET schools (Espenberg et al. 2012). Differences of the socio-economic development and employment opportunities in the regions also influence the potential of the VET schools and teaching staff to support and empower vulnerable VET students.

The legislation stipulating access to VET often tends to deal with the problems of exclusion by widening ‘lower end’ training opportunities for the most disadvantaged learners (e.g., introducing training pathways and tracks leading to the lowest qualification level), but lacks ambition to solve the situation by introducing inclusive and empowering education and training pathways by integrating ‘empowering’ curricula, high-quality support to learners (pedagogical, psychological and social) and creating spaces for their participation.

In Norway, inclusion is the fundamental principle in all education, not an element or an aspect of or in it (see Chap. 2 of this book). The Norwegian concept and model for social inclusion of VET students at risk of social exclusion demonstrates a range of powerful characteristics: it is comprehensive, stands on a strong value ground, it has been developed over a long period of time, yet it appears dynamic and flexible, and builds on a strong collaboration with external stakeholders (aligning with the long-term tradition of tripartite collaboration in working life), as well as internally at schools and locally among all stakeholders. To make the school-for-all principle (*enhettsskolen*) a reality, also taking into account the diverse VET student population at risk of social exclusion, the “best for the pupil/students” policy foundation presupposes an education and training system with a range of flexible learning trajectories. Thus, ‘the school’ needs to be adjusted to the students, not vice versa. VET schools that succeed in preventing dropouts focus on adapting to students’ needs, for their learning as well as their psychosocial needs. They ensure that students’ voices are heard by a trusted adult/teacher and by their classmates, in a safe and encouraging learning environment, which also nurtures feelings of belonging. Systemic support to this end is also provided in the form of a strong focus on student democracy, inscribed

in the curriculum (see e.g. Grevle 2023), including students' representation in decision making in the matters concerning students at school (see Chap. 2). Systematic cooperation with external and internal stakeholders and information exchange, particularly during primary and secondary school transitions, play a crucial role. Emphasis on early detection of challenges allows for timely intervention, supported by teachers with multi-professional collaboration teams. Among the most important cornerstones in the inclusive education and VET system in Norway there is the opportunity to tailor solutions to individual needs of students, with close follow-up and support. However, a critical issue is how much adaptation and flexibility are appropriate without compromising the learning and competence goals and outcomes (quality) of upper secondary education, especially concerning students with low basic skills and low motivation.

3 Agency and Resilience of At-Risk VET Students

Our research has disclosed a rather diverse and rich picture of the agency and resilience of vulnerable VET students. Personal educational pathways of these students are often defined by non-participation, imposed by the absence or lack of support from the families, social isolation, experience of bullying at school, physical and mental health issues, and the lack of support from teachers. In case of the Baltic countries, especially in Lithuania and Latvia, poverty is an important obstacle for participation in education (see Chaps. 3 and 4 of this book). In such cases students are minimally involved in the processes of learning and school life, they face the risk of dropping out, seek for, or are involved in precarious employment, which in most cases does not really contribute to their professional and personal development. In case of Norway, non-participation of vulnerable students is more related to the family problems, psychological issues and challenges caused by the socio-economic status (e.g., migrant background), as well as the lack of meaningful relationships with teachers and peers in the school (see Chap. 2 of this book).

In all the four countries, VET teaching staff, including WBL trainers and support staff, are the most important sources of student empowerment in the school. Supportive teaching staff creates favourable learning environments, apply different measures for prevention of non-participation (work with families of students), provide extensive and personalized pedagogical and psychological support. Vulnerable students notice different kinds of support from the teaching staff. Support is targeted to provision of assistance and guidance to learning in the classrooms (additional pedagogical help), involving students in social activities of the school, enhancing their civic participation in the student communities by facilitating their engagement in the student self-governance structures, and assisting students in getting contacts for the world of work when seeking apprenticeship, traineeship or decent employment.

In Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, VET pedagogical staff plays the crucial role in empowering vulnerable students in the school-based VET system oriented to the

marked needs (see Chaps. 2–5 of this book). However, the capacities of the VET teachers in providing pedagogical, psychological and social support to vulnerable students and their sustainability are limited by the weak and fragmented institutional measures of empowerment and support. Nevertheless, these students notice significant empowering potential of learning in the VET schools. This consists of orientation of learning to the employment and real needs of economic activities, providing possibilities for starting independent life and career, trusting in the capacities of learners and creating a space for their free self-expression in the areas of studies, self-governance and social life. In Norway, the VET teaching staff enjoys more comprehensive and systemic support from the state, municipalities and social partners in developing inclusive training practices for all. This makes the school a much happier place to learn and grow for many more students than without these efforts (see Chap. 2 of this book). However, the implementation of the principle and harnessing and harmonizing the entire support system to the best of every student, is a demanding endeavour, and there is still much room for improving the outcomes.

Participation of vulnerable students in vocational education is defined by involvement in mutual trust-based learning communities with peers and teachers through socialization in the WBL environments, or engagement in the civic representation and self-governance structures of the VET establishments (Bruin et al. 2023). Hearing the learners voice concerning their participation in VET is an important factor of empowerment of vulnerable learners. Also, VET school is seen by some vulnerable students as the space of re-habilitation and empowerment of their self-esteem, where students feel respected as persons, enjoy personal freedom and collegial relationships with teachers and especially with workplace trainers. Absence or insufficiency of support from VET teachers and other pedagogical staff make the learning process difficult or meaningless, disconnect students from the learning community and reduces their learning motivation. In the VET systems, which prioritise the market-based approach to employability as a way to empower vulnerable VET students and which at the same time downplay pedagogical component of empowerment, the VET teachers face the challenge of insufficient support from the school and state in executing the mission of empowerment (e.g., the problem of shortage of social pedagogues and psychologists in the VET schools of the Baltic countries). Weakening of the pedagogical component of empowerment especially compromises its sustainability. We have observed similar problems in the relationships between vulnerable VET students and employers in the Baltic countries, which cause anxiety, risk of exploitation or poor preparation for WBL in the enterprises (see Chaps. 3–5 of this book). Here, again, the intermediation of VET schools and especially teachers is the only accessible and effective solution. Compromising or restricting students' access to participation in the work communities also impoverishes the learning quality and facilitates dropout.

Referring to the Bronfenbrenner's model of social ecology (Biesta and Tedder 2007), the findings of the research have disclosed different features of the ecological agency of vulnerable learners and social ecology of the VET provision (Table 1).

These features are linked with the promotive factors—assets and resources of resilience (Fergus and Zimmerman 2013; Zimmermann 2013) of the vulnerable learners in the VET establishments (Table 2).

Table 1 Ecological agency of vulnerable students and social ecology of the VET provision

Ecological agency of vulnerable VET students—typical agentic roles	Social ecology of the VET provision—factors of social ecology enabling and restricting agentic roles
Assuming responsibility for learning and future employment, as a key strategy of improving vulnerable status (self-reliance) Assuming responsibility in helping and supporting family members in need Seeking support and assistance in resolving socio-economic, psychological and institutional obstacles to learning and employment Combining studying in VET and temporary employment to cope with economic problems and shortages Adjusting roles of participation in the school community and self-governance bodies of the educational institutions Critical user of the support service provided by the VET system and related institutions Planner of the further education and career pathways on the basis of the acquired VET education and qualification	Enabling factors Supportive family relationships Socio-psychological-pedagogical support in the VET school VET curricula enable meaningful learning in terms of future employment and social integration Possibilities for engagement and participation in the school and workplace communities Restricting factors Unstable, fragile family situation, unsupportive family relations Poverty and unstable economic situation of learners and their families (Baltic countries) Lack of support from the teaching staff in the VET schools Bullying at school Learning in VET detached from the work practice, irrelevance of the VET curricula to the personal plans of future career; poor image of VET amongst the peers and in society

Table 2 Promotive factors of resilience of vulnerable learners in VET

The assets of resilience in learning and employment	The resources of resilience in learning and employment
Self-reliance of vulnerable learners, driven by the realistic understanding of their situation Valuing learning in VET as a gateway to future independence and realization of career plans Visions of the brighter future related to the employment and career in the desired occupational field and country (including emigration)	Support of family and friends, including vocational guidance Socio-pedagogical support of vulnerable learners at school (especially individualized support) helps to overcome the obstacles of learning caused by the above-described restrictive factors Possibilities of participation in the VET school communities and workplace training Comprehensive institutional support for successful learning and employment provided by the solid institutional framework of inclusive education (Norway) Flexible learning trajectories Socialization and personal development opportunities provided by VET schools, including international exchange programmes (Erasmus+ in the Baltic countries)

The research has disclosed that scarcity of resources of resilience in learning and employment in some cases is compensated by a stronger mobilisation of the assets by vulnerable learners. For example, vulnerable VET students from the Baltic countries, especially from Lithuania and Latvia, facing economic shortages, as well as a lack of supportive family relations, rely more on themselves by assuming a responsibility for their learning and future employment, in a resolute way without looking for support from different institutions (see Chaps. 3–5 of this book). In the case of Norway, with stronger and much more generous institutional support for vulnerable VET students, their expectations regarding such support and reliance on it are much more visible (see Chap. 2 of this book).

In the course of coping with challenges, several types of social ecology of students at risk were identified, depending on the possibilities for development of agentic capacities (e.g. self-confidence) and getting support. First, the transformative ecology refers to rather favorable circumstances for the development of agentic capacities and at the same time, coming out from the risk situation. The second case is adaptive type of ecology demonstrating that there could be the possibility to break up the ecology of risk while getting enough support and understanding in a vocational school after the traumatic relationships from the previous school. This case also refers to the ecological nature of agency, meaning that some environments are more supportive for exercising and developing agency. The third case is reproductive, demonstrating how ecology may work to reproduce exclusion, being related to health problems too.

In terms of critical theoretical views on VET, the research findings confirm that neoliberal orientation to empowerment of vulnerable learners, when focusing only on the employment and employability, creates significant risks of eliminating or reducing the empowering potential of learning at VET, which largely depends on the education of personality, enhancing of meaningful choices in the future work career and learning pathways. When the orientation of VET to employment and labour market needs is directed only to the fastest and flexible provision of the currently demanded competences it would lead to the shallow and weak empowerment entailing large risks of the social exclusion of learners whose professional competencies become outdated (Wheelahan 2017). In the interviews, the students stressed high importance of experience of real work processes for the acquisition of competencies, by paying particular attention to the role of workplace trainers in providing the right knowledge, skills and attitudes required for making independent decisions in the workplace. Here, one of the key critical points is to find the right balance between the empowering potential of the flexible orientation of VET provision to the needs of the labour market, creating conditions for personal choices of the vulnerable learners in managing their studies and providing solid socio-pedagogical support and guidance to vulnerable learners under the conditions of the school-based and work-based learning.

4 Pedagogical Interventions Facilitating Empowerment of Vulnerable VET Students

The five educational interventions were conducted in Estonia, Norway and Lithuania aimed to support educators of VET schools in developing pedagogical approaches of empowerment of vulnerable students. These interventions followed the EDUlab approach, emphasising the co-creation between researchers and vocational teachers and workplace training instructors (see Chap. 7 of this book). The Knowledge Appropriation Model (KAM) enabled to analyse the process of knowledge maturation, scaffolding and knowledge appropriation (Ley et al. 2018). The intervention studies revealed that the collaborative approaches and co-design led methods are supporting making sense of the changes and creating ownership of the implemented change. Making sense of the changes is a prerequisite for adoption of any educational changes (Spillane et al. 2002). Long-term interventions involving several co-design sessions tended to support this aim. We can also conclude that if a bigger team of teachers or other stakeholders from the same school are involved in the intervention, the adoption of the change tends to be smoother. Moreover, the role of leadership cannot be underestimated in creating collaborative learning cultures at vocational establishments aimed at supporting the wellbeing of vulnerable youth. It permits to presume a high potential of Educational Living Lab in the development and dissemination of the innovative empowering pedagogical approaches in VET. The EDUlab interventions targeted to the empowerment of vulnerable VET students may involve various disruptions and obstacles, which are difficult to foresee, especially when they are related to personal vulnerability factors. Creative collaboration between the experts/researchers and VET teachers is necessary in solving such problems and challenges. To ensure the motivation of VET teachers to apply and implement EDUlabs, such interventions should be made a part of the planned continuing training/competence development plans or programmes provided in collaboration with teacher training institutions. This would ensure higher self development motivation and engagement of VET teachers and trainers, as well as provide access to the organisational and other resources needed for successful implementation of interventions.

5 Novelty of Research Findings and Their Contribution to the VET Theories

When it comes to the novelty of our research findings, two key aspects can be mentioned. First, the novelty lies in the exploration of empowerment of vulnerable youth in VET by triangulating the personal resiliency strategies of the young people themselves with the positions of the VET staff members (especially teaching and assistance staff), and an analysis of the institutional settings of empowerment in VET on the local and national levels. This factor enables us to see the empowerment processes themselves in a holistic view, where the position or the vulnerable young

person is at the centre of attention and not overshadowed by other dimensions, as is more common in this field of research. Secondly, our research brings a valuable comparative perspective in exploring the above-mentioned empowerment dimensions and their development in the Baltic countries and Norway, having different institutional models and traditions of VET, skill formation and employment. The empowerment of vulnerable youth in VET in the Baltic countries has been an under-explored and little-known topic, especially in the comparative perspective with the neighbouring regions.

6 Practical Relevance of Research Findings and Contribution to the VET Policies and Practice

Our research findings are valuable for the development of empowerment practices in VET in the four involved countries and globally. First, the findings of the qualitative research of vulnerable VET students encourage a more active engagement of these students in the design and development of empowerment and support practices, leading to more effective and personalized solutions in this area. Secondly, stressing the centrality of the VET teaching staff in empowering of vulnerable students, through educational support and building of social capital in the environments of school and enterprise, the research findings draws attention to the sufficiency and sustainability of capacities of VET teaching staff, especially in the Baltic countries. Thirdly, the findings of experimentation of the Educational Living Labs show a high potential of this methodological tool of development of pedagogical innovations, when creating or applying such innovations in the field of empowerment of learners in VET.

The research findings indicate that the VET systems in the Baltic countries and Norway largely act as enablers of empowerment and a counterforce of the social exclusion of vulnerable youth, although through rather different levies. In the Baltic countries (especially in Lithuania and Latvia) this empowerment is based on the agency of VET teachers and other pedagogical staff who play the central role in supporting learning and employment of the vulnerable learners. In Norway, the empowerment of vulnerable learners is the object of larger scope educational and socialization interventions, implemented jointly by the VET providers, governmental institutions and social partners.

The research confirmed the centrality of the roles of the VET teacher related to the social pedagogy, provision of social care and vocational guidance to vulnerable learners, in order to enable their inclusion and support the transformation of the skills and competencies of learners (Ryökkönen and Rätty 2022; Cort and Rolls 2010; Sirk et al. 2016; Ümarik and Rekkor 2013). With regard to the dropout of vulnerable learners from VET, the study disclosed a dominant impact of the socio-economic factors, especially poverty faced by the learners and their families in the Baltic countries, and the dominant role of psycho-social factors of dropout in the VET system in Norway.

The research confirmed the effectiveness of the EU policy initiatives and instruments related to the empowerment of vulnerable learners in the VET systems of the Baltic countries, especially several key effects of these instruments:

- (1) Empowerment by expanding opportunities of inter-cultural professional socialization through involvement of vulnerable students in the European student exchange programmes and projects. This has not only powerful psychological effect in terms of strengthening self-esteem and trust in personal capacities of learners, but also in terms of human capital development through enriching professional and personal skill and competencies.
- (2) Empowerment by making the training and employment of the vulnerable students the object of specific efforts and interventions by social partners and stakeholders. Specific projects and programmes funded by the EU become the gateway for more intensive and contributing involvement of employers and other social partners in expanding the access of high quality VET to vulnerable learners.
- (3) Empowerment by strengthening capacities of the VET providers to help the vulnerable students, for example, through the programmes and projects of training and capacity development of the VET teaching staff (e.g., ESF funded PUMPURS project implemented in Latvia).

7 Recommendations

Based on the research findings our recommendations for the policy and practice are as follows:

- (1) *For the national policy makers involved in the policies of VET, social affairs, and employment*

Building and developing the policies targeted to empowerment of vulnerable youth requires a holistic and systemic approach. Vocational education and training has been historically applied as a powerful instrument in empowerment of vulnerable youth. However, it does not work effectively and sustainably without a proper social policy, provision of systemic social, economic and psychological assistance to families in need facing different kinds of exclusion, taking care about fairness and dignity of work and employment opportunities.

The empowerment-oriented VET policies should create open and accessible educational pathways for all. Open, transparent, and accessible pathways of learning transition between the different educational sectors, especially the transition from the general education to VET (both initial and continuing), create a huge potential of empowerment for vulnerable young people. Such pathways must entail accessible pedagogical and psychological support reinforced with attractive vocational guidance measures. It is also important for the prevention of and dealing with school

dropout, too often leading to vulnerability and exclusion. The development of vocational guidance and investment in capacity building of vocational and career guidance specialists are likely to be the right solution.

WBL and apprenticeship have a vast empowering potential, which can be attained by focusing on systemic measures making WBL and apprenticeship open and accessible. Such measures could, for example, entail sustainable motivation of the enterprises to accept vulnerable trainees, creating national databases of socially responsible enterprises providing access to training workplaces.

Capacity building of VET teaching and support staff is also a crucially important area of empowering VET policies. Here, the VET policies may focus on the creation and/or sustaining of the preparation and training of support teaching staff (social pedagogues and psychologists), assistant teachers and support coordinators for the VET schools. Paying more attention to the capacity building of the trainers of enterprises in the field of pedagogical and socio-psychological empowerment of vulnerable learners may significantly widen accessibility of high-quality apprenticeship for such learners.

(2) For the VET schools and teaching staff

Vocational education and training have strong empowerment potential enabled by didactic-propaedeutic, as well as motivational-psychological support to vulnerable learners. The participation of the socially vulnerable students in vocational learning, their introduction in the real work processes through WBL and apprenticeships, as well as an active civic engagement in the school community and society, are fundamentally important elements of empowerment. Enabling such participation should be the task of the whole school community and not only of teaching staff directly engaged in educational relationship with vulnerable students.

Empowerment of vulnerable VET students often requires applying creative and innovative solutions, it can be treated as an important area for design, testing and implementation of different pedagogical innovations. The Educational Living Lab approach, tested for suitability and effectiveness in empowering vulnerable VET students in our project, provides a promising opportunity for development and implementation of such innovations in the VET schools.

(3) For the social partners and stakeholders of VET

Employability and employment are of key importance for sustainable empowerment of vulnerable students in VET. Therefore, active engagement of social partners (especially enterprises and trade unions) in the organization and development of concrete accessible opportunities of WBL, apprenticeship, or high-quality traineeship can make significant positive change in this area. Local and regional partnerships between social partners and VET schools can be very effective in creating meaningful and attractive pathways of learning for vulnerable young people.

8 Suggestions for Further Research

The volume and extent of exclusion and vulnerability of VET students in many countries remain high and even show a trend of increase, due to the fragilization of socio-economic conditions by the economic, social, security, healthcare, and other crisis at the global level. At the same time essential transformation and restructuring of educational and employment opportunities emerge, due to the technological and socio-economic changes (Industry 4.0, digitalization, green transition). Looking from this perspective, it would be pertinent to explore the empowering potential of this restructuring, as well as its entailed risks for empowerment of vulnerable youth in VET. The empowerment of specific groups of vulnerable youth, such as migrants, refugees in the countries of origin and destination is also a highly pertinent topic for future research.

Currently, one of the dominant trends of strategic development of VET policies and practices is market-driven excellence and ‘improvement’ of the image of VET from a second choice and second chance learning pathway to a competitive and attractive learning opportunity with promising rewards in terms of employment, career and human capital development. Referring to this, it would be relevant and important to explore the implications of this orientation to the potential of VET in empowering vulnerable learners at risk of marginalisation and social exclusion.

The implementation and development of the learning outcomes- and competence-based approaches to the design of VET qualifications and curricula are important trends of VET reforms, focused on improving responsiveness of the VET provision to the dynamically changing skills needs in the market. It would be pertinent to explore the implications of these trends in the design of qualifications and VET curricula for the empowerment potential of VET, especially when it comes to narrowing specialization, modularization, implementation of micro-credentials and micro-qualifications.

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