

“Vocational education and workplace training enhancing social inclusion of at-risk young people“ (EmpowerVET)

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VOCATIONAL EDUCATION PRACTICES FOR EMPOWERMENT OF VULNERABLE STUDENTS IN THE BALTIC COUNTRIES AND NORWAY

Research Report / Working Paper

Work Package 3. Study of the “best practice” in VET to support inclusion of at-risk youth in the Baltic countries and Norway

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The project “Vocational education and workplace training enhancing social inclusion of at-risk young people“ (EmpowerVET) benefits from a € (819000) grant from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through the EEA Grants. The aim of the project is to investigate, how can vocational education and training (VET) enhance social inclusion of young people at-risk, both in terms of combating school drop-out and promoting transitions between various (social) learning contexts, such as school-work transition. Project contract with the Research Council of Lithuania (LMTLT) No is S-BMT-21-2 (LT08-2-LMT-K-01-010).

1 Introduction

Social inclusion of young people is a high-level EU priority and a challenge simultaneously. This is especially relevant in relation to VET students who are subject to various risk factors that may result in dropping out from education. Social exclusion and poverty among young people have especially increased during the economic crisis of the previous decade, as well as in relation to other factors, e.g. Covid pandemic. In Europe the 2022 had been announced as the European Year of Youth, and 2023 has been promoted as the European Year of Skills (European Commission, 2022; European Youth Portal, 2022) which clearly indicates to the priorities the world of education and employment need to address and where also research is especially needed.

The EU Youth Strategy (EU Youth Portal, 2022) aims, in particular, to create more and equal opportunities for all young people to participate in education and in the labor market, support active citizenship, social inclusion and solidarity of all young people, realize the full potential of VET and employment institutions as a means of inclusion, encourage a cross-sector approach to address exclusion, as well as promote access to quality services, e.g. transport, e-inclusion, health, and social services.

“The European Year of Skills in its turn promotes ideas that having the relevant skills empowers people to successfully navigate labour market changes and to fully engage in society and democracy. A workforce with skills that are in demand also contributes to sustainable growth, leads to more innovation and improves companies' competitiveness. This will ensure that nobody is left behind and the economic recovery as well as the green and digital transitions are socially fair and just” (European Commission, 2022).

Baltic Research Programme Project “Vocational education and workplace training enhancing social inclusion of at-risk young people” (EmpowerVET project) addresses these key challenges and aims at investigating how VET can enhance social inclusion of young people at-risk, both in terms of combating school drop-out and promoting transitions between various (social) learning contexts, such as school-work transition.

It is already universal knowledge that vocational education is an important steppingstone for many students, providing them with the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in their chosen career paths. However, some vocational education students may be considered vulnerable due to a range of factors, including socioeconomic status and prior educational experiences. These vulnerabilities can impact their academic performance and overall well-being, highlighting the need for preventative and supportive measures (Cefai et al., 2022; Ferreira et al., 2020). This article explores educational practices of VET providers as a means of addressing the needs of vulnerable VET students, by looking into institutional and pedagogical factors of these practices.

Research focuses on the following questions on concrete educational practices related to empowerment of vulnerable VET students:

- 1) What are institutional factors of empowering practices in VET support empowerment of vulnerable VET students in the Baltic countries and Norway?

2) What pedagogical factors of applied pedagogical practices (related to curriculum design, organization of the training provision, assessment of learning, etc.) support empowerment of vulnerable VET students in the above- mentioned countries?

Comparative analysis of the institutional and pedagogical factors of the VET providers practices which support empowerment of vulnerable students enables more holistic understanding of the empowerment potential of these practices, as well as provides valuable know-how for the policy learning and transfer of know-how in this field.

2 Empowering practice of VET provision, it's institutional and educational factors: theoretical considerations

Empowering practice of VET provision can be defined as concrete intervention of the VET provider targeted to enabling the autonomy and enhancing capabilities of the vulnerable students in the matters concerning their learning, employment, and social participation. Looking from this perspective empowering VET practice balances between capacity building of learner and tackling different subjective and objective obstacles faced by the vulnerable learner in the VET schools, workplaces, and other related environments. Here the part of capacity building highly depends on the pedagogical factors of empowerment practice, while tackling subjective and objective obstacles faced by learners highly depends on the institutional factors of VET practice.

Empowering VET provider practices are also largely shaped by the policy context. The mission of vocational education and training (VET) is traditionally regarded by the policy makers through the duality of goals. The developmental and empowering mission of VET has been promoted and stressed by the EU policies aside to the economic mission in providing skills in line with human capital approach (López-Fogués, 2012). EU policies prioritize enhancement and development of the individual agency of VET learners, including their moral humanistic education, in seeking to make VET as one of the pathways of implementing social justice as a framework (ibid., 2012).

The idea that vocational education and training should help the integration of vulnerable and 'declassified' young people in the society by escaping them from the poverty and exclusion has been shared in Europe by the different interest groups from the mid of the 19th century, starting from the Church and religious charity organisations (Giovanni Bosco and other social saints in Italy, Kolping in Germany), social thinkers and intellectuals (Durkheim), reformers and ideologists of the national education systems (Kirchensteiner). One of the background principles of this idea is a that vocational training should be based on the publicly provided solid general education, including ethical and moral education as a background for shaping resilience, personal, civic and professional attitude/identity of a young person. It has been supported by the institutional 'formalisation' of provision of vocational training, when the apprenticeships-based training has been replaced with public school-based vocational education (Gonon and Deissinger, 2021). In this context the social integration and socialization of vulnerable, at-risk young people becomes integral part of the mission of the public education systems of the newly emerged nation states, impacted by the social uprisings and revolutions of the mid of the 19th century (Clark, 2023), establishment of the national states in the 2nd half

of the 19th century and development of the modern welfare state models in the 20th century.

Following Kitcher (2022), empowering educational/pedagogical capacities of the VET can be enhanced by liberating vocational education from the domination of the Smith's Principle (education narrowly targeted to skill formation for labour market) and directing it to preparing the youth for fulfilling lives and work. Vocational education and training should not only help learners access and engaging in the occupations, but also facilitate their fulfilment through them. In relation to this, VET can significantly contribute to the development of responsibility and citizenship competence of the vulnerable students by engaging them in the different planning activities, listening to their voices, facilitating such students to cooperate in finding solutions to the different problems. Here there can be applied the exercises in joint planning and cooperative decision making, pursued in fostering capacities of empathy and good citizenship (Kitcher, 2022).

Referring to VET curriculum design as a factor of empowerment of vulnerable students, there can be distinguished different aspects, starting from the scope and breadth of VET curriculum oriented to empowerment and ending with the accessibility of the content of VET curricula to low achievers in learning and vulnerable youth. For example, VET curricula adjusted to capacities of low achievers, but not challenging nor significantly improving the state of their competencies lead to low-skilled and low paid employment and present no sustainable solution for such learners in the conditions of high skills economy (Polesel and Clarke 2011; Young, 2008). Balance of consideration of students learning needs and their empowerment in providing solid 'powerful' general and vocational knowledge through comprehensive and undifferentiated curriculum could be more suitable for such learners (Young, 2008; Wheelahan, 2017). The tensions between the aims to achieve educational equality and equal access to education through the standardization of VET curricula from the one side and satisfaction of skills needs in the labour market which require more differentiated approach to VET curriculum design are typical for the VET reforms in different countries (Hiim, 2020).

Empowering pedagogy is always open to the perspective of employment, work, and civil participation. Empowering pedagogical approaches, like the ones developed by Giovanni Bosco, Paolo Freire and Lorenzo Milani, always foster disadvantaged learners to analyse and to discuss different moral dilemmas and aspects of justice in the situations of work and social life, including the moral and justice aspects of employment and industrial relations (Cesari, 2023; Tacconi, 2017; Roghi, 2023). Introduction of the learners to the understanding and analysis of literary-historical-geographical-anthropological perspective of work supplemented with main concepts in economics, sociology, political science and psychology can have very important orientation and educative effect (Kitcher, 2022). Industrial relations and collective defense of labour interests could also be important object of such study and learning (Cesari, 2023).

Other important element of empowering VET pedagogy is raising interest and motivation of disadvantaged learners in acquiring and nurturing powerful science-based knowledge by combining the presentation of this knowledge with practical problems in the work process and everyday life (Young, 2008; Tacconi, Gomez, 2013). Nurturing and fostering of the esthetical interests of vulnerable students is also highly important, including education of the aesthetics related to work processes combining it with the education of creativity (Kitcher, 2022).

Humanistic and justice-oriented direction of vocational education for empowerment of vulnerable young people is distinguished with openness to the needs and problems of the student from the one side, and to the empowering factor of community acting from the other. For example, the pedagogical approaches of the Salesian VET centres in Italy and other countries for empowerment of learners are based on the fostering of educative learning environment in the VET centres through friendly and supportive relationships between teachers and students enhanced by the community and family spirit, promotion of the tacit learning, applying personalized approaches to the vocational didactics, enabling the maturation of personality and internalization of moral and ethical values in the contexts of work (humanistic growth) (Tacconi, 2011; Tacconi, Mejia Gomez 2013). This is done through strong focus on learning in the real work contexts, attention to the development of methodical competencies, including learning to learn skills, development of the “eudaemonic” attitude to work by feeling the taste of “well done work” and nurturing responsible attitude to work, as well as applying didactic strategies based on learning by doing, enabling and encouraging learners to accomplish their masterpieces by allocating authentic tasks of practical training, facilitating transformation of the scholar failures (e.g., dropping out of general education) into the learning success by treating mistakes as source of learning in the context of work, strong orientation of the students to the autonomous execution of future work and learning activities, using humanizing power of religious education well integrated with vocational education (Tacconi, Mejia Gomez 2013). Treating disadvantaged young people with respect, caring for them, working in the small groups and teachers who enjoy working with youth are very important empowering factors of VET (Polesel, 2010; Tacconi 2011).

Similarly, capability approach in the design of the VET practices promotes the orientation of VET towards enabling human freedoms and flourishing of disadvantaged learners, by placing the needs and aspirations of these students at the centre of attention (McGrath et al 2022). It focuses the attention to such elements, as experiencing of multidimensional poverty by the VET learners, gendered perspective, interaction with the political economy of skills account, a broad conceptualization of work, a focus on flourishing, the centrality of aspirations, a multiplicity of decision points in vocational learning pathways and an evaluative dimension. Therefore, the interventions in supporting vulnerable learners involve solving the challenges of funding to sustain during the period of studies, supporting vulnerable students in making decisions about continuation and proceeding with their studies, dealing with the problem of employment in the low skilled or unskilled jobs during the studies (ibid, 2022).

Referring to the institutional aspects of implementation empowering VET practices, one of key challenges of the VET in empowering vulnerable learners is related to provision of high quality specific vocational competencies and skills for changing work processes, what requires focusing on the provision of hard to access high quality work-based learning in the real workplace settings, implying stronger selectivity of learners (Polesel, 2010). This challenge exemplifies a tension between the “social” orientation of the VET provision and application of market-based quality concept of vocational training with important role of input parameters tending to limit the access to high-quality VET, such as increasing selectivity in enrolment or involved additional costs for learners. Such tension can be observed in the dual vocational education and training typical for collective skill formation systems. Dual pathway of VET provision has already proved it’s effectiveness both in terms of quality, accessibility and

inclusiveness of VET provision in the context of fast industrial development and increasing demand of vocational skills in the labour market (Schmidt, 2010; Spöttl, 2016). Increasing attractiveness of VET for highly skilled youth in Germany facilitates the quality of the VET provision but at the same time makes high quality VET too competitive to access for low achievers, including school dropouts (Haasler, 2020). There is implemented transition system to help enter the dual apprenticeship for low-achievers, but rather significant part of these learners are not able to complete it. Provision of less qualifying dual training programmes for youth with learning difficulties and early school leavers indicates efforts of making dual training more accessible for vulnerable students. However, the accessibility of real workplaces for such training highly depends on the economic situation (Schmidt 2010).

Collective skill formation systems are also driven by the interests of productivity and quality of skilled workforce, what often causes the resistance of employers to the attempts to activate the social integration mission in this institutional form of VET provision (Aerne and Bonoli 2021). One of the key shortages of the application of work-based learning and apprenticeship for the integration and empowering of vulnerable youth is the narrow focus of such interventions and programs to the employment, preparation for the first job (Markowitsch, Wittig, 2022). Giesinger (2017) suggests bringing more equity in the dual VET by abolishing the early selection and tracking of students into workplace-based vocational and academic tracks, what should not endanger the quality of dual VET provision and would combine the benefits of strong vocational system and high-quality academic education and would foster the permeability between the VET and higher education studies. Therefore, educational interventions oriented to social integration in the countries with collective skill formation systems are often implemented without direct reference to these systems. Strengthening and extension of school-based VET provision in the economically challenging time periods with a strong component of general education are considered as potentially effective alternatives to dual VET for the disadvantaged learners.

Making VET more accessible and flexible through implementation of modular VET curricula are also considered as options. Here the absence of the solid VET qualification based on the important share of work-based learning in the enterprises presents important obstacles and risks in seeking for employment for the vulnerable or at-risk students completing different alternative or propaedeutic VET courses offered by the VET schools (Schmidt, 2010). This shows importance of the variety of the offer of the vocational and tertiary education opportunities for balancing the flows of learners and widening access to apprenticeship for different learners, including vulnerable ones.

Provision of vocational education integrated with general secondary education is the dominant trend in the school-based VET systems. This model of VET provision can have different implications for vulnerable youth: through higher selectivity it can reduce accessibility of such VET for disadvantaged youth, when such education is accessible it contributes significantly to social mobility of young people with poorer backgrounds (Polesel and Clarke 2011). The Nordic countries seek to increase the integration and empowerment potential of VET by strengthening the provision of general education and work-based learning, practical training (Nylund and Rosvall 2019). Increasing eligibility of vulnerable VET students to apply for higher education and implementation of apprenticeship schemes for the potential dropouts are applied as instruments. Implementation of apprenticeships for vulnerable youth also entails a

risk of blockage them into poorly valuated routes of employment and participation in civil society.

Understanding of variety of institutional and pedagogical factors of empowering VET practices is helpful in the processes of their design, implementation, revising and adjustment. Referring to the analysis above there can be suggested the following objects of research of these factors (Table 1):

Table 1 Institutional and pedagogical factors of empowering VET practices

Institutional factors of empowering VET practices	Pedagogical factors of empowering VET practices
Institutional accessibility (access regime) of VET practice. Relationship of practice to the VET policies and reforms. Reliance on and support of existing public institutional settings and legal framework of VET provision. Stakeholder involvement in the design and implementation of the measure.	Pedagogical goals of education and training practices and their orientation to empowerment. Priorities and targets of curriculum design related to empowering VET practice. Meeting the learning and development needs of vulnerable students with the support potential of the school's/training centre community. Availability of pedagogical support in the school-based and work-based learning environments.

These objects are referred to in the exploration of empowering VET practices in the Baltic countries and Norway described in the next parts.

3 Research methodology

Applied research methods include desk research and case studies of practices for empowerment of vulnerable VET students in the Baltic countries and Norway. These practices have been selected by applying the following criteria:

- 1) Target of the practice: enhancing and supporting social inclusion of the at-risk youth through VET by preventing exclusion from learning and employment and fostering individual growth.
- 2) Types of the practice: strategically oriented and planned intervention/measure/approach aiming to support vulnerable youth in the vocational education and employment processes.
- 3) Scope of the practice: practices initiated, implemented, and applied by the VET schools/providers (level of VET providers).

Following these criteria there have been selected seven practices: three in Lithuania, two in Latvia, one in Estonia and one in Norway.

Selected measures were analysed by applying desktop research of related secondary information and documents, interviews and focus group discussions with teaching staff, support staff, managerial staff, students at risk, relevant national level project managers and experts.

4 Basic characteristics of identified VET practices

4.1 Lithuania

VET practices disclosed in *Lithuania* deal with empowerment of vulnerable students through their active integration in the schools' communities and students' self-governance, scaffolding and guidance in learning and intermediation in the area of practical training and employment in the labour market of scarce opportunities.

1. Empowerment of the at-risk VET students by involving them into the school communities both live and in online format.

This practice is quite widespread and typical for the VET schools operating in the bigger cities (Kaunas and Vilnius in this case). Research in Lithuania disclosed 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.

Students' councils in the general education and VET already have some traditions and play important role in engaging students in decision making processes concerning activities of the school and educational processes, as well as in defending the interests of students. These councils also play a very important role in organizing the cultural life and leisure for the students. They also present the arena for the competence development, as well as fostering the skills and competencies important for the civic engagement. While in case of general education participation in these councils quite often is treated as a source of prestige and competitive advantages of involved students, thus fostering the elitism and meritocracy ideals, in case of VET schools these councils are more treated as important measures of socialization and social integration for the students, in particular for the at-risk students.

Such practice seems to be very effective in raising the self-awareness and self-trust of the at-risk students and creates additional area for the development of both professional and key skills. At-risk students (sometimes with the support and guidance of the social pedagogues) participate in the activities of the students' councils by taking different obligations and engaging in concrete activities. Covid-19 situation also created conditions for the development of the online communities and networks of students and teachers used for the training purposes. Here at-risk students are also actively engaged and contribute to the development and maintenance of such communities. Participation of at-risk students in such online networks and communities was very important support for their learning process during the pandemics and very significantly compensated the lack of the live contacts with the school mates and teachers in this period. Students' councils in the general education and VET target engaging students in decision making processes concerning activities of the school and educational processes, defending the interests of students, organizing the cultural life and leisure and creating space for competence development. While in case of general education participation in these councils quite often is treated as a source of prestige and competitive advantages of involved students, thus fostering

the elitism and meritocracy ideals, in case of VET schools these councils are more treated as important measures of socialization and social integration for the students, in particular for the at-risk students.

The key elements of this good practice are:

1. Guidance of the at-risk students in introducing them students' councils and inviting to take part in their activities.
2. Openness and democratic character of the activities of the students' councils.
3. Delegating concrete roles and responsibilities for the at-risk VET students with a credit of trust in them.
4. Exploiting the available expertise of the young people in the field of social networks by engaging them in the online school communities and networks.

This practice is characterized with different factors which support and hinder empowerment of vulnerable students:

Table 2 Supporting/empowering factors of the practice

Supporting/empowering factors of the practice	
Related to school	Openness of the VET schools in hearing the voice of students' community and respecting their opinion. At-risk students feel to be a full member of school community trusted by the others and delegated with important responsibilities. Increased awareness and interest of the at-risk students about school life, which fosters their socialization.
Related to teachers	Moral support and guidance to students running the activities of students' councils. Creative usage of the activities of students' councils and social networks of schools for the didactic purposes of vocational training (e.g. using the online platforms of students for organisation of training and learning during the Covid-19 pandemics.).
Related to peer-students	Feeling the meaningfulness of the students' councils and online networks/communities in terms of their contribution to the personal and professional development of self, as well as in terms of the accomplishment of the social mission of these structures (altruistic dimension of being useful to others). Credit of trust of the peer-students in the newly engaged members of the students' councils.
Hindering factors of the practice	
Related to school	High students' workload in the training process and their strong

	personal engagement in (concentration on) the studies.
Related to teachers	Teachers' support and motivating of at-risk students is a very important factor for their decision to engage in the students' councils and other school communities. Therefore, it can be presumed that the absence of this factor or its weakness could seriously impede participation of at-risk students.
Related to peer-students	Peers also play a crucial role in „opening the gates“ for at-risk students to engage in the students councils and other school communities. They also recruit newly arriving at-risk students to take part in the students' council by providing them with a credit of trust. The absence of this factor would also reduce the chances for at-risk students to get engaged there.

2. Provision of pedagogical and psychological support needed for the engagement of at-risk students.

The interviews carried out in one VET centre located in the regional centre revealed a practice of provision systemic mentorship for young people from vulnerable groups in several ways:

- Class teacher 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.)
- Mentorship practices offered by peers.

The practice is applied in a big and advanced VET centre in Lithuania. The centre maintains strong collaboration links with regional enterprises, which offer the graduates a job right after the graduation of the vocational training programme. The Centre attracts students mainly from the same and nearby regions. Students' diversity is well addressed by the school administration and teachers. Mentorship for the young people, coming from vulnerable groups, including students with special needs and disabilities, is one of the principles applied and implemented in the centre.

Mentorship and scaffolding permit the Centre to ensure sufficiently smooth integration of young people into the school community, develop skills and competences necessary for the labour market and employability, 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 autism spectrum disorders, however, the centre involves other students and teachers to support and engage these young people. From the very beginning of the school year, class teachers have meetings with parents or relatives of these young people, they try to better understand their situation and accordingly provide the necessary support. The Centre is also much focused on establishing links with enterprises which would be willing to employ students from all groups, including with disabilities. The main challenge remains to ensure a systemic support system and upgrade teachers' competencies to

work and address needs of variety if learners.

This practice contains different factors which support and hinder empowerment of vulnerable students:

Table 3 Supporting/empowering factors of the practice

Supporting/empowering factors of the practice	
Related to school	School administration and teachers' attitudes towards youth from vulnerable groups. Experience working with diverse needs. The developed mentoring model and scaffolding to students.
Related to teachers	Openness, willingness to help. Experience to understand and better know each student – his/her context, needs, etc.
Related to peer-students	Friendly atmosphere, support to peers, full-time engagement in formal and non-formal education activities
Hindering factors of the practice	
Related to school	The Training Centre is much dependent on regional enterprises and their situation, particularly furniture industry. This may cause certain vulnerability to specific study programmes and employability of students from different groups, not only groups at risk.
Related to teachers	Teachers are getting older and there is a limited inflow of young teachers to the centre.
Related to peer-students	Young people from vulnerable groups lack social skills, thus, it remains one of the key challenges to the school to develop these skills as well as support students who are willing to help and mentor. Not all young people at risk are willing to collaborate, some of them have really big special needs and lack professional support not only from social pedagogues but also from special pedagogues.

3. Vocational school mediation activities for integrating socially excluded adolescents into the labour market in a rural region of Lithuania.

In the rural area the lack of social skills and a lack of autonomy among socially excluded young people makes it especially difficult for them to get a good, stable, adequately paid job. Recognising this, vocational school communities are taking initiatives to help pupils find a job during the initial phase of their adaptation to the labour market. In the 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. In a labour market shortage of skilled workers, the school becomes one of the sources of supply of skilled workers for employers. School mediation activities are not formalised in the sense of the Education or Vocational Training Acts, but the management and administration of the activities is often carried out in the context of various projects.

The motivation behind the school's mediation activities is to guide young people living in the region and seeking vocational education to the vocational training programmes implemented in the school. In this way, schools contribute both to the policy of reducing regional exclusion and to the preservation and promotion of the school's mission as the region's educational and cultural centre. The number of pupils enrolled in a school determines the size of the budget allocated by the State and, consequently, the number of vocational teacher positions in the school.

There can be distinguished the following key elements of this good practice:

- A large proportion of vocational teachers 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.
- Schools implementing the apprenticeship model of vocational training 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 excluded adolescents.
- Vocational teachers in regional schools 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, schools fulfil 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 competence of the young worker by means of a recommendation (letter, testimonial) for the student/apprentice.
- The school develops projects with content focused on activities aimed at reducing social exclusion 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).
- Schools have developed databases of potential employers relevant to the content of vocational training programmes. They use these databases to organise various forms of practical training as well as apprenticeship training models.

Implementation of this measure also faces some challenges and difficulties. In schools in remote regions, the phenomenon of burnout is observed among members of the school community, due to demographic problems and the endless restructuring of the school network and the constant change of teaching content. Young, qualified teachers are reluctant to go to schools in remote regions, and teachers of Generation X or Boomer generation dominate the teaching profession. In remote regions, small businesses and the agricultural sector dominate, where the work is difficult, strenuous and not so attractive for young people. Adolescents often become disillusioned with this environment and plan to emigrate to other countries.

This practice contains different factors which support and hinder empowerment of vulnerable students:

Table 4 Supporting/empowering factors of the practice

Supporting/empowering factors of the practice	
Related to school	Identifying the behavioural characteristics of socially excluded pupils and organising pedagogical scenarios (projects) for labour market inclusion.
Related to teachers	Remaining open and empathetic to students experiencing social exclusion and contributing to non-formal education activities and curriculum.
Related to peer-students	Helping students to know themselves in terms of their abilities, feelings or physical powers. Helping them to realise that they are responsible for their life, career, family and network of friends.
Hindering factors of the practice	
Related to school	• The never-ending restructuring of the school network and curriculum reforms; • A redundant system of teaching quality, full of pointless bureaucracy; • Excessive state interference in the curriculum, leading to its depersonalisation. As a result, teachers often become disillusioned and young people shy away from a career in teaching.
Related to teachers	Teachers working in school communities in remote regions are of the older age (55-60 years old), which is why the phenomenon of burnout syndrome is often observed.
Related to peer-students	Socially excluded young people are characterised by a weak expression of the values of sociality (the world of relationships), because the values related to material and hedonistic needs satisfaction predominate amongst them.

4.2 Latvia

In Latvia best practice examples for the work with the youth at risk have been identified both, at national and institutional level. The research methods applied in the work were: desk research on national legislation, policy documents and projects, as well as content analysis of the interviews with students at risk and focus group discussions with teachers – implemented during

project WP2. In addition, interviews have been performed with relevant national level project managers and specialists to obtain more specific information regarding the interventions implemented within various targeted projects and activities.

Based on this, the report has been structured in two parts (chapters):

1. National level policies and projects to support VET institutions and other involved stakeholders in implementing work with students at risk.
2. Institutional responses to national policies and examples of best practice by VET institutions.

Both the parts – national level policies and VET institutional responses to it are closely related and mutually complementary. It has been recognised, that the development of such complex social systems as education cannot be controlled without involvement and interaction of all participants.

1. National level policies and projects to support VET institutions in working with students at risk.

To address the issue of work with 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 the students. Teachers are given the opportunity to improve professionally and strengthen their skills in working with students. Methodological aids have been developed. 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 full-fledged statistics, as well as allows long-term evaluation of the effectiveness of the measures. Initiatives of youth NGOs are also supported to raise the problem of dropping out of school among young people themselves, address learners with the help of peers and involve them in activities. Measures are aimed at early diagnosis of problems and solutions. Through local governments, individual support is provided to learners who might stop studying due to lack of financial resources, for example, expenses for transport, meals, service hotel, etc. are compensated. 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.

2. Targeted methodologies and training courses for VET institutions administration, teachers and other staff for work with students at risk

Within a targeted national level project “PUMPURS” a methodology has been worked out how to better support VET institutions administrations, teachers, and other staff for work with students at risk. To ensure that all potential institutions are informed about the support measures in working with youth at risk, introductory seminars are being provided for employees of educational institutions. Their purpose is to provide basic information about the creation of a prevention system in the prevention of early school leaving risks. The aim of the introductory seminars is:

- *“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,*
- *Inform about the individual support measures of the early school leaving risk group, development and implementation of the individual support plan, preparation of documentation*
- *Inform the participating groups about support measures,*
- *To increase the self-efficacy of pedagogues in working with learners of the risk group of early school leaving."*

Specially designed professional competence development programs are being offered. They are intended for educators and municipal youth affairs specialists and youth workers. It is typically a program of 12 academic hours over two days. The purpose of the programs is to improve the competence and efficiency of pedagogues of general and professional education institutions to promote the participation of learners in the pedagogical process.

These programs 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 programs are being provided in all regions of Latvia (Riga region, Riga, Vidzeme, Latgale, Kurzeme, Zemgale). Each professional competence development program is implemented no less than 15 (fifteen) times. The list of developed and implemented programs represent the following topics:

1. "Supportive learning environment - a resource in education".
2. "Individual and group counseling - a type of professional activity in education".
3. "Teacher's competence and effectiveness in today's pedagogical reality"
4. "Youth work with young people at risk of early school leaving".
5. "The role of social-emotional education in reducing early school leaving in an educational institution".
6. "Teachers' competence in solving cases of violence in the educational environment".
7. "Diversification of educational methods in work with students at risk of early school leaving".
8. "Pedagogical strategies for changing students' behavior patterns to reduce the risk of early school leaving".
9. "Social worker's work with family and students with a high risk of early school leaving".
10. "Working with parents of early school leavers.

Examples of specific programs

The objective of the “*Individual and group counselling-type of vocational activity in education*” programme for the development of professional competence was to offer 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 a 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 and skills to assess and apply the best practices and techniques for preventing or reducing early school leaving;
- skills in reflexing 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 teachers in general and vocational education institutions of the supportive learning environment as an essential resource in education in the 21 st century in order to promote interaction with learners, thereby reducing or eliminating the risks of early school leaving. After the acquisition of the vocational competence development programme, educators of general education institutions 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;
- the ability to plan the conditions of the assisting learning environment, taking into account the basic needs of the learners and providing them with support as a learning environment resource.

The aim of the “*Competency and effectiveness of the teacher in modern pedagogical realities*” programme for the development of professional competence was to improve the understanding of teachers in general and vocational education institutions about the skills of rolling and the effectiveness of the teacher in order to promote the participation of learners in the pedagogical process, thereby reducing or preventing early school leaving. Following the acquisition of the above-mentioned programme for the development of professional competence, educators were able to demonstrate:

- knowledge and understanding of the teacher's variability, its nature in preventing or reducing early school leaving;
- the ability to analyse, synthesize and evaluate problems associated with the risks of early school leaving;
- the ability to use knowledge in forecasting, planning and evaluating rolling skills in modern pedagogical realities, in their pedagogical practices, while respecting and respecting the individual differences between learners;
- skills to formulate and describe issues related to early school leaving; share experience in addressing such situations, involve social partners – educators, educational establishments support staff, parents, etc.

At the end of each vocational training programme, teachers assessed the quality of the training and expressed the main lessons learned. Teachers stressed the importance of understanding the causes of early school leaving, creating an emotionally positive learning environment, listening to learners, promoting their learning achievements, working with parents, colleagues, municipalities and other stakeholders.

3. Preventing the burn-out of teachers

Apart from availability of targeted training courses for work with youth at risk the teachers are being supported (provided) with supervision - consultative support that helps educators and support staff cope with the challenges of professional activity. The purpose of the supervisions 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 the ability to be aware of one's own resources in order to reduce the risks of burnout syndrome.

An innovative interactive approach to address the issue of students at risk

As an interactive approach to address the issue of students at risk – specially designated TV program “Class” has been created as support resources for all involved stakeholders. Within the program real-life situations are being discussed among teachers, specialists, and young people themselves. The program includes a range of video films on a broad spectrum of topics:

- Bullying at school
- Failure
- Pregnancy during school
- My appearance shocks many
- Relationship with parents too complicated
- Modern technologies and the Internet
- Life without parents
- Combining work with studies
- Life at a boarding school
- "Kicked out" of school because of bad grades and behaviour
- Exam stress
- What to do after 9th grade
- Relations between Latvians and Russians in the modern school environment
- Appearance and school
- Studies abroad
- I want to be the best
- Divorced families - today's reality
- School time love
- Who does today's teenager trust?
- Basting (escaping from classes, non-attendance)
- Social strata. How important is money?
- What does the child experience when changing schools?
- Life in dormitories
- Patriotism
- To have or not to have homework
- Extracurricular lessons
- Sports lessons
- My friend failed. He committed suicide.
- Friendship and school
- Individual consultations
- Parents abroad
- Competition and rankings in school
- Creative freedom at school

- Useless subjects
- Adolescent addictions

As a result of the participation in the TV programs the involved stakeholders have had a more immediate and more emotional involvement in addressing their problems and most urgent / burning issues. Also, all the colleagues and peers who have been watching the program (or replaying it at a later stage, also repeatedly) have been addressed in a more immediate mode, since their own colleagues and peers have been talking about their problems from the screen. In this way the students have been able to gain awareness that they are not alone with their problems, that there are other peers besides them and that there are certain solutions for their problems, as well. Alternatively, the teachers in all VET institutions have the possibility to discuss the various common problems and look for optimal solutions. This has been a particularly successful initiative.

4. Institutional responses to national policies and examples of best practice by VET institutions.

Examples of good practices from schools

4.1. The introduction of the position of specially designated non-academic staff members – group mentors

The Ogre Vocational Technical school (OVT) has pioneered in developing its own system for identifying the needs of the students at risk at their school and for communicating these needs to all relevant colleagues or services of their school for taking further actions. The system works as follows: The school has appointed 9 group mentors for the work with students from year 1 to 4. Every mentor works with 1-4 year students of a particular specialty (or several specialties). These class mentors are freed from any teaching, they work full load for the needs of students at risk. At the disposal of the 9 class mentors there are designated premises - 3 rooms allocated for communication with students any time. The work of the 9 group mentors in its turn is being organised and supervised by the institution level coordinator.

The prime task of the group mentor is to be available to the student of risk at any time to listen to what the student wants or needs to discuss. Depending on the type of issue or the problem the student speaks about, the group mentor either renders immediate support or notes it and organizes further necessary activities. For example, if the problem is related to academic issues, the group mentor may talk to the teacher of a specific subject. If it is a psychological or emotional problem, the mentor may speak to the school psychologist. If it is a social problem, the mentor may speak to the social worker. Alternatively, if it is a financial problem, the mentor speaks to the school administration etc. In this way there is a clear procedure put in place 1) for a students to know where to talk about their problems (the entrance point is the class mentor); 2) for the administration, teachers and other staff of the school – how the obtained or incoming information on the students at risk is being circulated internally – so that it is placed correctly and immediate or timely solutions are sought. This approach, among other issues, helps also to solve the contradiction between teaching and upbringing, addressed by pedagogical theories (Gudjons, p.281).

During interviews with students in WP 2 it clearly came out from the narrative of students from OVT that the class mentors are an indispensable support in their studies and lives since the students know the particular person (the class mentor) whom they can trust and to whom they

can talk about any of their problems any time. The mentor in its turn organises further circulation of information and the necessary procedures. Vika, for example, said, “Most of all at school I like to have contact with people, including adults and teachers. It's interesting to listen to them - what they say, what they think and how they analyse life in general. How different people are - I guess I have more of it”. To the question: “Do you think teachers know you well? Vika said, “Yeah, it's cool, we're lucky with her. She understands. We can write to her any time - even on her holiday or when she's on a sick leave. You can write without problems. She will help and support me”. To the question: “How do teachers support you? Not only the class mentor teachers and other staff”, Vika says, “They are trying to help. Answer all the questions and even sometimes works on their holiday. They help, answers the letters. If anything with the marks, for example, you must improve it, the teachers are always open”. To the question: “... when living in dormitories, who supports you most, e.g. the dormitory staff, the class mentor or the teacher of a particular subject? “Vika said, “We've got one teacher in tech, really cool. And she always supports. And also, the dorm teacher. She also comes in the evenings, checking if we're in the rooms, maybe sitting there, talking to us. We can talk about all the problems”.

The main benefit – such a system prevents the risk that the student is frustrated not knowing to whom to speak in a difficult situation, especially if there are several types of problems parallel, e.g. academic, social etc. another important aspect is that the student can trust the person (mentor), since the staff position has been specifically designed for this purpose. The group mentor has been specially trained to deal with these problems. He knows how to deal with the issues internally, how to re-schedule the information or to whom to convey the problem further on for subsequent solutions. But most importantly – he has been trained not to further frustrate or intimidate the students but, on the contrary, to assurance that the student is not alone with the problems and that the school staff is not there 'to punish', but on the contrary, to help and support in difficulty. It came out clearly from most of the interviews,

The OVT has disseminated their experience and practice to other VET schools in Latvia, according to the discussion with the school director who also informed that some other VET schools are considering overtaking of this practice. At least one more VET school has already done so, according to the available information.

4.2 Internal control system of the VET institution in work with students at risk

The Ogre Vocational school (OVT) has developed its internal control system for identifying and managing risks in the work with the target group – students at risk. 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. They may be related to social environment, the learning environment at (a) the educational institution, particular or special needs of the learner or the learners' economic situations.

The VET institution has developed a specific form that allows to identify risks for early leaving. The staff responsible person (group mentor) can identify these risks by evaluating the student's learning activity, behaviour, family situation, communication and collaboration with classmates and teachers. After the risk assessment, individual support measures can be developed for the student and the necessary preventive/ support/ intervention measures are being applied

according to the identified situation. These may include 1) consultations (with subject teachers, psychologists, social pedagogues, or other specialists) or 2) material support or compensations, for example for public transport tickets, accommodation, meals, or individual training resources, based on the individual situation.

In order 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. The individual plans are confirmed by the school director. The group mentor implements the monitoring of the plan. The coordinator of the 9 group mentors in it turns follows the whole process at institutional level and renders support to the group mentors, if needed.

4.3 Possibility of the support staff to develop their competence based on the needs or problems of the school students at risk

The staff of the school who work with students at risk needs a special training how to deal with this target group in general. During their work they encounter various problems of students, and the solutions may differ in each case. Addressing these problems often require a more specific or targeted training or competence development. During the focus group discussions and interviews the teachers and staff of the schools have reported about a possibility they can benefit from – receive a specific, close-to tailor made training and development. This has become possible due to the (initiative of the staff of the) European Social Fund (ESF) project. Not only this staff is executing their direct obligations in high quality but are also improving their performance. This is done by using the information coming from the teachers benefiting from the project. The project staff have developed and offer targeted training to address the problems or clusters of problems that the staff from schools have identified in real life situations and in practice.

Apart from the regular national legal framework to support students at risk there are certain initiatives implemented by a targeted ESF project “PUMPURS”. As part of the project tasks a methodology has been worked out on how to better support teachers and school staff for work with students at risk. At the same time, by their own initiative and based on the observations during the first years of project implementation and interview data from the involved teachers, the project staff concluded that it was not enough to render general support to the teachers. Instead, the support must be more targeted also in relation to the *main (most typical) clusters of problems or issues identified*. Consequently, the project staff took the liberty to create a sub-system of four larger groups of problems based on the underlying causes that create a potential risk for a student, thus improving the overall methodology. These four basic groups are:

1. Social environment, health (pregnancy, sickness of family members or of their own, etc.).
2. Learning risks, problems (mobbing, dyslexia, inability to follow the study content, school absences, academic 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), transport costs, etc.

4. Family risks (parents in long absences - abroad, need of the students to look after their siblings; parents' problems with alcohol, domestic violence, insufficient support or understanding from parents).

This allowed the project staff to prepare the training and competence development programs of schoolteachers in a more targeted way, so that the teachers can benefit from the training in a concrete way relevant to the real-life situations they encounter at school. The project staff has gone even further and have created a set of video films where apart from adults the students at risk talk about their problems and challenges. These films are a powerful tool for the internal discussions at VET schools, since all the involved sides can both - talk and be heard.

Based on the interviews and focus group discussions with teachers it follows that the approach has turned out to be very helpful to school administrations, teachers, and support staff. Firstly, the school personnel can think about the presented or identified student problems in a more systemic way and consequently render the support more effectively and efficiently. Secondly, the teacher can more easily identify what training or competence gaps they have and thus apply for competence development courses in a targeted way. This produces the needed results (acquired competences) in the fastest way and saves resources on training (the training course can be chosen according to specific needs of the teacher in general or at a particular situation).

The school management addresses the training needs of their staff by the following main approaches:

- 1) By offering participation in the existing professional development courses created within the framework of various projects.
- 2) Apart from the courses the school provides opportunity for the teachers and staff to participate various events related to the problems of early leaving and risks - seminars, supervision, targeted workshops, conferences, as well as benefit from methodological means and support.
- 3) Other types of informative and administrative assistance, for example, by organizing internal discussions on specific problems of risk groups, making the best and most efficient use of programs (TV and radio) dedicated to youth problems and including them in the educational process.

Counselling/consultative support is available for teachers and support staff (teacher, psychologist, social worker, teacher's assistant, special education teacher, sign language interpreter, ergo-therapist and other). Apart from the state system and additionally to it the school management organise targeted help to find the best ways to render support. Internal discussions are being organised regarding concrete cases. A very helpful tool is the discussions and analysis of the cases presented by the video films by the *PUMPURS* project where analysis is being made and potential solutions proposed for various typical (clusters) of problems.

4.4 Support for students at risk to obtain a job or activities for generating additional income

At Riga State Technical Vocational School effort is being taken to help to find a job (if need be) for students at risk, especially by involving them in work-based learning. Another innovative initiative by the school is a special offer to academically successful students from the 'at risk – group', especially in more remote affiliations of the school – to become the subject

teachers' assistants. It is an additional financial support for the student, as a certain sum of money is being added to their stipend. But no less importantly – the student receives a powerful boost to his/her confidence and belief in one's ability. In addition – it is a good possibility to improve one's competence, since by helping the subject teacher the student in the role of the teacher's assistant also learns in a more profound and systemic way. This innovative practice is much appreciated by the staff and students in the affiliation at a remote district of Latvia in Latgale which is statistically the least advanced part of Latvia, with marked social and economic problems. Economic and moral support to young people there may even be more important than in the central parts of the country.

4.5 Material support and compensation of expenses

Many schools have introduced the system that allows to provide material support to students at risk by compensation for public transport tickets, compensation for accommodation expenses, compensation for catering costs, reimbursement of costs of purchasing personal training equipment, compensation for the purchase of personal use items.

Some schools, e.g. the Riga State Technical Vocational school, have invented a practice to use part of the additional income or (mecenat/ patron) donations to support students at risk. The support can be of various kind, but most typically it is a partial (50%) coverage of the dormitory costs, especially if the student comes from a 3 or more children family, or a 100% coverage if the student is an orphan.

4.6 Supporting creative initiatives and individual interests of students at risk to increase their well-being, self-esteem and motivation to achieve a fulfilling life

Many schools are paying attention to voluntary and self- governance of students at risk to improve their confidence and well-being. This may include:

- *the possibility to engage in youth NGO projects in municipalities*

Katrin: To the question: "Do you also participate in extracurricular activities?" Answer: "I was like a teammate within "Spirit of Adventure" team. Kristians also goes there, and all kinds of creative activities take place there. And there, if you have a good idea that you want to implement, you can be given money for the implementation of that idea. And then there are events for children or teenagers: a lot of things of all kinds, hiking, traveling and all that.

Anda: "This year there was a very big project ... where we participated. It was the Wellbeing Roadmap where we talked and learned about student-teacher relationships and how to improve them, especially during COVID. It was also our own Wellness Roadmap for future. And they gave a lot of knowledge. We stayed at Jelgava technical school for three days with students from some other schools. And the main goal was to make an event in my school related to mental health. And how to help students and how to build relationships with teachers and school staff. Because it was such a big project where we had to write a lot. The municipality was there as well, and so. We were given money - 1000 euros. We created an "Open Day" event. There we invited Latvian influencers. And also, those... professionals... professional psychologists from the Youth Crisis Center. Just forgot the name. Yes."

- *participation in student governance bodies*

Ulla answered the question: "Do you have opportunities to get involved in organizing any events at school?" Can you influence what happens at school?" Answers: "Yes, I can, I am in the students' parliament. We can recommend something there, for example, to the president of our parliament. Then he will already discuss with the school director. All of us together, if we want to organize something, we go and say what we would like to see or some kind of event. We can influence, yes. "

Anda when asked: "What do you like about school, what are the challenges? What is interesting there." Answers: "School life...currently in the third year. I can proudly say that I am the deputy president of the self-government. I also ran for the president of the self-government a week ago. Unfortunately, I didn't win, and I didn't become one. But self-government is a very important period for me, which also gave me a stronger sense of responsibility. I feel that I look at life a little differently. Well, I have a very good friend in the self-government, who has also taught me a lot... also the teacher in the dormitories is very supportive. Because as a self-government we organised events there, and since then, many teachers also say a lot of good words about us, about me. The teacher always says a good word, and I say a good word to her."

Katrin to the question: "Have you been involved in school events?" Answers: "Yes, I get involved a lot. As I already mentioned, I am also in self-government. We also mostly organise all the events. We used to break out rooms on Halloween. We have had Teachers' Days. Hey, we had the big event "You are not alone". And now there's a lot more on the way. We just recently elected the new school president. And we also had another event, even though we had remote learning, it all happened through "ZOOM". I also mentioned that I participated in the Culture Canon contest with teacher Laine Vilkalne. And with my two fellow students, where everything is still in progress. I mostly try to participate whenever there is something to participate in."

Elza to the question: "Do you believe that you have the opportunity to influence some processes at school if you wanted to?" Answers: "I think, if you wanted to, then - yes. For example, we have self-government at our school. You can come to them and say that you have something else on your mind. They tend to listen. Self-government can, say, also convey some information to the school management about a debatable opinion."

Riana answers to the question: "But also, let's say, if you want to change something, can you, for example, mention to the teachers what you think might be done differently or what should be changed in the school or in the learning process?" Answers: "Yes, yes. But more about events. I don't discuss the classes. But in terms of events, we try to offer something more to teachers - what could be, well, what is interesting for young people."

- *engaging in sports*

Nils to the question: "What is going on at your school?" What about extracurricular activities?" Answers: "Well, we have several clubs. Like, for example, its self-government, athletics, basketball and... dance group. There is dance training. I participated in track and field training. I participated in one competition, but several competitions did not take place due to Covid. Yes, there are such groups."

- *singing in a choir*

Riana to the question: "Are you involved in any extracurricular activities?" Answers: "Yes." I participate - I sing in the choir. We have a youth choir. I used to dance, but now I haven't danced for a year. And that's all."

- *engaging in youth scout or young guards' teams*

Kristaps to the question: "And what events, activities have you been involved in outside of school?" Answers: "Outside of school? For example, I have signed up for young guards. Once I'm there, I can go there after the classes. If I'm not mistaken, we now have it on Wednesdays every week. We can discuss everything among young people."

Riana: "At first I had the idea of going to the border guard, after all this, because I used to like the border guard very much. When I found out how difficult it all is and how difficult it is for women in general, I changed my mind. But since I still have a year and a half left, I'm still thinking about what to do."

Egija also spoke about joining the Young Guard and making a serious decision to pursue a career in the Navy.

- *sustainable approaches – collecting waste-paper and other (green) activities*

Students are also involved in sustainability and green transformation activities. In the Riga State Technical School, for example, collecting wastepaper was organised. The students not only contributed to sustainable use of resources but also developed their sense of responsibility, about the value of resources and the need to be sensitive to green issues.

- *using Erasmus programme to keep students interested and to continue and improve their studies at school*

Katrin: "I'm also trying to get involved in "Erasmus" because it's not only in school, but also outside. Because I think it's a very good opportunity to fly somewhere and relax and get to know new people and all that." To the question: "Have you already gone somewhere with Erasmus?" Answer: "Not yet. I applied last year, but I didn't make it. However, two of my classmates did. But this year too, so far, I think, there has been no application yet. But there has been a small competition where you must draw an image how you feel about "Erasmus". Rather than drawing something that you think Erasmus looks like or feels like. And I have submitted such a work."

4.3 Estonia

The case identified in *Estonia* deals with a project targeting development of competencies of NEETs needed for the employment in the changing labour market. Project CODE (Competence Opportunities for Digital Employment) is a 3-year international project where partners develop curricula designed for at-risk and NEET youth. In addition to professional training, they contain a variety of supporting components (learning, communication, work skills, entrepreneurship, etc.). In January 2020, the first vocational elective year course started in one VET school within the CODE, where the participant gained a broad-based knowledge of the possibilities of digital design and practice self-analysis and teamwork skills. Graduates receive a 2nd level professional certificate and can work or study further in design specialties (or another specialty) (<https://creativeeurope.digital/>).

CODE's lead partner is Bulgaria, and in addition to Tartu Art School (one of Estonian vocational schools), public and third sector organizations from Italy, Romania and Latvia were participating. <https://creativeeurope.digital/>

For example, in the framework of this project there has been developed curriculum in a vocational school in Tartu, Estonia. It is a 6 month to one-year lasting program on graphic design targeted to young people at risk. This programme has been initiated as part of the international project “CODE – Competence Opportunities for Digital Employment”.

The students who participated in the code project received a scholarship with which they could cover accommodation and living expenses (scholarship received students who participated at least 75% in the courses). Code project also implemented a mentor program designed to support at-risk students. There was constantly provided support from individual teachers (students had guidance, someone to talk to), teaching and training activities involved no hierarchical relationships between student and teacher or between student and mentor. In CODE program students always had the chance to talk to the mentor if they had any problems, also once or twice a week they had group meetings where they talked about their feelings and problems. The whole group was involved in discussion.

The code project also implemented counselling classes and taught techniques to support mental health (yoga, meditation).

What regards supportive didactic approaches, the real cases (e.g., in the topic of art design) were given as homework, which the students had to solve independently, this gave them responsibility and courage. The atmosphere of the school was created to be very supportive, friendly, so that the students could feel at ease. Mentors and teachers in CODE program always supported students, if the student didn't show up to lessons or courses, then they immediately contacted the student and asked why he/she was absent. If students had some problems, they felt that their problems were taken seriously.

Group meetings were supportive, and this gave peer acceptance to all group members. For example, in the interview one student said that she couldn't understand why one boy in the group always comes to school in a bad mood. In one group meeting she realized that this boy could never have breakfast in the mornings because his parents didn't have enough money to buy food and he was always hungry.

The CODE students were able to work for companies as part of the project, and the best ideas were also recruited 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 CODE project got a job in this field or continued their studies in this field.

The subjects in the code project were created in cooperation with specific companies and organisations. Students were able to go and complete an internship in them, as well. Several study trips to companies related to the study field were also organised for the students.

Sharing experiences with peer-students and mentors helped to understand students' thoughts, feelings and behaviour, it gave them the knowledge that they can change things by themselves and be more independent to understand specific aspects in their life. Previous students who

completed the code project have been invited to the program to talk about their experience to students, some have also been involved as mentors. They have shared good practices among peers.

4.4 Norway

In Norway there were explored the cases of good practiced from two exemplary upper secondary schools in a county in western part of the country, and how have worked to prevent dropouts from vocational education programmes. The two schools have, in various ways, worked systematically over time to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment for the students, in broad collaboration with external actors, which we in this text call as ‘layers’. Indeed, there are a range of help- and support layers around the vulnerable students at Norwegian VET schools, which include:

- Teachers
- School management (rector, heads of school departments)
- Practice teachers (in enterprises)
- Special teachers
- Health/school nurses
- Educational Psychology Services (PPT) (other mental health services)
- Follow-up services’ advisors for NEETs (*oppfølgingstjenesten*, OT)
- The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV)
- Social services by the municipalities

In the county in question here, this work has been generally very successful, resulting in an increased completion rate of secondary education.

The data based the description of the cases is based on two focus group interviews with a range of actors, who have been involved in this collaboration. Upper secondary/vocational education belongs under the county level administration in Norway. Since the two schools are in the same county, it has been natural to approach the “best practice” in the context and 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 priorities (2021) are:

1. Increase knowledge about suicide, self-harm (“cutting”) and promotion of good mental health.
2. Strengthen the cross-sectoral collaboration in the county focusing on mental health.

The measures targeted to students are:

1. Develop and implement a joint guide concerning mental health among the students.
2. Strengthen collaboration between the county and other actors (stakeholders) sharing responsibility for at-risk (*utsatte*) children and youth in the county.
3. Strengthen the schools’ competence in mental health issues.

A comprehensive description of the VET as a part of the upper secondary education system in Norway is available on the website of the Directorate of Education (Utdanningsdirektoratet, Udir)¹.

¹ <https://www.udir.no/in-english/norwegian-vocational-education-and-training/>

4.4.1 Introduction of the good practice schools

Selected schools are referred as P1 and P2. Their main characteristics are provided in Table 5 below. Since 2020 upper secondary VET in Norway covers 10 education programmes. Both schools are running all of them.

Table 5 Characteristics of the Best Practice schools (P1 & P2)

	P1	P2
Size	Medium almost 800 students/170 staff	Big 2200 students/320 staff
Age	Old	A merger of two schools in 2014, orig. established in 1924 & 1943
Location	City	City
Number of vocational training programs	10	10 + introductory class and adult education

4.4.2 Summary of the success factors

When it comes to the major success factors in the above indicated schools, the group interviews reveal the following (in a random order):

1. The schools are being adjusted to the students, not vice versa - students are being listened to.
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 before.
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 the vulnerable students are individual, a tailor-made package.
9. Collaboration with and support functions from outside the school, make it possible to keep the vulnerable students at school, so that they do not fall outside/dropout.
10. Good routines for collaboration and between different professional groups (the team around children / pupils). EPS (Educational pedagogical service), NAV, supervisors in training, training office, program 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.

From the Norwegian perspective most of the issues mentioned in the EmpowerVET Best Practice criteria are regulated nationally, e.g. through Act on primary school and secondary education ([Education Act](#)), and for staff through the Act relating to working environment, working hours and employment protection, etc. (Working Environment Act). The analysis of the good practice shows exemplary implementation of the *intentions* in the regulative

framework.

4.4.3. Governance and administration

Engagement and commitment of the school administration

The school (P2) rector is committed to, follows-up, and participates in the work with issues concerning these students – attending also planning meetings of the student specific measures when needed (risk for dropout), and leading the regularly multi-actor meetings every second week. The school's measures cover the challenges with the at-risk students on both system- and individual level. – P1 the school does not mention the rector or other admin perspectives or their participation.

The schools do not have targeted projects of their own to at-risk students (see county level initiatives in Introduction). However, school P2 participates in a collaboration project, with six other schools in the county, with a particular focus on dropout issues. No specific current plans were mentioned in the interviews at the whole school level in regards at-risks students.

Human Resources (Health, Environment & Safety, HES)

The schools must have a HES plan, according to the work environment law, for both the staff and students. Health services for students are available, covering both mental and physical health issues (e.g. by a school-nurse). See also Introduction and section 2.3.5 Mental health later in the text.

Local collaboration (governments, employers, youth, cultural, environmental organisations) for PPD of young persons at risk

The school P2 is involved in rather broad and solid local collaboration. There are meeting arenas both within the school and outside the school between the multi-professional actors and support instances, emphasizing the importance of good structure to organize help for the vulnerable students. The school headmaster/ rector, together with the multi-professional community (*det profesjonsfaglige felleskapet*), is an important link connecting and following up the different arenas and their collaboration.

One example of this is that local municipality gave a summer job to at-risk students, the summer before they started at the secondary school (to add to their school motivation). Furthermore, municipality can provide additional measures/Social services to support the wellbeing of the worst-off students, where the schools' measures and solutions run short. Still, at least one advisor (*rådgiver*) suggests that the school should be even more active in looking at collaboration opportunities with the municipality with these students. To some extent neighboring municipalities also seem to collaborate to better support these students (except in regards the free choice of school).

Collaboration of the multiple professionals within the school is viewed as crucial for success. However, the collaboration around vulnerable students in addition outside the school, means that it is easier for the school to help these students. Collaboration is the key in supporting at-risk students.

Schools have also developed particular local transition plans (*overgangsplan*) to build systematic and better-quality practice around the transition-collaboration both between schools, also across municipalities, if needed. Another example of the local plans is the “flying start”

(earlier pre-orientation course in the summer), aiming at safe start of the secondary school for vulnerable students.

System for differentiation (types of problems or challenges of students)

The system seems to be built on the principle of uniqueness of the situation of each vulnerable student and functioning on the basis of close multi-professional collaboration and exchange of information around and about the students, also and perhaps especially 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 different measures at the school. Nevertheless, support and solutions for each of the students are tailor made.

4.4.4. Work and conditions of teachers and support staff

Staff availability

The only thing the interviews bring up about staff availability is that there is, indeed, a whole range of different professionals available around and for these students ("layers around a student" / *lag rundt eleven*) to support and help them health-wise, and regarding school (learning goals) and job placements, in addition to their teachers and the school management.

Competence development

The teachers in school P2 express a need for more better competence, particularly related to so called "social pedagogy" and in special education. "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 preventive" (a teacher at P2 school).

4.4.5. Students: conditions, opinions, aspirations, and opportunities

Living conditions

The interviews don't mention anything about the living conditions of the students. The only related thing that comes up, is that the students can also come from the neighboring municipalities, related to the free-school-choice policy, which does not seem to serve very well the most vulnerable students.

Individualised student support

The school P2 clearly has a very strong individual approach to support their vulnerable students. Indeed, as the challenges of these students are so versatile, in a sense unique package of challenges, the predominant approach to their support and solutions to this end, are tailor made to meet the needs of each individual case/set of challenges.

As the staff at the P2 has been working with these problematics already a long many years, they report to have made enormous progress methodologically: they have been able to develop a vast range / repertoire of different measures and solutions to support vulnerable students and help them to complete their education. "Earlier you either came to the school and studied at school or you were out." (a teacher at P2).

Continuous academic support

At least on some level continuous academic support is continuously available for the 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 has been to introduce more flexibility to the learning assessment systems (*vurdering*) to reduce the performance fear/angst among the students. Furthermore, more flexibility has been introduced nationally to the time (number of years) that the students can use to complete their education (Completion Reform - *fullføringsreformen*).

However, it can be a challenge to support students to level their expectations achievement goals realistically. As a teacher at P1 explains:

"... there is something about the collaboration between the 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 the 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."

The teachers underline that it is important to help and guide students, so that they both can nurture their ambitions, but also choose a study program which is realistic in relation to their abilities and aptitudes. Failure in such assessment and choices is likely to predict a dropout.

Staff support to students

There is, indeed, plenty of support available for the students in secondary education. At P1, the teachers explained that they have support from the Educational Pedagogical Services or the school psychology service (EPS), primarily in relation to writing an expert assessment, but also support to work more system oriented. One of the teachers mention that the EPS functions as a support (mediator) for the collaboration with parents of students who need extra support. (P1). The schools also cooperate well with The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), which can provide strong support (P1). One function to this NAV support is so-called youth advisers. P2 school has focus on multilingual students and their skills in the Norwegian language. They get good support from the language centre located at the municipality level, and from so-called refugee advisers. NAV seems to participate in the coordination of this work. Furthermore, the teachers at P2 receive support from EPS and from the so-called "follow-up team", which supports students who are at risk of dropping out. However, the teachers and school administrators face also some challenges in the collaboration with NAV, expressed in the following quote from a teacher at the P2 school:

"It is the big fear that we get students, who really shouldn't be at school, who really are here only because NAV requires them to have a "day care service", so that they then are associated with a school [i.e. not a drop-out], and then they get paid the NAV-support. But then they really have no development, there is no direction for what they are doing."

In this way, support from NAV could contribute to a "learned helplessness", where students become dependent of the financial support they receive. The same teacher continued about one such student:

"He can go to school all his life. He gets money from NAV every year. Ad 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 the money."

Mental health support & Support to students' character building

Mental health support is available for the students, as needed, as a part of the schools' student health services. Furthermore, all teachers (class teachers) in secondary schools have participated in a training course in mental health provided by the county, and there has been a long-term focus on work on students' mental health and wellbeing. See also the Introduction.

Taken that students' problems and challenges have been building up oftentimes during several years of schooling, prior to the secondary school, teachers are attentive to supporting students

in building of their coping strategies (*mestringfølelse*) in various situations and with their various challenges.

Correspondingly, teachers are very concerned about supporting students' motivation and acknowledging (*anerkjenne*) them in the place they are in their lives, take them as they are.

Safety and belonging

The students' safety (*trygg*) and belonging (*tilhørighet*) clearly are strong priorities in these schools. Teachers' long-term priority in Norwegian schools in general has been the classroom environment and safety for all students, having a zero tolerance to bullying of any kind.

School P2 also provides small group rooms for students, who get anxious in large classrooms with many students and feel therefore safer to study alone or in smaller groups.

Students' voice

Much attention is being paid at the schools to listening to all students' own voices, and of those at risk, and their opinions concerning their schooling and their choice of vocation and the practice-/ workplaces. To this end collaboration with students' parents is also very important, especially with students with immigration background and poor language/communication skills.

Inclusion and support

Education Act builds on inclusion and defines entitlement to special education, as needed.

At the P1 school students may be participants in the so-called study centre or resource centre for adapted education. This involves collaboration with the EPS to organize an inclusive learning environment for the students (P1). It is also emphasizing, how important the schools consider ensuring good boarder-crossings, which it facilities in ordinary classes.

Overall health care

Students' overall healthcare is well organized. Health-/school-nurse is part of the multi-professional student support collaborative teams. During the last years the focus in health care has been on students' mental health, also on the county level (see Introduction), an area in which students' and young people's problems have increased significantly during the last decade in Norway, added by the pandemic period.

E-inclusion

Hybrid learning opportunities and homeschool are among the flexible choices that that schools offer to their students at-risk, as needed. One example of such situations is school refusal (*skolevegring*) and difficulties in remaining in classes for an entire day. One teacher explains:

"So, they have this refusal, that is school refusal, which is very common. And that I think is almost the most difficult to work with, because it is so time consuming and you have to be so patient. You must as if run a marathon because it can take such a long time. And in a way you cannot give up and you must have new strategies. (...) I learnt once that you must be synchronized with the student, so that you are not running ahead of them, but you all along play in their team. So, I see that (...) you are very patient and worked together with the actors that belong around the student, parents, child protection services, and so on. So, we manage sometimes, succeed with small steps. But I think it is the most difficult. That's how I see it."

Access to work-place training

General impression from these schools is that there are really many actors, who work together to prevent dropout. It also seems that it is in the border-crossing between different levels in the schools that the “drop” occurs, for example in the transition between school and workplace training. A quote from a school advisor at school P1 illustrates this:

"We really try to capture the students in that transition between these phases. So, the problem is not when the student goes to school, then we have a vocational adviser who does a good job of guiding them further."

"So, if we don't get it done, we have... We are lucky enough to have the follow-up service here at our school, which often comes into play very early in this process. Maybe occasionally, when we see that there are problems in the class, that they start to lose their courage, their motivation for school, which can guide them on what options there are, if they don't want to go to school. Or not wanting to work. So, here there are actually many groups working together to prevent what we actually call dropouts."

The findings of interviews indicate that the transition between school and workplace training is particularly critical regarding dropout, but also that the BP schools, with their collaborators, do very good - systematic and devoted - work with this challenge. Even if the schools work well and systematically with the students as long as they are at school, there seems to be a potential to follow up the students still better, when they are starting their apprenticeship. We see that this applies especially to pupils with a minority background where language is an issue.

Teachers in both schools underline the importance of creating good border-crossings between VG2 (year 2) and VG3 (teaching, year 3). After VG2 most of the students start an apprenticeship in a company or public agency. A minority complete VET without having obtained an apprenticeship, predominantly due to shortage of work placements.

5 Institutional factors of identified empowering VET practices

Although in general the empowerment of vulnerable young people for learning and employment is (to the different degree) present as an object of VET policies and strategies in the Baltic countries and Norway, the level of priority of this issue differs in these countries. VET policies of all these countries share the priority attention to making VET provision better responsive to changing skills needs in the labour market, what in general enhances improvement of the quality and accessibility of VET provision. Nevertheless, VET policies of the Baltic countries stronger follow the neoliberal pathway of reforming VET and skill formation, what makes empowering vulnerable students one of the objects of employment-oriented policies and practices in VET. As a result, governments, using the financial support from the EU invest in the infrastructure of the VET provision, implement competence-based VET reforms and work-based learning approaches. One of the key problems with this approach is a lack of attention to the systemic pedagogical-psychological and social aspects of empowerment of vulnerable VET students, such as capacity building of teaching staff in this field, or insufficiency of available socio-economic support to learner and their families. This problem is partially tackled by the EU supported programmes and measures, like Youth Guarantees programmes for supporting labour market integration of unemployed youth. Such institutional context in the most cases significantly narrows the possibilities for the VET schools' practices and actions directed to empowerment of vulnerable students to rely on systemic support of state by relying more on the local capacities and (often rather fragmented) local networks of social partners. However,

there is a rather interesting exception.

In Latvia there are being implemented national level measures that promote the creation of a sustainable collaboration system between the municipality, educational institutions, teachers, support staff and the parents or representatives of the 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 full-fledged statistics, as well as allows long-term evaluation of the effectiveness of the measures. Measures are aimed at early diagnosis of problems and solutions. Through local governments, individual support is provided to learners who might stop studying due to lack of financial resources, for example, expenses for transport, meals, service hotel, etc. are compensated. 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. In seeking to develop targeted methodologies and training courses for general education and VET schools teaching and administrative staff working with vulnerable students there has been implemented ESF funded project PUMPURS. In the framework of this project there were developed specially designed professional competence development programs for teaching and administrative staff. These programs target understanding of the unity of the education (upbringing) and learning process, improvement of skills in individual and group counselling, abilities to recognize problem situations (including cases of peer violence) and seek appropriate solutions, as well as offer support materials for educators/ teachers. Apart from availability of targeted training courses for work with youth at risk the teachers are being supported (provided) with supervision - consultative support that helps educators and support staff cope with the challenges of professional activity. The purpose of the supervisions 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 the ability to be aware of one's own resources in order to reduce the risks of burnout syndrome.

In case of Norway the institutional model of VET provision is based on the institutional settings of the Nordic welfare state enabling rights-based access to the empowerment through VET and systemic provision of support to vulnerable students. Well-developed social dialogue involving state, regions, social partners, and VET providers significantly helps in mobilizing different stakeholders to engage in the empowerment practices. As a result, the initiatives and interventions of VET schools to empower vulnerable students in the Baltic countries are more isolated and detached from both national policies, regional and sectoral settings of institutions and stakeholders, compared to Norway, having direct implications for the sustainability and impact of these measures (Table 6).

Table 6 Overview of institutional factors of empowerment typical for identified VET practices.

	<i>Institutional accessibility (access regime)</i>	<i>Relationship of practice to the VET policies</i>	<i>Reliance on / and support of existing public institutional</i>	<i>Stakeholder involvement in the design and implementation of</i>
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	<i>of VET practice</i>	<i>and reforms</i>	<i>settings and legal framework of VET provision</i>	<i>the measure</i>
Empowerment of the at-risk VET students by involving them into the school communities (LT)	Openness of the VET school community (teachers and peers) for involvement of vulnerable students in the student councils.	Participation in the students' councils is considered by the policies as a measure for development of citizenship skills and attitudes, as well as solidarity. There is no specific attributed role for these bodies related to integration and empowerment of vulnerable students.	Does not rely /nor there is a need for reliance of engagement to the existing institutional and legal settings of VET.	Key stakeholders are teachers and peers who encourage participation of vulnerable students.
Mentorship and scaffolding for the youth from vulnerable groups (LT)	Access to measure is defined by the VET school, available resources and networking of school with social partners, especially local enterprises when it comes to practical training area.	No direct link to the VET policies and reforms.	Dependence of measure on the availability of human resources (teaching staff) and partnerships with enterprises.	VET teachers, trainers and schools administration are the key stakeholders involved in the design and implementation of scaffolding measure.
Vocational school mediation activities for	Local social partnership network between school	Indirectly linked to the policy initiatives	Reliance of the local partnership between the	VET school, local companies.

integrating socially excluded adolescents into the labour market of rural regions (LT)	and regional enterprises defines the access to the measure.	targeted to the regional development and implementation /fostering of work-based learning.	school and enterprises in the region, sometimes using support from the other projects.	
Introduction of the position of specially designated non-academic staff members – group mentors (LV)	Accessibility of measure is defined by the VET school's decision.	Enhanced and supported by the nationally implemented ESF funded project PUMPURS directed to strengthen capacities of the teaching staff in general education and VET in dealing with vulnerable youth.	Dependence of measure on the availability of human resources (teaching staff). Reliance on the capacities and resources provided by the ESF funded project PUMPURS	VET school.
Internal control system of the VET institution in work with students at risk (LV)				
Employment mediation and support to vulnerable students(LV)	Accessibility of measure is defined by the VET school's decision.	No direct link to the VET policies and reforms.	Dependence on the networking of the VET school with the local employers.	VET school
Project CODE targeted to at-risk youth, including NEETs (EE)	VET schools project initiative.	No direct link to the VET policies and reforms.	Cooperation networks with other VET schools, project partners.	VET school
Preventive measures against dropout from VET schools (NO)	Access to empowerment measures is ensured by the complex and dense network of collaboration of the local	Integrated with the national and local policy measures of education and training.	Reliance on the dense cooperation networks on the local (regional) level, supported by the national	Active and strong participation of stakeholders and social partners.

	institutions, including schools, professional communities, municipalities and enterprises, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV).		institutions.	
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6 Pedagogical factors of empowering VET practices

Pedagogical factors of empowerment practices of the VET establishments are defined by the educational orientation of the public VET provision (balancing of orientation to the vocational and general education pathways), role and place of such empowerment in the VET policies and reforms concerning curriculum design and organisation of the vocational learning and training pathways, as well as resourcefulness of the VET providers and stakeholders in terms of human, organizational and other resources, necessary for empowerment practices. Referring to this, there can be outlined important similarities and specificities of the analysed countries (Table 3).

First, the VET provision in the Baltic countries and VET integrate provision of school-based vocational training and general education, what creates favourable preconditions to vulnerable young people for their educational empowerment by fostering accessibility to the further learning pathways after graduation of the VET school. Here should also be considered some important nuances. VET policies and reforms in the Baltic countries foster liberalisation and flexibility of choice of the educational pathways in VET, what often leads vulnerable young people (especially those facing economic deprivations and difficulties) to choose easier accessible and shorter educational pathways, leading to quicker acquisition of vocational qualification without general secondary education. The efforts of implementation of apprenticeship in the VET system due to their marginal spread and coverage so far do not result in significant outcomes of empowerment and graduates for employment and career. Pedagogical empowerment potential in the Baltic countries is also weakened by the systemic shortages of the pedagogical staff, especially support staff for the vulnerable students in VET establishments, remaining one of the key gaps of resources after the significant upgrading of the training infrastructure of the VET schools with the help of EU structural funds projects.

The VET policy of Norway, on the contrary, seeks to balance the provision of general secondary education with the dual model of vocational training, in this way (of course, not without specific difficulties and challenges) providing promising employment and further education possibilities for the graduates. Availability of resources is ensured not only by the state, but also by the dense networks of regional level social partnership in the VET provision involving VET providers,

local governments, employers, and other partners.

Empowerment measures identified in Lithuania entail the pedagogical support and assistance enabling participation of the vulnerable students in the school community, solving learning problems and challenges of practical training and employment. VET teachers play a highly significant role in all these measures. In case of enrolment of vulnerable learners in the students' councils, the pedagogical empowerment consists of raising self-esteem of vulnerable students by delegating them concrete roles and responsibilities with a credit of trust, as well as by exploiting the available expertise of these young people in the field of social networks used for development of online school communities and networks. It enables creative usage of the activities of students' councils and social networks of schools in making vocational training more accessible for all learners (e.g. using the online platforms of students for organisation of training and learning during the Covid-19 pandemics.). Vulnerable students enrolled in the activities of students' councils feel the meaningfulness of these activities in terms of their contribution to the personal and professional development of self, as well as in terms of the accomplishment of the social mission of these structures (altruistic dimension of being useful to others). VET teachers here play the roles of encouragement, guidance, and expertise support to participation of vulnerable students.

The role of VET teachers is more crucial in the identified case of providing scaffolding for the learning of vulnerable students. Provision of such scaffolding requires mobilization of the pedagogical expertise of the VET teachers, trainers, and special pedagogues in tackling the variety of learning needs (especially special needs related to disability), as well as in targeting the shortage of social skills needed for successful learning and employment.

The practice of assistance to vulnerable students at the VET school in rural area in providing guidance and intermediation for practical training and subsequent employment presents example of articulation of the available educational environments of the school-based and work-based learning for the sake of empowerment. A large proportion of vocational teachers 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. In implementing the apprenticeship model of vocational training school selects and trains master trainers by developing their didactic-pedagogical competences and sensitiveness (empathy) to socially excluded adolescents. 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. These activities are supported by the various targeted training projects aimed to development of students' employability skills, development of artistic expression tools to enhance the creativity, productive independence and enhancing critical perception of the labour market needs. All these activities of the school involve participation of the local enterprises whose fields of activities are relevant to the content of vocational training programmes.

The cases of empowerment practices from Latvia illustrate the efforts of schools to provide systemic pedagogical support to vulnerable students with the focus to the immediate availability and personalization of such pedagogical support. These goals are attained through introduction of the system of early identification of the need of pedagogical, sociopsychological and other support to vulnerable students in the classrooms supplemented with the new role of group

mentors. Such a system prevents the risk that the student is frustrated not knowing to whom to speak in a difficult situation, especially if there are several types of problems parallel, e.g. academic, social etc. another important aspect is that the student can trust the person (mentor), since the staff position has been specifically designed for this purpose. The group mentor has been specially trained to deal with these problems. He knows how to deal with the issues internally, how to re-schedule the information or to whom to convey the problem further on for subsequent solutions. 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, to fix the situation. Group mentors, in turn are supported by the school in providing specific, close-to tailor made training and competence development. Here there are used training opportunities provided by the above-mentioned national ESF funded project PUMPURS. Such an approach in empowering vulnerable students enables systemic understanding of the identified student problems and consequently renders more effective support solutions. This approach, among other issues, also helps also to solve the contradictions and tensions between teaching and upbringing rather typical for the education of vulnerable students (Gudjons, p.281).

Pedagogical empowerment of the practice identified in Estonia (the CODE project) combines three important aspects of VET pedagogy: curriculum interventions targeted to the provision of competencies needed in the changing jobs, individualised pedagogical in the field of work-based learning oriented to the concrete work processes in the enterprises, as well as provision of various socio-pedagogical and psychological support. The CODE programme aims at providing young people at risk with work skills, specifically by developing their digital competencies and skills needed in today's increasingly digital work environment. The programme promotes an empowering work-based learning environment that supports the learning process of its participants, by providing authentic and complex tasks that support key competencies, including self-regulation and problem-oriented cooperation skills. This approach helps participants acquire new skills and knowledge while encouraging them to take ownership of their learning, preparing them for the modern workforce. In addition, by creating a safe and inclusive space, participants are encouraged to make mistakes and learn from their experiences. The programme recognizes that everyone learns differently and therefore different methods such as hands-on activities, interactive workshops and group projects are used to engage and motivate participants. This approach not only helps participants acquire new skills and knowledge, but also encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning, which is essential for long-term success. Supportive learning environment is ensured by special work-based learning space, on-site mentors, individualised pedagogical support of VET teachers. The learning tasks given to participants are closely aligned with real-world work scenarios, providing them with practical know-how and skills, recognizing critical importance of hands-on experience for learning. In addition to this, the CODE places great emphasis on the formation and functioning of teamwork. By collaborating with others, participants learn to communicate effectively, share ideas, and work towards common goals. Group counselling is an important component of the CODE, providing participants with essential support and guidance as they navigate their educational and career paths. The programme helps the participants to make sense of their career path, develop self-analysis skills and learn time management strategies. In addition, the project offers counselling to deal with feelings of loneliness and provides

guidelines for effective communication with peers. Students' mental health is also important at CODE, regular individual counselling is on this issue offered at least once a week. By offering individual counselling, CODE aims to help participants increase resilience, manage stress and achieve their learning goals.

The pedagogical factors of empowerment of the Norwegian practice of empowerment also stress the importance of systemic development of inclusive and supportive learning environments in VET for the prevention of dropout and related implications of social risk and vulnerability of young people. The background pedagogical ideas and principles of these practices refer to the adjustment of the teaching and school environment to the needs of students by actively listening to students, systemic monitoring of the learning trajectories of students, especially in the transitional phases from the period of school-based VET to the period of apprenticeship in the enterprises (after the second year of schooling in VET), early identification of dropout risks and intervention, involvement of multi-professional collaboration teams with a range of support functions (the team around children), ensuring high level of flexibility when it comes to pedagogical solutions and their application by using large repertoire of different measures to support vulnerable students. Other principles of this pedagogy include close follow-up of vulnerable students and applying individualised tailor-made solutions and support for the vulnerable students. Schools have also developed local transition plans to build systematics and better-quality practice around the transition-collaboration both between schools, also across municipalities, if needed. The system for differentiation of types of problems or challenges of students seems to be built on the principle of uniqueness of the situation of each vulnerable student and functioning based on close multi-professional collaboration and exchange of information around and about the students, also and perhaps especially in the transition phases. Differentiation seems to be an issue only to the extent that different areas of students' challenges are treated by different professionals and different measures at the school. Collaboration of the multiple professionals within the school and extensive usage of external collaboration networks play the key role in ensuring relevant capacities for implementation of the pedagogical instruments supporting at-risk students, when a whole range of different professionals are available around and for these students ("layers around a student") to support and help them health-wise, and in regard to school (learning goals) and job placements, in addition to their teachers and the school management. Mental health support is available for the students, as needed, as a part of the schools' student health services. Furthermore, all teachers (class teachers) in secondary schools have participated in a training course in mental health provided by the county, and there has been a long-term focus on work on students' mental health and wellbeing. The students' safety and belonging clearly are strong priorities in these schools. Teachers' long-term priority in Norwegian schools in general has been the classroom environment and safety for all students, having a zero tolerance to bullying of any kind. Much attention is being paid at the schools to listening to all students' own voices, and of those at risk, and their opinions concerning their schooling and their choice of vocation and the practice-/ workplaces. To this end collaboration with students' parents is also very important, especially with students with immigration background and poor language/communication skills. In seeking to address the issues of mental health of students, hybrid learning, and e-inclusion opportunities and home school are among the flexible choices that schools offer to their students at-risk, as needed. The transition between school and workplace training is particularly critical point regarding dropout, but VET schools rather

successfully perform not only guidance and support in helping this transition, but also individually follow-up the performance of students as they are progressing in their apprenticeship, especially in case of students with migrant background where language is an issue.

Table 7 Overview of pedagogical factors of empowerment typical for identified VET practices

	<i>Pedagogical goals of education and training practices and their orientation to empowerment</i>	<i>Priorities and targets of curriculum design related to empowering VET practice</i>	<i>Balancing of the learning and development needs of vulnerable students and supportive potential of the school's/training centre community</i>	<i>Availability of pedagogical support in the school-based and work-based learning environments</i>
Empowerment of the at-risk VET students by involving them into the school communities (LT)	Enabling and facilitation development of capacities and talents of vulnerable young people, strengthenning self-esteem. Educating inclusiveness and openness of students. Development of skills needed for social participation and citizenship.	Openning possibilities to express own voice and opinion about curricula. Contribution to the development of vocational and transversal competencies foreseen in the curricula.	Active involvement of vulnerable students in the decision making on their own and school community lives from the one side, and creating areas of self realization and additional space for development of professional and key skills from the other.	Pedagogical support provided through collegial communication and coopeartion of students councils with teachers and administrative staff. Encouragement of teachers for vulnerable students to participate in the activities of students' councils.
Mentorship and scaffolding for the youth from vulnerable groups (LT)	Ensuring suffiently smooth integration of young people into the school community, developing skills	Mentorship and guidance in the modules of introduction to the occupation	Challenge in ensuring systemic support system and upgrade teachers' competeces to	Ensuring scaffolding for all students in need by teaching staff, more specifically working with students from

	and competences necessary for the labour market and employability, developing self-confidence and self-esteem through regular consultations with the school social pedagogue.	(starting module of VET curriculum) and introduction to the labour market (concluding module).	work and address needs of variety if learners.	vulnerable groups. Provision of systemic support in learning and entering labour market.
Vocational school mediation activities for integrating socially excluded adolescents into the labour market of rural regions (LT)	Helping students to find a job during the initial phase of their adaptation to the labour market. Provision of vocational guidance of young people living in the rural area.	Developing VET curriculum design projects focused on reduction of social exclusion 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).	Identifying behavioural characteristics of socially excluded pupils and organising pedagogical scenarios (projects) for labour market inclusion.	Taking care about development of specific didactic and pedagogical competencies of the enterprise trainers in case of apprenticeship schemes for vulnerable students. Targeted work of VET teachers and social pedagogues with families/children at risk of social exclusion while the children are still in school.

Introduction of the position of specially designated non-academic staff members – group mentors (LV) Internal control system of the VET institution in work with students at risk (LV)	Identifying the needs of the students at risk at their school and for communicating these needs to all relevant colleagues or services of their school for taking further actions. Identifying and managing risks in the work with the students at risk as conditions in the student's environment or personality which hinder a successful learning process and can lead to early school leaving.	Not directly related to curriculum design and development. Support and guidance in learning is provided within the framework of established modular VET curricula.	Strengthening the potential of intermediation between the vulnerable students needs and available support opportunities and providing corresponding guidance to the students.	Provision of pedagogical and sociopsychological support to vulnerable students by the class mentors, the class mentor working as a key contact person for vulnerable students.
Employment mediation and support to vulnerable students (LV)	Help in finding a job (if need be) for students at risk, especially by involving them in work-based learning.	Not directly related to VET curriculum design.	Involvement of vulnerable students in the different forms of employment, including assistance to teachers facilitate competence development of vulnerable learners.	Employment mediation involving not only support related to employment and work, but also direct and indirect pedagogical support in case of need of work-based learning.
Project CODE targeted to at-risk youth, including	Development of curricula designed for at-risk and NEET	Work and practice orientation of VET	Strong involvement of the companies as a factor of	Complex pedagogical and psychological support provided

NEETs (EE)	youth providing professional competencies and different supporting components (learning, communication, work skills, entrepreneurship, etc.).	curricula: curricula designed in cooperation with the specific companies and organisations.	success which enables part time employment of enroled students (duality of training). Motivation of students by the real work environment in the company, fostering of individual talents who after finishing CODE project and employed or continue studies.	by the school: mentors and teachers in CODE program support enroled students.
Preventive measures against dropout from VET schools (NO)	Individualised and systemic pedagogical and psychological support to prevent dropout and ensure successful transition of the vulnerable students in the learning pathways of the dual VET provision.	Support of learning through higher flexibility of learning assessment systems (<i>vurdering</i>) in order to reduce the performance fear/angst among the students. Flexibility of time management of studies (number of years) that the students can use to complete their education).	Well functioning support networks involving VET schools, regional administrations, specialised support services and social partners.	Availability of the individualised pedagogical support is ensured and maintained by the schools and VET partnerships on the regional and national levels.

7 Discussion and conclusion

Analysed practices of cover different factors of empowerment of at-risk youth related to the pedagogical relationship between students and teaching staff, propaedeutic effects of work-based learning and work itself, participation in the school communities and support of peers, systemic pedagogical, psychological, and social support procured by the national policy measures.

The evidence about the impact of these practices and their effectiveness in empowering at-risk VET students is still rather fragmented. Especially it concerns the potential of these measures to respond to the key problems which define social risks and exclusion of youth, such as poverty, disparities of social-economic development between cities and rural regions, policies of social support of youth and children. It requires further longitudinal studies.

All measures disclose the central role of VET teachers and other teaching staff members in empowering at-risk VET students. Here emerges the issue of their capacities and capacity building needs in dealing with the challenge of increasing the volume of at-risk students in VET schools. The results of the study show the abandonment of standardisation and narrow specialisation, the increased use of the individual approach in pedagogical practices in VET in all 4 countries. Preference is given to expanding the scope and individualization of the applied pedagogical practices for at-risk students. Increased attention is being paid to the living conditions of at-risk students outside school, addressing students' social problems, development of key skills and attitudes, coaching and methods of individual co-operation. In Lithuania and Norway, pedagogical practices for risk groups are being developed to involve students in student self-governance. In Norway and Estonia, increased attention is paid to mental health.

The findings of analysis of empowerment practices of the VET schools also point to the importance of institutional support for the VET establishments in design, implementation and especially maintaining these practices. VET systems of the Baltic countries seek to provide such kind of institutional support and related capacity building of VET providers through EU funded projects (PUMPURS project in Latvia, CODE project in Estonia), what raises some issues and problems for long-term sustainability of these practices. In case of Norway the main source of sustainable institutional support and capacity development needed for empowerment of vulnerable students are dense networks of partnerships and collaborations between the VET schools and different national, regional bodies and social partners.

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