



Vocational education and training in Bulgaria

Short description

Please cite this publication as:

Cedefop (2018). *Vocational education and training in Bulgaria: short description*. Luxembourg: Publications Office.

<http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/600634>

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Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018

Print ISBN 978-92-896-2658-3

doi:10.2801/924675

TI-01-18-258-EN-C

PDF

ISBN 978-92-896-2660-6

doi:10.2801/600634

TI-01-18-258-EN-N

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Foreword

2018 marks Bulgaria's first presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU). The presidency priorities for vocational education and training (VET) focus on initiatives within the 2016 *New skills agenda for Europe* and the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning, embedded in the European pillar of social rights.

Ensuring adequate skills sets for the future of work and sustaining training quality is at the core of the initiatives that the presidency is taking forward: understanding better the labour market outcomes of VET, revising the key competence framework, and agreeing a European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships to reinforce countries' efforts in expanding this mode of learning. These initiatives also underpin the priorities for VET that Member States, Norway, Iceland and the candidate countries agreed to focus on in 2015. The mid-term evaluation of the *Erasmus+* programme during Bulgaria's presidency may help move the agenda forward. *Erasmus+* does not only help increase mobility for VET learners and professionals but also supports partnerships and mutual learning to modernise education and training systems and make them more responsive and inclusive.

These EU-level priorities are closely linked to the country's challenges and its national priorities for VET: reducing early leaving, ensuring quality and relevance of VET provision, and supporting teachers and trainers.

Despite high attainment rates, too many young people still leave education and training early, especially from VET. Socioeconomic factors and parents seeking jobs abroad contribute considerably – but not solely – to this challenge. Bulgaria's work to improve VET quality and develop multifaceted policy responses needs to be understood in this context. Setting up interinstitutional teams across the country, representing the education and labour ministries and local authorities, to work with individual learners and their families and help retain them in education and training is just one approach.

VET in Bulgaria has been mainly school-based. Since 2015, as in many other EU countries, work has focused on reinforcing dual VET to give learners the opportunity to acquire real work experience and understand which skills employers expect and those that can help them succeed. While creating a sustainable national model is still in progress, the country is also working on accompanying policies necessary to make these developments successful.

Committed and competent teachers, trainers, mentors and other VET professionals are key to ensuring VET is of high quality. This means investing in their professional development but also valuing their roles and contributions to

shaping VET, making it relevant and supporting learners. Bulgaria has one of the most rapidly ageing teaching staff in the EU. Almost half of the teachers and trainers are at or above age 50. As in some other countries, standards for professional qualifications as teachers, and reviews of initial training to make teachers fit for current and future demands, aim to ensure quality and make the profession more attractive, not least also through salary increases. More in-company training also requires encouraging more employees to work as young people's mentors, an aim that is included in the country's national action plan for employment.

But even the most advanced VET will not empower graduates to succeed on the labour market and in society if it neglects civic and transversal competences and if it prepares for jobs and skills that are outdated; especially so if employers are not fully engaged and participation in adult learning remains among the lowest in the EU.

Matching a country's investment in education and training better to dynamically changing skill needs, shaped by digitisation and automation, requires a well-developed skills anticipation and matching infrastructure. Cedefop's long-standing research on skills anticipation and skill mismatch in EU countries has revealed that an integrative approach to skills governance is crucial to strengthening feedback loops between VET and the labour market.

While skills anticipation and matching is at an early stage in Bulgaria, steps have been taken since 2013 to address challenges and areas of improvement, particularly regarding the active involvement of stakeholders, including regional/local administration. According to Cedefop's country review of governance of skills anticipation and matching, Bulgaria has the potential to develop from a formal framework into a working mechanism, so to support policy decisions better.

This short description, drawn up in collaboration with Cedefop's national ReferNet partner, aims to help understand VET in Bulgaria better. Supporting the motto of the Bulgarian presidency *United we stand strong*, we aim to offer a taste of Bulgaria's VET to a wider European audience. Our overall aim is to help build bridges between VET systems, encourage learner and teacher mobility across Europe, and foster the understanding that VET's inclusiveness does not mean it is second rate but quite the opposite. As the many national skills competitions, such as *Euroskills* and *World skills*, demonstrate, VET is first rate. In a nutshell: VET is for everyone, as stated in the message of the VET conference in Bulgaria.

I hope that the information in this publication will be useful as a source of inspiration for policy-makers, researchers, VET providers and other readers across and beyond Europe.

Joachim James Calleja
Director

Acknowledgements

This publication was produced by Cedefop, Department for VET systems and institutions, under the supervision of Loukas Zahilas. Dmitrijs Kuļšs, Cedefop expert, was responsible for the publication.

Cedefop would like to acknowledge the ReferNet Bulgaria (National Agency for VET) team and its partners from the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy who provided input for the short description under team leader Radosveta Drakeva.

The publication was peer-reviewed by Eleonora Schmid, Cedefop expert.

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Bulgaria



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Area:	110 995 km ²
Capital:	Sofia
System of government:	Parliamentary republic
Population:	7 101 859 (2017)
Per capita gross domestic product (GDP) (nominal):	EUR 6 600 (2016)
Legislative power:	exercised by the National Assembly (<i>Народно събрание</i>)

Since 2016, vocational education and training (VET) has been reformed. While learners who enrolled in VET before the reform continue studies within the former system, this short description focuses on VET after the reform.

The following national definitions used in this publication may differ from pan-European ones:

- vocational education refers to secondary education programmes provided by VET schools; vocational education includes a general education element;
- vocational training is provided for learners from age 16. It does not include general education, which needs to be acquired prior to entering vocational training;
- qualifications are distinct from certificates attesting education levels (such as basic, secondary and higher); they can be acquired in addition to certificates and are linked to a profession.

CHAPTER 1.

External factors influencing VET



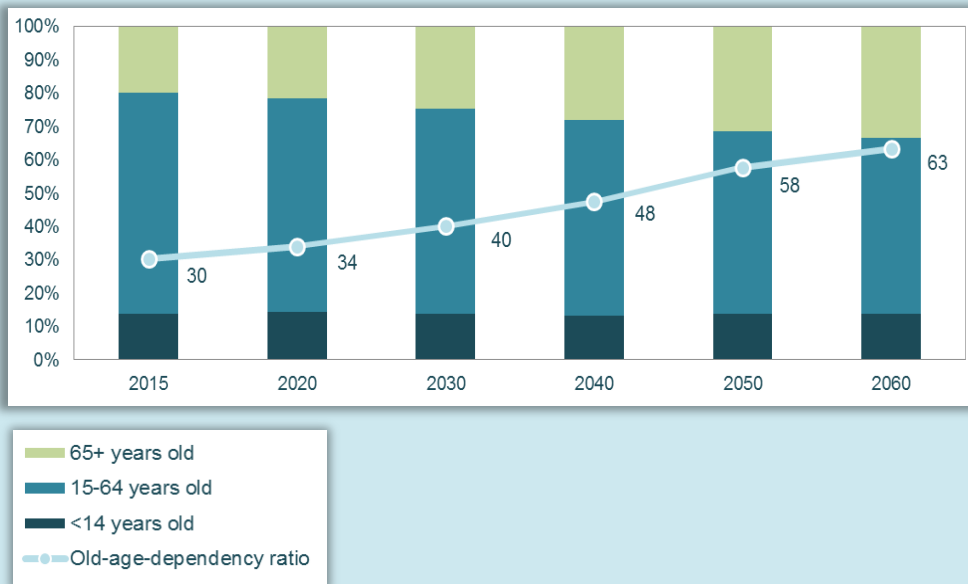
1.1. Demographics

Bulgaria's population is 7 101 859 (2017) ⁽¹⁾. Its area of 110 995 km² comprises 28 districts, 265 municipalities, 257 towns and 4 997 villages ⁽²⁾. The population is decreasing due to negative natural growth and migration.

As in many EU countries, the population is ageing. The share of people aged 65+ has increased from 21.4% in 2007 to 24.3% in 2016; accordingly, the share of the working-age population (15 to 64) has decreased from 69.1% to 65.6%.

The old-age-dependency ratio ⁽³⁾ is increasing. It is expected to double by 2060 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Population forecast by age group and old-age-dependency ratio



Source: Eurostat, [proj_15ndbims](#) [extracted on 30.8.2017].

Demographic changes have an impact on vocational education and training (VET). Participation in secondary education has been decreasing, leading to optimisation of a school network aiming at better efficiency while safeguarding

⁽¹⁾ Eurostat, [tps00001](#) [extracted on 5.2.2018].

⁽²⁾ National register of populated places [extracted on 11.7.2017], provided by BG experts.

⁽³⁾ The ratio between the number of those aged 65 and more over those of working-age persons (15 to 64 years).

quality. Since 2012, the number of VET schools has decreased by 10.6%, less than in secondary general education (-14.7%). Many small VET schools have been merged with bigger VET providers. Adjustments continue in line with demographic trends.

The country is multicultural. According to the most recent census, 84.8% of individuals declared themselves as Bulgarians, 8.8% as ethnic Turks and 4.9% as Roma ⁽⁴⁾.

1.2. Economy and labour market indicators

Most companies are micro and small-sized. The number of regulated professions is relatively low ⁽⁵⁾. The labour market is rather flexible and employers often do not demand formal qualifications.

Services are the main economic sector; in 2016, its relative share of the gross value-added in the national economy was 67.6%. The share of industry was 28% and agriculture 4.4% ⁽⁶⁾.

The main export sectors are:

- (a) machinery and transport equipment (21.5% of total export in 2016);
- (b) goods from leather, rubber, wood, paper, mineral, metals, etc. (20.3%);
- (c) furniture, apparel, footwear, travel goods, handbags, etc. (17.9%).

The main export destination countries are Germany (13.3% of total export in 2016), Italy (9%) and Romania (8.6%) ⁽⁷⁾.

Exports had an important role in recovery from the economic recession, despite low industrial output, weak retail trade and construction sectors, tight credit market conditions, decreasing foreign direct investments and job losses.

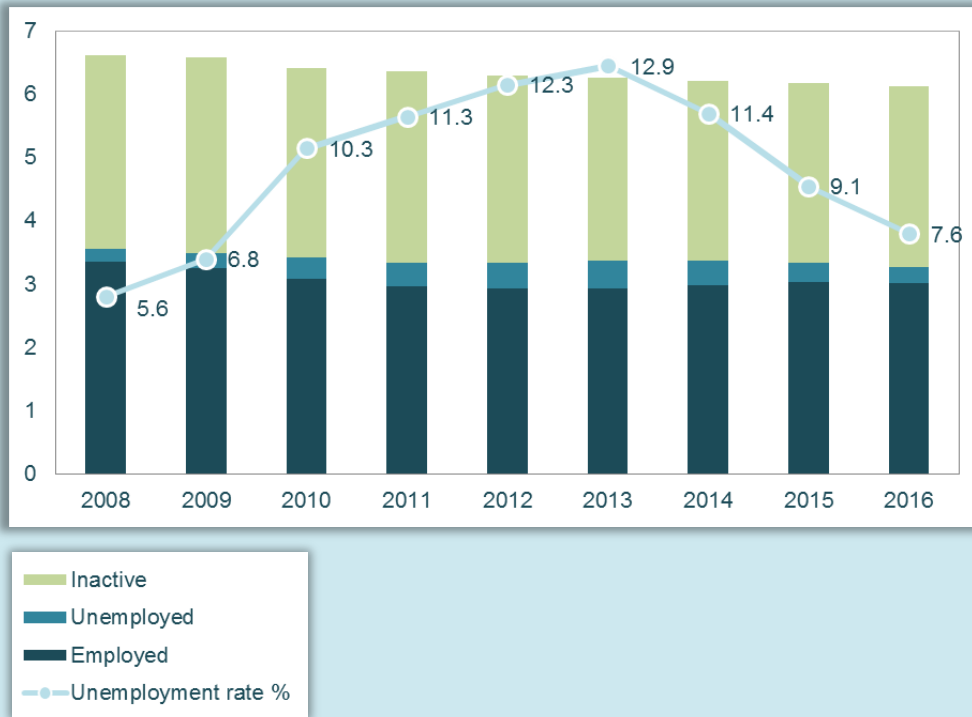
⁽⁴⁾ National Statistical Institute, 2011. Persons declared their ethnic identity on a voluntary basis.

⁽⁵⁾ Compared with Central European countries: https://ec.europa.eu/growth/single-market/services/free-movement-professionals/regulated-professions-database_en [accessed on 29.1.2018].

⁽⁶⁾ National Statistical Institute (preliminary estimates, unadjusted data).

⁽⁷⁾ National Statistical Institute, 2015.

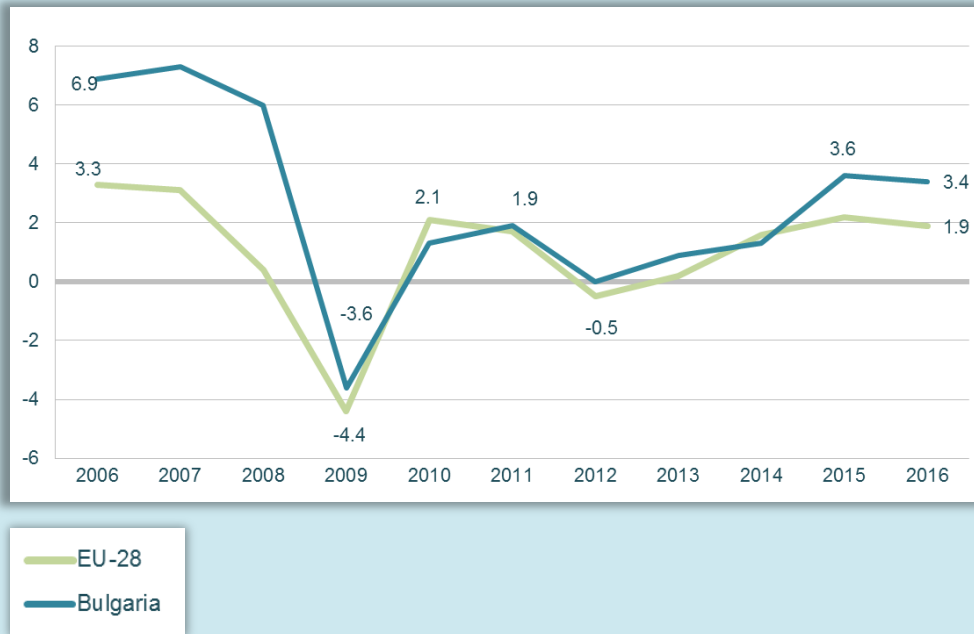
Figure 2. **Employed, unemployed and inactive population (aged 15 to 74) in 2009-16 (millions)**



Source: National Statistical Institute.

Unemployment increased from 5.6% in 2008 to 12.9% in 2013, mainly in agriculture, forestry and fishing, manufacturing and construction (Figure 2). In 2013, economic recovery reversed the trend, resulting in unemployment below the EU average; in 2016 unemployment dropped to 7.6%.

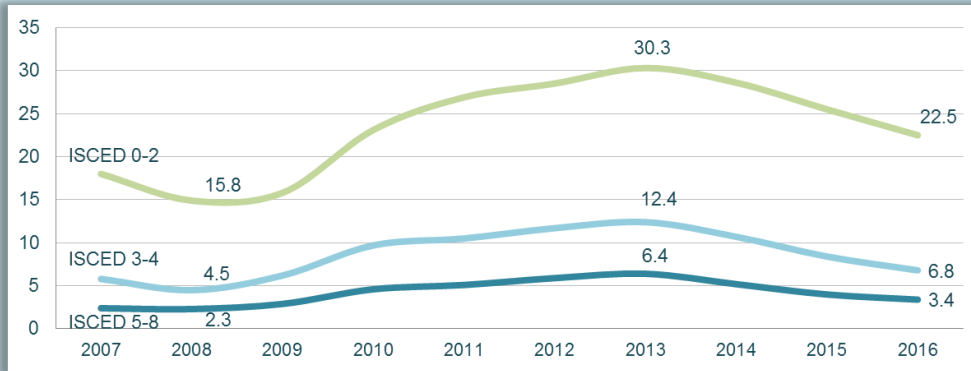
Figure 3. Real GDP growth compared to the previous year (% points)



Source: Eurostat, tec00115 [extracted on 30.8.2017].

In 2015 and 2016, real GDP growth was 3.6 and 3.4 percentage points respectively due to increasing domestic demand (private consumption), supported by low interest rates and EU funds. Growth is expected to continue in 2017, followed by a marginal decline in 2018 (European Commission, 2017a).

Figure 4. Unemployment rate (aged 15 to 64) by education attainment level in 2007-16



NB: Data based on ISCED 2011.
ISCED 0-2 = less than primary, primary and lower secondary education
ISCED 3-4 = upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education
ISCED 5-8 = tertiary education

Source: Eurostat, *lfsa_urgaed* [extracted on 30.8.2017].

As demonstrated in Figure 4, unemployment is distributed unevenly by education attainment. The gap has increased since the crisis (with its peak in 2013) as unskilled workers are usually more exposed to unemployment. In 2016, the unemployment rate of those with medium level qualifications, including most VET graduates (international standard classification of education (ISCED) levels 3 to 4) was still higher than in the pre-crisis years. Within this attainment group, the unemployment of VET graduates is traditionally slightly lower (6.5% in 2016) than for general education graduates (7%).

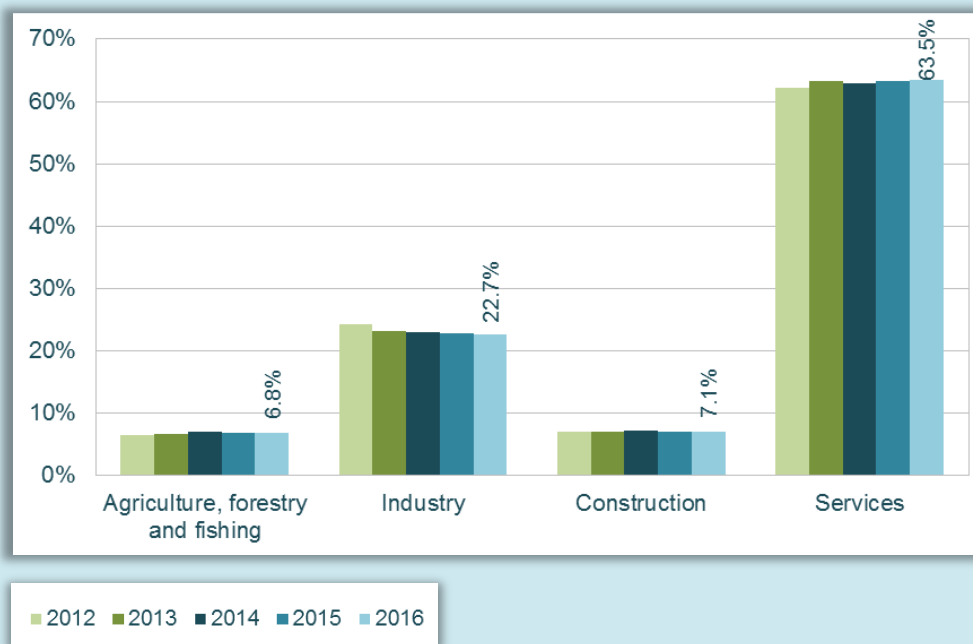
The employment rate for recent VET graduates increased from 63.8% in 2014 to 64.2% in 2016 ⁽⁸⁾. Almost two-thirds of this can be attributed to services, one-fifth to industry and 6.8% to the primary economic sector ⁽⁹⁾ (Figure 5).

In recent years, the services sector has slightly expanded by employing more people in finance, insurance, administrative, support, technical, food and accommodation services. Employment in industry has decreased, mainly in mining and quarrying sectors. Since 2013, the balance between sectors has remained relatively stable.

⁽⁸⁾ Those aged 20 to 34 who graduated one to three years ago from secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary VET (ISCED levels 3 and 4). Source: Eurostat, *edat_lfse_24* [extracted on 30.8.2017].

⁽⁹⁾ The primary sector of the economy makes direct use of natural resources.

Figure 5. **Employment by economic sector in 2012-16 (aged 15 and above, % of total employment)**



Source: National Statistical Institute.

In 2016, labour force demand in the real economy increased. Rapid growth in vacant jobs has been registered by the labour offices since 2013. Supported by active labour market policy, it reached its highest values in 2014 and 2015 (and continued increasing in 2016), comparable with pre-crisis levels.

In 2016, most of 196 300 job vacancies registered by the labour offices (Employment Agency, 2016) were in the following sectors:

- manufacturing, 28%: this denoted fast recovery from the biggest job vacancy decrease during the economic crisis;
- wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles, 14.4%;
- accommodation and food service activities, 11.3%;
- administrative and support service activities, 7.8%;
- public administration and defence; compulsory social security, 5.5%;
- education, 5.4%.

In 2016, most of the unemployed were looking for a job in personal services such as chefs, waiters, bartenders, hairdressers, cosmetics, totalling more than

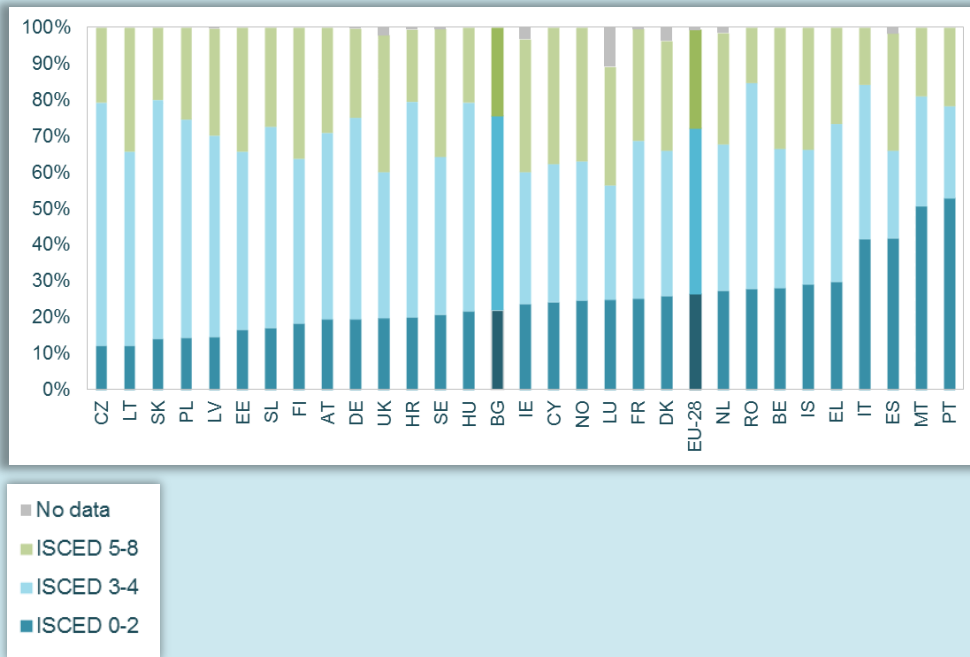
24 000 places ⁽¹⁰⁾. There was also a high supply of operators of stationary machinery and equipment (15 244 places), sellers (13 301 places), teachers in primary and secondary schools, including VET teachers (almost 13 700 places) and administrative staff (cashiers, receptionists, data entry operators, technical assistants, totalling more than 8 400 places).

1.3. Education attainment

Education attainment in Bulgaria is traditionally high, also in VET. In 2016, the share of the population aged up to 64 with upper secondary and post-secondary education was 53.7%, higher than in the EU on average. The share with low or without qualification was 21.9%, less than the EU average (Figure 6).

⁽¹⁰⁾ Survey of job vacancies on primary market by occupations (Employment Agency, 2016).

Figure 6. Population (aged 15 to 64) by highest education level attained in 2016



NB: Data based on ISCED 2011.

ISCED 0-2 = less than primary, primary and lower secondary education

ISCED 3-4 = upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education

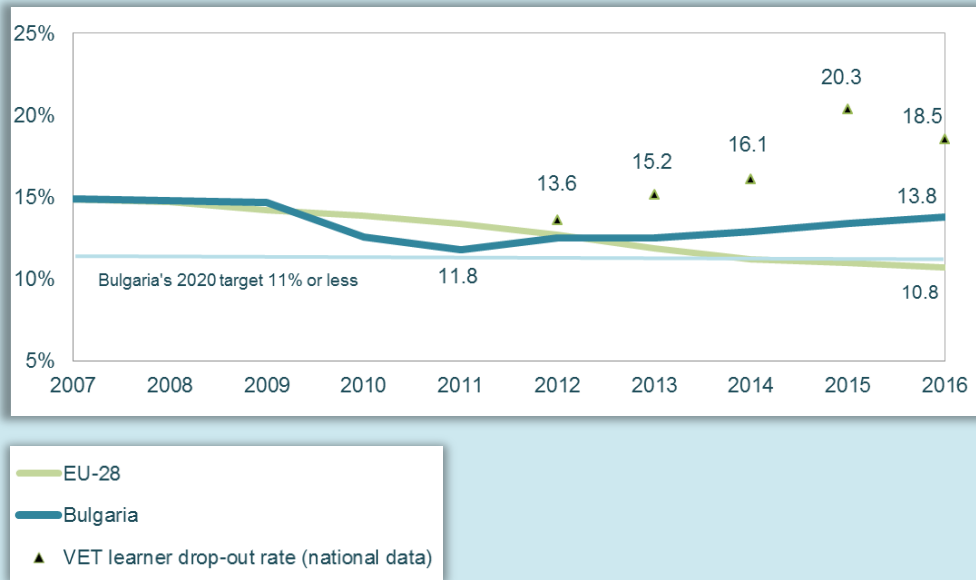
ISCED 5-8 = tertiary education.

Source: Eurostat, [ifsa_pgaed](#) [extracted on 5.5.2017].

Despite high attainment rates, the share of early leavers from education and training has only decreased from 14.9% in 2007 to 13.8% in 2016; this is above the country's 11% target for 2020 (Republic of Bulgaria, 2017). The drop-out rate ⁽¹¹⁾ of VET learners is higher compared with general education learners due to 'socioeconomic factors, educational difficulties and, increasingly, to emigration (which accounts for more than half of drop-outs)' (European Commission, 2017b, p. 4).

⁽¹¹⁾ Drop-outs are school-age learners who do not enrol in the next grade until grade 12.

Figure 7. Early leavers from education and training in 2007-16



NB: Share of the population aged 18 to 24 with at most lower secondary education and not in further education or training.

Source: Eurostat, [tsdsc410](#) [extracted on 30.8.2017].

In 2009-11, the share of early leavers from education and training decreased. This could be because many young people could not find a job during the economic downturn and stayed in education or training.

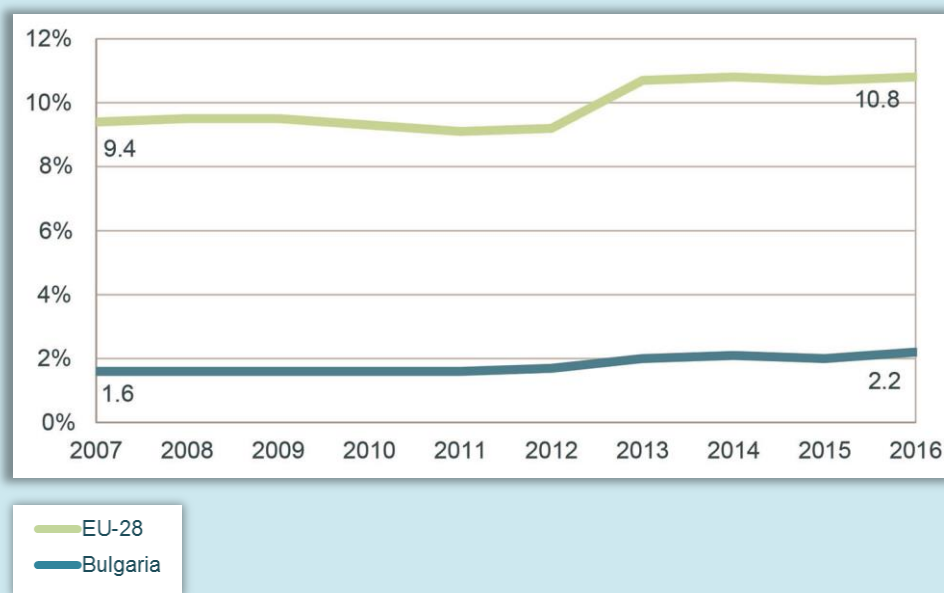
In July 2017, the government launched an interinstitutional mechanism to retain learners at risk of dropping out in education ⁽¹²⁾. More than a thousand interinstitutional teams (representing the education and labour ministries as well as local authorities) were formed to work with individual learners and their families. Their tasks include contacting drop-outs at home, discovering reasons for leaving education and training, speaking with their parents and motivating learners to return

⁽¹²⁾ Government Decision No 373/5.7.2017 for the establishment of a mechanism for the joint work of the institutions for inclusion and retention in the educational system of children and students in compulsory pre-school and school age: http://pris.government.bg/prin/file_view.aspx?did=79904&pid=88425 [accessed on 29.1.2018].

to school. At the beginning of 2017/18, 17 297 general education and VET learners returned to school ⁽¹³⁾.

Lifelong learning could also offer training opportunities to early leavers from education and training, including adults (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Participation in lifelong learning in 2005-16



NB: Share of adult population aged 25 to 64 participating in education and training.

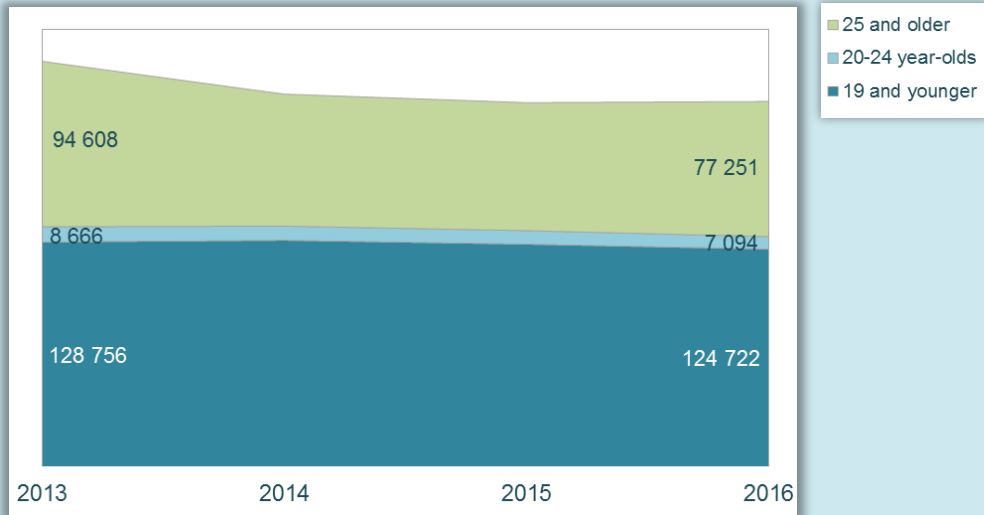
Source: Eurostat, [trng_lfse_01](#) [extracted on 1.6.2017].

However, participation in lifelong learning was the second lowest in the EU in 2016 and has been increasing only slowly in the past decade. The lifelong learning strategy 2014-20 and its annual action plans support measures to increase the adult participation rate to 5% by 2020. Cedefop expert discussions with national policy-makers ⁽¹⁴⁾ have also revealed details of how Bulgarians perceive participation in education and training. While official certificates are highly valued by learners, non-formal training not offering such certificates is not always perceived (and therefore also may be not reported) as lifelong learning.

⁽¹³⁾ Press-release of the Ministry of Education and Science (16.11.2017): <https://mon.bg/?go=news&p=detail&newsId=2829> [accessed on 29.1.2018].

⁽¹⁴⁾ From 2 to 4 October 2017 in Sofia.

Figure 9. VET learners by age in 2013-16



Source: Ministry of Education and Science; NAVET.

As shown in Figure 9, the share of adults (age 25 and over) in initial and continuing VET has been decreasing from 40.4% (2013) to 36.6% (2016) of the total VET population. This reflects demographic trends but also limited European Social Fund (ESF) funding availability at the beginning of the new structural funds' planning period 2014-20.

1.4. Employment policies influencing VET

The national employment policy in 2017 ⁽¹⁵⁾ aims at reducing imbalances between labour supply and demand, job creation, labour force mobility and improving the business environment. It also seeks to develop social partnerships and achieve the objectives of the *European youth guarantee* by further reducing youth unemployment. The plan also targets efficiency and quality improvement in the public employment service (Employment Agency).

⁽¹⁵⁾ Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2017.

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In 2016 and 2017 ⁽¹⁶⁾, the ESF and State budget supported vocational training for 21 500 (8%) of the registered unemployed people. Licensed VET providers and others, mostly training centres, offered this training.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Data in 2017 are for the period from January to September.

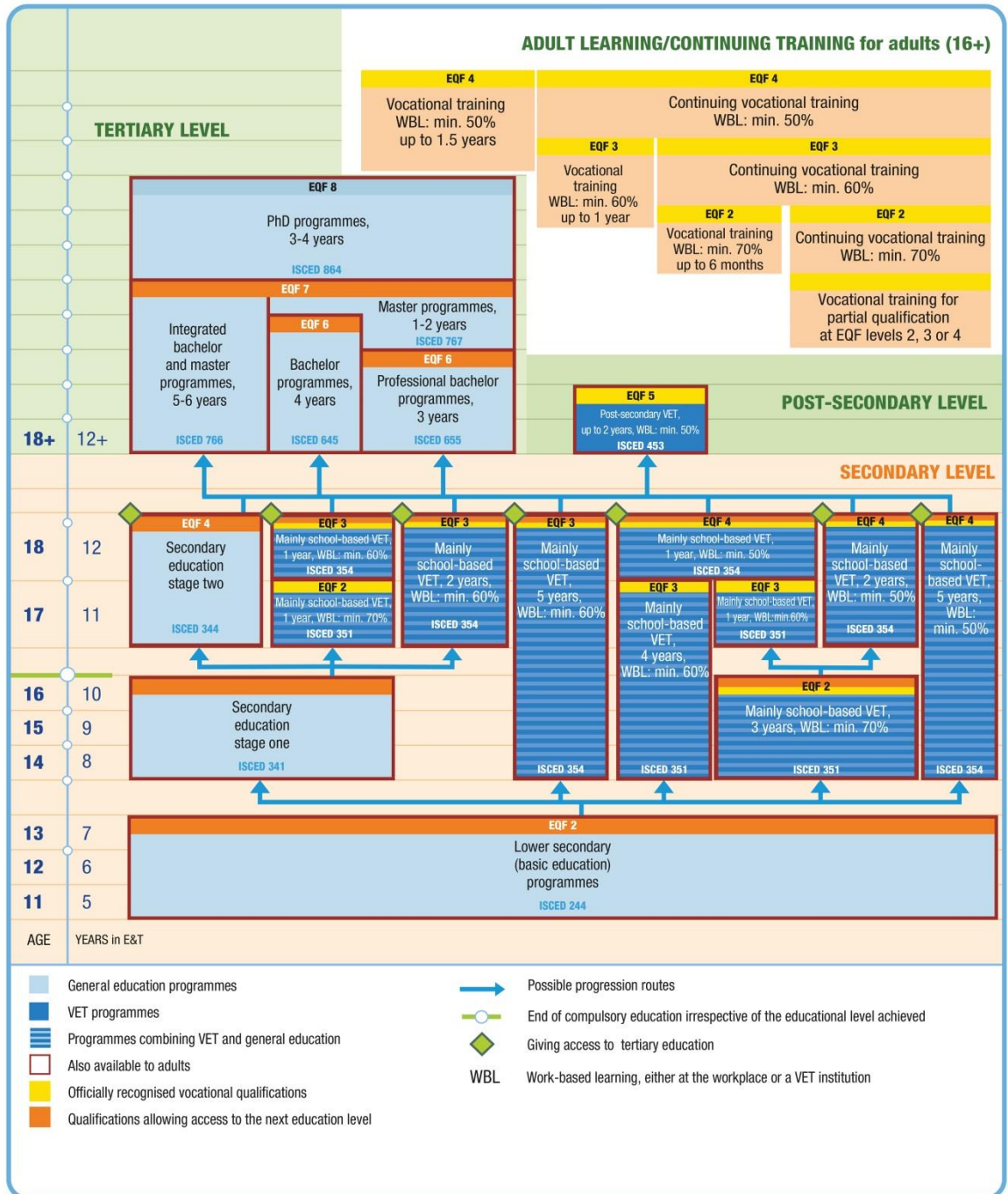
CHAPTER 2.

Provision of VET



2.1. VET in the national education and training system

Figure 10. VET in the Bulgarian education and training system in 2017/18



NB: ISCED-P 2011.

Source: Cedefop and ReferNet Bulgaria.

The right to education is guaranteed by the constitution. Education and training provision is regulated by three main acts:

- (a) Pre-school and School Education Act (2015) ⁽¹⁷⁾;
- (b) VET Act (1999, last amended in 2018);
- (c) Higher Education Act (1995, last amended in 2016).

Box 1. Recent education reform

Recent amendments to the Pre-school and School Education Act, also known as the education reform, have triggered changes in the VET Act, also known as VET reform. The main objective of the reforms was to make education pathways more flexible, allowing for better permeability. The current priorities of the education ministry are in line with this objective and aim at:

- inclusive education (to reduce early leaving from education and training);
- better VET;
- professionalisation of teachers and trainers.

Source: As presented by the Director General for VET (DGV) on 4 October 2017.

The Pre-school and School Education Act defines the following education levels:

- (a) primary (grades 1 to 4) (European qualifications framework, EQF/national qualifications framework, NQF level 1);
- (b) basic (grades 5 to 7) (EQF/NQF level 2);
- (c) secondary stage one (grades 8 to 10) (no EQF/NQF level assigned);
- (d) secondary stage two (grades 11 to 12) (EQF/NQF level 4);
- (e) (professional) bachelor (EQF level 6; NQF level (6A) 6B);
- (f) master's (EQF/NQF level 7);
- (g) doctoral (EQF/NQF level 8).

Post-secondary level, according to legislation, is not an education but rather a qualification level (Box 2). Training at this level is provided by vocational colleges.

⁽¹⁷⁾ This applies to learners who have enrolled in grades 1 or 5 since 2016/17 and in grade 8 since 2017/18. Other learners will complete their studies according to the former Public Education Act.

Box 2. The difference between education levels and qualifications in the national context

Qualifications are linked to a profession but not to education levels (basic, secondary and higher). They can be acquired in addition to a certificate attesting an education level. The latter gives the right to continue one's studies at the next education level and is the same for general education and VET.

Source: Cedefop expert discussions with national policy-makers from 2 to 4 October 2017 in Sofia.

Primary and basic education (grades 1 to 7) is compulsory. Primary education starts at age seven ⁽¹⁸⁾ and is provided by State, municipal and private schools. There are no VET programmes at this level. Graduates may continue to general or vocational secondary education. In 2016/17 ⁽¹⁹⁾, all general education programmes became profiled, meaning they specialise in a selected subject such as mathematics, natural sciences or foreign languages.

Secondary education comprises general (profiled) and VET programmes in two subsequent stages: one and two. It is compulsory for learners until they reach age 16. At the end of stage two, learners who pass State matriculation examinations (*Matura*) ⁽²⁰⁾ (Bulgarian language in addition to another subject or – for VET learners – State qualification examination ⁽²¹⁾) receive a secondary education diploma (EQF level 4). Others receive a certificate for completion of secondary education with access to vocational training for adults ⁽²²⁾ but not to higher education. VET programmes provide graduates with a general education diploma in addition to a VET qualification certificate.

Higher education does not formally comprise VET programmes. However, professional bachelor programmes (NQF level 6a, EQF level 6) offer more practice-oriented studies than academic bachelor programmes. Higher education providers may establish vocational training centres and provide vocational training but this is not considered as higher VET. Partnerships between VET and higher education providers ease transitions from secondary VET to tertiary programmes. Learning outcomes acquired in VET may be recognised by higher education providers, sometimes allowing VET graduates to enrol in tertiary programmes without entry

⁽¹⁸⁾ Seven years old by 31 December.

⁽¹⁹⁾ In practice, first learners enrolled in 2017/18.

⁽²⁰⁾ In Bulgarian: *Държавен Зрелостен Изпит*.

⁽²¹⁾ Until 2020, the State qualification examination can be replaced with another subject.

⁽²²⁾ From age 16.

examinations. Some higher education programmes even reserve places for VET graduates in similar study fields, as with technical universities in engineering programmes.

2.2. Government-regulated VET provision

This section includes information about learning opportunities leading directly to government-recognised qualifications ⁽²³⁾ irrespective of age or previous learning experience (NAVET, 2016). Initial and continuing ⁽²⁴⁾ VET are presented together in this report.

Most learners choose a VET path at age 14 (grade 7). As State exams are the same in VET and general education, family traditions and personal interests are main factors for choosing VET. Guidance is still developing and does not have a real impact on learner choices.

VET learners may choose between eight study forms, though not all programmes are offered in all forms (Figure 11).

⁽²³⁾ Including education and qualification levels according to national definitions.

⁽²⁴⁾ Continuing training is offered to learners aged 16+ who would like to progress further or to update knowledge or skills. Completed education level may be required to enrol.

Figure 11. VET study forms

STUDY FORM	CHARACTERISTICS
Daytime	Takes place between 7.00 and 19.00 and no more than eight hours a day, five days per week
Evening	Takes place after 17.00 and no more than six hours a day, five days per week
Part-time	Comprises in-school lessons, self-learning and exams on each subject/module
Individual	Organised for individual learners and comprises in-school lessons and exams on each subject/module
Distance	Individual or group ICT-based learning that comprises distance lessons, self-learning, feedback on the learning outcomes and face to face exams on each subject/module
Dual	Organised by VET providers in partnership with employer(s); includes work-based learning in real work environment in addition to lessons in school
Self-learning	Comprises self-learning and exams on each subject/module

NB: The law defines the forms while VET providers decide on their exact definitions.
Source: Ministry of Education and Science, 2015.

The most popular study form in upper secondary VET is daytime. This was attended by 85.9% of VET learners in 2017. There were also 7.10% part-time learners and 4.49% self-learners in VET. The individual and the combined study forms were introduced to ensure more flexible learning and training offers for students with special educational needs or students who, for some reason, cannot attend regular day-teaching school.

Work-based learning (WBL) is a compulsory element in every VET programme but is not considered a separate study form according to legislation. In the national context, WBL at school premises as part of regular classes during the school year is called study practice (*учебна практика*). For professions related to high-end technology it takes place in a real working environment. In-company WBL time (for example a week or month) at the end of grades 11 and 12 is called production

practice (*производствена практика*). WBL comprises at least 70% of VET programme time at NQF/EQF level 2, at least 60% at level 3 and at least 50% at levels 4 and 5.

2.2.1. National VET qualification levels

There are four national VET qualification levels:

- (a) level 1: acquired competences for performance of routine activities (WBL at least 70%) – NQF/EQF level 2;
- (b) level 2: acquired competences for performance of complex activities in a changing environment (WBL at least 60%) – NQF/EQF level 3;
- (c) level 3: acquired competences for performance of complex activities in a changing environment, including human resource management (WBL at least 50%) – NQF/EQF level 4;
- (d) level 4: acquired competences for performance of a broad range of complex activities in a changing environment, including human and financial resource management (WBL at least 50%) – NQF/EQF level 5.

2.2.2. Secondary VET

Secondary VET aims at providing a vocational qualification. It also comprises a general education element that is required to acquire a secondary education diploma. VET may also be organised in dual form (Figure 11).

Schools providing VET are vocational gymnasiums, art schools and sports schools. Other providers (profiled gymnasiums, secondary schools, prison schools) may also offer VET as a separate programme from mainstream (Section 2.2.8).

Examples of qualifications at secondary level (Figure 10) are computer system technician, technician in transport equipment, electrician, restaurateur, chef, economist, system programmer, construction technician and agricultural machinery fitter.

Secondary VET is completed with State matriculation examinations (*Matura*) in Bulgarian language and literature and a State examination to acquire a VET qualification (Box 2) ⁽²⁵⁾. The latter comprises theoretical and practical parts and is based on a set of possible questions, practical tasks and evaluation criteria approved by the education ministry ⁽²⁶⁾.

⁽²⁵⁾ Until 2020, it is possible to replace the qualification examination with another subject examination as in general education.

⁽²⁶⁾ So-called national examination programmes.

Examination commissions are composed of teachers, employers and professionals with four or more years of experience in the field ⁽²⁷⁾. Graduates receive a secondary education diploma (EQF level 4) and a certificate of vocational qualification (EQF levels 3 or 4). The vocational qualification acquired gives access to the labour market. Students who are willing to continue their education, can enrol in higher education institutions (Ministry of Education and Science, 2016).

2.2.3. Post-secondary VET

Post-secondary, non-tertiary vocational qualifications (ISCED 2011 level 4, EQF level 5) can be acquired only by people with previously completed secondary education. The qualification acquired at this level provides access to the labour market but not to another education level.

Examples of such qualifications are company manager, hotel manager, restaurant manager, as well as sports and military/defence qualifications.

Post-secondary VET takes place at vocational colleges. The share of VET learners in vocational colleges compared to the total number of VET learners is marginal (around 1% in 2017). Vocational gymnasiums, art schools and sports schools can also provide VET at EQF level 5 if decided by the respective minister ⁽²⁸⁾.

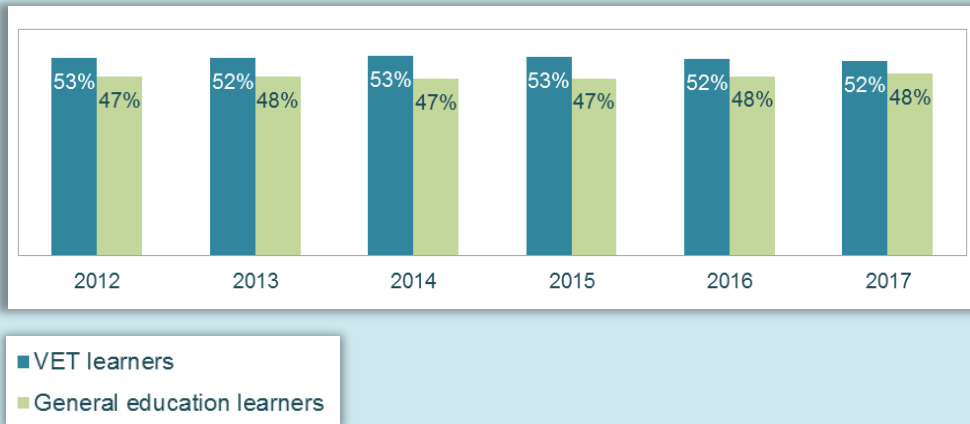
2.2.4. Participation in VET

There are more learners in VET than general education. In 2017, there were 117 130 VET learners, which is 51.7% of the total secondary education population. However, this share has decreased from 52.5% in 2012 (Figure 12).

⁽²⁷⁾ For art and sports programmes, relevant university and sports federation representatives participate accordingly.

⁽²⁸⁾ Either by the minister for education, for culture or for youth and sports.

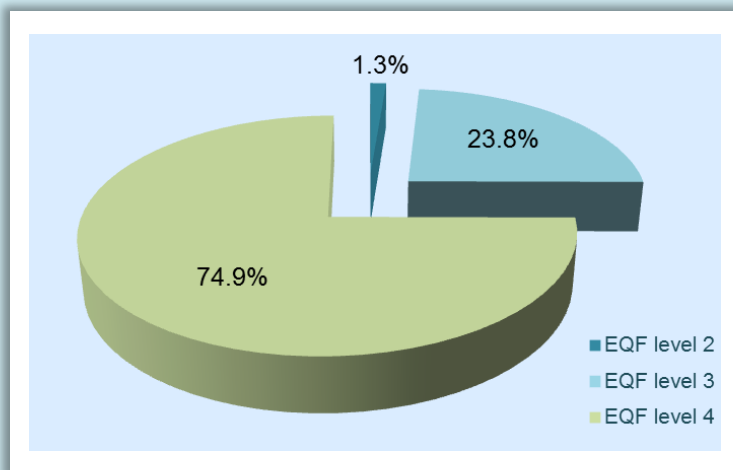
Figure 12. Learners in secondary education



Source: Ministry of Education and Science.

Most VET learners (74.9%) at secondary education level attain NQF/EQF level 4 qualifications (Figure 13).

Figure 13. VET learners by education attainment in 2016/17



Source: Ministry of Education and Science.

In 2017, the share of newly-enrolled VET learners in NQF/EQF level 2 programmes has increased almost five times to 6.40%, compared to 1.3% in 2012, as a result of the education reform allowing more permeability: graduates may now continue to NQF/EQF level 3 and 4 programmes or to the labour market.

Traditionally, there are more males in VET (60%) ⁽²⁹⁾. They prefer programmes related to computer systems and coding (the most popular options), transport, agriculture, economy, construction. Females enrol more often in economics and administration programmes (the most popular options), services (tourism, hotels and restaurants) as well as design and clothing.

2.2.5. Framework programmes

All VET offers are based on framework programmes; VET providers use these to design their programmes ⁽³⁰⁾. Framework programmes are approved by the Education Minister and include:

- (a) general provisions, including the regulatory basis, the aim and purpose of the programme;
- (b) requirements ⁽³¹⁾:
 - (i) entry (age, medical, previous education and qualification level);
 - (ii) career and education pathways;
 - (iii) form(s) of training (day, evening, part-time, individual, distance, dual, self-learning);
- (c) structure of curriculum (selection of modules);
- (d) training module content (theoretical and practical);
- (e) graduation requirements (State examinations for full qualifications and final examinations for partial qualifications).

⁽²⁹⁾ National Statistical Institute, data provided by BG experts.

⁽³⁰⁾ The compulsory part of the curriculum for VET schools is designed by the education ministry.

⁽³¹⁾ Different requirements apply for learners of age 16 and over.

Table 1. Framework programmes

Type	Dual training	Available for adults (16+)	EQF level	VET qualification level	Duration (years)	Provided by
A (A)	☑	☑	2	1	≤0.5 ^(a) , 1 or 3	VET schools and centres
B (Б)	☑	☑	3 and 4 ^(a)	2 or 3	≤1.5 ^(a) , 1 or 4	VET schools and centres
C (B)	☑	-	3-4	2 or 3	1, 2 or 5	VET schools
D (Γ)	☑	adults only	5	4	≤2 ^(a)	VET schools and colleges
E (Д)	☑	☑	2-4 partial	-	1	VET schools and centres
F (E)	☑	adults only	2-4 partial	1, 2, 3 or none	not defined	VET schools and centres

NB: ^(a) for programmes for adults only.

Only type C(B) programmes offer access to higher education on graduation and only if the certificate attesting the education level has been obtained in addition to a vocational part.

Source: <https://www.navet.government.bg/bg/dokumenti/normativni-dokumenti/ramkovi-programi/>

2.2.6. Access requirements

The requirements for enrolment in VET programmes are minimum age, health condition, previous education and qualification level.

The minimum required age is 13 (in the year of application) for vocational gymnasiums and schools. It is 16 for vocational training centres (initial and continuing VET providers for employees and the unemployed, without acquisition of an education level). The health condition of the applicant is attested by a medical certificate indicating fitness for the selected occupation. Previous education requirements are at least a completed primary, basic or secondary education or a successfully completed literacy course under the employment promotion Act.

The following programmes are available for VET school learners (Table 2).

Table 2. VET programmes

Framework programme	Duration (years)	Minimum entry requirements (*)	EQF level
A (A)	3	basic education	2
	1	secondary education stage 1	2
B (B)	4	basic education	3
	1	secondary education stage 1 and VET qualification level 1	3
C (B)	5	basic education	3-4
	2	secondary education stage 1 and VET qualification level 1	3-4
	1	grade 11 and VET qualification level 1 or 2	3-4
E (D)	up to 1	basic education	2-4 (partial qualification)

(*) National VET qualification levels.

NB: Requirements for learners with special educational needs may differ.

Source: <https://www.navet.government.bg/bg/dokumenti/normativni-dokumenti/ramkovi-programi/>

2.2.7. Dual VET

There are several types of training in real work environments.

In 1992, so-called apprenticeships for employees were introduced. They often guarantee a job at the end of training, according to the contract with the employer. The duration of this type of apprenticeships is up to six months.

In 2014, internships were introduced for young people (up to 29 years old) who have already acquired a VET qualification (or higher education degree) but have no work experience in the profession. The duration of internships is between six and 12 months.

Since 2014, dual VET has started to evolve; this allows learners to acquire a VET qualification. Practical training in a company alternates with periods of theoretical training in a school or another VET provider. In-company trainers (mentors) are responsible for the practical training. They are required to have a VET or higher education qualification and at least three years of work experience (Table 3).

Table 3. Main characteristics of dual VET

Regulated by	Labour Code ⁽³²⁾ ; VET Act; Dual VET ordinance ⁽³³⁾
Type of contract between employer and learner	Labour contract with conditions for dual training
Duration	1-3 years
Learner age	16+ years
Minimum education requirements	Secondary education stage one
Remuneration	At least 90% of the national minimum wage ⁽³⁴⁾ (varies by sector) paid by the employer
Trainers (mentors)	Financed by employers
Requirements for trainers	VET qualification or higher education degree 3+ years of work experience
Specialised training for trainers provided by the employer	Yes
Obligation of the employer to offer a job after the training is completed	No
Obligation of the employee to accept the job, if offered	No
Partnership with a VET provider (school, college or vocational training centre)	Compulsory
Number of days per week in class	3 or less in grade 11 2 or less in grade 12
Final examination	Same as in school-based VET but with employers on the examination board
Documents issued	Certificate of vocational qualification

Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2015; Ministry of Education and Science, 2016; Ordinance No 8 of 2015 regulating dual VET ⁽³⁵⁾.

Creating a sustainable national dual VET model is a complex task. While legislation encourages dual VET ⁽³⁶⁾ and the new school curricula and training

⁽³²⁾ <http://www.lex.bg/laws/ldoc/1594373121> [accessed on 29.1.2018].

⁽³³⁾ Regulation is under revision in 2017: http://www.navet.government.bg/bg/media/Naredba_1_dualno_obuchenie_08_09_2015.pdf [accessed on 29.1.2018].

⁽³⁴⁾ 235 EUR in 2017.

⁽³⁵⁾ <https://www.mon.bg/?h=downloadFile&fileId=8097> [accessed on 29.1.2018].

⁽³⁶⁾ Including the updated 2015 Ordinance No 1 on organisation of dual training at schools that clarifies stakeholder (VET school, company, mentor, teacher and learner) responsibilities.

programmes for dual VET for 2017/18 are ready, implementation is still mostly project-based.

Since 2015, dual VET has been piloted within a Bulgarian-Swiss cooperation programme ⁽³⁷⁾. The DOMINO project of the education, labour and economics ministries aims at creating a national model and capacity building for the successful introduction of dual VET. In the first year, it involved two VET schools in Sofia and Kazanlak and covered two professions. A year later the pilot project expanded to 16 VET providers, and five occupations, 424 learners and 63 partner companies in 11 towns. In 2016/17, the first 20 graduates received a dual training certificate to complement their machine technician professional qualification certificate. Most of these graduates now work in the companies where they were trained; several study in higher education. In 2017/18, around 800 learners in 30 VET schools in 19 towns enrolled in dual VET within the project.

The Austrian chamber of commerce also supports dual training in Bulgaria, with a project that includes economist and mechatronics qualifications. The chamber writes on its page: 'After successful implementation of the first two dual classes in Bulgaria in 2015/16 (in Sofia with 27 students in the profession economist, specialty trade and in Gabrovo with 26 students in the profession mechatronics) in 2016/17 we managed to launch another five classes [...]'⁽³⁸⁾.

The German-Bulgarian industrial chamber of commerce has had dual training for a company manager qualification since 2015. Companies, educational institutions, organisations and political institutions created a cluster for this training ⁽³⁹⁾.

Another initiative financed by companies in the Panagyurishte municipality supports dual training in the qualifications machine technician, mining technician, textile clothing designer and laser, and optical equipment technician.

These projects provide support for the development of curricula for schools and companies and also for trainer training, with learner salaries paid by the companies.

In 2017/18, the total number of learners in dual VET reached 1 307. The most popular programmes are those leading to computerised numerical control (CNC)

⁽³⁷⁾ *Swiss support for the introduction of dual track principles in the Bulgarian vocational education system project.*

⁽³⁸⁾ Source:
http://www.advantageaustria.org/bg/oesterreich-in-bulgaria/news/local/Duale_Ausbildung.en.html [accessed on 29.1.2018].

⁽³⁹⁾ Source:
<http://bulgarien.ahk.de/bg/qualifizierung/geschaeftsfeld-duale-berfsausbildung/> [accessed on 29.1.2018].

machine, electronic engineering, transport equipment, electronics, wood-processing, milk and dairy production technician as well as cookery qualifications.

2.2.8. VET providers

VET providers are ⁽⁴⁰⁾:

- (a) VET schools (provide education and training):
 - (i) vocational gymnasiums (373);
 - (ii) vocational classes in general education schools;
 - (iii) art schools (22);
 - (iv) sports schools (24);
- (b) adult training institutions (provide training only):
 - (i) vocational colleges (36);
 - (ii) vocational training centres (1006).

Vocational gymnasiums offer vocational education leading to VET qualifications at NQF/EQF levels 2 to 4. They enrol learners with completed basic (grade 7) or stage 1 of secondary (grade 10) education. They may also provide a VET qualification at EQF/NQF level 5, partial qualifications and training for learners aged 16 or older.

Art and sports schools provide vocational education leading to a VET qualification at NQF/EQF levels 3 to 4 and, occasionally, at level 5.

Religious, special, prison schools, special education support centres and merged profiled gymnasium/primary schools (called united schools) may also provide vocational education.

Vocational colleges provide vocational training leading to a VET qualification at NQF/EQF level 5; they accept learners with completed secondary education.

Vocational training centres provide vocational training leading to a VET qualification at NQF/EQF levels 2 to 4 and partial qualifications to individuals aged 16 or older.

Vocational gymnasiums, vocational colleges, vocational training centres and information and vocational guidance centres are State-controlled, municipal and private. Sports schools are State or municipal; art schools are State only.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ According to the VET Act, centres for information and vocational guidance (43) are also part of the VET system in Bulgaria. Figures in parentheses refer to the total number of VET providers in 2016/17.

Sources:

National Statistical Institute: <http://www.nsi.bg/en>

NAVET register of vocational training centres:

<https://www.navet.government.bg/en/register-cvt/>

Continuing vocational training is carried out by formal education and training institutions, mainly vocational gymnasiums, vocational colleges and vocational training centres.

Based on quality aspects (innovative elements in the content, organisation, management, learning environment and teaching) the government may grant innovative status to secondary education providers, allowing more flexibility in VET implementation. Currently, 185 schools have been identified as potential innovators.

2.2.9. Adults in formal VET

There is no maximum age limit for VET enrolment. Adults (16+) can enrol at any level and in any study form, so long as they have the education level requirements for the particular qualification.

For individuals above age 16, the following programmes are available (Table 4).

Table 4. VET programmes for learners above age 16

Framework programme	Duration (years)	Minimum entry requirements (*)	EQF level
A (А)	up to 6 months	primary education or literacy course	2
B (Б)	up to 1 year	secondary education stage 1	3
	1.5 years	secondary education or grade 12 without passing State <i>matura</i> exam	4
D (Д)	up to 2 years	secondary education	5
E (Е)	-	same as for the full qualification	2-4 (partial)
F (Ф)	-	partial qualification	2
	-	VET qualification EQF level 2	3
	-	VET qualification EQF level 3	4

(*) National VET qualification levels.

NB: Requirements for learners with special education needs may differ.

Source: <https://www.navet.government.bg/bg/dokumenti/normativni-dokumenti/ramkovi-programi/>

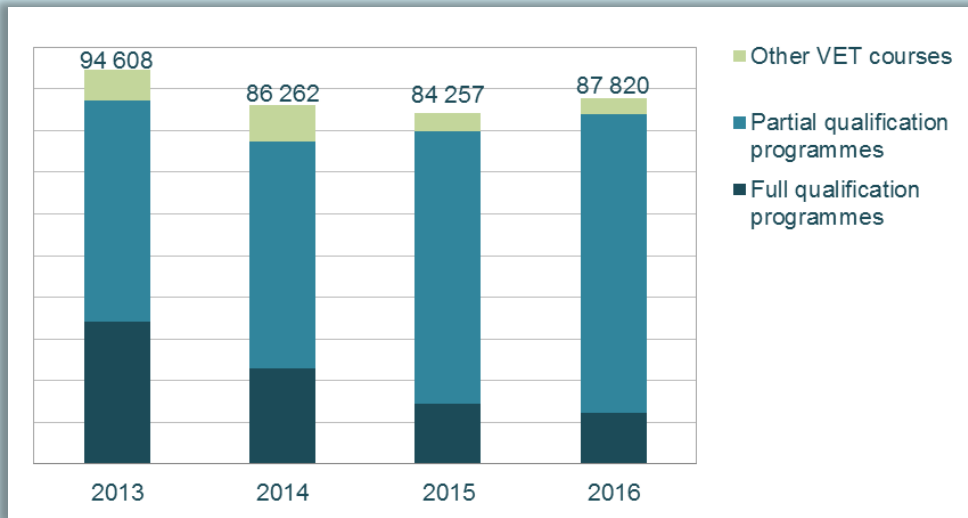
In order to acquire a VET qualification, adult learners study for:

- (a) 300 hours for EQF level 2;
- (b) 660 hours for EQF level 3;
- (c) 960 hours for EQF level 4;
- (d) 1 260 hours for EQF level 5.

Adult learners can obtain either a full qualification according to the State educational standard or partial qualification for a specific part of a profession. In the last four years, the number of applicants for partial qualifications has been increasing compared with full qualification applicants. Since 2013, the total number

of learners in formal adult VET programmes has decreased by 7%, which may be due to both increased on-the-job non-formal training opportunities provided by employers and reallocation of public funding more to the employed rather than the unemployed (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Adult VET learners by qualification type



Source: NAVET.

This increase is in line with labour market dynamics. Most full qualifications acquired are at EQF/NQF level 2, while partial qualifications are at level 3.

2.3. Financing VET

According to the latest data available, the total public expenditure for education and training was 4.0% of GDP in 2015, which is less than the EU average of 4.9% (European Commission, 2017b). The Pre-school and School Education Act defines the basic principles of financing education, including VET. The education ministry determines the cost per student for State and municipal schools in coordination with the finance ministry and in accordance with the State standards. In 2017/18, the

cost per VET learner was between EUR 1 000 and 1 500 per year ⁽⁴¹⁾ depending on the programme. This amount covers expenditure for school infrastructure, teacher salaries and additional remuneration (for extra work, achievements, participation in projects) and social security.

Schools receive so-called delegated budgets. They are determined by a formula that includes the number of learners in the programme and its type (for example, engineering is more expensive than some other programmes).

According to the VET Act, sources of financing for State and municipal schools, vocational training centres for information and vocational guidance, and training centres for trainers are:

- (a) the State budget;
- (b) the municipal budget;
- (c) donations;
- (d) own revenue;
- (e) national and international programmes;
- (f) other sources.

The financing of vocational training offered after secondary education is provided by individuals under the terms and conditions set by the Education Minister. The training is financed by:

- (a) learners;
- (b) employers;
- (c) the State budget (active labour market policy);
- (d) EU programmes (mainly ESF).

Secondary VET is mostly State-financed. Private VET schools may also apply for State funding, though only 11 out of 350 VET schools were private in 2017/18.

All adult VET providers are private. They may also receive public financing. In 2016, self-financing of training courses by learners was the most common source (53.49%) followed by employer financing (29.14%) and funding through national or European public resources (16.83%).

⁽⁴¹⁾ Source: Decision of the council of ministers No 458/11.8.2017:
http://pris.government.bg/prin/file_view.aspx?did=80315&pid=88929
[accessed on 29.1.2018].

2.4. Other forms of training

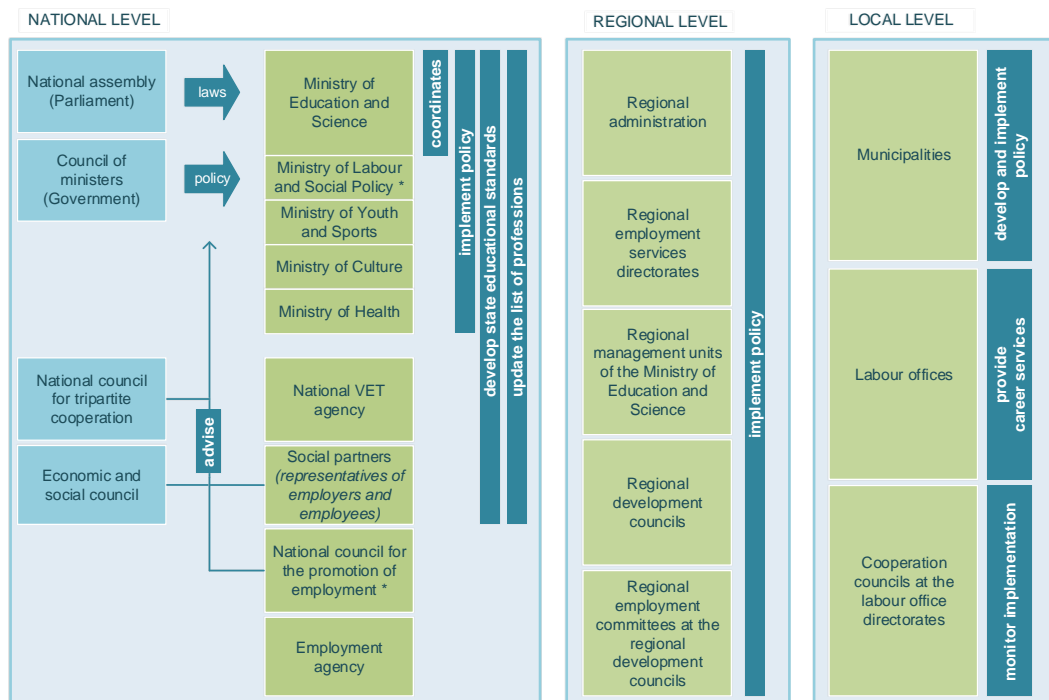
The Employment Promotion Act (2002, last amendments in 2016) stipulates that vocational training for the unemployed can be organised by employers as vocational training courses, in-service training, seminars and conferences.

Non-governmental organisations, enterprises, companies and traditional Bulgarian cultural and educational community centres (*читалище*) offer non-formal training. The community centres are often the only organisations providing access to a library and internet in small towns and villages.

2.5. VET governance

VET governance is in place at national, regional and local levels (Figure 15).

Figure 15. VET governance at national, regional and local levels



Source: Cedefop based on ReferNet Bulgaria.

2.5.1. National level

VET governance comprises the following institutions at national level:

- (a) the National Assembly (parliament) approves VET legislation;

- (b) the council of ministers (government) sets out VET government policy;
- (c) the education ministry manages, coordinates and implements VET policy;
- (d) the labour ministry participates in implementing national VET policy;
- (e) the culture ministry implements VET policy in art schools;
- (f) the sports ministry implements VET policy in sports schools;
- (g) the health ministry participates in the coordination of the list of professions for VET;
- (h) sectoral ministries are involved in the development, coordination and updating of the State educational standards for the acquisition of qualifications; in the development, coordination and updating of the list of professions for VET; in coordinating the admission plan for schools, funded by them;
- (i) social partners (employers' representatives and trade unions), participate in the development, coordination and updating of the State educational standards for the acquisition of qualifications, the legislative framework and policy documents, as well as in updating the list of professions and in organising and conducting qualification examinations;
- (j) the Economic and Social Council discusses and makes proposals on issues, related to education, including VET in the context of lifelong learning;
- (k) the National Council for Tripartite Cooperation discusses and gives opinions on draft legislation regarding employment and vocational qualifications and so participates in the formulation of VET policy. The council is a body for consultations and cooperation at a national level for labour, social insurance and living standard issues, consisting of two representatives of the government (of whom one is the Vice Prime Minister), two representatives of trade unions and two representatives of employers' organisations;
- (l) the National Council for the Promotion of Employment at the labour ministry is also based on the tripartite principle. Its functions are to discuss and give opinions regarding the development and implementation of employment policy and the national action plan for employment;
- (m) the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET) is a specialised body within the council of ministers. The agency develops the State educational standards for the acquisition of VET qualifications. It maintains the list of professions according to the needs of the labour market, licenses. It also controls the activities of VET institutions for people older than 16 and vocational guidance providers;
- (n) the Employment Agency implements the State policy on promoting employment and provides career information, counselling and training for employees and the unemployed;
- (o) the Human Resource Development Centre coordinates the management and administration of the EU *Erasmus+* programme.

2.5.2. Regional level

VET governance comprises the following institutions at regional level:

- (a) the regional administration participates in the implementation of government policy for employment and acquisition of VET qualifications;
- (b) directorates of the regional employment services implement government policy for training of the unemployed and employed adults to acquire a vocational qualification; they offer training measures and projects; provide coordination and support in the field of vocational training, consultancy on and guidance for the local employment offices;
- (c) regional management units of the education ministry (territorial administrative units of the ministry, situated in the 28 district centres) implement State policy in VET at regional level through projects, programmes and strategies for development, functioning and improvement of VET at district level;
- (d) the permanent and temporary employment committees to the regional councils for regional development identify, organise and control the implementation of State policy on the promotion of employment and training to acquire a vocational qualification at a regional level.

2.5.3. Local level

VET governance comprises the following institutions at local level:

- (a) the municipalities participate in the development of VET policy within their territories regarding:
 - (i) employment needs for vocational guidance and training of students, the unemployed and other groups;
 - (ii) the equipment needed by schools, vocational training providers and centres for information and guidance, using funds from the municipal budget;
- (b) the labour offices of the Employment Agency provide career services:
 - (i) career information;
 - (ii) advice and guidance for inclusion in the appropriate programme/measure for employment and training;
- (c) the cooperation councils at the labour office directorates monitor the implementation of programmes and measures included in the national action plan for employment (NAVET, 2016).

2.6. Teachers and trainers

In 2016/17, the total number of teachers and trainers was 102 335, including 11 534 teaching staff in vocational schools, vocational gymnasiums and vocational colleges

(⁴²). According to NAVET data, the teaching staff employed in vocational training centres was over 5 000. Their basic employment contract is with vocational gymnasiums or companies in the respective industrial branch.

The teaching staff is one of the most rapidly ageing in the EU. Almost half of teachers/trainers are aged 50 or older. To attract more young teachers, the government increased teacher salaries by 15% in 2017 and announced plans for even higher increase by 2021 (European Commission, 2017b).

National policy on teachers' education is provided in the regulations governing teacher qualifications, employment and career development (⁴³). The basic rules and regulations addressing initial teacher training are common for the whole country; they are in the uniform State requirements for the acquisition of a teaching qualification, adopted by the council of ministers in 1997. The first prerequisite for the acquisition of this qualification is to obtain a professional bachelor, or master degree. Teachers must have a qualification certificate, which requires a compulsory minimum of theoretical and practical training in pedagogy, psychology, audio-visual and information technology in teaching and methodology of teaching. This certificate may be acquired simultaneously with primary specialty training or later, after graduation. Possession of this document, however, is mandatory only for teachers in general subjects (including foreign languages), but not for teachers in the specific vocational subjects in the VET system. This legal statement promotes the involvement of highly qualified business professionals in educational activities in VET that should be encouraged with a view to a closer alignment of VET with industry.

While initial teacher training is carried out by many higher education institutions, the postgraduate qualification that is directly related to career development can be acquired only in specialised departments of three higher education institutions.

Ordinance No 1 (September 2015) on the terms and conditions for providing work-based learning (dual training) prescribes the need for employers to have a mentor(s)/instructor(s) for each learner. According to the ordinance, the mentor is an employee in the enterprise who possesses a qualification in the profession, at least three years of work experience in the same profession, and has completed training to be a mentor, provided by the employer. This person help devise curricula for practical training in a real working environment for students aged 16 or older.

The Pre-school and School Education Act (2015) sets the requirements for qualification update programmes for teachers and trainers. These programmes can

(⁴²) According to data collected by the National Statistical Institute.

(⁴³) <http://www.mon.bg/?h=downloadFile&fileId=10486> [accessed on 20.2.2017];
<http://www.mon.bg/?h=downloadFile&fileId=10269> [accessed on 20.2.2017].

be provided by companies, organisations and others. They are included in the *Information register of approved programmes for improving the qualifications of pedagogical specialists*, created and maintained under the management of the Education Minister.

In 2016, a new system for career development for VET teachers and trainers was created. The 2016 Ordinance No 12 regulates the statute and the professional development of teachers, school headmasters and pedagogical staff. According to the ordinance, teachers (including VET teachers) are required to improve their competences continuously. They receive a certificate for continuing training or specialisation credit points; sixteen training hours (academic) equals to one credit point and at least three credit points acquired in external programmes are compulsory for each period of appraisal ⁽⁴⁴⁾ in addition to one credit point per year acquired in the institution where they work. The credit system ensures opportunities for accumulation, recognition and transfer of credits (for forthcoming periods, or in case of change of school, in application for higher qualification level). Teachers, headmasters and other pedagogical staff now have to create and maintain their professional portfolio (NAVET, 2016).

More information is available in Cedefop ReferNet thematic perspective on teachers and trainers ⁽⁴⁵⁾.

2.7. Recent policy changes

Borders between general education and VET are blurring. While many general education graduates find jobs immediately, for example in administration, in some VET programmes (such as economics), up to 90% of learners continue studies in higher education directly after graduating from VET. The recent education reform suggests that every general education learner has to choose a profile (such as maths or languages) and general education schools may provide a VET element instead of the profile.

VET Act (1999) regulates the organisation, management and financing of VET. The 2014 amendments to the act ⁽⁴⁶⁾:

- (a) broaden access to VET through validation of non-formal and informal learning carried out by VET providers;

⁽⁴⁴⁾ According to the Pre-school and School Education Act, the appraisal of teachers, directors and other pedagogical specialists is carried out every four years.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Kovachev and Ganova, 2016.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ <http://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp?idMat=86590> [accessed on 29.1.2018].

- (b) better match competences acquired in VET to labour market demand;
- (c) strengthen the quality assurance of training providers;
- (d) allow learners to accumulate credits towards the acquisition of a vocational qualification. Credits can be transferred between qualifications in the same vocational area;
- (e) restructure the State educational standards for VET qualifications, including units of learning outcomes and assessment criteria;
- (f) introduce dual training, that has combined school- and work-based learning since 2015. Dual training is based on partnership between VET providers and employers;
- (g) oblige VET providers to establish internal quality assurance systems to ensure correspondence of the services provided with the expectations and needs of society.

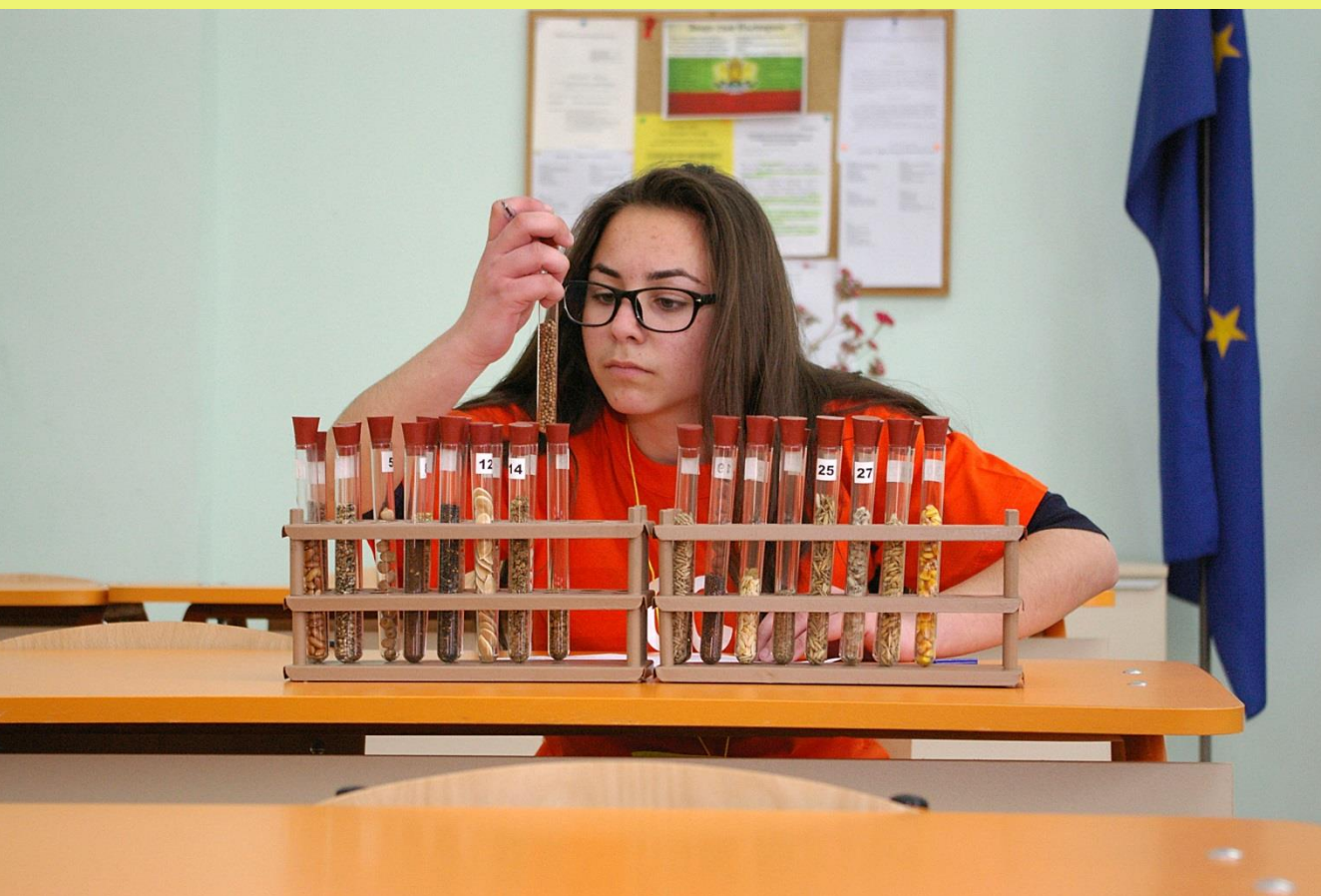
Recent (2016) amendments harmonised the VET Act with the Pre-school and School Education Act and introduced additional opportunities for acquiring a vocational qualification in the new secondary education structure (two stages). They also aim at improving the quality of VET by changing the ratio between theoretical and practical training in favour of the latter, including practice in a real working environment.

Following the amendments in the VET Act, the Labour Code (1986) was also amended in 2014 to support the work-based form of learning (dual) as a type of apprenticeship.

Underfinancing, poor cooperation with the business sector, increasing drop-out rates and lack of a coherent system to assess the quality of VET remain challenges (Court of Auditors, 2016). To address these challenges, in 2017, the education ministry approved the 2017-21 concept for the development of VET in Bulgaria. The draft concept was discussed with social partners (employer organisations, employers, local authorities, trade unions and education providers) in a series of regional meetings between June and November 2017.

CHAPTER 3.

Shaping VET qualifications



3.1. Anticipating skills needs

The forecast demand for qualifications is based on the macro-economic model (for medium- and long-term forecasts) and the annual employer skill needs survey (for short-term forecasts).

Medium- and long-term forecasts take into account demographic trends and changes in the education attainment of the labour force and in the structure of the economy. They provide information on labour demand and supply by:

- (a) level of education (primary, lower secondary, secondary or higher);
- (b) economic activity ⁽⁴⁷⁾;
- (c) profession ⁽⁴⁸⁾;
- (d) structural shortage/surplus of labour by education level.

According to the model, in 2020 the labour market will require qualifications at the following levels:

- (a) primary education or lower – 1.1%;
- (b) lower secondary education – 6.2%;
- (c) secondary education (both stages) – 67.1%;
- (d) higher education – 25.6%.

In the long term (2030), labour demand will increase for higher education (will reach 28.8%) and decrease for secondary education qualifications (will reach 64.1%).

According to the 2015 employer skill needs survey ⁽⁴⁹⁾ the occupations most sought-after by employers were forecast for the following year to be:

- (a) for those with higher education: information and communications technology (ICT), business and administrative (financial and sales) professionals, teachers, mathematicians;
- (b) for those with secondary education: service and sales workers (cooks, waiters, bartenders, hairdressers and beauticians), workers in food and wood processing, operators of stationary machinery and equipment, drivers of motor vehicles;

⁽⁴⁷⁾ According to the classification of economic activities (2015):
<http://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pages/KOO2015.pdf> [accessed on 12.2.2018].

⁽⁴⁸⁾ According to the national classification of occupations (2011):
<https://www.mlsp.government.bg/nkpd/index.php> [accessed on 12.2.2018].

⁽⁴⁹⁾ Conducted by the Employment Agency:
https://www.mlsp.government.bg/ckfinder/userfiles/files/politiki/zaetost/informaciq%20za%20pazara%20na%20truda%20tekusto%20systoqnie%20i%20prognozi/Doklad_Forecast_1.pdf [accessed on 29.1.2018].

- (c) for those with primary or lower secondary education: workers in agriculture, forestry and fisheries; workers in mining and manufacturing, construction, in food processing, clothes and wood product manufacturing.

The survey showed that 10.3% of employers planned to provide training to their employees, mostly leading to a professional qualification as accountant, bodyguard, teaching assistant, waiter, bartender and workers in catering and entertainment. The acquisition of key competences (social, civil, digital, initiative and entrepreneurship) and training on new technologies, equipment and product innovation, working with clients and business activities, were also to be done.

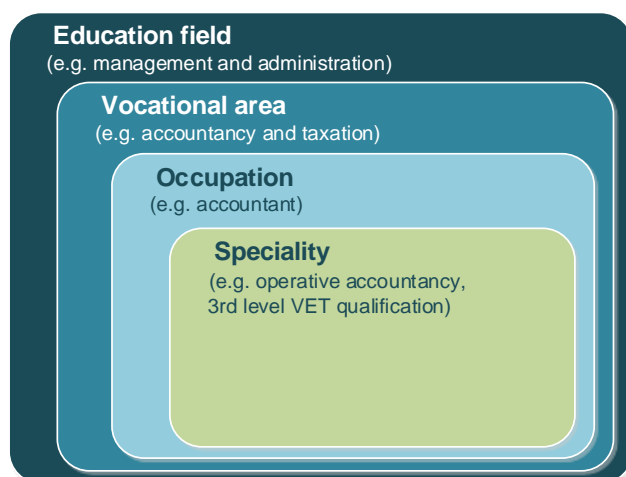
Since 2018, the employment committees of the regional development councils have collected, processed and submitted to the Employment Agency, biannually, information on employer labour force demand. This will ensure adequate VET offer planning to reduce skills imbalances in the labour market.

3.2. List of professions for VET

VET qualifications are included in the list of professions for VET that is approved by the Education Minister ⁽⁵⁰⁾. It is developed by NAVET in social partnership with branch chambers, ministry and employers' representatives; the last of these usually initiate changes in the list. In practice, this happens once a year. The list is structured by education field, vocational area, profession and speciality. VET qualification levels are described in the list (Section 2.2.1) (Figure 16).

⁽⁵⁰⁾ https://www.navet.government.bg/en/media/LPVET_2014.pdf [accessed on 29.1.2018].

Figure 16. **Structural elements in the list of professions for VET**



Source: NAVET.

There are about 500 qualifications (specialities) included in the list; two to three new ones are usually added every year, depending on labour market needs.

3.3. State educational standards for VET

According to the Pre-school and School Education Act and the VET Act, acquisition of vocational qualifications is regulated by the State educational standards. The national agency for VET designs the standards, in coordination with the relevant ministries and departments, and the Education Minister endorses them. The standards are structured by profession (often for multiple specialities) and comprise:

- (a) requirements for the candidates;
- (b) description of the profession;
- (c) units of learning outcomes;
- (d) requirements for training facilities;
- (e) requirements for trainers.

This approach has used the principles of the European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) recommendation since 2015. It aims at linking units of learning outcomes with credits in VET.

The standards are mandatory for VET programmes leading to nationally recognised qualifications, including for adults.

3.4. VET curricula

The curricula are based on the framework programmes (Table 1) and on the State educational standards for VET (Section 3.3).

The education ministry develops the compulsory part of the VET curricula for new professions or forms of learning in VET schools. Designing the curricula is supported by VET teachers and employers. The school-specific curricula part is designed by VET providers for each programme to reflect the specificities of the local labour market.

Curricula for VET schools include a training schedule, subject distribution between general and vocational parts, graduation requirements, and explanatory notes to ensure the achievement of learning outcomes.

Vocational training centres develop their own training programmes that take account also of prior learning. These programmes are evaluated (licensed) by NAVET.

3.5. National qualifications framework

The national qualifications framework (2012) ⁽⁵¹⁾ covers the entire education system and all qualifications. It defines nine levels, including level 0 (preparatory). Secondary and post-secondary VET qualifications refer to NQF levels 2 to 5. Levels 6 to 8 relate to bachelor, master and doctor degrees in higher education, referenced to the framework for qualifications of the European higher education area.

The national qualifications framework is to be updated in line with the new structure of upper secondary education (stage 1 and stage 2).

3.6. Managing qualifications

Introducing new qualifications involves consultations between VET providers and business representatives. For example, in 2016, a new applied programmer qualification at EQF level 4 was added to the list of professions for VET. The proposal for developing this new qualification was submitted by the Bulgarian association of software companies to overcome the shortage of staff in the software industry. Together with NAVET, they drafted the State educational standard, describing knowledge, skills and competences necessary for the profession. The proposal on introducing the new qualification together with the standard were then

⁽⁵¹⁾ https://www.navet.government.bg/bg/media/NQF_bg.pdf [accessed on 29.1.2018].

approved by the expert committee for information and communication technologies, electronics and automation represented by social partners (employers, trade unions) and NAVET.

Approval of the new qualification allowed the introduction of new training for an information technology (IT) career VET programme in 2017/18. Curriculum flexibility allows learners from both VET and general education to join the programme which covers 900 training hours in three years ⁽⁵²⁾.

3.7. Validation of non-formal and informal learning

Validation is an alternative way to acquire a professional qualification for those who have not completed a formal VET programme.

The validation of knowledge, skills and competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning is an integral part of lifelong learning policy. The national lifelong learning strategy 2014-20 foresees introducing validation of knowledge, skills, and competences acquired through non-formal training and informal learning by 2018; the VET development strategy 2015-20 defines validation as a priority in the context of lifelong learning.

These policy documents identify validation as an effective instrument to support the employability of groups with traditionally low participation in lifelong learning, such as those with no education and qualification, aged 50+, or the long-term unemployed.

While validation has been included in the VET Act (Article No 40) since 1999, the regulation did not provide guidance on how the procedure should have been organised. It was only available to employees with at least six-months' working experience in the occupation. In 2014, validation of informal and non-formal learning outcomes was introduced by the amendments to the VET Act. Following the changes in the act, a validation procedure (regulated by Ordinance No 2) has been approved and in force since 2015). VET providers organise the validation for professions and specialities included in the list of professions for VET.

Introducing, in 2014, a new approach for developing State educational standards, based on units of learning outcomes, made the validation process more transparent. Applicants present the evidence of learning outcomes they possess to acquire a qualification or a part of it, allowing access to vocational training and to the labour market.

⁽⁵²⁾ <https://mon.bg/?go=news&p=detail&newsId=2847> [accessed on 29.1.2018].

The methods for assessing the learning outcomes are essentially identical to those for assessing knowledge, skills and competences applied in formal education and training. Two types of certificate can be issued following the validation ⁽⁵³⁾:

- (a) a certificate validating a full qualification. By means of examination it certifies that all units of learning outcomes defined in the State educational standard have been achieved;
- (b) a certificate validating a part of vocational qualification (partial qualification). This certifies, through an examination, that one or several units of learning outcomes included in the State educational standard have been achieved.

Holders of these certificates have the same rights as those who have attained corresponding certificates through the formal education system.

Validation procedures are monitored by the regional education authorities and NAVET. They also consult and guide provider approaches.

Validation procedures can be funded by beneficiaries (individuals), companies and projects; a validation fee for individuals cannot exceed the actual expenditure incurred by a provider.

In 2016, according to NAVET, 257 people acquired qualifications through validation (2.9% of all qualifications obtained in 2016), including 105 full qualifications and 152 partial qualifications.

3.8. Quality assurance

The Pre-school and School Education Act (2015, in force since August 2016) establishes quality management processes, including for VET. Quality management is a continuous process of organisational development based on its analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation. It takes account of:

- (a) whether VET providers achieve the objectives set, for example, graduate transition to the labour market, matching provision to the regional labour market demand;
- (b) analysis of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and risks for development;
- (c) learner performance;
- (d) school environment, including the need for special services.

The evaluation is performed through biennial self-assessment and inspection ⁽⁵⁴⁾.

⁽⁵³⁾ According to the 2015 Amendment to the Ordinance No 4 of 2013.

Self-assessment is part of the internal evaluation of education quality. VET schools set their own self-assessment procedures and criteria based on the guidelines of the State educational standard for quality management in the institutions ⁽⁵⁵⁾. The process follows these steps:

- (a) establishing a working group;
- (b) defining activities, procedures, criteria, indicators and tools;
- (c) contacting learners, teachers and parents;
- (d) performing self-assessment and analysing the results that may lead to recommendations;
- (e) preparing and validating the report.

The inspection is a process of preparing an overall independent expert evaluation of education quality in schools at a given moment, with guidelines for improvement. At least one inspection should be carried out in each school every five years.

VET providers must establish an internal system for quality assurance to meet the requirement of the standards. This system comprises:

- (a) policy and goals for quality assurance;
- (b) quality management responsibilities;
- (c) rules for system implementation;
- (d) annual schedule for self-assessment;
- (e) rules and procedures for measuring the quality achieved through self-assessment.

Crucial areas for quality improvement are: the working environment; learning outcomes; interaction with local community stakeholders, social partners, employers' organisations and universities; and staff training. The education ministry supports and monitors quality assurance in VET schools; NAVET does the same in vocational training centres.

⁽⁵⁴⁾ Inspection by internal experts supported by experts from the national education inspectorate.

⁽⁵⁵⁾ Quality management is regulated by the Ordinance No 16 of 2016.

CHAPTER 4.

Promoting VET participation



4.1. Campaigns and easy-to-access registers

Information about VET is easily available through five web portals:

- (a) the public register of the education ministry includes information on State, municipal and private VET schools and colleges as well as traceable information about qualification certificates ⁽⁵⁶⁾;
- (b) the website of the education ministry complements this with information on State educational standards, curricula, legislation and more ⁽⁵⁷⁾;
- (c) the NAVET system ⁽⁵⁸⁾ provides access to information on licensed vocational training centres (and upcoming courses) and on centres for information and vocational guidance. After the 2015 amendments in the VET Act, all qualification certificates issued by the vocational training centres are uploaded in this system to allow checks on their authenticity;
- (d) since 2017, the education ministry and the national *Erasmus+* agency have made available a national register of qualifications ⁽⁵⁹⁾ that comprises all VET and higher education qualifications and pathways. The register is to be connected to the learning opportunities and qualifications portal of the European Commission.

Since 2009, the *National VET panorama* event ⁽⁶⁰⁾ has promoted VET, enhanced learner motivation and prepared transition to work. It presents examples for acquiring vocational qualifications and provides a platform for VET providers, companies, students and parents to meet; it also hosts VET learner competitions. The ninth national VET panorama event in 2017 gathered 350 learners from 150 vocational gymnasiums from all (28) districts around 11 skills' competitions ⁽⁶¹⁾. Companies and higher education institutions support it. Representatives of employer and branch organisations participate in committees to assess the knowledge, skills and competences demonstrated and to rank the participants. The business representatives ensure logistic support and awards for members and

⁽⁵⁶⁾ <http://www2.mon.bg/adminmon/schools/> [accessed on 29.1.2018].

⁽⁵⁷⁾ <https://mon.bg/?go=page&pageId=2&subpageId=295> [accessed on 29.1.2018].

⁽⁵⁸⁾ <http://navet.government.bg> [accessed on 29.1.2018].

⁽⁵⁹⁾ <http://euroguidance.bg/Public> [accessed on 29.1.2018].

⁽⁶⁰⁾ An annual event that promotes VET and provides information to learners about occupations.

⁽⁶¹⁾ *I can and know how, Young talents in fashion, Best young baker, Best young chef, Best young waiter, Best young builder, Landscaping and floriculture, Stylish furniture and wood carving, Best business idea, Best young hairdresser and make-up and Best young ceramics.*

winners. Higher education institutions offer the winners places in their programmes; companies offer jobs to the best VET learners.

4.2. Incentives for learners

VET learners in Bulgaria, as is the case with general education learners, may receive financial incentives.

4.2.1. Allowances/scholarships

Secondary VET learners may receive grants:

- (a) performance scholarships are awarded to learners with high learning achievements;
- (b) social allowances support access to education and prevent early leaving from VET of disadvantaged learners, for example with special education needs or orphans.

The grants are offered on a monthly basis and vary between 5% and 15% of the minimal national salary ⁽⁶²⁾.

Learners in dual VET receive monthly remuneration from the companies they are trained in based on their contract. Secondary VET learners can participate in ESF projects for work-based learning where they can also receive an additional grant of EUR 150.

4.2.2. Vouchers for adults

Government Decree (No 280 of October 2015) determines the terms and conditions for provision of training vouchers for the unemployed and employees, part-financed by the ESF. The Decree regulates different types of training, target groups and requirements of training providers. A person (employed or unemployed) may have only one training voucher for key competences and one for VET training during the implementation of the programme in 2014-20:

- (a) at EQF level 2 – EUR 300;
- (b) at EQF level 3 – EUR 600;
- (c) at EQF level 4 – EUR 900.

⁽⁶²⁾ Ordinance of the council of ministers on the terms and conditions for receiving scholarships from students after completion of basic education, 2017.

4.2.3. Public transport discount

All secondary VET learners are entitled to receive discounts when using public transport, including trains and in-city public transport. The discount can be up to 60% and is decided by each municipality.

4.3. Incentives for enterprises

4.3.1. VAT exemption

According to the VAT Act, provision of training is free of value added tax for companies.

4.3.2. Financial support for offering dual VET

The Employment Promotion Act foresees financial benefits for employers for creating training places (jobs) for the unemployed. The State budget pays remuneration, social security and health insurance for apprentices for up to 36 months. It also covers the costs of the training institution that provides theoretical lessons to an apprentice and mentoring costs.

4.4. Guidance and counselling

Guidance and counselling for the unemployed and employees is well developed. Vocational guidance services for job seekers (employees and the unemployed) are provided by the labour offices⁽⁶³⁾ and include:

- (a) vocational counselling (individual and in groups) that helps choosing the right VET qualification and provider;
- (b) information on the main characteristics of occupations (requirements, demand and trends) and the relevant VET programmes (providers, forms of training, admission requirements, diplomas).

In the education system, specialised guidance services exist mainly through the ESF project-financed career guidance centres at district level. Project results are expected to be transferred to the system level.

⁽⁶³⁾ <http://www.az.government.bg/pages/profesionalno-orientirane/> [accessed on 29.1.2018].
Guidance and counselling is among main functions of the local labour offices.

4.5. Key challenges and development opportunities

The VET Act has changed 27 times since its adoption in 1999. Many key concepts, such as quality assurance, work-based learning and validation of non-formal and informal learning credit system are now fully or partially implemented.

The main challenges in VET are ⁽⁶⁴⁾:

- (a) reducing early leaving from education and training (higher in VET than in secondary education in general);
- (b) expanding dual VET provision (dual training is still mostly project-based);
- (c) professionalisation of teachers/trainers (teacher population is ageing).

The Pre-school and School Education Act (2015) introduced reform in primary and secondary education, including VET, targeting these challenges. However, it is too early to evaluate the results.

⁽⁶⁴⁾ According to the interview with the Director General for VET in Bulgaria on 4.10.2017.

Acronyms and abbreviations

CNC	computerised numerical control
DGVT	Director General for vocational education and training
ECVET	European credit system for vocational education and training
EQF	European qualifications framework
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
GDP	gross domestic product
ICT	information and communications technology
ISCED	international standard classification of education
IT	information technology
NAVET	National Agency for Vocational Education and Training
NQF	national qualifications framework
VET	vocational education and training
WBL	work-based learning

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Vocational education and training in **Bulgaria**

Short description

This short description helps improve understanding of vocational education and training (VET) in Bulgaria. It covers the main features, highlighting policy developments and current challenges.

Bulgaria has strong youth education traditions. The share of those with upper secondary and post-secondary education is higher than in the EU; the share with low or no qualification is below EU average. Participation in VET is slightly higher than in general education; family traditions and personal interests are drivers for choosing VET. Demographic changes have affected the VET population. A declining school population has led to school network optimisation, targeting greater efficiency while safeguarding quality. Many small VET schools have been merged with larger providers.

The 2015 amendments to the Pre-school and School Education Act triggered changes in the VET Act in 2016. These aim to make education pathways more flexible, allowing for greater permeability while helping create a sustainable national dual VET model.

4161 EN – TI-01-18-258-EN-N – doi:10.2801/600634



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Publications Office

ISBN 978-92-896-2660-6



9 789289 626606