

EASPD Policy Paper

Inclusive skills for all: EASPD's contribution to the European Vocational Education and Training Strategy



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Introduction

Vocational education and training (VET) systems remain insufficiently inclusive by design, often presenting fragmented pathways and offering limited opportunities for the recognition of skills acquired outside formal education. These challenges affect all learners, but are particularly pronounced for people with disabilities, who often experience exclusion from mainstream education and rely more heavily on non-formal or experiential learning. Limited cooperation with social services and employers can further hinder their transitions to the open labour market, while inadequate support measures, fragmented governance, and weak links between training and employment can exacerbate these barriers. Only half of EU’s [42.8 million](#) working-age persons with disabilities are employed and for almost ten years, the [disability employment gap](#) has remained significant (24%).

Launched in March 2025, The Union of Skills Strategy can be leveraged to improve access to inclusive, high-quality education and training across the life of persons with disabilities and to improve the quality of employment in the care and support sector, thus helping to face the staff shortages the sector faces.

The strategy is particularly relevant in people-centred sectors such as long-term care, which faces staff shortages and rising demand, with the potential to create [8 million jobs](#). The lack of modular, stackable learning options makes step-by-step progression difficult, especially when training is combined with employment or caring responsibilities. In addition, qualifications in social care and disability support are not consistently recognised across EU Member States, limiting mobility and career development.

The [European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities](#) (EASPD) is the leading voice of disability services across Europe. Representing over 20,000 services in 50 different countries, we promote human rights and equal opportunities for people with disabilities through effective and high-quality support. Our work focuses on key areas essential to quality support provision. This includes inclusive living, employment, education, early childhood intervention, person-centred technology, workforce development and human resources, arts, culture and sport, and policy impact.

In our views, a future-proof VET strategy should prioritise inclusion, flexibility and labour market relevance, as highlighted in our [Position Paper on the Union of Skills](#). In particular:

- **Inclusive and accessible VET should become the standard approach**, incorporating accessible curricula, adapted learning materials, assistive technologies, and continuous educator training in inclusive teaching methods.
- **Stronger systems are needed for the recognition and validation of skills** acquired through formal, non-formal, and work-based learning, supported by modular units that can accumulate into partial or full qualifications along flexible pathways.
- The strategy should also promote **structured cooperation between VET providers, social services, and employers**.
- **Adequate and sustainable funding is required to support inclusive VET pathways and reduce administrative barriers**.
- In people-centered sectors such as social services, health, and care, strengthening **inclusive and portable VET systems is both a social priority and an economic necessity** to ensure the sustainability and quality of essential services.

EASPD initiatives driving inclusive VET across Europe

EASPD supports inclusive, high-quality education and training systems that align with the needs of both learners with disabilities and education workers: [EqualVET](#), and [DIG-i-READY](#) projects focused on improving accessibility, digital readiness, and equality of opportunity within VET systems across Europe; [INCLUSIVE-PATH](#) creates inclusive educational pathways for people with intellectual disabilities; [ADEDU](#) equips educators with the skills to make adult learning environments more accessible through the use of digital tools; and [ACT-INCLUSIVE](#) supports educational professionals with a rights-based education.

Under the Pact for Skills, EASPD is leading the development of a [Large Scale Partnership for long-term care](#) (LTC), with the [Care4Skills](#) project aiming to enhance the attractiveness of the LTC sector, equip professionals with basic and advanced digital and person-centred care skills, and improve the gender balance. The [goal](#) is to train at least 60% of long-term care (LTC) professionals every year by 2030. More than 1,500 workers, across 10 countries, have been trained in the first year of the project through a [rapid-response training](#) based on the two main pillars of digitalisation and person-centered care. EASPD has also led the development of the [European Care Certificate](#), Europe-wide qualification which covers the basic knowledge that is required for an individual to work in a health and social care setting, applied in 17 countries.

Making VET accessible to all

The following challenges and barriers have been identified by VET providers within EASPD's membership. Addressing them would benefit all VET providers and learners, particularly those with disabilities or in vulnerable situations. These barriers include:

- **Lack of certification recognition:** Even after completing training or education programmes, qualification certificates of persons with disabilities are often not officially recognised by employers or national authorities. This is even more difficult when qualifications are acquired through non-formal education pathways.
- **Absence of certification for new curricula:** The [B-WISE project](#) has shown that service providers struggle to gain formal recognition for newly developed training programmes. At national level, certification bodies are reluctant to give approval, and efforts to engage with the European Co-operation for Accreditation have met limited success.

- **Lack of cross-border certification equivalent:** Despite national certification and common training frameworks, the lack of mutual recognition and varying national certification levels limit the portability and value of qualifications.
- **Inadequate VET curricula and lack of support:** There is no provision for assistant teachers to provide additional support, and teachers/other staff are often not adequately trained in inclusive approaches. There is a lack of specialised training for adult educators on these methods and tools to support learners with diverse needs.
- **Fragmented governance and insufficient support and resources:** A lack of coordination between relevant ministries creates barriers to advancing inclusive adult education and training. Often the Ministry of Education oversees mainstream education, while the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is responsible for VET and policies related to persons with disabilities. This leads to fragmented policies, limited funding and insufficient support measures for learners with disabilities.
- **Lack of intersectoral collaboration:** Poor collaboration between education providers, social services, and employers weakens the link between training and inclusive employment. This hinders smooth transitions from education to work.

The European VET Strategy has the potential to address these challenges. The European VET Diploma pilot can improve learners' and workers' mobility through a harmonised qualification framework at upper-secondary and post-secondary levels, but only if it is inclusive from the outset. It must include targeted projects for learners with disabilities and meaningfully involve them, together with disability support services, in design and implementation. This should be the basis of the common European framework for the automatic recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad in school, VET, and higher education.

In addition, for many people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, valuable competences are acquired through on-the-job training in alternative employment models (sheltered employment, work integration social enterprises, apprenticeships). Skills often go unrecognised due to the lack of official accreditation frameworks and the non-recognition of these support services as training institutions.

To address this gap the VET Strategy should:

- **Acknowledge and validate alternative pathways to skills development.** Recognising social service providers as training entities can foster inclusive VET systems by enabling individualised support and training schemes to lead to recognised qualifications.
- **Support continuous professional development for VET** educators, particularly in Universal Design for Learning and inclusive pedagogy.
- Support **targeted incentives** to promote partnerships between disability support services, VET providers, and employers to facilitate inclusive employment post-training.
- Ensure **long-term, inclusive funding instruments** to support flexible, person-centred learning pathways and ensure continuity of support.

The following measures would also support more inclusive and effective skills recognition:

- The European Commission should **increase flexibility in certification processes** by enabling modular and context-based pathways tailored to diverse learning experiences. Simplifying administrative procedures and enhancing certification transparency requirements would ease access for both learners and training providers. Early engagement with stakeholders and strategic partnerships can foster smoother implementation and shared ownership of reforms.
- Greater **standardisation and harmonisation of skill recognition systems** across Member States would improve portability and comparability.
- **Streamline bureaucratic processes and enhance clarity.** Several countries in B-WISE faced challenges with complex bureaucratic procedures and unclear guidelines to complete the certification process.
- Financial barriers should be addressed through **targeted subsidies**, ensuring that individuals and organisations can access training and certification opportunities.

- **Adapting certification systems** to meet the needs of diverse learners, through simplified curricula and accessible credentials, will help ensure that no one is left behind in Europe's skills agenda.

Closing the Skills Gap in care and support services

While many workers in other fields are at risk due to automation and structural changes, the care and support workers face some of the highest labour shortages in the EU. Maintaining current care coverage will require an estimated 1.6 million additional workers by 2050, making this a sector with strong job creation potential.

To ensure the mobility of the care workforce and the quality-of-service delivery, the European Strategy for VET has the potential to address this sector. The strategy can ensure that both future and current skilling, upskilling or reskilling efforts respond to evolving demands and to the transition toward community-based, person-centred care and support.

This should be supported by further harmonisation of qualifications and the mutual recognition of diplomas and certifications, across Member States and for jobseekers from third countries. This would improve labour mobility, helping to address workforce shortages and supporting initiatives such as the EU Talent Pool and the Skills Guarantee as well as the quality of care and support across the EU.

The recently launched [Skills Guarantee Pilot](#) can play a key role in addressing this challenge, as it aims to support workers affected by restructuring or unemployment to transition toward sectors with growing labour shortages. This would address workforce needs while supporting the prioritisation of training for community-based, person-centred care, in line with the sector's ongoing shift away from institutional care models.

This approach focuses on meeting individual needs in inclusive environments, enabling people to live with greater autonomy and be integrated into society. The [rapid-response training](#) developed in the Care4Skills project, has the potential to support the effective rollout of the Skills Guarantee for workers pilot, with an interest to transition to social services while also supporting the upskilling of current workforce.

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