

Digital Readiness

of Vocational Educational

Institutions

in an Inclusive Environment

PR2: Handbook

CHAPTER 6

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# Abbreviations

* AT: Assistive Technology
* CV: Curriculum Vitae
* ETCF: ENTELIS+ Trainers Competence Framework
* EU: European Union
* ICT: Information and Communication Technology
* NGO: Non-Governmental Organization
* VET: Vocational Education and Training
* AIAS: Associazione Italiana per L'Assistenza Agli Spastici Provincia di Bologna
* DP BGCPO: Darzhavno predpriyatie "Bulgaro-germanski centur za profesionalno obuchenie"
* DTS: Daugavpils tehnikums
* EUC: European University Cyprus
* IB: Internationaler Bund
* JKU: Johannes Kepler Universität Linz
* TUD: Technische Universität Dresden
* DigCompEdu: Digital Competence Framework Educators
* DigComp: Digital Competence Framework Citizen 2.2

# The national contexts

## Introduction

In Section 6 of the national versions of the Handbook (German, Austrian, Bulgarian, Italian, Latvian) information is reported that is typically referring to the national context with relevance for the national stakeholders and the national implementation of the Handbook. Because this information is less relevant for the international audience who will read the Handbook in English, only a summary of the information on the situation of learners with disabilities in VET and the challenges of digital inclusion is provided here for the various countries in alphabetical order.

## Austria

In Austria, young people from the age of 15 who have successfully completed lower secondary education can choose between dual vocational training or full-time vocational school. Since 2016, education has been compulsory until the age of 18. In Austria, parents and guardians of children with disabilities can choose between a special school and an inclusive regular school. There are nine levels of special school, the last year of which is vocational preparation. In the inclusive regular school, there were 6.1% of students with disabilities in upper secondary education in the school year 2021/22.

Regarding the digitalization in schools and vocational training, the amendment to the School Organisation Act (BGBl. I No. 232/2021) established the compulsory teaching of basic digital education at lower secondary level (§21b Para. 1 Z 1 SchOG) and general secondary schools (§39 Para. 1 SchOG) and was implemented by the ordinance BGBl. II No. 267/2022.

Triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, digital tools were used in learning- and teaching processes, although digitalisation in schools had only made hesitant progress until then. In the context of inclusive education, digitalisation is fundamentally seen as an opportunity to design teaching and learning processes in a differentiated and individualised way. However, during the digital distance learning caused by COVID-19, it also became clear that there is a risk of creating and reinforcing existing social inequalities.

## Bulgaria

At the heart of modern society are the ideas of humanism, which imply the discovery and realization of the potential of each person. Creating equal opportunities and an accessible environment for people with disabilities to receive quality education and successfully integrate into their natural social environment is of utmost importance.

According to the Vocational Education and Training Act in Bulgaria, the institutions in the VET system are: vocational high schools, schools of arts, sports schools, special schools - educational boarding schools and social-pedagogical boarding schools, vocational colleges, vocational training centers, information and vocational guidance centers. Psychologists or pedagogical counsellors, speech therapists, resource teachers and other specialists according to the needs of the learners work there for the purpose of inclusive education and personal development of children and students. The activities they carry out are related to teamwork between teachers and other pedagogical specialists, interest-based activities, health care, early assessment of needs and prevention of learning difficulties, encouragement with moral and material rewards, activities to prevent violence and overcome problem behavior.

Local authorities are required, in partnership with pupils and parents, to draw up and publish an 'offer' of all the education, health and social care services available in their area. They also undertake to ensure that children and pupils with individual support plans have access to mainstream education in schools and colleges.

The estimated number of children with disabilities and developmental difficulties in Bulgaria as of 2022 is around 32 000, although there is no complete information on their exact number in the country.

Digitalization offers a chance for training and realization of this specific group of people, but to reach the necessary level requires joint efforts of training and management institutions. Digitalization in the education system is possible, according to the data of the educational software platform Shkolo.bg, which is used by 78% of schools in Bulgaria. Over 60% of administrative activities in schools have been digitalized in recent years. COVID - 19 has given a new impetus in this direction. Some of the higher education institutions have their own digital learning platforms, and assistive technologies such as Communicator 5 are used locally in the auxiliary schools.

An important project that aims to ensure higher quality and access to education for children and students with special educational needs, chronic diseases, at risk and with special gifts in kindergartens and schools is "Support for Inclusive Education". Under the OPENOIR procedure "Qualification of pedagogical specialists", training for 39 000 teachers is foreseen.

In Chapter 4, the Handbook contains a collection of tools tested in the SE BGVTC with the main target group - unemployed people aged 16 and over, many of whom are individuals with special needs. This collection of successful opportunities inspires learners to progress and acquire lasting knowledge and skills. All that is needed is a match between the tools chosen and the training, participants and devices available.

## Cyprus

Regarding Vocational Education and Training in Cyprus in general, it is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, and specifically the Directorate of Secondary Technical and Vocational Education. In addition to the Ministry of Education, the central responsibility for supporting the Vocational Education and Training of persons with disabilities in Cyprus belongs to the Department of Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, which has a Vocational Training Program funding scheme aimed at strengthening vocational training opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Information regarding the participation of students with disabilities in vocational and technical education is not consistently available through the years. Nevertheless, given the available data it seems that the majority of primary and lower secondary education students (compulsory education) do not choose technical or vocational education.

Regarding the connection with the labour market and data on employment of persons with disabilities, the only evidence available concerns the employment of persons with disabilities in the public sector, which is under a relevant law for the obligation of public sector to maintain a 10% of employees with disabilities.

Regarding COVID-19 impact, no additional measures were taken and there were no flexible working arrangements in the summer of 2020, although there was a delay in the opening of schools.

Links to resources are included in the report, mostly referring to responsible bodies such as the Department of Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities and the funding schemes for employers, references to relevant projects, and other reports.

Regarding further suggestions for decision makers at this stage, it is important to stress the need to combine employment programs with corresponding vocational education and training programs that also enhance lifelong learning, as well as support for reasonable accommodations including Assistive Technology in the workplace and education. Measures for transition to the labour market are also essential, including employers’ incentives for the sustainability of relevant schemes.

## Germany

Unlike in other partner countries of the DIG-i-READY project, with the exception of Austria, education in Germany is characterised by a tripartite vertical structure: The federal government (Bund), the sixteen federal states (Länder) and the local authorities (Kommunen). This federalist system does not allow the establishment of standardised patterns or guidelines in VET, nor does it allow the creation of comparable information on supporting needs and the required specific learning environment.

Rather, scientific institutions such as those of the *Bertelsmann Foundation* or international surveys such as ICILS (International Computer and Information Literacy Study) can be referred to.

In the context of the pandemic, it became particularly clear that there was no specific support for people with disabilities in dealing with digitality, but that there has been a general expansion in acquisition and expansion of digital infrastructures at all German schools which can be seen in increased expenditure for the years 2022-2023 under the funding programme *Digitalpakt Schule*.

However, it is important to make the use of these new infrastructures tangible for both teachers and students as the *Digitalpakt* does not provide any actual training and schools are understaffed. Teacher training is generally made possible by SchiLf (school-internal teacher training), but the costs of 1,850€ must be financed by the school and teachers themselves. As a result, in many cases, training students in the use of digital infrastructures depends on the financial resources and willingness of the teachers, even though the actual digital devices are available.

## Italy

In the context of vocational training, in Italy, legislative and administrative responsibilities are decentralized to regions and provinces. Collaborating with the European Social Fund, they co-finance training courses across public and private institutions. These courses span post-compulsory schooling, post-diploma, and university levels, fostering skill acquisition aligned with labor market demands. Emilia-Romagna Region, following Legislative Decree no. 226/2005, established the Vocational Education and Training (IeFP) system. Accredited professional training bodies within this system play a crucial role in ensuring equal opportunities for students, actively participating in the second cycle of education.

Addressing inclusiveness, implementation agreements under L.104/1992 outline paths to inclusion for students with disabilities. Regions guarantee specialized activities in vocational training centers for those unable to benefit from conventional learning methods. The process involves individualized educational plans (PEI), collaboratively developed by schools, services, and families. Instead, digitalization finds support through the network of Public Centers for Aids, fostering educational integration of persons with disabilities through technology. This network, originally under the NTD (New Technology and Disability) project, spans Italy and offers tangible assistance to schools in adopting and efficiently utilizing digital technologies. Examining the impact of the pandemic, the adoption of Distance Learning (DAD) presented challenges for interaction among students. Recent directives mandated in-person teaching, improving the participation of students with disabilities. Despite increased attendance, socialization aspects suffered, with a significant portion of students having limited interaction with their peers in the remote setting.

## Latvia

In Latvia, VET is provided on three levels:

* Basic education;
* Secondary education;
* Higher education.

VET institutions, depending on their founder, can be public (state, municipal) or private, in most cases they are state-founded.

The inclusive education in Latvia provides support to two types of schools – comprehensive schools (general education) and special schools. Special schools provide support to students with mental development challenges yet who are rather developed. Special schools have trained specialists, yet comprehensive schools may lack support teachers and specialists (special teacher, social teacher, speech therapist, psychologist).

It is complicated to ensure inclusive education in comprehensive schools as students’ parents have rights not to inform the school about special educational needs of their children or AT and any kind of support they might need, thus sometimes making the work of teachers extremely hard.

After the pandemic, schools and teachers have started to use more digital teaching aids and digital tools, yet Latvia still lacks targeted development of digital teaching aids. At the same time the level of digital skills in Latvia has increased and is rather close to the European average having at least basic digital skills.

The Covid-19 caused transition to digital world where many people were left out due to insufficient digital skills and unavailable equipment, including school children as not all the families could afford separate digital devices for students to fully follow their classes. Many had to learn new computer skills and tool literacy. The pandemic also caused considerate drop in the sense of well-being, in particular in pupils and students. Students in regions lacked the needed technologies and did not follow their studies due to social and economic reasons.

Thee major education system project in Latvia – School 2030 (Skola2030) aims at introducing competence-based education in all state-funded education. It also provides some suggestions for implementing inclusive education: direction for development, staff qualification, creating systems supporting inclusion.

The chapter 6 in the Latvian version of the Handbook further provides a list of teaching resources and platforms in addition to what is included in the handbook. These include resources provided by some schools, National Nature Museum, National Culture Center, etc., as well as several platforms devised by Ministry of Education and State Education Development Agency that include different types of exercises and materials teachers can use.

In Latvia, various training initiatives are organized where participants can acquire the required skills or improve their understanding of inclusive education or digitalization. The training is conducted both in face-to-face and online sessions using different digital tools.

Apart from special schools, comprehensive and vocational schools do not always receive sufficient funds to ensure the required AT and support, specialists required. This is mostly related to the fact that student parents are not obliged to provide the required information to schools and in many cases schools and teachers do not know they actually need to provide some support.

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