

The Modernisation of Vocational Education and Training project in Bulgaria

Lessons from early implementation



Foreword

This report is an output under the OECD's agreement on multi-year support for the implementation of the Evaluation Plan of Programme "Education" 2021-2027 with the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Executive Agency "Programme Education". Programme "Education" 2021-2027 is financed by the European Social Fund Plus and Bulgaria's national budget.

Dr. Anett John (external expert) was the lead evaluator and Zhasmin Avetisyan (OECD Secretariat) was co-evaluator. Christa Rawkins (OECD Secretariat) supervises the OECD's evaluation support to Bulgaria. The evaluation followed the overarching framework for the OECD's evaluation support, prepared by Cassie Hague and Zhasmin Avetisyan from the OECD Secretariat. Administrative support was provided by Diana Egeli, Daiana Torres Lima and Eda Cabbar coordinated the overall production of the report.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CPD	Continuous Professional Development
EAPE	Executive Agency “Programme Education”
ESF+	European Social Fund Plus (previously ESF)
EU	European Union
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ITE	Initial teacher education
MES	Ministry of Education and Science
MLSP	Ministry of Labour and Social Policy
NAVET	National Agency for Vocational Education and Training
NEA	National External Assessment
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
NSI	National Statistical Institute
NZQA	New Zealand Qualifications Authority
OPSESG	Operational Programme “Science and Education for Smart Growth”
PE	Programme “Education” 2021-2027
PISA	OECD Programme for International Student Assessment
RED	Regional Education Department
SES	State Educational Standards
SMART	Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound
SMEs	Small and medium enterprises
SSC	Sectoral Skills Council
ULO	Unit of Learning Outcomes
VET	Vocational Education and Training

Executive Summary

From March to December 2025, the OECD conducted an interim evaluation of Bulgaria's *Modernisation of Vocational Education and Training* (VET) project (2023-2029). The project supports both system-level reforms and school-level innovations to strengthen the labour-market relevance of vocational pathways. It aims to update what is taught, improve how it is taught, and strengthen links between VET providers and employers, equipping learners with skills for both current and emerging professions.

The project is implemented under Programme “Education” 2021-2027, financed by the European Social Fund Plus and Bulgaria's national budget. The OECD provides evaluation support under the Agreement on multi-year support for the implementation of the Evaluation Plan of Programme “Education”, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria (MES) and the Executive Agency “Programme Education” (Executive Agency).

This interim evaluation aims to help the Executive Agency, MES, and project stakeholders improve delivery and achieve the intended outcomes. It adopted a mixed-methods approach, including analysis of project documentation and monitoring data; a survey of Sectoral Skills Council (SSC) members; semi-structured interviews with national and institutional stakeholders; and site visits to participating schools. The OECD evaluations follow a realist approach, reporting on what works, for whom, in what contexts, and how.

The evaluation focuses principally on the provision of initial VET and evaluates four key project activities:

- Activity 1: Revision and implementation of the qualifications and curricular framework for VET.
- Activity 2: Introduction of VET teacher competence profiles and related training.
- Activity 5: Participation of external experts in VET teaching (i.e. practitioner teachers); and short modular trainings for VET teachers on modern production techniques and technologies.
- Activity 8: Expansion of the availability of student placements in real working environments.

Key findings by evaluation criteria

Relevance: *Modernisation of VET* addresses a critical need to strengthen links between VET and the labour market, introducing collaborative mechanisms such as SSCs, practitioner teachers, and expanding 240-hour student placements. These are well-aligned with the overall goal of improving labour market relevance. Collaborations are typically built on personal networks and individual expertise but are less clearly informed by labour-market intelligence which risks limiting their impact. Project monitoring is largely focused on activity tracking as opposed to project outcomes; this supports implementation progress but limits opportunities to learn and adapt.

Coherence: The parallel revision of the List of Professions, State Educational Standards, national examination programmes and teaching curricula is a step towards more coherent VET pathways. The project aligns well with national and EU priorities, which emphasise labour market responsiveness and work-based learning, for example. It also complements other VET operations under Programme “Education”, providing reform at system level compared to their more regional and sectoral focus.

European Union (EU) added value: Stakeholders consistently reported that the scale and pace of reforms – especially the simultaneous revision of 150 Standards and the List of Professions – would not have been possible without EU support. Funding enabled cross-institutional coordination and accelerated processes beyond what national budgets typically allow, complementing domestic programmes.

Effectiveness: The project shows early signs of effectiveness where reform and implementation design have promoted coherence and multi-stakeholder partnership (e.g. revision of the List of Professions) and the expansion of 240-hour student placements. However, tight timelines appear to have constrained the quality of revised State Educational Standards. The review processes for new teacher competence profiles and teaching curricula are not comprehensive, raising concerns about whether these elements will fully align with labour market realities and practical implementation. At school level, initiatives to strengthen collaboration have been welcomed by staff, but lack of clear guidance on intended roles and objectives results in inconsistent implementation which will likely lead to variable benefits for students.

Efficiency: SSCs leverage the intrinsic motivation of sectoral experts, many of whom contribute voluntarily. Conversely, the public procurement of expert teams to draft the Standards was slow and burdensome, deterring participation among industry practitioners and VET professionals. Tight drafting timelines and delayed involvement of SSCs increased rework and transaction costs. Institutional capacity has been stretched (e.g. four National Agency for VET (NAVET) coordinators managed 150 standards; eight MES coordinators supported 218 SSC members) despite impressive efforts from staff.

Sustainability: SSCs have strong support, but long-term viability depends on future contracting models that ensure independence and predictable engagement. Maintaining updated Standards will require attracting more industry practitioners and applying realistic timelines. The 240-hour student placements are valued by schools and students, but the provision of financial incentives for students is reliant on EU funding and therefore currently time-limited.

Lessons and recommendations

Based on the findings and informed by international evidence, the OECD identifies eight recommendations to strengthen *Modernisation of VET* and related actions in the next programming period.

1. Bulgaria could **institutionalise the SSCs** by establishing a clear legal framework, flexible contracting options, and simplified recruitment processes.
2. The Ministry and NAVET could **enhance future revisions of State Educational Standards** by facilitating participation of industry practitioners, expanding the timeline and involving SSCs early.
3. Bulgaria could **strengthen quality assurance in the development of VET programmes and qualifications** by establishing common content standards and minimum expectations for the use of data. Such efforts could be integrated into the next programming period.
4. The Ministry could **establish a clear, staged review of teacher competence profiles and a comprehensive plan for their implementation**, covering initial and continuous teacher development. Such efforts could be integrated into the next programming period.
5. The Ministry could **clarify the composition of drafting teams for teaching curricula, strengthen practical support, and implement a multi-staged review process**.
6. The Ministry could **provide further guidance to schools on good practice for collaborating with external practitioners** from business and non-governmental organisations.
7. Bulgaria could **explore sustainable models for 240-hour student placements**, including new approaches to financing, timing and recruiting host organisations.
8. The Executive Agency could **further strengthen project monitoring** by ensuring the project questionnaire fully captures outcome-oriented data and that all indicators support comparability.

1 Overview

Over the past decade, Bulgaria has made efforts to modernise vocational education and training (VET), recognising it as a critical lever for strengthening human capital and supporting the country's transformation towards a more digital, innovative and skills-intensive economy. Despite previous efforts – including curriculum revisions, expanded workplace learning and the introduction of apprenticeship pathways – several challenges continue to limit system performance. These include relatively low learning outcomes among vocational students, ongoing misalignment between VET provision and labour-market needs, and the limited attractiveness of vocational pathways for students and parents.

Bulgaria is currently advancing a large-scale reform through the *Modernisation of VET* project under Programme “Education” 2021-2027. The project is financed by the European Social Fund Plus and the national budget. The OECD is providing evaluation support under the Agreement on multi-year support for the implementation of the Evaluation Plan of Programme “Education” with the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria (hereafter, Ministry), the Executive Agency “Programme Education” (hereafter, Executive Agency), and the OECD.

As part of the evaluation support, this report presents findings from an interim evaluation examining the implementation of *Modernisation of VET*. It aims to support implementation teams to better deliver intended system-level and school-level improvements in the quality, relevance and labour-market responsiveness of VET provision. The report is organised as follows:

- **Chapter 1** provides an overview of the report, including main findings, recommendations and definitions of key terms used throughout.
- **Chapter 2** outlines the broader evaluation context and research design, including data collection approaches and the reconstructed theory of change.
- **Chapters 3** presents main findings on system- and school- level collaboration efforts to improve the responsiveness of VET to labour-market needs across six evaluation criteria. These are relevance, coherence, European Union (EU) added value, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability.
- **Chapter 4** identifies promising practices, recommendations and suggested actions that Bulgaria can draw on to enhance implementation during the current programming period and beyond.

Evaluation design

The *Modernisation of VET* project supports system- and school-level measures to strengthen structured collaboration between the VET system and the labour market, with a view to enhancing alignment. System-level activities establish formal mechanisms – such as the Sectoral Skills Councils (SSCs) and expert drafting teams – for developing the new List of Professions for VET, State Educational Standards, national examination programmes and teacher competence profiles. School-level activities establish or extend opportunities for school-employer collaboration through introducing practitioner teachers into schools and expanding student placements. These efforts aim to foster more applied, practice-oriented teaching and learning in VET.

Launched in May 2023, the *Modernisation of VET* project is the first of the three VET initiatives under Programme “Education” 2021-2027 to enter implementation. It will run until the end of 2029, with a total budget of EUR 47 million. It is a designated project of strategic importance.

In line with the OECD’s approach, this interim evaluation seeks to understand what works, for whom, in what context and how. It follows six evaluation criteria via key questions as follows:

- **Relevance:** To what extent are the collaborative mechanisms introduced under the project appropriate and well-targeted to strengthening the labour-market responsiveness of VET in Bulgaria?
- **Effectiveness:** To what extent are the newly introduced collaborative mechanisms functioning effectively?
- **Efficiency:** To what extent do they make efficient use of available resources and capacities?
- **Coherence:** To what extent are the reforms aligned with current legal, institutional, and policy frameworks, and coherent with other national and EU-level initiatives?
- **EU added value:** What added value has EU support brought to the design and implementation of activities aimed at strengthening collaborative mechanisms in the VET system?
- **Sustainability:** To what extent are the collaborative mechanisms likely to be sustained beyond the funding period?

The evaluation adopts a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative data. Evidence was gathered through the analysis of project documentation and activity outputs, semi-structured interviews with the Ministry, National Agency for VET (NAVET), employer and union representatives; focus groups with SSCs; school site visits to three VET institutions; and an online survey of SSC members. The evaluation team used purposive sampling to identify individuals and organisations directly involved in project activities, ensuring that the evidence reflects system- and school-level perspectives on how collaboration is developing.

The research design shapes how the evaluation findings should be interpreted. Purposive sampling and voluntary participation mean the data are not nationally representative, raising the risk of selection bias. In addition, systematic outcome data are not available at this stage of implementation. The evaluation therefore focuses primarily on identifying factors that facilitate or hinder the implementation of system- and school-level collaboration activities, as well as early indications of emerging results, based on the perspectives of those directly involved in the project.

Key findings

This section outlines the key findings of this interim evaluation, organised by evaluation criteria (see Table 1.1). While the evaluation looks at all criteria, its interim nature places greater weight on the design and early implementation of the activities, with particular emphasis on relevance, coherence and early indications of effectiveness. Insights from this evaluation can help inform adjustments during the second half of the programming period and strengthen the foundations for longer-term impact.

Overall, the evaluation finds that the *Modernisation of VET* project is highly **relevant** to Bulgaria’s efforts to make VET more responsive to labour-market needs. By introducing mechanisms such as the SSCs, practitioner teachers in schools, and 240-hour student placements, the project creates opportunities for collaboration between policymakers, VET professionals and industry practitioners. However, across these and other mechanisms, collaboration is built on individual relationships and expertise rather than systemic processes. Part of this is due to key issues in the VET data infrastructure, which the project does not address, such as gaps in available labour-market data or insufficient integration and coordination of existing skills intelligence. In addition, project monitoring collected via the dedicated questionnaire is largely

focused on activity tracking as opposed to project outcomes, limiting opportunities to learn from implementation and adapt accordingly.

The project demonstrates strong **coherence** with national and EU policy directions, particularly in promoting work-based learning and skills for the future. The simultaneous revision of the List of Professions, State Educational Standards, teaching curricula and teacher competence profiles represents a significant step toward more coherent VET pathways. Complementarity with other EU-funded VET operations under Programme “Education” which support VET Centres for Excellence and dual VET programmes is clear, particularly as the three operations operate at different levels (i.e. system, regional and sectoral, school). As implementation advances for all three, there will be an opportunity to pursue synergies more actively.

The **EU added value** of the project is clear: stakeholders consistently emphasised that the scale, scope and pace of reforms – especially the parallel revision of the List of Professions and 150 Standards and national examination programmes – would not have been possible without EU support. Funding enabled cross-institutional coordination and mobilisation of expert teams, accelerating processes that have historically progressed more slowly.

Early signs of **effectiveness** are visible. Student placements are expanding work-based learning opportunities and increasing student engagement, while schools and VET professionals report strong enthusiasm for collaboration opportunities with external practitioners. Moreover, the SSCs mobilise previously under-utilised expertise and have a clear mandate under the project. However, effectiveness remains uneven as some gaps in key processes and demanding timelines appear to have constrained effectiveness in some areas. For example, the initial drafts of State Educational Standards were of low quality, putting considerable pressure on the review stage. Meanwhile, the review processes for teacher competence profiles and teaching curricula are less comprehensive than for other components thereby raising concerns about quality and consistency. At school level, limited guidance on the intended purpose and expected outcomes of collaboration mechanisms has led to very varied approaches to implementation, which may lead to inconsistent results.

Efficiency varies across activities. The SSCs leverage the intrinsic motivation of sectoral experts, with many contributing time voluntarily – an efficient use of under-utilised social capital. Both the Ministry and NAVET have delivered important administrative support at impressive scale (e.g. four NAVET coordinators managed 150 standards; eight coordinators within the Ministry supported 218 SSC members). Conversely, the public procurement process for drafting teams was lengthy and may have discouraged participation from VET professionals and industry practitioners, skewing teams toward academia. Tight timelines and sequential involvement of SSCs in the review process for the Standards increased rework and transaction costs.

Sustainability prospects are mixed. SSCs enjoy strong support and members signal willingness to remain engaged, but long-term viability depends on contracting arrangements that balance independence with predictable expectations and time commitments. The simultaneous revision of 150 Standards was an exceptional, one-off effort; keeping them current should be feasible through periodic updates, but this will require attracting more industry practitioners and VET professionals into each revision cycle. Student placements are valued by schools and learners, but financial incentives for students are EU-funded and therefore time-limited, raising questions about continuity beyond the current programming period.

Table 1.1. Overview of key findings by task and evaluation criteria

Task	Finding	Relevance	Coherence	EU added value	Efficiency	Effectiveness	Sustainability
SYSTEM-LEVEL COLLABORATION (ACTIVITIES 1 & 2)							
Creation of the Sectoral Skills Councils	As a permanent, formal mechanism for multi-stakeholder collaboration, the establishment of SSCs is a relevant response to labour-market misalignment	Y					
	The selection process for SSCs was transparent and well-structured, but securing qualified industry practitioners with sufficient availability proved challenging					Y	
	SSCs have a clear mandate aimed at enhancing labour-market responsiveness. Members are generally satisfied with the guidance received, though gaps in technical and procedural support and concerns about independence remain	Y				Y	
	The SSC model is cost-efficient and mobilises underused expertise				Y		
	SSCs are viewed across stakeholder groups as viable and sustainable in the long term, but the most suitable contracting model is still unclear						Y
The development of the new List of Professions for VET	The revised List of Professions includes broader vocational categories than its predecessor, facilitating school-level implementation and potentially enhancing labour market responsiveness. This is also supported by a focus on specialisations related to the digital and green transitions	Y	Y			Y	
	The new List of Professions was developed through an effective participatory process, though some limitations in the support and guidance provided to SSCs may have inhibited efficiency and coherence		Y		Y	Y	
	Despite initial intentions, the revision of the List of Professions did not include the preparation of a sectoral skills mapping					Y	
The drafting of the State Educational Standards	The simultaneous revision of all State Educational Standards and examination programmes is ambitious, has potential to enhance coherence across the VET system, and adheres to international guidance	Y	Y				
	Criteria for the composition of drafting teams and the use of the public procurement process for appointing them appears to have introduced some barriers to the participation of industry practitioners and VET professionals, limiting practical orientation				Y	Y	
	There were major quality concerns with the initial drafts of the new State Educational Standards, reflecting limited research and consultation during drafting and tight timelines				Y	Y	
	NAVET provided a lot of guidance and training to expert teams, but quality assurance constituted a major gap					Y	
The development of teacher competence profiles for VET	SSC members hold mixed views on their involvement in preparing teacher competence profiles, suggesting a need for more technical support					Y	
	Review of teacher competence profiles was limited, reducing opportunities for feedback and quality assurance					Y	
	Current plans for the implementation of the teacher competence profiles are unclear and limited						Y
The preparation of teaching curricula	School-led drafting of teaching curricula offers flexibility, but gaps in guidance and review, as currently planned, may inhibit the quality of final outputs		Y		Y	Y	
SCHOOL-LEVEL COLLABORATION (ACTIVITIES 5 & 8)							
Involvement of external actors in VET schools	Schools value practitioner teachers, but the activity currently lacks clarity for those implementing it	Y	Y			Y	
	Strong uptake of mentoring workshops for external practitioners highlights their perceived value among schools, but objectives vary	Y	Y				
	Participation in modular trainings for teachers is currently not sufficiently incentivised	Y				Y	
The expansion of student practices	Student placements are perceived positively by VET professionals and are helping to build school-employer links, but the funding model is unlikely to be sustainable					Y	Y
OVERALL (ACTIVITIES 1, 2, 5 & 8)							
	By strengthening collaboration mechanisms between VET professionals and labour-market actors, the activities can help address multiple challenges facing VET in	Y					

Bulgaria						
The project does not address key issues in the VET data infrastructure; this may constrain system-level collaboration	Y					
The introduction of a monitoring questionnaire for the project improves implementation tracking, but its current design does not enable assessment of programme effects on school-level beneficiaries or system-level outcomes	Y					
EU support enables an unprecedented scale and pace of reform, which can ultimately facilitate greater consistency and alignment across VET pathways			Y			
The project is coherent with previous and current VET efforts within Programme “Education”, national strategic priorities, and European policy frameworks		Y				

Promising practices, recommendations and possible actions

The evaluation identifies several promising practices in implementation at different levels of project implementation (see Figure 1.1) These provide a strong foundation on which Bulgaria can build as implementation progresses.

Figure 1.1. Promising practices for the management and coordination of the *Modernisation of VET* project

Executive Agency “Programme Education”	Ministry of Education and Science	National Agency for VET	VET schools
Integrated revision of VET reference framework components, with joint updates to the List of Professions and State Educational Standards, supports consistency and coherence and helps align qualifications with labour market needs. Structured monitoring practices provide a solid base for results-based approaches, as the new questionnaire enables systematic tracking of progress and documentation of activities, while emerging indicators (e.g. qualification attainment) signal a shift toward linking implementation with outcomes.	Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) provide a formal platform for cross-sectoral collaboration, bringing together industry, education, and social partners to co-develop system-level instruments and improve labour market relevance. SSCs mobilise expertise cost-effectively, relying on voluntary participation to access deep professional know-how without significant cost. Multi-stakeholder revision processes ensure inclusiveness, with SSCs, NAVET commissions, and public consultations contributing to comprehensive programme development.	Simultaneous drafting of Standards and examination programmes strengthens coherence, as the same team ensures alignment between learning outcomes and assessment. Support resources foster consistency and quality, with templates, sample tools, and tailored guidance helping drafting teams apply evidence-informed practices.	Employer collaboration informs instruction, as schools leverage long-term partnerships to obtain feedback and keep programmes workplace-relevant. Practitioner teachers expand access to industry expertise, sourced through open calls and partnerships to bring current practices into classrooms. Short pedagogical training for practitioners improves structure and safety, building basic mentoring skills for work-based learning and classes led by external experts.

Based on the key findings, the report identifies eight recommendations to further strengthen collaboration mechanisms under *Modernisation of VET* – at both system and school level – so that teaching and learning remain responsive to labour-market needs and sustainable over time.

Recommendation 1: Institutionalise the SSCs to continue strengthening the VET system’s responsiveness to labour-market needs over time

Bulgaria can strengthen the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of the SSCs by establishing a clearer institutional and contracting model that secures balanced participation and protects the SSCs’ independence. Several SSCs faced challenges attracting and retaining members – particularly industry practitioners – because voluntary roles and short labour contracts were not practical for all groups.

Providing clearer guidance, simplifying entry processes and undertaking targeted outreach could help broaden participation and ensure Councils have the expertise needed for their remit. *For the next programming period*, Bulgaria could formally anchor the SSCs in law or regulation, clarifying their mandate in updating the List of Professions, the State Educational Standards and national examination programmes, alongside transparent selection processes and safeguards. Developing a small set of engagement options, such as employer time-release, voluntary participation or service contracts for external experts, would also help accommodate different member profiles. Bulgaria will also need to consider how the SSCs' mandate can change over time; for example, they could additionally take on a light-touch brokerage role to support school-employer collaboration. This can be factored into project design for the next programming period.

Recommendation 2: Review the design of future revisions of the State Educational Standards. This may include facilitating the recruitment of industry practitioners, expanding the timeframe and involving SSCs earlier

Bulgaria can strengthen future cycles of revising the State Educational Standards by introducing efforts to attract a broader mix of industry practitioners and VET professionals through a more accessible recruitment process. To help enhance the quality of the initial drafts, Bulgaria could also clarify responsibility for specifying skills by profession and provide a shared reference before drafting begins. This can either be the responsibility of SSCs or the drafting teams, but responsibilities, support and timelines will need to be adapted accordingly. Moreover, allowing more time for fieldwork and consultation in the initial drafting phase with realistic expectations for the use of evidence will be important. This may require limiting the number of Standards assigned to each team. Finally, engaging SSCs from the outset could help improve workflow and consistency across professions.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen quality assurance in the development of VET programmes and qualifications by establishing common content standards and minimum expectations for the use of data

Bulgaria can improve the consistency and transparency of future revisions of VET programmes and qualifications by introducing clearer expectations for content and evidence use across all system-level instruments. Establishing a concise set of cross-cutting content standards, alongside minimum expectations for drawing on existing labour-market information, would give drafting teams and SSCs a common foundation for their work. *Looking ahead to the next programming period*, Bulgaria could also support more consistent practice by improving access to available datasets, providing simple templates and guidance for interpreting key indicators and introducing early, light-touch quality checks to reduce late-stage rework and anchor revisions more firmly in evidence. Bulgaria may also consider integrating efforts to enhance data infrastructure under the next programming period with a view to improving the labour market intelligence system. This would require close collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and employer associations, among others.

Recommendation 4: Establish a clear, staged review of teacher competence profiles, integrating feedback from education and industry, and develop a comprehensive implementation plan covering initial and continuous teacher development

Bulgaria can further strengthen the quality of teacher competence profiles by introducing a more structured review process and can better ensure their use through a more comprehensive implementation plan. As new profiles are developed, introducing a staged review process involving training providers, teachers and industry representatives would help ensure profiles are consistent, feasible and relevant to practice. *For the next programming period*, Bulgaria could develop a coordinated implementation plan that integrates the profiles into qualification requirements, uses them to inform updates to initial training curricula and

practicum expectations, and to frame the professional development offer with clear incentives for teacher participation. This would help ensure that competence profiles play a meaningful role in shaping both entry pathways and professional growth for VET teachers.

Recommendation 5: For the development of teaching curricula, clarify the composition of drafting teams and strengthen the support they receive, including establishing a multi-staged review process

Bulgaria can improve the quality and consistency of revised teaching curricula by increasing transparency around the selection of coordinating schools and drafting teams. The Ministry could also strengthen the practical guidance and support being offered to the school drafting teams. This might include practical tools for core design tasks such as curriculum sequencing, linking each learning outcome to the specific part of the State Educational Standards it fulfils. Bulgaria could also adapt the existing plan for reviewing the draft curricula, establishing a staged review process with clear steps for quality assurance. This could involve SSCs and other stakeholders at defined points, supported by simple checklists, clearer timelines and a central register of approved versions.

Recommendation 6: Provide further guidance to schools on good practice for collaborating with external practitioners from business and non-governmental organisations

Bulgaria can enhance the quality and consistency of collaborations between schools and external practitioners by offering clearer and more practical guidance on how to implement Activity 5. Providing short, practical guidance notes, simple model documents and clearer expectations for each subactivity would help schools and partners organise collaboration more confidently and ensure that both learners and practitioner teachers benefit from these exchanges. Bulgaria could complement this guidance with structured peer-learning opportunities and more formal recognition of participation, helping schools share emerging practices and embed more coherent, sustainable approaches to collaboration with external practitioners. -activity would help schools and partners

Recommendation 7: Ensure sustainable options for supporting student placements in the long term, including new approaches to financing, timing and recruiting host organisations

Bulgaria can improve the longterm sustainability of student placements by reviewing how they are financed and scheduled, and by broadening the pool of host organisations. This can include identifying or establishing a multi-stakeholder working group to develop and test options for alternative financing and organisational models, before the end of the current programming period. Design options to explore include rebalancing financing towards more targeted supports and integrating the placements into vocational curricula time, at least partially. Finally, it will also be important to work to broaden the pool of placement hosts to help ensure more equitable access to work-based learning. This can be achieved through structured national and regional partnerships with SSCs, employer associations and Regional Education Departments, along with simple guidance, templates and onboarding materials for hosts. This will require ongoing efforts and could be integrated under a relevant project for the next programming period. -term sustainability of student placements by reviewing how they are financed and scheduled, and by broadening the pool of host organisations.

Recommendation 8: Strengthen the monitoring tools for Modernisation of VET to drive learning and effectiveness in the second half of the implementation period

Bulgaria can make further improvements to project monitoring for *Modernisation of VET* by complementing activity-based tracking with indicators that show whether implementation is leading to meaningful improvements in VET quality or labour-market relevance. This includes expanding the monitoring questionnaire to capture both intermediate outcomes and longer-term effects across the project's nine main activities. This would allow the Executive Agency to assess progress towards intended outcomes and impact more effectively during implementation. In addition, revising selected measures to consistently track percentage shares rather than absolute numbers would also improve comparability across schools of different sizes. Over time, using these data for reflection with beneficiaries mid-cycle could support more responsive implementation and strengthen the project's contribution to system improvement.

Key terms

This section outlines key terms used in this report:

Industry practitioners – Employers, employees and self-employed professionals with current experience in relevant economic sectors. They can contribute directly to the delivery of VET through activities such as practical instruction, on-the-job mentoring, and curriculum co-design, ensuring that training reflects authentic workplace practices and sectoral needs.

List of Professions for VET – An officially recognised register of occupations for which VET programmes can be designed and delivered. Each profession on the list is linked to a specific qualification level and includes defined competency requirements, training standards, and expected learning outcomes. The list ensures that VET provision is aligned with national education standards and labour market needs, serving as a reference for curriculum development, programme licensing, and quality assurance.

Practitioner teachers – Professionals from business, industry or non-governmental organisations participating in the teaching of vocational programmes.

Reference framework for VET – The set of core system-level instruments that define the structure, content, and assessment of vocational programmes. It typically includes: 1) *List of Professions*: the official catalogue of occupations covered by VET qualifications; 2) *State Educational Standards*: specifications of required learning outcomes and competencies for each profession; *national examination programmes*: guidelines for assessing whether learners meet the standard; *teaching curricula* – detailed plans for delivering instruction aligned with the standards and examinations.

Sectoral Skills Councils – Advisory bodies composed of representatives from industry, education and government. They operate at the sectoral level to identify current and future skills needs and support the development of policy and regulatory tools used to align education with labour market needs.

State Educational Standards for acquiring professional qualifications – Official regulatory documents that define the key competencies, knowledge, and subject-specific learning outcomes that learners are expected to achieve at the end of each phase of VET. They serve as a foundation for curriculum development, assessment and certification, ensuring that qualifications are aligned with labour market needs and the national qualifications framework.

Student practices – Structured workplace placements that some upper secondary VET students undertake. Each placement has a total duration of 240 hours.

Teacher competence profiles (in VET) – Structured descriptions of the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of VET teachers. These profiles define the competencies needed to deliver high-quality instruction that is relevant to labour market demand. They typically include pedagogical and

technical expertise, the ability to support work-based learning, collaboration with industry stakeholders, and a commitment to continuous professional development. Teacher competence profiles serve as a reference for teacher training, recruitment, and performance evaluation within VET systems.

Teaching curricula – Includes model curricula and subject syllabi which provide important information to schools and teachers for course and lesson planning. *Model curricula* are profession-specific plans that set the structure of provision: the list of subjects and modules to be covered, weekly and total hours by grade, the split between training practice and production practice, optional components, and the way programmes conclude (e.g. State Matriculation Examination and the national VET examination). *Subject programmes* are the syllabi for each subject; they set aims, content, expected learning outcomes and assessment arrangements. Schools then use these national instruments to produce their own school curricula within the national framework.

Unit of Learning Outcomes (ULO) – A component of a vocational qualification that consists of a coherent set of knowledge, skills, competences, and related values, which can be assessed and validated. ULOs are defined in the State Educational Standards for VET and are linked to the Bulgarian Qualifications Framework, ensuring alignment with occupational standards. Each ULO includes clear criteria and assessment methods, as required by Bulgaria's Vocational Education and Training Act.

2 Evaluation context and approach

This report provides an interim evaluation of the *Modernisation of vocational education and training (VET)* project, co-financed with the European Social Fund Plus under Bulgaria's Programme "Education" 2021-2027 (PE). The evaluation was carried out under the framework of the Agreement on multi-year support for the implementation of the Evaluation Plan of Programme "Education" 2021-2027 between the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria (hereafter, Ministry), the Executive Agency "Programme Education" (hereafter, Executive Agency), and the OECD. It is the first of two interim evaluations focused on VET, with a final evaluation planned for the end of the programming period.

This chapter introduces the context for this first interim evaluation. It begins by outlining the key challenges facing Bulgaria's upper secondary VET system to help establish the rationale behind the reform efforts under the *Modernisation of VET* project. It then outlines the project activities implemented so far and presents the evaluation design, including a reconstructed logic model that illustrates how key activities are expected to create impact under the project.

Main trends and challenges in vocational education and training in Bulgaria

Upper secondary VET is a core part of Bulgaria's education system, with 56% of upper secondary students enrolled in vocational tracks in 2023 (OECD, 2025^[1]). Over the past decade, Bulgaria has invested heavily in reforming the sector, revising curricula and expanding workplace learning opportunities, including through the introduction of apprenticeship pathways. The *Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning 2021-2030* identifies VET reform as a key national priority, aiming to improve the overall quality of VET and strengthen responsiveness to labour market needs, particularly with a view to better supporting the digital and green transitions (Ministry of Education and Science, 2025^[2]).

To achieve these aims, Bulgaria needs to overcome several persistent challenges that have been inhibiting progress thus far. These include low skill outcomes for vocational students and misalignment with labour market needs, limited practical orientation in many vocational pathways and the low attractiveness of VET among students and their families.

Employers face difficulties finding workers that meet their needs while many students leave the VET system without having mastered key skills and competences

According to the European Labour Authority, Bulgaria is currently facing labour shortages in 191 occupations – the third highest among European countries, after Malta (307) and Slovakia (250) (European Labour Authority, 2025^[3]). These shortages span both high- and medium-skilled professions, with particularly acute gaps in professions such as electronics and Information and Communications Technology (ICT), mechanical engineering and healthcare. Employers in Bulgaria frequently report that graduates do not have the skills required for the workplace. In 2023, about 80% of employers reported difficulty finding staff with the right skills (Cedefop, 2023^[4]), and nearly 90% of firms identified skills shortages as a major barrier to investment (EIB, 2024^[5]). This poses considerable economic challenges, inhibiting growth and reducing the returns on public investment in education.

These skill gaps are partly shaped by the fact that many students in Bulgaria graduate upper secondary education with low foundational skills, regardless of whether they followed a general or vocational pathway. Around half of students entering the labour market in Bulgaria will have completed an upper secondary VET programme. Selection into these tracks occurs early – typically around age 13 – and they disproportionately enrol students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, many of whom enter with already weak learning foundations (OECD, 2025^[6]).

Among these vocational graduates, evidence points to persistent gaps in general employability skills, which include both cognitive and transversal skills. PISA 2022 data show that by age 15, students in Bulgaria's vocational tracks perform 21 points lower in mathematics than those in general education, after controlling for socio-economic factors – a gap that exceeds the OECD average of 14 points (OECD, 2023^[7]). Similarly, results from the Grade 12 State Matriculation Examination in Bulgarian language show that, on a six-point scale, vocational students score nearly one grade point lower on average than general education students, despite similar instructional time and curriculum frameworks (IME, 2023^[8]).

Employers also report that young VET graduates lack transversal skills – such as adaptability, problem-solving, and taking initiative – skills that are increasingly important in fast-moving sectors such as those undergoing digital and green transitions (WBL, 2021^[9]). PISA 2022 results reinforce this concern: vocational students in Bulgaria scored nine points lower than general students in creative thinking – a skill linked to collaboration and innovation (OECD, 2024^[10]).

In addition to these general employability skills, the relatively limited practical orientation of some VET programmes in Bulgaria (see below) means that many vocational students have limited opportunities to develop applied, sector-specific competencies. This undermines the central value proposition of VET as graduates may lack the technical and practical skills required for a smooth transition to work and for a dynamic economy.

Finally, high dropout rates compound the issue: vocational students are more than twice as likely to leave school before completing upper secondary education compared to their general education peers, and completion rates among those who reach Grade 12 have declined over time, in contrast to increases in general education (World Bank, 2022^[11]).

There is considerable misalignment between the VET offer and labour market needs, driven in large part by weak employer engagement at system level

There is a persistent disconnect between what vocational programmes in Bulgaria teach and the skills the labour market requires. Nearly half of VET graduates in Bulgaria are not working in the profession for which they studied (Vasilev, 2024^[12]), a mismatch that reflects multiple factors. Upper secondary VET programmes are designed to combine general academic curriculum with vocational subjects: this wide common core enables greater permeability between general and vocational programmes but the curricular breadth prevents VET students from covering subjects in depth and limits time for more personalised support and guidance (World Bank, 2022^[11]; OECD, 2025^[6]). As such, VET students have less opportunity to consolidate fundamental competencies and to specialise. This partly contributes to the poor learning outcomes of VET students and more difficult labour market transitions (OECD, 2025^[6]).

In addition to a heavy curriculum, Bulgaria has faced long-standing challenges in keeping VET programmes up to date. The revision of the VET reference framework (i.e. the set of core system-level instruments that define the structure, content, and assessment of vocational programmes) launched in 2024 under the *Modernisation of VET* project has addressed some of these issues, including updates that give greater representation to professions in green and digital sectors (see below and Chapter 3). However, curriculum updates were historically infrequent and slow to respond to emerging skill needs. Before 2024, the List of Professions for VET had not been revised since 2003, leaving many outdated programmes in place and provision ongoing in specialties with little or no labour market demand (IME,

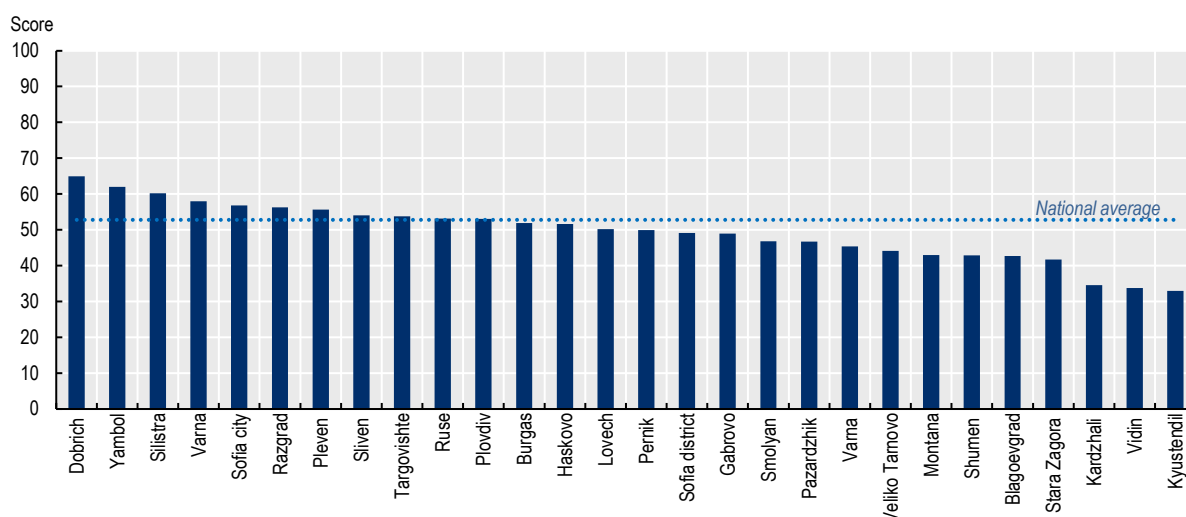
2024^[13]). Meanwhile, fast-evolving sectors like ICT, green technologies and advanced manufacturing have been facing skills shortages that risk constraining productivity and growth (OECD, 2025^[6]). This misalignment has been compounded by the fragmented structure of VET provision: Bulgaria offered close to 600 specialties clustered into 245 occupations, many of them structured as non-modular programmes (OECD, 2023^[14]). Such early specialisation narrowed students' skillsets early on, reducing their ability to adjust their skills as labour market needs evolve.

The lack of structured collaboration between the VET sector and industry practitioners has also contributed to the misalignment between training and labour market needs. There is no clear framework at system-level for joint work in key areas such as admissions planning, curriculum development, or quality assurance (Vasilev, 2024^[12]; Bergseng, 2019^[15]). While legislative amendments in recent years have enabled employer organisations to propose changes to vocational programmes, their role remains largely reactive, with little influence over programme content or scale, even in sectors facing acute skill shortages (Cedefop, 2019^[16]; Vasilev, 2024^[12]). As a result, programmes often evolve in relative isolation from labour market trends, leading to uneven quality and relevance across regions.

Beyond the system level, the absence of collaboration efforts at local level reduces the ability of VET programmes to respond to regional and sectoral demand, creating sharper mismatches in some districts. There is wide geographic variation in the labour market relevance of VET provision, measured as the ratio between planned student intake by specialty and actual local employment in related sectors (see Figure 2.1). While alignment is relatively high in northeastern agricultural districts, such as Dobrich, Razgrad, Silistra and Targovishte, gaps are larger elsewhere (IME, 2025^[17]). In Vidin, for instance, more students are trained in agriculture than the local job market demands, while in industrial hubs such as Stara Zagora, Veliko Tarnovo and Vratsa, too few enrol in manufacturing programmes to meet local need (IME, 2025^[17]).

Figure 2.1. The extent to which vocational education prepares students for available jobs differs by district

Index of labour market alignment of vocational education and training by district, 2025



Note: The index shows how well student enrolment in vocational programmes matches local labour market demand across six key sectors: agriculture, forestry and fishing; manufacturing; construction; transport, storage and postal services; hotels and restaurants; information and communication industries. A score of 0 means no alignment, while 100 means perfect alignment.

Source: Adapted from Institute for Market Economics (2025^[17]), *Index of alignment between vocational education and the economy profile 2025*, https://ime.bg/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/educationemployment_index2025-ime-29.07.pdf (accessed on 16 August 2025).

Despite an increase in the availability of work-based learning, few vocational students in Bulgaria gain sufficient practical experience during their studies

Bulgaria has taken steps in recent years to increase vocational students' exposure to authentic workplace environments, and three types of work-based learning are now available: mandatory two-week practices, extended 240-hour placements and dual VET pathways.

All initial VET programmes in Bulgaria include a compulsory two-week (64-hour) work-based practice in each grade of the second stage of upper secondary education (Grades 10, 11 and 12). While it is positive that this practical experience is available to all VET students, the short duration can limit students' ability to experience a range of workplace tasks and activities and gives employers little incentive to invest in structured mentoring or training.

Beyond the mandatory two-week practice, Bulgaria introduced extended student placements during the 2014-2020 European Union (EU) programming period through the Operational Programme "Science and Education for Smart Growth" (OPSESG). Each extended placement lasts 240 hours, and around 14 000 students participated during the previous programming period, with measures envisaged to expand participation during the current period (European Commission, 2022^[18]; Economy, 2023^[19]). While these placements offer much more exposure to real work settings, they reached fewer than 10% of the total upper secondary VET population across the programming period, based on estimated annual intake.

The third form of work-based learning is the dual VET pathway, which follows an apprenticeship model whereby at least 25% of training is delivered in the workplace. Since 2015, Bulgaria has invested heavily in expanding dual VET, including EUR 3.6 million through the Swiss-funded DOMINO project. International evidence shows that well-designed dual pathways can improve school-to-work transitions, strengthen job-specific skills and employability, and keep curricula aligned with workplace technologies (Cedefop, 2014^[20]). In Bulgaria, participation in these dual programmes has grown, with the number of schools offering them rising from 151 in 2020/2021 to 180 in 2022/2023 (Ivanova, 2023^[21]). Nevertheless, overall uptake remains modest: as of 2025, only about 9% of new VET entrants choose this pathway (IME, 2025^[22]).

As well as being small-scale, participation in dual VET is also uneven across both regions and vocational fields. Uptake is highest in districts such as Ruse (32% of VET students), Gabrovo (28%) and Vidin (24%), but falls below 5% in 8 districts, with none in Pernik (IME, 2025^[22]). By field, programmes with large student numbers – such as transport, technology and hospitality – record relatively higher participation (up to 11%), while enrolment is below 5% in computing, economics, and design, despite strong labour market relevance (Slavova, 2024^[23]). In addition, over 90 professions, including some shortage occupations such as dental assistance, food processing, and social work, currently have no dual options (Slavova, 2024^[23]).

To support the expansion of work-based learning, Bulgaria has amended the VET Act over the past decade, introducing new rules for cooperation agreements between VET providers and employers, defining responsibilities for organising work-based learning, and, most recently, easing qualification requirements for workplace mentors and trainers (Cedefop, 2025^[24]). Despite these efforts, employer participation remains the main constraint: fewer than 10% of Bulgarian enterprises offer work-based learning, one of the lowest shares in the EU (OECD, 2023^[14]). As a result, for most vocational students, VET remains largely school-based, with practical learning often delivered in simulated rather than real workplace contexts (OECD, 2023^[14]).

Bulgaria lacks sufficient supply of VET teachers with adequate pedagogical and technical skills to ensure quality

Bulgaria faces difficulties in attracting and retaining VET teachers who combine strong pedagogical skills with up-to-date industry experience (Vasilev, 2024^[12]; Bergseng, 2019^[15]). While teacher shortages are a

broader issue across the education system, they are especially pronounced in fast-evolving vocational fields such as digital and green technologies, where industry competition for talent is much higher. Recruiting qualified teachers is also more difficult for schools in rural areas and regions with higher levels of poverty (World Bank, 2022^[11]).

At the same time, Bulgaria's VET teaching workforce is ageing quickly. In 2023, nearly half of vocational teachers were aged over 50, compared to an OECD average share of 43% (OECD, 2024^[25]). Across the broader teaching profession, the share of those aged over 50 rose from 36% to 48% between 2008 and 2022 (OECD, 2025^[26]). As many educators approach retirement, the need to attract and prepare new entrants for the profession is becoming increasingly important.

In addition to challenges in attracting new vocational teachers, evidence indicates that access to high-quality professional development remains limited. Many teachers lack regular opportunities for training, (Vasilev, 2024^[12]), and workplace exchanges or industry placements – essential for staying current with evolving industry practices and technologies – are rare. This can make it difficult for teachers to keep pace with workplace innovations, particularly in fast-changing fields, such as ICT, civil engineering or those implicated in the green and digital transitions. These VET-specific challenges exist in addition to weaknesses in teacher professional development more broadly in Bulgaria (see OECD (2025^[6])).

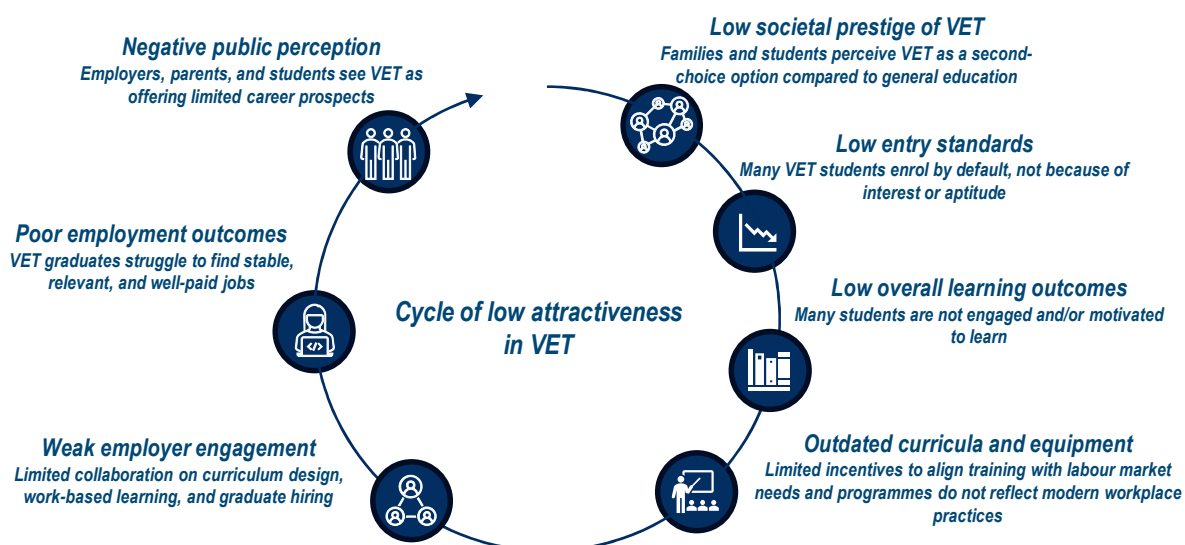
Teaching materials for the vocational sector also present a challenge – especially textbooks and digital resources, which are often obsolete, not well adapted to VET needs, or simply unavailable (Vasilev, 2024^[12]). As with other challenges, this is partly due to limited employer engagement in curriculum design – there is no systematic channel for industry to signal emerging skill needs or validate training content (OECD, 2025^[6]). Without such feedback, updates lag and curricula adapt slowly to new trends and technologies. Digital transition efforts in education reflect this; for example, the *Digital Backpack* developed under the *Education for Tomorrow* project (2019-2022) still lacks VET-specific content. In parallel, the share of students enrolled in vocational programmes in general education schools as opposed to specialised VET schools has been growing – from about 5% in 2016 to almost 13% in 2019 (World Bank, 2022^[11]). This shift means schools may increasingly expect teachers to deliver vocational content in contexts with limited technical equipment or without specialised professional expertise.

VET programmes in Bulgaria are relatively unattractive to students and their families and do not sufficiently engage those who do enrol

VET in Bulgaria is often perceived as a less attractive option, with students and parents viewing it as academically inferior to general education and less likely to lead to high-quality employment (Bocheva, 2017^[27]). When students and families observe that VET graduates frequently work outside their field of study, it reinforces the perception that vocational training lacks practical value and labour market relevance. The absence of post-secondary VET options – especially short-cycle and applied tertiary programmes – further limit opportunities for students to develop higher-level skills and deepens the disconnect between vocational education, employment, and further learning (OECD, 2025^[6]).

Low attractiveness then feeds back into quality issues. Many students enter vocational tracks by default rather than by choice, weakening their motivation, engagement, and commitment to learning. This, in turn, makes it harder to recruit and retain skilled teachers and discourages employers from investing time and resources in building training partnerships. As a result, programme quality and labour market relevance may deteriorate further, perpetuating the perception of VET as a less desirable option (see Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2. Limited curricular alignment with labour market needs exacerbates the low attractiveness of VET in Bulgaria



Source: Adapted from Cedefop (2014^[28]), *Attractiveness of initial vocational education and training: identifying what matters*, <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/5539> (accessed on 14 August 2025).

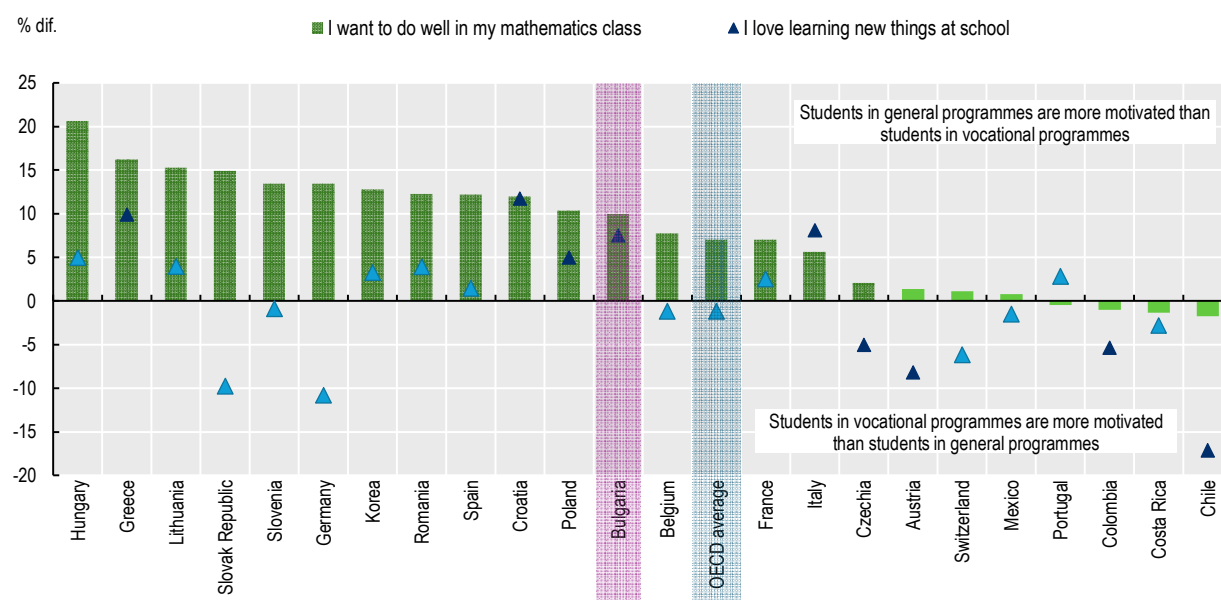
Importantly, admission to upper secondary vocational programmes in Bulgaria is organised through a centralised process that matches students to their ranked choices using a points score based on results in the Grade 7 National External Assessment and selected school grades (OECD, 2025^[6]). VET is almost universally viewed as a “second choice”. As a result, those with higher scores typically enter general education profile or “elite” schools, while those with lower scores – often from disadvantaged backgrounds – are channeled into vocational pathways (OECD, 2025^[6]; OECD, 2023^[7]). Once placed in VET, students have few options to change tracks (Bergseng, 2019^[15]; OECD, 2025^[6]).

Beyond initial enrolment, the VET system also faces challenges in sustaining learner engagement throughout upper secondary education. VET students report having lower motivation to learn than their general education peers (see Figure 2.2) (OECD, 2024^[29]). This can have important implications for academic performance, critical thinking, and the use of effective learning strategies. Lower motivation among VET students may also influence their likelihood of staying in education, contributing to the higher dropout and lower completion rates observed among students in vocational tracks.

Low appeal and engagement are particularly concerning in the context of a growing demand for vocational graduates: Bulgaria has predicted a significant shortage of technical personnel over the next decade, especially in fields requiring digital and green technical skills (Ministry of Education and Science, 2025^[2]).

Figure 2.3. As in many other European countries, vocational students in Bulgaria report lower motivation to learn and enthusiasm than their peers in general education

Percentage-point difference in share of 15-year-olds agreeing or strongly agreeing with the following statements, by programme orientation (students in general – vocational programmes)



Note: Statistically significant differences are shown in darker tone. Countries and economies are ranked in descending order of the percentage difference (students in general – vocational programmes) in the share of students agreeing that they want to do well in mathematics.

Source: OECD (2024^[29]), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume V): Learning Strategies and Attitudes for Life*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/c2e44201-en>.

Vocational education and training under Programme “Education” 2021-2027

This section provides an overview of the *Modernisation of VET* project, outlining its scope, key objectives, activities and implementation design. It situates the project within the broader VET reform efforts under Programme “Education” (PE) and in relation to initiatives from the previous programming period.

Modernisation of VET supports both system- and school-level changes to enhance the labour market relevance of VET, making it a key project under Programme “Education”

Bulgaria’s PE is designed around three priority areas, the third of which aims to strengthen the relevance of education – especially vocational and higher education pathways – to labour market needs. The efforts targeting upper secondary vocational education are organised around three key operations:

- The *Modernisation of VET* project (4.8% of the total PE budget) seeks to improve the labour market relevance of vocational pathways.
- The projects under *Dual VET education* (4.6%) aim to expand and strengthen work-based learning.
- The projects under *Supporting Centres of Excellence* (3.8%) focus on strengthening the role of designated Centres in leading innovation across the VET system and developing programmes focused on skills for the future.

Launched in May 2023, the *Modernisation of VET* project is the first of the three VET initiatives to enter implementation. It will run until the end of 2029, with a total budget of EUR 47 million given the latest

contract modifications in 2025. As an operation of strategic importance under EU Cohesion Policy, the project is considered essential for achieving PE programme objectives and is subject to stricter requirements for monitoring, evaluation, and communication (European Commission, 2024^[30]). This status also obliges the project to demonstrate core EU values, such as equality, sustainable development and the “do no significant harm” principle, among others (European Commission, 2024^[30]).

While the other two initiatives under the VET thematic area target specific pathways or institutions within the VET system, *Modernisation of VET* supports both system-level reforms and school-level innovations that can impact all VET providers and learners. It focuses on updating what is taught, improving how it is taught and strengthening ties to the world of work. The project’s core aim is to enhance the responsiveness of vocational pathways to evolving labour market needs. It pursues two objectives: (1) adapting VET to labour market dynamics, and (2) equipping learners with skills for both current and emerging professions.

To achieve these aims, as a preliminary step, the project established 20 Sectoral Skills Councils (SSCs) – multi-stakeholder bodies with a formal role in the implementation of several project activities. These Councils bring together industry practitioners (i.e. employers, employees and the self-employed), VET professionals (school leaders and teachers), trade unions, employer and professional association staff, and higher education professionals. They aim to strengthen the alignment of vocational programmes with labour market needs. There are nine key activities as follows:

- Activity 1: Development and implementation of a new List of Professions for VET and related curricular documents, including State Educational Standards (which provide learning outcomes for each pathway), national examination programmes, and teaching curricula to guide lesson planning.
- Activity 2: Introduction of VET teacher competence profiles and related training in profession-specific skills.
- Activity 3: Introduction of flexible pathways, micro-credentials and credits in VET to facilitate student mobility and permeability between different programmes, professions, sectors, and education levels.
- Activity 4: Development of new teaching and learning resources for VET, including innovative digital content, the use of artificial intelligence, virtual reality and blended learning.
- Activity 5: Participation of external experts from business, science, public and non-governmental sectors in VET teaching (hereafter referred to as practitioner teachers), and short modular trainings for vocational teachers on modern production techniques and technologies.
- Activity 6: Professional development for VET teachers in areas such as digital and green transitions, blue growth, industry 5.0.
- Activity 7: Improving VET students’ transversal skills, including entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship, in cooperation with employers.
- Activity 8: Expanding the availability of student placements in real working environments.
- Activity 9: Information campaigns and guidance activities to raise the attractiveness of VET

The Ministry is the direct beneficiary of the funds, awarded by the Executive Agency. It holds overall responsibility for the full cycle of project implementation – from project design and funding applications to coordination with business partners and outcome reporting. The Ministry provides strategic leadership, setting the direction of VET reform and ensuring policy coherence across initiatives. It oversees the work of the SSCs, coordinates the development of the List of Professions, and guides the creation of teacher competence profiles. The Ministry also approves new State Educational Standards and curricula and manages contractual arrangements with SSC members, underscoring its central coordinating and supervisory role.

The National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET) is a specialised body under the Council of Ministers. It is responsible for licensing VET and career guidance centres, developing State

Educational Standards, and maintaining the national List of Professions. Under the project, NAVET is responsible for both operational and technical tasks: it recruits and manages technical expert teams, coordinates the development of over 150 new State Educational Standards and leads the creation and review of national examination programmes and qualification profiles. NAVET also prepares technical specifications for integrating new VET content into digital systems, ensuring that reforms are effectively translated into practice.

Regional coordination units within the Regional Education Departments (REDs) support the Ministry's national project management team. These units function as intermediaries between the Ministry, VET institutions, and local stakeholders. They help adapt national strategies to local contexts and ensure consistent delivery across regions. At the school level, each participating VET institution has a dedicated project management team that coordinates and monitors school-level activities, such as updating curricula, organising workplace learning, and supporting teacher development.

Evaluation approach

Purpose and scope of the evaluation

This interim evaluation assesses early progress made under Bulgaria's *Modernisation of VET* project in improving the alignment of vocational education with labour market needs. Its objective is to identify early lessons on how to establish sustainable, structured forms of collaboration between VET institutions and labour market actors – including industry practitioners, business associations and trade unions – to support the design, delivery, and governance of vocational education.

The evaluation focuses on four of the project's nine activities: Activities 1, 2, 5 and 8. The evaluation team selected these activities as they involve structured forms of collaboration between the VET system and the labour market. This includes collaboration through formalised, recurring mechanisms for sustained interaction, such as the SSCs and student placements, and through initiatives that require collaboration for implementation, such as the development of the State Educational Standards and the training of teachers and external practitioner teachers. The activities cover collaboration efforts at two levels:

- **System-level** (Activities 1 and 2): Both the SSCs and the expert teams appointed to draft the new Standards are key examples of collaborative mechanisms at system level. They create formal platforms that bring together VET professionals, industry practitioners, employer and professional associations and trade unions. Both are intended to support the revision of vocational programmes, qualifications, and teaching standards to better reflect evolving sectoral needs.
- **School-level** (Activities 5 and 8): Collaboration at school level is the foundation of efforts to engage external actors in schools and to expand students' access to workplace learning. Both activities are intended to enhance knowledge transfer between schools and local employers and to support vocational teaching and learning in becoming more applied and practically oriented.

The four activities selected for evaluation are at varied stages of implementation. This report therefore focuses predominantly on design and early implementation rather than outcomes. The evaluation of other project activities falls beyond the scope of this evaluation, as these activities – while essential for modernising VET – were not primarily aimed at strengthening collaboration between VET and labour market. A fuller assessment of these activities will be carried out in evaluation work planned for the end of the programming period.

The evaluation team designed the research with the aim of supporting policymakers in the Ministry and NAVET, as well as VET professionals and industry practitioners, to better facilitate and engage in collaboration. While the findings and related recommendations presented in this report focus primarily on improving the implementation of the current project, they also provide insights that can guide the design of

future efforts to strengthen collaboration between Bulgaria's VET sector and the labour market, as well as support the Managing Authority in programming future operations.

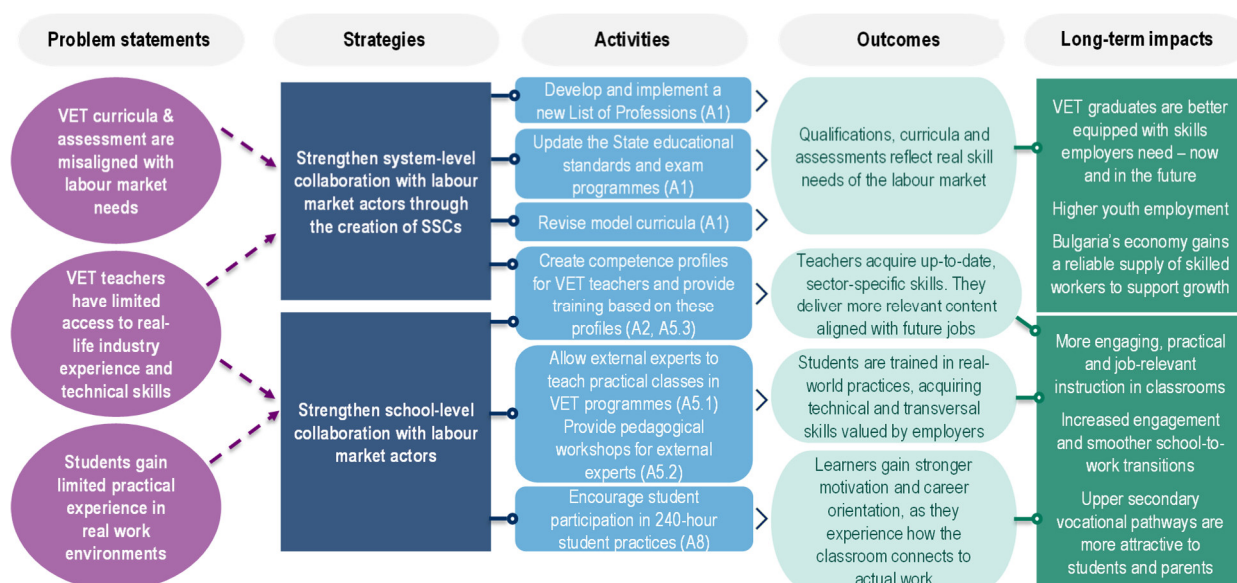
Reconstructed theory of change

While the project documentation does not set out an explicit theory of change, the structure of its objectives and activities reflects a coherent strategic logic. Figure 2.4 reconstructs that logic for the four activities evaluated (Activity 1, 2, 5 and 8).

Activities 1, 2, 5 and 8 reflect two overarching strategies: strengthening system-level collaboration and enhancing school-level partnerships. These strategies address three core challenges in Bulgaria's VET system identified earlier in this chapter: misalignment between VET curricula, assessment and labour-market needs; limited industry exposure among teachers; and insufficient workplace experience for students. The activities are designed to reinforce one another: revised Standards and examinations set clear expectations; teacher profiles and training support delivery; and school-employer partnerships bring this content into classrooms and workplaces (for an assessment of the relevance of these activities, see Chapter 3, Section 3). Over time, experience gathered in classrooms and companies can feed back into future rounds of standard-setting, supporting a more responsive and adaptive system.

Figure 2.4. Reconstructed theory of change for *Modernisation of VET* - Activities 1, 2, 5 and 8

Intended logic linking activities, outputs, and outcomes under both system- and school-level interventions



Source: Authors based on Executive Agency "Programme Education" (2023^[31]), *Guidelines for the implementation of project activities BG05SFPR001-3.001-0001 "Modernisation of Vocational education and training"*, <https://sf.mon.bg/?go=news&p=detail&newsId=1104> (accessed 25 November, 2025).

The reconstructed theory of change indicates that expected results under the project should progress as follows:

- **Short term:** Updated reference framework for VET (List of Professions, Standards, examination programmes and teaching curricula) is in place; teachers are clearer about current technical requirements in their sector and have access to targeted training; students are exposed to current workplace knowledge.

- **Long term:** The skills of vocational graduates align more closely with labour-market demand and can respond to related evolutions; employers gain a more reliable supply of talent, supporting productivity and growth; vocational pathways are more engaging for students and thus more attractive to them and their parents.

The causal chain that can lead to these expected results relies on several conditions:

- **Proactive and credible employer engagement:** consistent participation by industry practitioners, business associations and trade unions; SSCs are seen as credible and independent.
- **Clear guidance and support:** those revising curricula and teacher competence profiles have practical tools and support to carry out high-quality work.
- **School teams and employers with sufficient capacity and incentives:** schools and employers have the expertise, time, and motivation to collaborate, including scheduling for practitioner teachers and extended student placements.
- **Adequate contracting and resourcing:** workable contracting models for SSC members and practitioner teachers, and modest but reliable budgets to support the different activities and those implementing them.
- **Equitable coverage:** smaller schools, rural areas and small and medium-sized enterprises are included, not only large urban institutions, to ensure reforms benefit all learners.

Evaluation criteria and questions

The evaluation is guided by the six criteria agreed between the OECD and Bulgaria for assessing activities under PE. The first five – relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and EU added value – follow the European Commission’s *Better Regulation Guidelines* (European Commission, 2021^[32]). Informed by OECD evaluation criteria, a sixth criterion – sustainability – has been added to assess the long-term continuity of project outcomes beyond the programming period (OECD, 2019^[33])

An overarching evaluation question establishes the focus of the evaluation: **To what extent are early activities under the *Modernisation of VET* project establishing effective collaborative mechanisms that enhance the responsiveness of vocational education to labour market needs?** The evaluation examines whether these mechanisms are fostering regular, inclusive, and sustained dialogue between education and employment actors at system and school level, as well as laying the groundwork for future reforms that are both scalable and durable.

Evaluation questions by criteria were agreed at the outset of the work and were further developed and regrouped in the preparation of this report, as follows:

- **Relevance:** To what extent are the collaborative mechanisms introduced under the project appropriate and well-targeted to strengthening the labour market responsiveness of VET in Bulgaria?
- **Effectiveness:** To what extent are the newly introduced collaborative mechanisms functioning effectively?
- **Efficiency:** To what extent do the newly introduced collaborative mechanisms make efficient use of available resources and capacities
- **Coherence:** To what extent are the reforms aligned with current legal, institutional, and policy frameworks, and coherent with other national and EU-level initiatives?
- **EU added value:** What added value has EU support brought to the design and implementation of activities aimed at strengthening collaborative mechanisms in the VET system?
- **Sustainability:** To what extent are the collaborative mechanisms developed under the project likely to be sustained beyond the funding period?

While the evaluation looks at all criteria, its interim nature places greater weight on the design and early implementation of the activities, with particular emphasis on relevance, coherence and early indicators of effectiveness.

Research design and data collection methods

The evaluation adopts a realist approach, asking what works, for whom, in what contexts, and how (Pawson and Tilley, 1997^[34]). It seeks to understand how project outcomes are shaped by the interaction between context (e.g. institutional capacity, local labour market dynamics), actors (e.g. the Ministry, VET professionals, SSC members, employers), and mechanisms (e.g. curriculum updates, employer engagement, teacher training) that contribute to – or hinder – the achievement of desired outcomes.

To explore these interactions, the evaluation follows a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data. The OECD evaluation team applied purposive sampling to identify individuals, organisations and bodies directly involved in project design, delivery, or participation, ensuring that data came from those best placed to speak to the research questions. Data collection focused on three stakeholder groups: system leadership (i.e. the Ministry and NAVET), labour market partners (i.e. industry practitioners, business association staff, trade union representatives), and VET professionals (i.e. VET teachers and school leaders). Data collection was iterative: early insights helped inform the development of instruments and the purposive sampling strategy.

The following methods were used:

- **Review of project documentation and data** helped map the project's intended logic and clarify its formal governance and institutional structures for implementation. This included national policy and project documentation (e.g. technical guidelines, implementation reports, methodological notes), as well as key activity outputs, such as the revised List of Professions and examples of teacher competence profiles (see Annex C).
- **Interviews and focus groups** provided insight into how the project is understood and perceived among key stakeholders and how it is being implemented. Semi-structured interviews with the Ministry and NAVET officials explored questions of strategic direction, technical delivery, and SSC coordination. Focus groups with three SSCs – electronics, informatics and information technology; mechanical engineering, metalworking and metallurgy; and healthcare – examined how SSCs operate, their influence on the List of Professions and the State Educational Standards, and their views on the relevance and sustainability of reforms introduced under the project. Additional interviews with representatives from business associations and trade unions explored their role in the VET reforms and SSC governance.
- **School site visits** allowed the evaluation team to observe implementation at school level. The evaluation team selected three schools participating in the project: a Centre for VET Excellence, a VET school, and a general secondary school offering vocational pathways. During the visits, the team interviewed school leaders and project coordinators to explore institutional involvement in reform activities, collaboration with local employers, and implementation challenges. Focus groups with vocational teachers explored how the delivery of vocational training to students is changing, how schools engage with employers, and how relevant the project activities feel to those directly involved in teaching.
- **A Survey of Sectoral Skills Councils** was administered online to all SSC members (May-June 2025) in order to broaden the evidence base and help triangulate qualitative insights. Informed by early findings, the survey explored members' experiences of SSC recruitment and contracting, participation in different tasks, and views on the sustainability and effectiveness of both the SSCs as an institution and the wider reform process (see Annex A). Implemented online via LimeSurvey, the survey combined open- and fixed-response questions. Of the 218 invited SSC members, 111

responded, yielding an overall response rate of 51%. Participation varied by contract status: 80% of those on labour contracts responded, compared to 28% of volunteers. VET and higher education professionals are somewhat overrepresented in the sample. Survey analysis relies on descriptive statistics and accounts for subgroup differences to ensure sensitivity to variation in perspectives.

Limitations

This evaluation faces specific limitations that should shape the interpretation of findings. First, data collection focused on a targeted set of institutions and actors, selected for their direct involvement in project activities or their strategic roles. While this approach yields rich insight into implementation, it does not reflect the full range of perspectives across the VET system. For example, the evaluation did not include industry practitioners, VET or higher education professionals, or business association representatives who chose not to participate in the SSCs, or those who applied but were not selected. Findings should therefore be read as illustrative rather than representative. Moreover, participation in interviews, focus groups, and surveys was voluntary, raising the possibility of response bias. Those who engaged may have been more involved, informed, or supportive of the reforms while data collection may not have captured the perspectives of those who are more critical or less engaged.

Second, the evaluation relied primarily on qualitative methods. The absence of systematic outcome data – such as learner progression or employment rates – at this point in project implementation meant that the team could not assess impact or make claims about the effectiveness of specific reforms. Instead, the focus was on how reforms are understood, delivered, and experienced by participants, reflecting the interim nature of the evaluation.

Third, some project activities were still evolving during data collection. For example, work on updating the State Educational Standards, developing the new teaching curricula or teacher competence profiles was ongoing, while school-level activities were generally at an early stage. As a result, the evaluation captures early lessons and signals of change, rather than final outcomes or long-term effects.

Despite these limitations, the evaluation draws strength from its depth, diversity, and triangulation of stakeholder perspectives. The evaluation team gathered insights across levels and actor groups. The use of multiple methods enabled the team to cross-check findings and build a coherent picture of how the project is playing out in practice.

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3 Main findings

Key messages

- **Sectoral Skills Councils** have a clear mandate under the project which is highly relevant to addressing key challenges facing Bulgaria's VET system. In their current form, they are a cost-efficient way of mobilising previously underutilised expertise.
- The **revised List of Professions** includes broader and fewer vocational categories than its predecessor which can facilitate school-level provision and offer students greater flexibility to adapt to labour-market evolution during their studies and subsequent careers.
- The simultaneous **update of 150 State Educational Standards and national examination programmes** is an ambitious reform that can enhance coherence across VET programmes. However, some expert teams did not sufficiently integrate VET professionals and industry practitioners and, while comprehensive, the drafting and review process was inefficient.
- The review process for new **teacher competence profiles** was limited as is the planned review of the **teaching curricula**, with only a narrow group of stakeholders involved. This may inhibit both quality and implementation.
- Schools view efforts to bring schools and employers closer together, including through **practitioner teachers, teacher and mentor training and student placements** with enthusiasm. However, their prospective sustainability is in doubt given the lack of structured guidance offered to schools implementing activities for teachers and practitioners, and the high cost of providing financial compensation to students on placements.
- The project carries strong European Union (EU) **added value**, delivering system-level reforms at a scale and pace unmatched by previous national efforts. Project design has ensured a **high level of relevance** to the current challenges facing VET and **coherence** with national and European strategic priorities.

This chapter presents the main findings from the interim evaluation of the *Modernisation of vocational education and training (VET)* project. The evaluation focuses on Activities 1, 2, 5 and 8 under the project. Findings relate principally to initial VET (i.e. VET programmes for students in upper secondary education), though some activities also benefit continuing VET (i.e. VET programmes in post-secondary education). In line with the overarching evaluation question, the findings explore to what extent early activities under the *Modernisation of VET* project are establishing effective collaborative mechanisms that enhance the responsiveness of VET to labour-market needs.

Sections 1 and 2 of the chapter group findings according to key collaboration efforts under Activities 1, 2, 5 and 8. Findings cover five evaluation criteria: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability. The first section focuses on system-level collaboration – including the creation and deployment of the Sectoral Skills Councils (SSCs), the development of the new List of Professions for VET, the drafting of State Educational Standards, and the preparation of teacher competence profiles and teaching curricula. Section 2 examines collaboration efforts implemented at school level, focusing on the

involvement of external actors as practitioner teachers in VET, training for VET teachers and the expansion of student placements.

Section 3 provides final overarching findings bringing together the four activities. These focus on relevance, European Union (EU) added value and coherence.

Section 1. Evaluation findings for system-level collaboration (Activities 1 and 2)

This section examines early evidence on the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of system-level collaboration efforts introduced under the Modernisation of VET project. It examines formal, nationally coordinated arrangements that bring together VET professionals, industry practitioners and other key stakeholders, and that shape teaching and assessment in vocational programmes. It explores the following evaluation questions:

- **Relevance:** To what extent are the project's system-level efforts to bring stakeholders together appropriate and well-targeted to strengthening labour market responsiveness in VET?
- **Coherence:** To what extent do the system-level collaboration efforts align with current legal, institutional, and policy frameworks, and other national and EU-level initiatives?
- **Effectiveness:** To what extent are they functioning effectively?
- **Efficiency:** To what extent are they making efficient use of available resources?
- **Sustainability:** To what extent are they likely to be sustained beyond the funding period?

The key tasks covered in this section include: 1) the creation of the SSCs; 2) the development of the new List of Professions; 3) the revision of the State Educational Standards; 4) the development of teacher competence profiles for VET; 5) the preparation of teaching curricula. The findings are organised by key task to support stakeholders in easily identifying the findings most relevant to their work.

The creation of Sectoral Skills Councils

Under *Modernisation of VET*, Bulgaria has established 20 sector-specific multi-stakeholder councils, each with a formal role in several project activities (see Finding 3). These newly established SSCs bring together industry practitioners (i.e. employers, employees and the self-employed) working in the sector, VET professionals (school leaders and teachers), trade union staff, employer and professional association staff, and higher education professionals with the aim of strengthening the alignment of vocational programmes with labour market needs. By 2024, the SSCs comprised a total of 218 members across sectors, ranging from mechanical engineering to personal services and healthcare (EAPE, 2025^[1]).

To establish the SSCs, the Ministry of Education and Science (hereafter, Ministry) designed an open, criteria-based recruitment process, carried out by dedicated SSC coordinators within the Ministry. The Ministry disseminated public calls for member applications, outlining clear role descriptions and eligibility requirements. The Ministry required candidates to meet the following minimum criteria:

- A higher education degree in the relevant professional field.
- An accredited VET qualification, in instances where a profession does not have a relevant higher education degree.
- At least three years of relevant professional experience (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023^[2]).

SSC coordinators then assessed applicants against additional criteria to determine priority for selection. These included:

- Additional professional qualifications.

- Prior experience in developing VET curricula, State Educational Standards, or national examination programmes.
- Awards for excellence in VET, science, or business.
- Demonstrated experience in partnerships between employers and schools offering VET programmes (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023^[2]).

As detailed in the following subsections, the evaluation finds that overall, the creation of SSCs responds directly to a major challenge in Bulgaria's VET system by establishing an institutional mechanism for collaboration that can help address labour market misalignment. The selection process for SSC members was transparent and well-structured, but the Ministry encountered some challenges recruiting industry professionals. The SSCs operate under a clear mandate and deliver related tasks cost-effectively, thanks to the voluntary nature of many experts' involvement. Finally, while there appears to be consensus that Bulgaria should maintain the SSCs over the long term, questions remain regarding future contracting arrangements.

Finding 1. As a permanent, formal mechanism for multi-stakeholder collaboration, the establishment of SSCs is a relevant response to labour market misalignment (relevance)

The establishment of SSCs fills an important gap in Bulgaria's VET system. For the first time, an institutionalised mechanism bringing together VET professionals and industry practitioners now exists on a permanent basis at sector level. A 2019 functional analysis of VET policy commissioned by the Council of Ministers emphasised the ad-hoc nature of collaboration which had been insufficiently institutionalised (Council of Ministers, 2019^[3]); the SSCs fill this gap. In interviews carried out for the evaluation, many SSC members themselves recognise the relevance of the Councils, identifying their introduction as a long-overdue step towards stronger social partnership in VET governance. Several described it as one of the most important reforms in recent years.

"I believe that the [establishment of the] SSCs has proven to be one of the best decisions of the Ministry in the field of vocational education for the last 20 years. The influence of SSCs should be increased and they should be able to propose changes in the regulatory framework, as well as to contribute to the formation of innovative practices in the field of VET." – SSC member

The introduction of SSCs also directly responds to the current misalignment between vocational programmes and labour market needs (see Chapter 2). The project enables the SSCs to play an active role at key decision points – to identify sector skill needs, review and reformulate entries in the List of Professions, and advise on programme and examination content through the revision of the Standards. This ensures that the diverse perspectives of industry practitioners, VET professionals, trade union representatives, and other stakeholders inform both VET curricula and practical aspects of their delivery. The approach also aligns with international practice: in several OECD and EU countries (including Hungary, Portugal and Slovakia, for example), sector-level councils are used to structure social dialogue on VET standards and play a key role in updating qualifications and aligning training with labour-market needs (OECD, 2020^[4]; Cedefop, 2024^[5]).

Finding 2. The selection process for SSCs was transparent and well-structured, but securing qualified industry practitioners with sufficient availability proved challenging (effectiveness)

The competitive recruitment and selection process run by the Ministry ensured that appointed SSC members had a minimum standard of relevant professional expertise and experience. Of 379 applications received, the Ministry initially appointed 264 members in April 2024, with 218 participating as members as of July 2025. According to the OECD's *Survey of Sectoral Skills Councils* conducted in May 2025 for this evaluation (hereafter "SSC survey"), the large majority of members met minimum requirements: 89% held

a relevant higher education degree, 69% had a relevant VET qualification, and 97% reported at least three years of relevant experience (OECD, 2025^[6]). The SSCs remain open to new members, subject to the same selection criteria and based on voluntary service.

Moreover, the Ministry made a deliberate effort to secure stakeholder diversity within each SSC. Among the 12 to 18 planned seats per Council, roughly 40% were reserved for industry practitioners; 30–40% for VET professionals; and the remainder for higher education staff and representatives from employer associations and trade unions (Ministry of Education and Science, 2025^[7]). In principle, this diversity can help ensure that the drafting of VET qualifications considers both labour market needs and the realities of delivering vocational training.

In practice, however, challenges faced by SSC coordinators in appointing suitable industry practitioners inhibited diverse representation. Some coordinators reported that there were not enough candidates with sufficient expertise in certain fields (e.g. mechanical engineering, heavy industry). On the other hand, those with relevant industry expertise may face more barriers to applying, including time constraints, inability to accept the contracts offered by the Ministry (see Finding 5), and/or limited familiarity with administrative procedures and documentation requirements. The evaluation team could not speak to those who chose not to apply, limiting the available evidence on related constraints.

As a result, there was a relative underrepresentation of industry practitioners on some SSCs; their seats were either not filled or were filled with people from other backgrounds. In contrast, higher education and VET professionals were sometimes overrepresented relative to the planned quotas. For example, the SSC for Electronics and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) includes up to 60% VET professionals, 25% higher education professionals, and only 15% industry practitioners (OECD, 2025^[6]). Across all sectors, trade union representatives were also overrepresented, accounting for 42 of the 218 SSC members active in July 2025. This imbalance raises concerns about the SSCs' capacity to fully reflect labour market needs. In addition, since their establishment there has been wide variation in the number of Council members per sector, ranging from 24 in Arts to 5 in Forestry, as of April 2024 (see Figure 3.1). This signals further recruitment challenges for certain sectors.

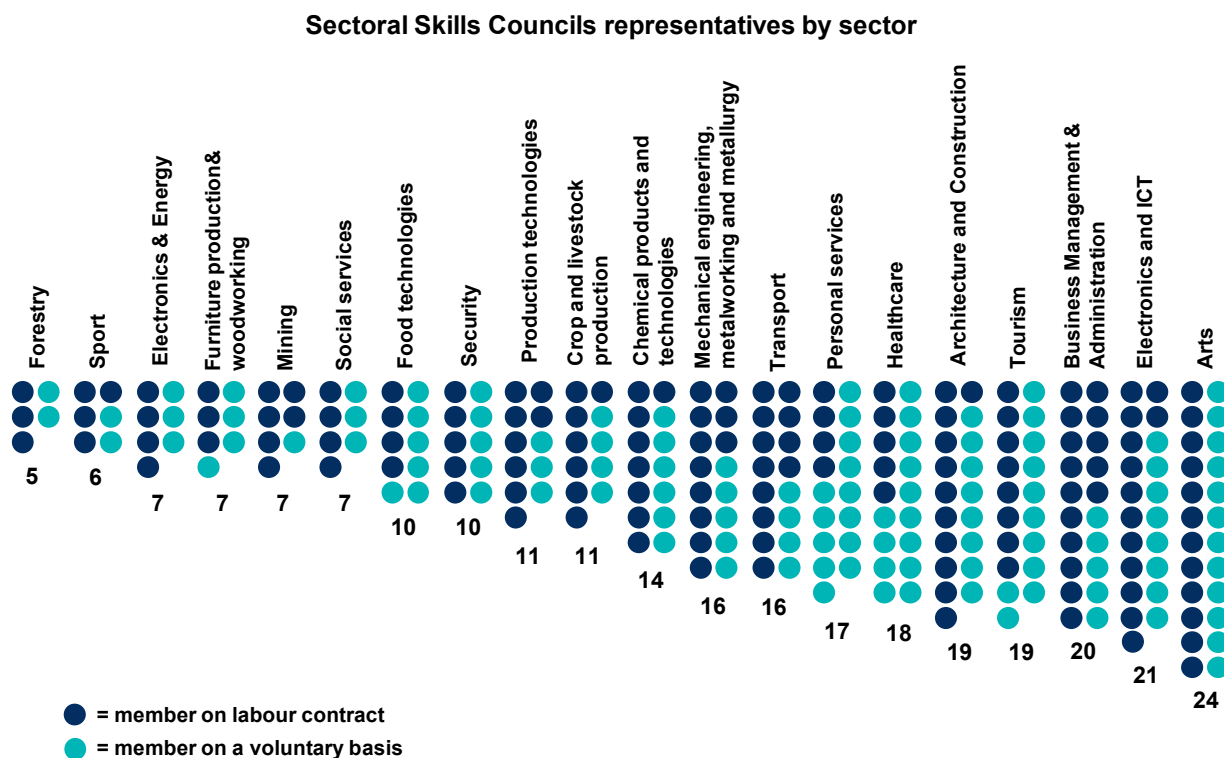
"The idea is good, but the implementation is not. In most cases, SSC members lack the necessary qualifications, competencies, and knowledge. A proper selection process is needed to give SSCs meaning and a future." – SSC member

While more strongly enforcing the planned quotas may be one means of promoting diversity in the future, a core challenge consists in making SSC participation more attractive and accessible for industry practitioners. Some SSC members suggested that the influence and visibility of SSCs themselves could be strengthened. In their view, if SSCs were more independent from the Ministry (see Finding 3) and were a genuine forum for cooperation, it would be easier to recruit committed experts from industry.

"If the Ministry and NAVET actively develop their activities in cooperation with employer and professional associations, I think that committed and responsible specialists from all professions will run for members of the SSC. The industry and small business want to be heard and have something to contribute to vocational education and training in Bulgaria." – SSC member

Figure 3.1. The number of members in each Sectoral Skills Council varies widely across sectors, with most members participating on a voluntary basis

Number of members in Sectoral Skills Councils (SSC), by sector and participation type (April 2024)



Note: SSCs are listed in ascending order of the total number of members. The figure presents SSC membership as of April 2024. Since then, membership has evolved; in July 2025, there were a total of 218 SSC members across 20 sectors.

Source: Adapted from Ministry of Education and Science (2024^[8]), List of ranked candidates for participation in Sectoral Councils for Skills under BG05SFPR001-3.001-0001 "Modernisation of Vocational Education and Training" funded by Programme "Education" 2021-2027, unpublished.

Finding 3. SSCs have a clear mandate aimed at enhancing labour market responsiveness. Members are generally satisfied with the guidance received, though gaps in technical and procedural support and concerns about independence remain (relevance, effectiveness)

Bulgaria created the SSCs with a clear mandate: to strengthen the connection between vocational education and the labour market. Each SSC was given specific responsibilities to shape key system components for their sector, each of which has the potential to support labour market alignment. These include:

1. **Proposing updates to the List of Professions:** the SSCs can help track emerging and declining occupations so the qualification offer reflects sector demand.
2. **Contributing to the revision of the State Educational Standards, national examination programmes and teaching curricula:** the SSCs help to ensure that revisions adequately reflect current workplace tasks, tools and processes.
3. **Drafting teacher competence profiles for new or priority professions:** SSC involvement anchors the profiles in up-to-date skills for teaching new or priority professions, with a particular focus on teacher competencies for the green and digital transitions (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023^[2]).

The SSCs' mandate aligns with international practice. For example, in England, employer Trailblazer groups develop occupational standards that underpin apprenticeships and VET qualifications, while employer panels set the outline content for those qualifications (Skills England, 2025^[9]). Meanwhile, in Australia, industry-led Jobs and Skills Councils (and previously Industry Reference Committees) lead the development and updating of national training packages used for delivery and assessment (DEWR, 2025^[10]).

Guidance materials prepared by the Ministry and NAVET helped coordinate the work of SSCs across sectors, supporting a more structured and consistent approach to implementation. The SSCs received detailed guidance for the administration of each task from the Ministry; NAVET provided additional documentation for the revision of the List of Professions. According to the SSC survey, 81% of members were either mostly or very satisfied with the support they received (OECD, 2025^[6]). Several of those reporting otherwise identified the timelines as being too short.

However, the evaluation team identified several potential gaps in the support provided to SSCs across tasks (see Finding 7 for related findings for the preparation of the List of Professions, specifically). Support was mainly administrative in nature – focused on documentation, communication, and process-related questions – with less support to ensure SSC members fully understood how to best fulfil their responsibilities. Other aspects that could have been helpful include:

- **Clear guidance on how to use data and evidence in decision-making.** This may further include technical support on how to assess labour market relevance, navigate trade-offs between feasibility and ambition, or weigh sectoral priorities to ensure labour market relevance.
- **Structured onboarding for new members,** including orientation on VET policy, State Educational Standards, curriculum development, and system goals. While the Ministry covered these themes during two large-scale SSC meetings in 2024 supplemented by subsequent online sessions, a formal onboarding process for new members could enhance clarity in roles and responsibilities reducing variability in member preparedness and strengthening SSC functionality over time.
- **Defined procedures and responsibilities** within each SSC, including guidance on how to make decisions in the event of disagreement.
- **A clear work plan,** developed and owned by each SSC, built around specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART) criteria.
- **More realistic timelines,** as current deadlines for the completion of core SSC tasks were frequently viewed as too short by members. Short deadlines were driven by legislative changes – VET Act amendments in March 2024 required all new content to be finalised by early 2026. This compressed timeframe ultimately limited the extent to which SSC members could engage in preparation, detailed research and coordination.

“After the Council was created there should have been serious preparation on how it would work – how to coordinate processes and expectations for contracted members and volunteers. I also think that independent professionals from outside the sector could bring creativity, productivity, and stronger results, while helping to avoid negative consequences. For example, a teacher, an inspector, a public health officer, a lawyer, and a technical secretary of the SSC who takes minutes and manages communication. My impression is that in the Council we are doing all this on the side.” – SSC member

Finally, some members raised concerns about the independence of the SSCs, viewing them as too closely tied to the Ministry. For example, the SSCs were created and are managed as part of the project, with some members directly contracted and paid by the Ministry. While formally all members – whether engaged on a contractual or voluntary basis – have the same rights and responsibilities, some interviewees expressed that such arrangements may affect the perception of SSCs as an independent institutional mechanism, which may in turn weaken trust and buy-in from industry practitioners and unions, and risk that the SSCs' recommendations are viewed as Ministry-driven rather than sector-owned. This could, in

turn, reduce the SSCs' ability to challenge proposals, broker balanced compromises, and secure employer action.

Both SSC members and employer associations stressed the importance of maintaining SSCs as independent, collaborative bodies rather than as extensions of the Ministry. International guidance is clear that the legal framework, mandate and basic operating rules for SSCs need to come from government, which holds primary responsibility for skills policy (ILO, 2021^[11]). Within this framework, guidance from the Ministry should be constructive and facilitative, without overly detailed bureaucratic management that could constrain the SSCs' work. Stronger leadership and ownership from employer and professional associations will play an important role, particularly in proposing nominees, contributing to technical content, and mobilising wider sector engagement in and around the SSCs.

"The SSC is a tool for social partnership. It is autonomous and not a structural unit subordinated to the Ministry. Its activities cannot be managed by administrative and bureaucratic approaches. There must be a clear work plan, accepted by the SSC, which meets SMART criteria. Expert, information, material and time resources must be made available." – SSC member

Finding 4. The SSC model is cost-efficient and mobilises underused expertise (efficiency)

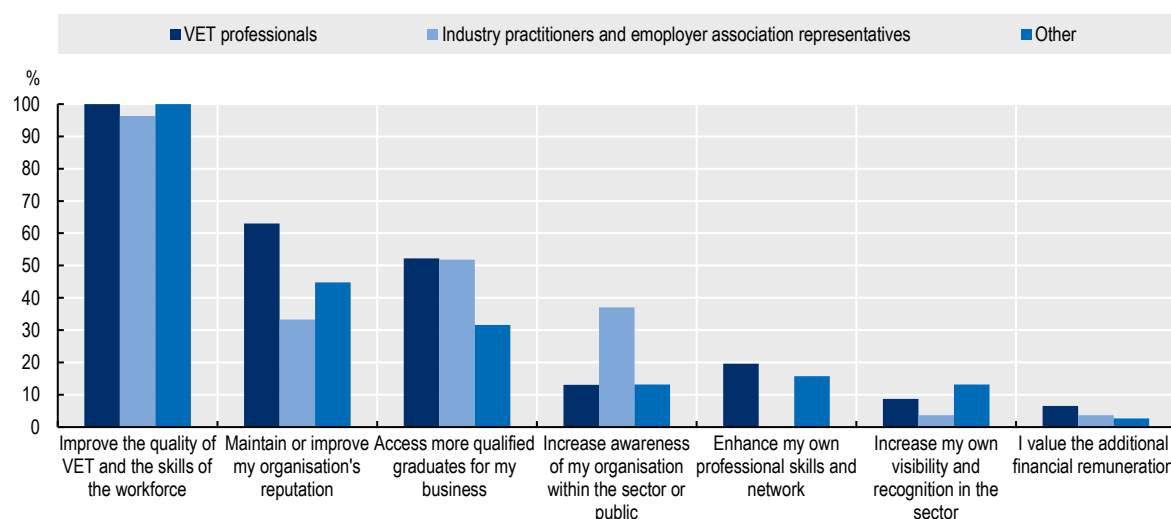
As a collaborative mechanism, the SSCs offer Bulgaria's VET system good value for money. They enable VET policymakers to access the time and expertise of highly experienced professionals – most of whom contribute on a voluntary basis – while keeping overall costs low. In July 2025, out of the 218 SSC members appointed by the Ministry, 123 volunteered their time, while 95 worked under part-time labour contracts. This means that the system benefits from expert input from across sectors and regions without the cost of full-time staffing. This represents an efficient way to draw on expertise that has previously been underutilised in national VET reforms.

Moreover, for little expenditure, the VET system taps into the considerable expertise and time contributed by SSC members. Typically, senior and experienced, SSC members bring a wealth of practical knowledge, sectoral insight, and teaching experience to their work. According to SSC survey data, 45% of members are aged between 50 and 59, and the average reported length of work experience in their respective sectors is 23 years (OECD, 2025^[6]). The group also shows a good degree of gender diversity, with 65% of members being women. Members dedicate considerable time to the work of the SSCs: for the revision of the List of Professions alone, survey respondents reported attending an average of 3 in-person meetings, 6 online meetings, and 14 phone calls (OECD, 2025^[6]).

The SSCs are therefore tapping into underutilised social capital. Members' willingness to invest their time and expertise, largely without payment, reflects an underlying motivation to improve vocational education, rather than reap financial rewards. SSC survey responses confirm that a strong sense of purpose drives participation. When asked to name up to three primary motivations for participating, almost all respondents (99%) cited improving the quality of vocational education. In addition, 45% were motivated by the prospect of getting more qualified candidates for their businesses (among industry practitioners) or achieving stronger outcomes for their students (among VET professionals), while 50% hoped to enhance their organisation's reputation. Very few (5%) mentioned financial compensation as a main incentive (see Figure 3.2) (OECD, 2025^[6]).

Figure 3.2. Members of Sectoral Skills Councils are motivated by improving the quality of VET, with about half also citing organisational benefits like better-qualified graduates and stronger reputation

Share of respondents reporting the following motivations for participating in the Sectoral Skills Councils (SSCs)



Note: Survey items are organised in descending order based on the share of VET professionals reporting each motivation. The "Other" category refers to system-level stakeholders not directly involved in the delivery of VET or in business operations. It includes representatives from higher education institutions, trade unions, government bodies, and non-governmental organisations.

Source: OECD (2025^[6]), Interim evaluation of "Modernisation of Vocational Education and Training" project: Survey of the Sectoral Skills Councils, *OECD Support for the Evaluation Plan of Bulgaria's Programme "Education" 2021-2027*, unpublished.

The current model for SSC participation principally attracts intrinsically motivated experts who can afford the time to volunteer. While this is valuable and efficient, the pool of such contributors is naturally limited, potentially inhibiting broader participation, particularly from industry practitioners with less discretionary time.

Finding 5. SSCs are viewed across stakeholder groups as viable and sustainable in the long term, but the most suitable contracting model is still unclear (sustainability)

There is a clear will to ensure the sustainability of the SSCs, with strong stakeholder support for maintaining them beyond the current project funding. Almost two-thirds (63%) of surveyed SSC members reported that they intend to stay engaged for at least the next revision cycle – expected in approximately five years (OECD, 2025^[6]). The remaining third plan to review their engagement after the current round of activities, depending on how the model evolves. Both SSC survey data and the broad support expressed in interviews with Ministry officials, SSC members and employer associations suggest that the model has generated commitment from across stakeholder groups.

However, the most appropriate future contracting model for SSC members is still to be identified. The current hybrid model (i.e., both voluntary engagement and short-term labour contracts) emerged as an ad-hoc solution during the project after it became clear that service contracts would have required lengthy public procurement procedures. The Ministry did not intend for this hybrid model to be a long-term solution.

Looking ahead, the Ministry will need to consider different options for contracting SSC members. The voluntary model has clear advantages, particularly for industry practitioners, who are more likely to have the legal flexibility to participate without formal contracts and value the independence it allows. Many interviewees also cited a preference for flexibility in how much time they are required to dedicate. However, this flexibility comes with drawbacks: while it allows experts to contribute on their own terms, it may also

make it harder to secure predictable time commitments for more demanding tasks in the future. It is notable that membership has reduced over time: in April 2024, there was a total of 265 SSC members; by July 2025 the total was 218, suggesting possible discontent with the contracting model, a sentiment raised by some interviewees during data collection. Moreover, unpaid participation may not be a feasible long-term solution for VET and higher education professionals: only about half of those surveyed from this group said they would be willing to continue under a purely voluntary model. While they appear to favour labour contracts, which offer both recognition and compensation for their time, these are not always a viable option for industry practitioners. Some employers do not allow their staff to hold multiple formal contracts, and this model could contribute to concerns regarding independence (see Finding 3).

Service contracts might offer a more flexible middle ground as they provide recognition without implying direct employment; both SSC members and employer associations reported viewing this contracting option favourably during interviews. However, the Ministry ruled out their use during the project phase since this would have triggered a lengthy public procurement process. International examples offer helpful insights, with several OECD countries adopting models based on employer time-release (see Box 3.1).

Box 3.1. International examples of contracting models for sector councils: employer time-release

In several OECD countries, employer time-release models are used for sectoral councils, whereby employers release staff for council duties and continue to pay their salaries during that period. This model offers an attractive balance between financial sustainability and independence from government structures while helping to overcome potential time pressures that voluntary participation can generate.

In **Germany**, the Vocational Training Act requires employers to release staff who serve on examination boards and other statutory VET bodies. Members perform these duties as an honorary service, with travel costs covered according to rules, while the employer normally maintains employment. Chambers of Industry and Commerce – which organise much of VET governance – are funded through mandatory member levies and fees rather than the central budget, helping sustain participation without paying individual stipends.

In **England**, employers shape apprenticeship and technical qualification content through the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education's route panels and Trailblazer groups. Participation is voluntary and not a salaried role; members are recruited from employers and employer or professional associations, with reasonable out-of-pocket expenses reimbursed. In practice, the employer contributes staff time as part of their sector engagement.

The Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market (SBB) in **the Netherlands**, brings employers and VET providers together in sector chambers that are responsible for maintaining the qualification structure and overseeing workplace learning. SBB is a public body funded through national arrangements; employers second employees to act as chamber members as part of their regular roles, with meetings and travel organised by SBB. While there is no individual salary, participation costs (e.g. meetings, logistics) are covered institutionally, and member time is contributed by their organisations.

Across these models, commonalities emerge: (i) roles are honorary/voluntary rather than salaried; (ii) employers (or social-partner organisations) release staff during working time; and (iii) systems cover necessary expenses and coordination costs centrally (often via chambers or public bodies), rather than paying individuals for council time.

Source: IHK (2025^[12]), *Leave of Auditors*, <https://www.ihk.de/rhein-neckar/ausbildung-weiterbildung/ihk-pruefer/freistellung-pruefer-4656068> (accessed on 29 September 2025); Institute for apprenticeships (2017^[13]), *'How to' guide for trailblazers*, https://skillsengland.education.gov.uk/media/1033/how_to_guide_for_trailblazers_-_v2.pdf (accessed on 29 September 2025); SBB (2025^[14]), *Activities*, <https://www.s-bb.nl/activiteiten/> (accessed on 29 September 2025).

The development of the new List of Professions for VET

One of the first and most substantial tasks assigned to the newly established SSCs was the revision of the List of Professions – the national catalogue of occupations and specialties offered in Bulgaria's VET system. It specifies each profession or specialty, the qualification level and entry requirements, serving as the reference point for developing State Educational Standards, national examination programmes and teaching curricula.

The revision of the List of Professions took place in the first half of 2024, reducing the number of specialisations from over 600 to 193 broader vocational categories, of which 40 are explicitly linked to the green or digital transition. To support the implementation of the new List, SSCs also prepared a correspondence table mapping the 2003 List to the revised List. The revision process formally started at the end of March 2024, with SSCs typically given 30 days to prepare their proposed drafts. In early May 2024, these drafts entered a four-month revision and validation process involving NAVET expert commissions (permanent tripartite advisory bodies to NAVET), the NAVET Governing Board, cross-ministerial consultation, and a public consultation process. According to official monitoring reports, the Minister of Education and Science approved the new List of Professions on 9 August 2024.

Overall, evidence collected for the evaluation indicates that the revision of the List of Professions marks a relevant and promising shift away from over-specialised entries towards broader vocational categories, which can better accommodate changing labour market needs. The process was broadly participatory, with clear roles and an efficient administrative flow, although methods and quality standards were not consistently defined. Despite initial intentions set out in the *Instructions for the implementation of project activities*, (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023^[15]), the revised List of Professions did not include a sectoral mapping of key skills by profession, which was instead included in the State Education Standards. This limited its immediate usefulness for downstream tasks such as drafting the new Standards, national examination programmes and teaching curricula. Evidence for these findings is detailed below.

Finding 6. The revised List of Professions includes broader vocational categories than its predecessor, facilitating school-level implementation and potentially enhancing labour market responsiveness. This is also supported by a focus on specialisations related to the digital and green transitions (relevance, coherence, effectiveness)

The reformed List of Professions provides a relevant response to several important challenges in Bulgaria's VET system. It has the potential to facilitate greater labour market responsiveness within VET programmes and qualifications, marking a decisive shift from many narrowly defined profiles towards fewer, more generalised categories. This provides a more flexible structure with benefits both for students and for institutions.

VET professionals agree that the new List of Professions overcomes key practical limitations which existed under its predecessor at the school level. Previously, narrow specialisations made it harder for schools to form viable class groups and strained available teaching capacity, with limited teaching and learning materials tailored to each specialisation. In interviews, school leaders and teachers noted that the revised List offers a clearer structure, facilitates forward planning, and is more manageable from a teaching and organisational perspective.

In addition, school-level interviewees welcomed the shift toward broader categories as being more in line with students' needs and maturity levels during upper secondary education and beyond. The previous List placed a heavy burden on students who had to choose a narrow vocational path around the age of 13, when many do not yet have a clear or informed view of their future career. The new structure also provides students with greater flexibility from a labour market perspective, as they can more easily adapt to emerging job opportunities during their studies and subsequent careers. This is particularly important given

the current rapid pace of change in many sectors, especially those affected by digitalisation or the green transition.

The revised List of Professions offers a foundation of transferable sectoral skills, which VET students or adults can then complement through further training on more specific competencies at later stages. This model is consistent with practice in many OECD countries, where upper-secondary pathways typically allow students to explore a sector before gradually specialising (OECD, 2024^[16]). It also reflects recent trends in Europe to reduce the number of initial VET qualifications and broaden profiles (Cedefop, 2023^[17]).

“With the old system, we sometimes had to teach speciality subjects in Grade 8, and it was really hard. For prospective students not yet inside the VET system, it was very difficult to explain what we teach. The new list is much simpler and reflects the needs of the labour market.” – VET school representative

The reformed List of Professions is therefore on a promising path to improving the effectiveness of VET programme delivery, though its full impact will depend on the next stages of implementation.

Nevertheless, some coordination challenges emerged during the revision process. In particular, the inclusion of new profiles related to the digital and green transitions has raised questions about how to categorise emerging interdisciplinary roles. For example, it remains unclear whether a profession such as “digital marketing specialist” should be situated within ICT or economics. These boundary issues reflect broader changes in the world of work rather than shortcomings in the List of Professions structure.

In addition, several stakeholders expressed concern about alignment between the List of Professions and the National Classification of Occupations and Positions maintained by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. The National Classification is used for employment contracts, labour statistics, and administrative systems. To the evaluation team’s knowledge, there are currently no plans to embed the corresponding codes from the National Classification directly in the List of Professions. Discrepancies between the two lists can create confusion for employers, hinder graduate tracking, and complicate the recognition of qualifications. Classification gaps are particularly likely for emerging or hybrid roles that are included in the List of Professions but not yet represented in the National Classification.

Finding 7. The new List of Professions was developed through an effective participatory process, though some limitations in the support and guidance provided to SSCs may have inhibited efficiency and coherence (coherence, effectiveness, efficiency)

The revision of the List of Professions was a process characterised by broad participation, clear roles, and an efficient administrative flow. This is an important achievement given that it constitutes a major policy step and engaged a wide range of sectoral experts.

The SSCs played a central role in the development of the revised list, and their contributions were substantial. According to SSC survey data, in 14 out of 20 sectors, the draft lists submitted by the SSCs were accepted with no or only minor revisions following review by NAVET expert commissions and the Ministry. This indicates that the SSCs had genuine influence over the outcome of the new List of Professions for their sector.

Moreover, SSC members reported high levels of satisfaction with the support received: 80% of surveyed experts expressed satisfaction with the assistance provided by the Ministry and NAVET throughout the revision process. The timeline was tight – SSCs typically took 30 days to prepare their proposals – but the administrative process moved efficiently, and most participants felt that their input was taken seriously (OECD, 2025^[6]).

Nevertheless, in line with the SSCs’ work across different tasks (see Finding 3), the evaluation team observed some gaps in guidance and support that may inhibit the quality of the final outputs:

- **Limited guidance informing SSCs how the work could or should be carried out produced very varied approaches.** In the words of one SSC representative: *“The working methodology*

[was] *not clear enough*”, meaning that the basis for many proposals was left largely to the individual professional judgement of SSC members. The Ministry did not require them to use labour market data or adopt structured methods such as occupational analysis, employer consultations, or forward-looking skills assessments. The Ministry provided background data on professions without any student admissions in the past five years, which could be a useful starting point, but the use of such information was neither standardised nor mandatory, and there was no shared approach for integrating evidence into decision-making. As a result, around two-thirds of respondents to the SSC survey reported having consulted any form of statistical or labour market information – such as employment agency data, job postings, or existing skills forecasts – while others relied solely on their own experience or informal discussions with colleagues (OECD, 2025^[6]).

- **Undefined decision-making practices and other working processes resulted in a lack of clarity for some.** No formal rules were in place to guide SSCs on how to reach conclusions or resolve disagreements. Several members noted that this lack of structure sometimes made it unclear how to proceed in the case of diverging opinions. While many SSCs operated efficiently thanks to the professionalism and mutual respect among members, the absence of defined protocols may have affected consistency across sectors.

“Unfortunately, the SSC operated without written rules for decision making. No minutes were taken. The only written evidence is emails exchanged, and files shared. The impression was that the work was running late and had to be rushed.” – SSC member

- **The absence of a common framework for quality assurance inhibited consistency and coherence at the national level.** While the review and validation process lasted four months and involved a wide range of stakeholders, there was no common framework to define or assess the quality of the revised List of Professions entries, and thus SSCs and reviewers operated without shared criteria for evaluating relevance, consistency, or comparability across sectors. In practice, teams lacked a common reference for questions such as: Is the proposed profession clearly linked to current labour market needs, as evidenced by data? Is the profile sufficiently broad to allow flexibility, but still concrete enough for planning teaching and learning? Do the qualifications build up logically and offer clear progression routes? These gaps made it more difficult to ensure that all proposals were equally well-aligned with labour market needs, and that sectoral outputs could be meaningfully compared or integrated into a coherent national offer.

As a result of these gaps, the process commonly followed by SSCs did not fully adhere to international guidance on revising VET occupation or qualification lists. While SSCs provided multi-stakeholder expert input, they did not consistently underpin revisions with evidence combining quantitative and qualitative inputs. Key relevant sources include labour force surveys and administrative statistics, employer or establishment surveys, vacancy information, and graduate tracer studies (OECD, 2023^[18]). These sources help assess items such as employment and unemployment by occupation, wage trends, hard-to-fill vacancies and vacancy pressure and, where relevant, strategic demand by occupation. Triangulating such indicators with expert judgement is standard practice. Web-based big-data sources (e.g. online job advertisements), with human oversight, can support the efficiency of such processes (Cedefop/ETF/ILO, 2016^[19]; Cedefop et al., 2021^[20]).

Finding 8. Despite initial intentions, the revised List of Professions does not include a sectoral skills mapping (effectiveness)

The SSCs did not identify the skills required for each profession under the revised List of Professions, causing challenges in subsequent stages of project implementation. Overall, the *Instructions for the implementation of project activities* published by the Ministry required SSCs to carry out a: “*Definition of sectoral skills for each professional field according to the forecasts for the development of the labour market and the trends in the development of the respective sector/industry* (Ministry of Education and

Science, 2023^[15]). However, this step was not implemented: the revised List of Professions submitted by the SSCs included updated profession titles and short descriptions, but did not contain a mapping of occupations to required skills (Ministry of Education and Science, 2024^[21]). None of the stakeholders consulted during data collection – whether from the Ministry, NAVET, or the SSCs themselves – were aware that such an input was expected as part of the process.

A skills mapping was subsequently included in the draft State Educational Standards; expert teams were expected to refer to the key skills associated with each profession. However, they typically lacked the time and sector-specific labour market insight to develop such a reference framework independently. As originally recognised in the *Instructions for the implementation of project activities*, the SSCs – industry-led bodies with direct insight into labour market trends – were likely better positioned to identify skill needs than the expert teams, who typically did not have comparable industry expertise. Moreover, relying on the expert teams to identify necessary skills in each occupation increased the complexity and demands of their work, which already followed a very tight timeline. Including a more detailed skills mapping either as part of the List of Professions or as an annex to it would have created a more complete reference base upon which the expert teams could draw. In turn, this may have enhanced the quality of the initial drafts and reduced the inefficiencies that arose in the subsequent review process (see Finding 11).

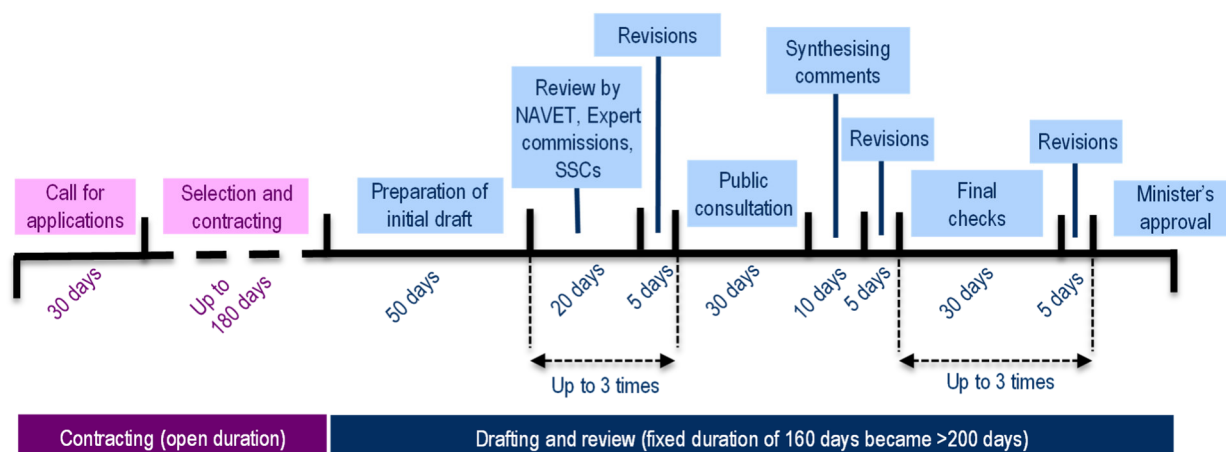
The drafting of new State Educational Standards

The new State Educational Standards are expected to set the required learning outcomes and the structure and conditions for training for each entry in the List of Professions. They specify minimum entry qualifications, a description of the profession, units of learning outcomes for each degree of professional qualification, criteria and tools for assessing each unit, facility standards, and requirements for teachers (Council of Ministers, 2024^[22]). School drafting teams then develop the teaching curricula (i.e. model curricula and subject programmes) based on these Standards to ensure alignment with qualification requirements.

As part of the *Modernisation of VET* project, the Ministry assigned the revision of 150 Standards and their accompanying national examination programmes to expert teams recruited through a public procurement process. A total of 28 expert teams were contracted, with experts selected based on having a degree relevant to the sector and experience in education and training. In total, 132 individuals took part in the drafting process, with some participating in multiple teams.

Following their recruitment and contracting, each team had 50 days to produce initial draft Standards and national examination programmes (see Figure 3.3). In some cases, the same team handled multiple professional profiles within the same field – for example, the “Architecture and Construction” team drafted 18 Standards simultaneously.

Figure 3.3. Indicative timeline for the revision of the State Educational Standards



Note: The timeline is indicative of the typical process for the revision of State Educational Standards; in practice, the timeline differed for each Standard. After each revision, staff from NAVET allocated at least two days to verify that all comments had been properly incorporated.
Source: Authors' own based on information identified during evidence collection for this evaluation.

Once the expert teams submitted initial drafts, the review process unfolded in several stages, each taking longer than planned. The technical review, expected to last 20 days, stretched beyond 60 days in many cases, due to repeated reviews by the SSCs and NAVET expert commissions. Public consultation, scheduled for 40 days, was delayed as incorporating comments often required multiple rounds of revisions and involvement of the Expert Commissions in final approvals. After each round of reviews and consultations, the drafting teams were given five days to incorporate comments. NAVET's final verification of the revisions, planned for 5 days, extended to over 30 days due to repeated checks and technical editing. Consequently, the originally planned 160-day timeline increased to over 200 days.

By October 2025, the Ministry had published 111 of the planned 150 Standards for public consultation and was progressing towards approval of those remaining. All Standards should be finalised by early 2026. At the time of writing, the Ministry has not yet formally published final versions, so this evaluation could not assess quality and labour market relevance.

Overall, the evaluation finds that revising all Standards and national examination programmes in parallel is an ambitious undertaking. The design and execution of the revision is broadly consistent with international guidance and has clear potential to improve system-wide coherence. However, the criteria for drafting team composition and the use of public procurement to recruit the teams appear to have deterred participation by industry practitioners and VET professionals, narrowing the practical orientation of the teams. Tight timelines further constrained the process, limiting opportunity for occupational analysis and practitioner consultation, and reviewers reported quality concerns with several of the initial drafts. Through review, the SSCs contributed to shaping content, but were engaged too late and substantial iterative re-working was necessary. NAVET provided extensive process guidance and training; however, oversight focused on procedures rather than shared content criteria. There was no system-level quality-assurance framework to guide the process. These findings are presented in detail below.

Finding 9. The simultaneous revision of all State Educational Standards and examination programmes is ambitious, has potential to enhance coherence across the VET system, and adheres to international guidance (relevance, coherence)

Bulgaria's commitment to revising the State Educational Standards under the *Modernisation of VET* project is both ambitious and forward-looking. Revising almost all Standards at once creates an opportunity to

improve system-wide coherence, reduce fragmentation across sectors, and better allocate cross-cutting skills. Moreover, the expert teams drafted both the Standards and the national examination programmes for their sector in one step. Drafting teams had not done this in the past but all stakeholder groups consulted in data collection welcomed this approach, seeing it as creating the potential for stronger alignment between what students are expected to learn and how they are assessed.

The planned structure of this activity also reflects several features recommended internationally. The OECD and World Bank have previously emphasised that mixed expert teams should develop Bulgaria's State Educational Standards, with representation from VET professionals, higher education researchers, and industry practitioners. This can help to ensure that Standards reflect both pedagogical realities and workplace practices (OECD, 2023^[18]; Comyn and Liang, 2025^[23]). Similarly, multi-stage revision processes that incorporate iterative quality assurance, consultation with employers, and alignment with assessment frameworks are consistently recommended in international guides to good practice (European Union, 2009^[24]; OECD, 2023^[18]).

Finding 10. Criteria for the composition of drafting teams and the use of the public procurement process for appointing them appears to have introduced some barriers to the participation of industry practitioners and VET professionals, limiting practical orientation (effectiveness, efficiency)

The recruitment process to form the expert teams to draft new Standards was procedurally sound but introduced barriers that may have reduced the practical orientation and diversity of those selected. Two main factors have contributed to this outcome: the design of team composition rules and the public procurement process.

Each expert team was required to include five key experts, comprising of a team leader, one higher education lecturer/ researcher, and three experts with proven expertise in drafting curricula or other pedagogical resources (NAVET, 2024^[25]). While this structure aimed to ensure technical quality and academic rigor, there were no mandatory slots for industry representatives, and VET teachers or school leaders. This meant that there was no formal requirement to include VET professionals working directly with students.

In addition, the calls placed strong emphasis on prior experience in developing curricula, textbooks, Standards and/or national examination programmes (NAVET, 2024^[25]). While this was intended to safeguard quality, it likely deterred candidates with important knowledge to share but without formal authorship experience – particularly VET teachers and industry practitioners with substantial practical expertise but limited exposure to drafting Standards.

"The teams should be made up of competent people who are directly involved in teaching." – SSC member

"Industry organisations (where they exist and are active) should participate actively, with their opinion taking the lead. Only in this way will good vocational education be revived and the image of all professions be protected and enhanced." – SSC member

The public procurement procedure added further constraints that may have discouraged participation from a broad spectrum of stakeholders:

- **Limited dissemination and short bidding windows.** Several interviewees noted that the calls did not always circulate widely, especially among schools providing VET and employer associations. Calls were typically open for only one month – a window that may have been too short for interested experts to become aware of the opportunity, mobilise a team, and prepare a complete application. This was particularly challenging for those with full-time professional responsibilities or without prior experience navigating procurement procedures.

“The State Standards should not have been developed through public procurement. No one contacted the competent engineers from our school to join the teams.” – VET professional

- **The volume of required documentation was substantial.** Applicants had to submit many documents, including technical forms, legal declarations, and budget justifications. This complexity may have discouraged participation by individuals or organisations with limited experience in public procurement processes, particularly from business and industry, and schools providing VET.
- **Applicants reported that the procurement process was slow.** In some cases, the contracting phase took up to six months, creating a long delay between the submission of proposals and the start of drafting.

The administrative burden placed on NAVET – who coordinated the public procurement processes for the 28 teams – was significant, inhibiting their capacity to provide support to applicants. With only four coordinators managing the recruitment process for the revision of 150 SES, institutional capacity was stretched in terms of both the amount of work required and the time allocated to the process. This may have contributed to delays in processing applications and providing support to potential bidders, further limiting the efficiency and responsiveness of the process.

These challenges are consistent with known limitations of public procurement in skills-related domains. OECD research on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and procurement systems highlights that complex documentation, short bidding windows, and the administrative cost of compliance often deter individuals and organisations without prior procurement experience (OECD, 2018^[26]; 2020^[27]). When it comes to VET, this can particularly affect industry professionals, who may lack the time or support structures to respond to tenders. In Bulgaria, academics, and consultants with prior experience in proposal writing appear to have been better placed to respond. Their greater familiarity with administrative procedures, higher tolerance for paperwork, and more flexible work schedules may have given them a comparative advantage in navigating the process. As a result, interviewees noted an overrepresentation of university-affiliated experts and consultancy firms in the expert teams, with insufficient participation from VET professionals and industry practitioners. This imbalance raises concerns about whether the new Standards adequately reflect the needs of learners and employers.

Finding 11. There were major quality concerns with the initial drafts of the State Educational Standards, reflecting limited research and consultation during drafting and tight timelines (effectiveness, efficiency)

In interviews, several of those involved in the review process – including SSC members and those working within NAVET and the Ministry, reported the initial draft Standards to be unsatisfactory. They considered many drafts to be overly academic or theoretical, and not well adapted to the skill level of upper secondary VET students. Moreover, interviewees reported that learning outcomes were often poorly specified, and the expert teams inconsistently applied progression between qualification levels.

“Some of the submitted draft Standards were of extremely low professional standard, did not reflect the nature of the profession, and were full of terminological and technological errors.” – SSC member

Evidence collected for this evaluation suggests that a combination of factors contributed to the weaknesses in the drafts. Firstly, the drafting teams undertook limited research and consultation in the preparation and drafting phases. Teams were expected to consult relevant sources such as existing curricula, sectoral job profiles, and labour market data, and to engage in applied research – visiting companies, speaking with practitioners, and identifying concrete skill needs on the ground. To support this, NAVET provided extensive written guidance and templates, including sample interview questions for expert teams to use during consultations with employers and professionals in the field. These expectations align with international guidance, which consistently highlights the importance of an occupational analysis phase

before drafting VET standards, involving field visits, job analysis, and consultation with employers (EU KOSVET, 2011^[28]; OECD, 2023^[18]).

In practice, however, such activities were not meaningfully carried out and interviews undertaken for this evaluation indicate that expert teams largely omitted the research phase.

“The way the teams worked was not the best. Some teams did not research. Some of them relied on legislation, some on what was previously taught. Our NAVET experts explained to them that some of the competences [in the drafts] are not adapted for secondary education, they are for higher education.” – NAVET official

This was partially due to the limited time available. The expert teams operated under very short timelines, often drafting multiple Standards at once. These compressed timelines were a consequence of the laborious public procurement process and the ambitious final deadline of October 2025. However, they may have had significant implications for the content and quality of the drafting process. The lack of a skills mapping by profession in the List of Professions also constrained the research stage (see Finding 12). This made the research task for expert teams more substantial – requiring first the identification of appropriate skills before then considering how the new Standards should apply them.

“There was no sectoral skills analysis. The teams need more time to research which skills are required. They were cut off from this. Experts from Switzerland and Germany [tell us] that this is extremely important and needs to be done.” – NAVET official

Another key factor contributing to the low perceived quality of the draft Standards relates to the inconsistent involvement of the SSCs early in the drafting process. Although SSCs were able to shape the content of the final standards via the review process as intended, their involvement typically came too late. There was a clear division in the roles of the drafting teams (research and drafting) and the SSCs (review). This division aimed to maintain a clear separation between technical drafting and stakeholder oversight; but, in practice, it limited timely collaboration. SSC members consistently reported that their inclusion in the process came too late to meaningfully shape the content of the drafts.

While some meetings took place after the initial training for drafting teams in the presence of SSC members – focusing on clarifications about missing profiles or qualification levels – such meetings were not held systematically. SSC survey data confirms this inconsistency: only 25% of SSC members reported having any contact with expert teams before the submission of the initial draft Standards, and 33% reported feeling poorly informed about the revision process overall (OECD, 2025^[6]).

As a result, SSCs reviewed fully developed drafts, which limited their ability to raise more fundamental concerns – such as gaps in skills coverage, unrealistic academic requirements, or unclear progression across qualification levels – before major decisions had already been taken. Moreover, SSCs had only 10 days to return comments, creating substantial time pressure. Both the Ministry and SSCs invested significant effort in revising and editing all Standards at this late stage and SSCs had the opportunity to conduct multiple reviews, according to need. The revision process also required several joint online meetings, where SSCs and expert drafting teams worked together to review drafts and agree on changes. Several SSC members described having to suggest extensive revisions at this late stage. One noted that colleagues in their SSC had “*rewritten more than 90%*” of some drafts. Although their involvement at this later stage likely helped improve the relevance of the Standards to labour market needs, the revision process became laborious, creating inefficiencies and placing a heavy burden on all those involved.

In contrast, international good practice emphasises the value of early and sustained stakeholder involvement in the design of VET standards. Engaging employers, sector bodies, and other stakeholders from the beginning is more effective than only soliciting their input at the final stage. The European Training Foundation cautions that consulting stakeholders only at the end of a process serves more to validate decisions than to shape them (European Training Foundation, 2017^[29]).

Finally, several SSC members indicated that the review process was challenging, not just because of its timing but also because the drafting teams provided limited guidance to support the review. Members noted that brief explanatory summaries alongside the draft Standards may have helped SSCs navigate the technical language and structure of the documents more efficiently and effectively.

Finding 12. NAVET provided a lot of guidance and training to expert teams, but quality assurance constituted a major gap (effectiveness)

NAVET provided procedural, methodological and content-related guidance in the development of the new State Educational Standards. However, the lack of shared, content-focused quality standards, enforced across expert teams, may have contributed to the variation in the quality of the resulting drafts and inconsistencies in the ways they were prepared across sectors.

As with the revision of the List of Professions (see Finding 8), the development of the new Standards was primarily driven by expert judgement. There were no binding or enforceable requirements for teams to consult labour market data, conduct occupational analysis, or apply structured methods – although NAVET did provide some suggestions on related aspects. Ultimately, expert teams were free to draw on their own knowledge and professional networks, which led to significant variation in approach and content standards across sectors.

NAVET provided a broad range of support to the expert teams during the development of the new Standards. This included written methodological guidance, examples, and explanatory sessions – delivered through in-person and online formats (NAVET, 2025^[30]; 2025^[31]). This guidance addressed not only procedural and technical aspects of drafting, but also content-related issues. The support was designed to be flexible and advisory in nature. NAVET coordinators clarified legal provisions and provided templates to support the structuring and submission of outputs, while teams were free to decide which guidance materials, analytical approaches, or reference tools to apply, depending on their expertise and time constraints.

Expert teams generally valued the technical, procedural, and content-advisory support provided by NAVET. However, in practice, this support functioned primarily as facilitation rather than as a quality-assurance mechanism shaping content decisions. There was no overarching quality assurance framework to ensure that the available guidance translated into practice. For example, shared, enforceable content standards – such as explicit minimum requirements for labour-market alignment, operational principles for the consistent structuring and specification of learning outcomes, and agreed expectations regarding the scope and granularity of qualifications – would have incentivised teams to apply principles promoted via the guidance to their work. This would have helped to ensure consistency across teams and sectors. These challenges may have been further complicated by the substantial consolidation of the List of Professions, which required the development of new and often significantly redefined occupational profiles.

International guidance typically highlights that quality assurance for occupational and educational standards should go beyond procedural compliance to define what constitutes a high-quality standard in substantive terms (i.e. relevant, comparable across sectors, and fit for purpose). Common components of such frameworks include:

- **Evidence-based skill alignment:** Standards should be underpinned by labour market data, such as job vacancy trends, occupational skills profiles, and employment forecasts – to systematically inform the selection, structuring, and updating of skills and learning outcomes within a standard. This ensures that the *content* of standards reflects current and emerging skill requirements in the labour market (OECD, 2023^[18]).
- **Coherent progression and clarity of pathways:** The components of qualifications should build logically on one another and reflect realistic learner pathways, avoiding overlap or fragmentation across related sectors (World Bank, 2015^[32]; 2022^[33]).

- **Use of learning outcomes aligned to the European Qualifications Framework:** Occupational standards should be expressed in terms of learning outcomes, clearly specifying what learners are expected to know, understand, and be able to do, mapped to Framework levels (Cedefop, 2017^[34]).

An example from New Zealand offers an illustration of how development processes for vocational qualifications can embed content-focused quality assurance components, implemented through structured procedures and requirements (see Box 3.2). In Bulgaria, the revision of the Standards followed some of the components listed above and those seen in New Zealand, notably alignment with the European Qualifications Framework. However, others were less evident including the comprehensive justification for new qualifications content-based quality assurance.

Box 3.2. New Zealand's approach to content-based quality assurance for VET qualifications

Several core features of New Zealand's approach to content-based quality assurance in the development and maintenance of vocational qualifications are worth highlighting. In particular, the approach demonstrates how quality assurance frameworks can move beyond procedural guidance to focus on what makes a qualification robust. This includes relevance to labour market needs, outcome-based design, consistent implementation, and periodic renewal.

First, any new or revised qualification must be supported by a structured evidence base. Qualification developers are required to submit an "evidence of need" dossier to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), which includes labour market data, skills forecasts, and sector-level analyses to justify the inclusion or revision of a qualification. This ensures that standards are rooted in demonstrable demand rather than institutional inertia or supply-side interests.

Second, all qualifications follow a uniform national template that includes a clearly structured "Graduate Profile." These specify the expected knowledge, skills, and attributes of graduates, aligned with relevant level descriptors from the New Zealand Qualifications Framework. This facilitates comparability across sectors and supports alignment with assessment standards and employment pathways.

Third, after the first cohorts have graduated, NZQA convenes a "Consistency Review" for each qualification. Providers must submit assessment samples, graduate outcome data, and other forms of evidence to demonstrate that learners are achieving the intended outcomes. The NZQA chairs these reviews with input from employers and VET providers, reinforcing external accountability.

Finally, every qualification is subject to a scheduled review at least once every five years. These reviews consider uptake, ongoing relevance, and consistency of delivery. Low-performing or outdated standards can be revised or removed from the national register.

Source: New Zealand Qualifications Authority (2025^[35]), "Qualification and Micro-credential Listing and Operational Rules 2025", <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/About-us/Our-rules-fees-and-policies/NZQA-Rules/2025/Qualification-and-Micro-credential-Listing-and-Operational-Rules-2025-signed.pdf> (accessed on 25 September 2025); New Zealand Qualifications Authority (2025^[36]), Assuring national consistency of graduate outcomes, <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/tertiary/quality-assurance/consistency/> (accessed on 25 September 2025).

The development of teacher competence profiles for VET

Following the revision of the List of Professions, a second core task assigned to the SSCs under the *Modernisation of VET* project was the drafting of teacher competence profiles relevant to their sector. Competence profiles specify the necessary professional and transversal competences that vocational teachers and trainers require. Bulgaria designed the task to create profiles for selected professions which had been newly added to the List of Professions, as well as those aligned with the green and digital transitions.

After preparing the new List of Professions, the Ministry tasked the SSCs with drafting new teacher competence profiles for their respective sectors. SSC coordinators within the Ministry then reviewed them. The project initially planned for 20 new profiles (i.e. covering 20 professions out of a total of 183 in the new List) but by October 2025, SSCs had developed 26 profiles, of which 6 following their own initiative. As of December 2025, the Minister of Education and Science had approved all these profiles.

Evidence collected for the evaluation indicates that, in summary, SSC members held mixed views about their role in drafting teacher competence profiles, and that many would have benefited from stronger technical support for this task. The review of draft profiles was limited – typically confined to the SSC coordinator within the Ministry – reducing opportunities for wider feedback and quality assurance across sectors. In addition, current plans for implementation are not yet well-defined and focus on short in-service training, with limited clarity on how profiles will inform initial teacher education or ongoing professional development. Taken together, the profiles are a promising step towards better connecting VET teaching and evolving sector demands. However, more work is required to ensure this promise is fulfilled. These findings are presented in detail in the following subsections.

Finding 13. SSC members hold mixed views on their involvement in preparing teacher competence profiles, suggesting a need for more technical support (effectiveness)

Overall, while the intention to involve SSCs in shaping teacher competence profiles was well-aligned with Bulgaria's policy priorities and international guidance, some SSC members have concerns regarding their capacity – in terms of knowledge, expertise, and time – to conduct this task.

In principle, tasking SSCs with the drafting of teacher competence profiles made good use of their diverse expertise. It allowed sector-specific insights to inform the definition of teaching competences and provided a useful forum in which pedagogical and workplace perspectives could come together. From a policy perspective, assigning this task to multi-stakeholder groups aligns with international good practice. According to Cedefop and OECD guidance, VET professionals bring perspectives on classroom feasibility and learner needs, while industry practitioners ensure that training remains relevant to current technologies and practices. Together, such teams can strengthen the legitimacy and quality of competence profiles and help secure buy-in from social partners (OECD, 2021^[37]; Cedefop, 2022^[38]; Cedefop, 2009^[39]).

Importantly, the Ministry gave SSCs the discretion to choose which teacher profiles to develop, subject to confirmation by the SSC coordinator within the Ministry. Members appreciated this flexibility, which also helped ensure a strong focus on evolving skill needs. For instance, one SSC developed a competence profile for a teacher in digital and sustainable furniture design – an example well aligned with cross-cutting national priorities. The freedom to select priority areas appears to have encouraged meaningful sectoral engagement.

In practice, however, SSC members held diverging views on whether they were the appropriate body to conduct this task. According to the SSC survey, 42% of respondents agreed that the SSCs had the necessary competences to draft teacher profiles, while 44% disagreed (OECD, 2025^[6]). The remaining 13% expressed no strong opinion (see Figure 3.4). These results suggest a deeply divided view within the SSCs themselves, with several members on both sides expressing strong convictions.

Interestingly, opinions did not appear to correlate with professional background or contractual status. Both industry practitioners and VET professionals were split in their assessments. Members from higher education institutions tended to be more positive, while those from both employer and worker associations expressed greater skepticism. Some members highlighted the value of the SSCs' broad composition:

"I believe that the participation of the SSC is important because the Council includes representatives of various stakeholders – educational institutions, employers, and social partners. This allows the profile of the teacher to be viewed not only from an academic point of view, but also through the prism of the real needs of the sector."
– SSC member

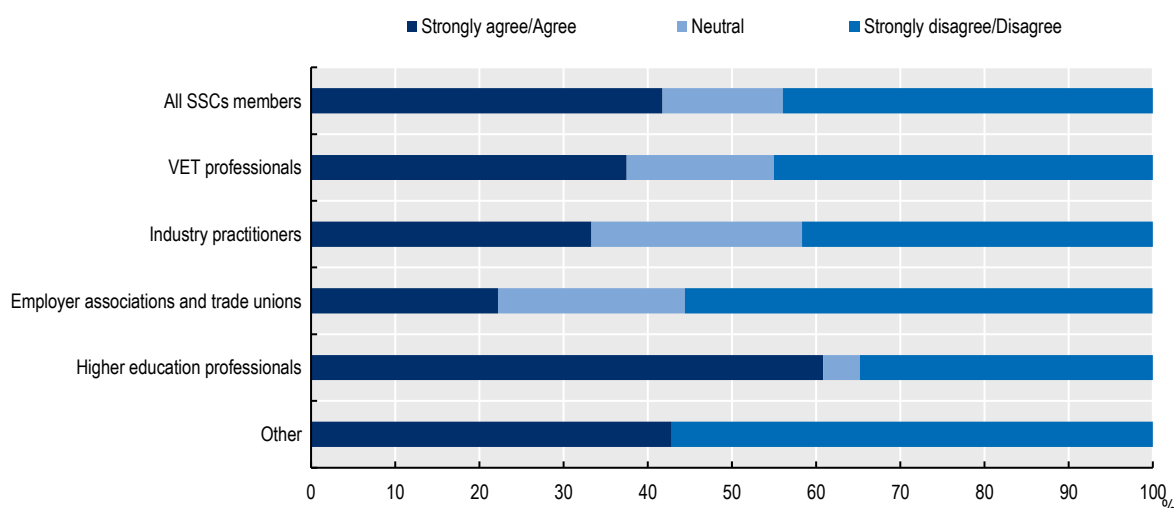
Others raised concerns about the technical demands of the task:

“The development of a competence profile of a teacher requires additional competencies that not all members of the SSC have. Therefore, additional training or methodological guidance is required to bring clarity about the expected result. Otherwise, each Council develops a profile according to its understanding and competencies, as there is no universal framework.” – SSC member

These contrasting views suggest that the issue may lie less in a lack of substantive expertise, and more in the unfamiliarity of SSC members with the technical format typically used for competence frameworks and the process for their development. Drafting technical competence profiles can be daunting for practitioners, whether from the VET sector or from industry, who are not accustomed to articulating competences in a formal, standardised way. While SSCs received written guidance, a template, and an example profile, several members described this support as too general to be of practical help.

Figure 3.4. SSC members hold divergent views on whether they are the right people to develop teacher competence profiles

Share of respondents who agree/disagree that the SSC has the right skills and competences to design teacher competence profiles



Note: “Other” category includes non-VET teachers, government bodies, and non-governmental organisations.

Source: OECD (2025^[6]), Interim evaluation of “Modernisation of Vocational Education and Training” project: Survey of the Sectoral Skills Councils, OECD Support for the Evaluation Plan of Bulgaria’s Programme “Education” 2021-2027, unpublished.

A useful middle ground may lie in offering more targeted and direct support. Rather than narrowing the role of SSCs in the development of the competence profiles, a more collaborative approach – such as pairing them with representatives from NAVET or the Ministry who are already familiar with teacher competence frameworks – could provide the reassurance and technical fluency needed. Alternatively, involving external pedagogical experts, teachers or teacher trainers and inspectors as sounding boards during the drafting process could help clarify terminology and structure without undermining the sector-specific insight that SSCs are well-placed to offer. Even light-touch assistance or collaboration of this kind could make the process more accessible for practitioner-led groups.

Finally, as observed in other areas of the project, many SSC members viewed the time available for completing this task as too limited. Tight deadlines may have further constrained the ability of SSCs to consult, iterate, or validate their proposals. Some interviewees indicated that the limited time and capacity

of the SSC members, who serve either on a voluntary or part-time basis, was a challenge in the context of the technical complexity of the work.

Finding 14. Review of teacher competence profiles was limited, reducing opportunities for feedback and quality assurance (effectiveness)

The challenges many SSCs reported in drafting teacher competence profiles were compounded by the absence of a structured review process. In contrast to the more rigorous procedures applied to the development of the new List of Professions and the State Educational Standards, the review of teacher profiles typically involved only the SSC coordinator within the Ministry. There was no requirement for consultation with external experts, validation by NAVET structures, or broader stakeholder engagement.

Several stakeholders saw this as a missed opportunity. Without input from other actors – such as NAVET’s sectoral expert commissions, other Ministry departments, teacher training providers or external pedagogical experts – important dimensions such as technical accuracy, pedagogical realism, and alignment with national frameworks may not have been fully addressed. The limited review also meant that profiles varied in scope and format across sectors, with little opportunity for harmonisation.

“The profiles could benefit from the kind of external review used for the List of Professions – with opportunities for feedback and technical scrutiny.” – SSC member

Experience across OECD countries suggests that teacher competence profiles are most effective when they are treated as shared professional standards that are co-developed and socialised across the system. Early involvement of teachers, school leaders, and initial and continuing teacher-education providers helps test feasibility and creates a common understanding of what high-quality vocational teaching looks like in each field. Where profiles are discussed through working groups, briefings and alignment with appraisal and training templates, practitioners tend to view them as a tool for improving practice rather than an administrative requirement (OECD, 2013^[40]; Guthrie et al., 2022^[41]). In this first cycle, the narrower review route appears to have limited this kind of socialisation, which helps explain variation in scope as well as uncertainty about how the profiles will be used in the future.

Finding 15. Current plans for the implementation of the teacher competence profiles are unclear and limited (sustainability)

It is currently unclear how the new teacher competence profiles will be translated into practice, with Bulgaria having so far defined only one implementation action with a narrow focus on in-service teacher training. Without a defined and comprehensive plan for implementation, there is a risk that the profiles remain aspirational documents rather than practical tools that shape teacher development.

According to current plans, the Ministry intends to survey active VET teachers to assess their upskilling needs. The Regional Education Departments will conduct this survey, and the results will be shared with the SSCs. Based on this input, SSCs are expected to propose topics for short modular training courses – typically one to three days in duration – delivered in real working environments under Activity 5.3 of the project (see also Finding 19). This model is innovative in that it creates a direct link between schools and the world of work and offers teachers a practical opportunity to update their skills in line with workplace realities.

However, while promising, Activity 5.3 may not be sufficient to implement the new competence profiles at scale. First, focusing efforts on in-service teachers overlooks the importance of reaching trainee teachers. Second, Activity 5.3 may not be sufficient to operationalise the new profiles among in-service teachers, particularly in emerging sectors. For example, while modular trainings of one-to-three days may be appropriate for refreshing or updating specific competences, they are unlikely to provide adequate preparation for entirely new or expanded roles, such as in areas related to digital or green competences.

For instance, a profile focused on energy-efficient building design would likely require substantial technical training, didactic preparation, and access to new teaching materials and infrastructure. One-off short trainings may not be adequate to equip teachers for such a shift.

In addition, participation in the modular trainings is voluntary and only available to teachers whose schools participate in the *Modernisation of VET* project. Interviews with VET teachers conducted for this report indicate that interest in the training itself is currently limited (Finding 19). Several factors may contribute to this: teachers do not receive formal credit or recognition for completing the modules; some may not be aware of the relevance of a given training to their field; and many rely on their own judgement in deciding whether upskilling is necessary, with limited school-based feedback from peers or school leaders. While self-assessment is helpful, it may not fully capture gaps between current practice and the demands of updated competence profiles or labour market realities.

To ensure the sustainable integration of new teacher competences, it is critical that they are also embedded in initial teacher education (ITE) programmes. At this stage, the process for implementation of the new competence profiles is not yet clearly defined, which limits the extent to which they can shape practice. Current plans do not specify whether or how the official qualification requirements for vocational teachers will integrate the profiles, nor is there explicit guidance on communication to accredited teacher-training providers. As a result, training institutions lack a clear basis upon which to update their curricula in line with the profiles. In comparable systems, implementation involves mapping each competence to a module, revising learning outcomes, and adjusting practicum expectations; accreditation bodies typically request a matrix showing coverage across the programme before approving updates. Such steps are not yet set out in Bulgaria's current implementation plans.

Across Europe, continuing professional development (CPD) for VET teachers is increasingly viewed as a shared responsibility. According to Cedefop's 2022 synthesis report, 19 European countries (including Bulgaria) have mandatory CPD requirements for vocational teaching staff (Cedefop, 2022^[38]). Austria, for example, asks each teacher to complete at least 15 hours of professional learning per school year, while in Belgium every school prepares an annual professional-training plan that sets out staff development priorities. All but three European countries report carrying out a structured needs analysis before planning CPD, helping to ensure that activities respond to clearly identified skill gaps.

The preparation of teaching curricula

To help translate the system-level changes (new List of Professions, State Educational Standards, and national examination programmes) into day-to-day teaching, in October 2025, the project launched a full revision of the Ministry-issued teaching curricula, which individual schools use to produce their own school curricula. The teaching curricula include two key components:

- 1) **Model curricula**, which are profession-specific plans that set the structure of provision: the list of subjects and modules to be covered, weekly and total hours by grade, the split between training practice and production practice, optional components, and programme completion requirements (e.g. the State Matriculation Examination and the national VET examination).
- 2) **Subject programmes**, which are the syllabi for each subject; they set aims, content, skills, expected learning outcomes and assessment arrangements.

Under the project, 26 vocational schools and two general schools offering VET programmes lead the coordination and drafting of the model curricula and subject programmes. An ordinance issued by the Minister of Education and Science in September 2025 formalised their role. The following month, the Ministry published guidelines, setting three eligibility criteria for schools wishing to draft the revised curricula: schools must, i) formally declare their interest in participating in the revision for a specific sector; ii) have prior experience in developing curricula under national programmes; iii) maintain partnerships with other schools, higher education institutions and business organisations (Ministry of Education and Science,

2025^[42]). Schools also have the flexibility to invite external experts, including industry practitioners, to participate in the drafting teams, though this is not mandatory.

The Ministry's guidelines require drafting teams to first prepare model curricula and submit them to the Ministry by 17 November 2025. Teams then have three months (until mid-February 2026) to develop subject programmes. Draft subject programmes will then go through a review phase, during which the relevant SSCs check compliance with the State Educational Standards and national examination programmes. The SSCs will have three days to provide their feedback, after which drafting teams have seven days to make revisions. Once the SSC approves the draft, the documents will be submitted to the Minister of Education and Science for final approval. Given that Bulgaria is still in the early stages of this process, findings in this section focus on the process for the development of teaching curricula as it is currently planned.

Overall, the evaluation finds that the Ministry's guidelines set a formal framework for school selection and team composition. However, these were published after the selection of schools, and the application and selection process was not clearly documented, which may affect perceived fairness and consistency among stakeholders. The review and validation process, as planned, includes clear steps and timelines for SSC involvement and Ministry approval. Yet, short feedback windows and the absence of broader quality assurance mechanisms may limit the depth and effectiveness of quality control.

Finding 16. School-led drafting of teaching curricula offers flexibility, but gaps in guidance and review, as currently planned, may inhibit the quality of final outputs (coherence, effectiveness, efficiency)

The Ministry's guidelines outline a formal framework for school selection and team composition; however, there is no evidence of a documented or publicly available procedure for how schools were selected (Ministry of Education and Science, 2025^[42]). For example, there is no public record of the number of schools that applied or how eligibility was assessed. Moreover, the selection criteria were only published after the appointment of school drafting teams. Interviews carried out in April 2025, when the process was not yet fully planned, revealed a common interpretation that schools would be nominated by Ministry coordinators. While this nomination-based approach may have expedited implementation and the rationale for individual choices may be clear internally, the absence of a transparent process raises questions about consistency and fairness.

The Ministry established minimum requirements for the composition of the school drafting teams: there must be at least three members, including one qualified teacher. The participation of industry practitioners with at least two years of sectoral experience is encouraged but not mandatory (Ministry of Education and Science, 2025^[42]). Given that a key challenge in the quality of Bulgaria's VET programmes is the lack of practical orientation, this is a notable gap. Providing schools with this level of flexibility to compose drafting teams has the advantage that it enables them to build on their internal capacities and professional networks. However, it may also lead to wide variation in team composition, which could influence the consistency of teaching curricula across different programmes.

Internationally, when curriculum development is delegated to provider institutions, three features typically support quality: clear national guidance on scope and format, structured mechanisms for employer involvement, and a formal review process to check both consistency and alignment with qualification standards (OECD, 2010^[43]; Cedefop, 2021^[44]). Under *Modernisation of VET*, each of these components is currently planned for in the preparation of teaching curricula but with limitations.

The Ministry's guidelines offer a conceptual framework for linking curriculum development to the State Educational Standards and national examination programmes (Ministry of Education and Science, 2025^[42]). The school teams also receive general recommendations – such as avoiding merging unrelated units, balancing academic and practical elements, and maintaining traceability from Standards to

curriculum. However, clear criteria or examples illustrating what this might look like in practice have not yet been provided.

Thus far, school drafting teams have participated in one information session organised by the Ministry in October 2025. However, they have not yet received practical guidance on developing outcome-based curricula – an approach that defines what learners should know, be able to do, or demonstrate at the end of the process. Without further direct support or examples, teams may struggle to operationalise the conceptual framework effectively. Moreover, there is currently no monitoring mechanism to verify whether teams follow these principles, nor tools that would help SSC reviewers assess alignment with State Educational Standards and national examination programmes. In the absence of such support, the Ministry's guidance may prove difficult to apply in practice.

It is very positive that the SSCs will play a key role in the review process; this provides some opportunity to check for practical orientation and alignment with other components of the VET reference framework, for example. However, as currently planned, the short timeframe - three days for SSC review and seven days for revisions - may make it difficult for reviewers to go beyond surface-level reflections. Moreover, some review tasks, such as assessing alignment between the curricula, Standards and national examination programmes may be better assigned to staff within the Ministry. For school drafting teams that do not include industry practitioners, the SSC's review may be the first time such perspectives are involved. As such, their review would most efficient if it focused on the practical orientation of curricula. Their involvement under tight deadlines may not prove efficient, as experienced in the review of the State Educational Standards. Finally, learner engagement, which is increasingly recognised internationally as an important aspect of curricula development, is also currently absent from the planned drafting or review stages (European Commission, 2023^[45]).

Section 2: Evaluation findings for school-level collaboration (Activities 5 and 8)

This section presents evaluation findings on the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of school-level collaboration efforts introduced under *Modernisation of VET*. **This refers to** partnerships between schools offering VET programmes and employers that influence day-to-day teaching, teacher development and students' exposure to workplaces. The section aims to respond to the following evaluation questions:

- **Relevance:** To what extent are the project's school-level efforts to bring stakeholders together appropriate and well-targeted to strengthening labour market responsiveness in VET?
- **Coherence:** To what extent do the school-level collaboration efforts align with current legal, institutional, and policy frameworks, and other national and EU-level initiatives?
- **Effectiveness:** To what extent are they functioning effectively?
- **Efficiency:** To what extent are they making efficient use of available resources?
- **Sustainability:** To what extent are they likely to be sustained beyond the funding period?

As in the previous section, findings are organised by task to support key stakeholders to engage with the information most relevant to them. The section first reviews the involvement of external actors (i.e. businesses and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)) in schools offering VET programmes under Activity 5 through practitioner teachers, training for workplace mentors and teacher workplace training. It then reviews the expansion of extended student practices (Activity 8). As both activities were in an early stage of implementation at the time of data collection, findings for school-level collaboration efforts focus principally on aspects of design and implementation planning.

Involvement of external actors in schools offering VET programmes

Activity 5 of the *Modernisation of VET* project aims to strengthen the link between schools offering VET programmes and the world of work by directly involving external actors, such as representatives from business, industry and NGOs, in the delivery of vocational programmes. It consists of three components:

- Under Activity 5.1, schools offering VET programmes can offer **20-hour contracts per semester for external practitioners** from business, industry and NGOs (hereafter, practitioner teachers) to teach in their programmes. The intent is to bring current workplace practices into classrooms, expose learners to real equipment and workflows, and expand provision in specialist or shortage areas with limited staff availability.
- Activity 5.2 supports the organisation of **mentoring trainings for external actors from business, industry or NGOs**. The activity aims to build their pedagogical and methodological skills and primarily targets practitioner teachers offering practical classes under Activity 5.1.
- Activity 5.3 funds **one- or two-day modular workplace trainings for VET teachers** (short industry placements) to update them on new technologies, techniques and production methods, so that delivery remains current with labour-market needs. The intention is for trainings to align with the competence areas in the newly developed teacher profiles.

The activities are designed to give schools significant discretion in implementation, allowing them to adapt to local opportunities and needs. By June 2025, 384 schools were implementing one of the three components of Activity 5, mostly the mentoring training for business representatives. However, at the point of data collection, implementation among participating schools was in the planning stage. The evaluation thus focuses on design aspects, rather than results or effectiveness.

As detailed in the subsections below, evidence collected for the evaluation indicates that schools value the involvement of external actors, but key operational elements of the activities remain unclear. Mentoring workshops have seen stronger uptake across schools than the other two activities, yet schools interpret the key objectives differently, some focus on mentoring those supervising student placements, others on preparing practitioner teachers. This points to potential inconsistencies in practice. Participation in modular workplace training for teachers is currently limited; interviews suggest potential barriers such as timetable clashes, limited formal recognition within professional development systems, and a perception among some teachers that needs lie more in curriculum content than in updating their skills.

Finding 17. Schools value practitioner teachers, but the activity currently lacks clarity for those implementing it (relevance, effectiveness, coherence)

Activity 5.1 has been well-received and is generating strong interest among schools that offer VET programmes. As of August 2025, almost 220 contracts had been initiated, with more than 80% of practitioner teachers having already delivered the required 20 hours of classroom instruction – demonstrating not only interest but also active implementation by schools (EAPE, 2025^[1]; Ministry of Education and Science, 2025^[46]). Looking ahead to the 2025/2026 academic year, many schools have begun identifying candidates. Recruitment approaches vary: some schools reported publishing open calls on their websites and across professional networks, while others are working with long-term partner companies to identify suitable practitioners.

Bulgaria's efforts to bring external practitioners into schools to support the teaching of vocational programmes are relevant to the VET system's need for greater alignment with the labour market and coherent with international evidence on quality VET. International experience suggests that involving industry practitioners in VET teaching could bring multiple benefits to classrooms in Bulgaria including:

1. Up-to-date expertise: Practitioners bring current technical knowledge and exposure to modern workplace practices.

2. A bridge to work-based learning: Practitioners can use their professional networks to facilitate internships, apprenticeships, and other school-to-work pathways.
3. Support for VET teachers: By sharing their experience, practitioners can help full-time teachers integrate new technologies and innovative practices (OECD, 2021^[37]).
4. Addressing skills gaps: Practitioners can teach niche or emerging skills where no established VET programme or qualified teachers currently exist within a school.

Bulgaria's approach – inviting practitioners without formal teaching qualifications to teach a small number of hours – is less common internationally than the practice of relying on VET teachers with prior industry experience (which is used in Bulgaria as well). However, it is not unique; similar arrangements exist in the Flemish Community of Belgium and the Netherlands (see Box 3.3), where professionals can work as guest lecturers or under temporary arrangements for a few hours per week, particularly in fields with teacher shortages (Essenscia, 2024^[47]). Furthermore, the design of *Modernisation of VET* seeks to address the potential lack of pedagogical expertise among practitioner teachers by providing them with mentorship training under Activity 5.2.

As a new initiative in Bulgaria which relies on school–business partnerships, clear operational parameters for Activity 5.1 are important. However, in interviews carried out for the evaluation, schools reported a lack of clarity and a need for more guidance. Questions remain about how the 20 hours should be structured – for example, although the project requires the 20 hours to take place within one school term, schools are unsure whether to teach 2 hours per week for 10 weeks or to organise an intensive block of 20 hours. Schools were also uncertain whether classes should take place on school premises or in the workplace. In its current form, the activity does not yet fully align with international practice, which typically sets out expectations for scheduling, roles and responsibilities, and intended learning outcomes to support consistent delivery (OECD, 2021^[37]). Without such clarity, implementation is likely to vary across schools, which may dilute potential benefits and complicate monitoring as the model scales.

“For Activity 5, it was unclear exactly what we were supposed to do. We didn't really have guidelines. We were only told we can have 20-hour contracts.” – VET teacher

Box 3.3. Industry professionals as part-time VET teachers in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, “hybrid teachers” are professionals who combine a job in industry with a part-time teaching role. The model is used to bring current workplace practice into classrooms and to ease teacher shortages, especially in technical fields. Regional pilots – most visibly in Brainport Eindhoven – show steady take-up. Brainport reports that since the launch of its Hybrid Tech Teacher pilot in 2020, more than 160 hybrid teachers from over 50 companies have taught in local schools and colleges.

Formative evaluations point to clear perceived benefits and recurrent practical hurdles. Research led by Fontys University of Applied Sciences, which developed a “Hybrid Tech Teacher Monitor” for the Brainport pilot, finds that hybrid teachers help update lessons with current tools and workflows and strengthen school–company links. At the same time, schools and firms report obstacles such as rigid timetables, unfamiliar contract routes, and human resources rules that treat hybrid teachers as ordinary part-time staff rather than recognising their distinct role.

Independent studies draw similar conclusions. Windesheim University and the national TechYourFuture platform underline that hybrid teachers can act as bridges between VET and industry, but success depends on practical enabling conditions: simple contract templates, early timetabling, co-teaching, or mentoring by a lead teacher, and clear role definitions. These are presented as conditions for scaling, not as one-off fixes.

Early monitoring from the Brainport pilot provides further detail on patterns of participation (e.g. most hybrid teachers teach well under 240 hours per school year) and reiterates the need for flexible scheduling and supportive human resource arrangements to sustain engagement.

While these sources are process- and implementation-focused rather than impact evaluations of student outcomes, they offer practical lessons on how to organise hybrid roles at school level. Overall, the Dutch experience indicates that hybrid teaching can strengthen the relevance of VET when schools and employers have simple contractual routes, flexible scheduling, and co-teaching support. Where these conditions are weak, there is a risk that initiatives remain small-scale and person-dependent, even when intrinsic interest among practitioners is strong.

Source: Brainport Eindhoven (2025^[48]), *Hybrid Teachers in Brainport Eindhoven*, <https://brainporteindhoven.com/en/education/hybrid-teachers-in-brainport-eindhoven> (accessed on 29 September 2025); Koop-Spoor et al., (2020^[49]), “Faciliteren van hybride docenten binnen het vo en mbo: Een verkenning van succesfactoren, instrumenten en juridische kaders [Facilitating hybrid teachers in secondary and vocational education: An exploration of success factors, tools and legal frameworks]”. Eindhoven: Fontys Hogeschool HRM en Toegepaste Psychologie. <https://www.fontys.nl/Nieuws/Rapportage-faciliteren-van-hybride-docenten-binnen-het-VO-en-MBO.htm> (accessed on 29 September 2025); Fontys (2025^[50]), *The hybrid tech teacher monitor*, <https://www.fontys.nl/Onderzoek/Dynamische-talentinterventies/De-hybride-tech-docent-monitor.htm> (accessed on 29 September 2025); Schipper et al., (2021^[51]), *Hybrid professionals in technology: towards a strong connection between technical vocational education and the technical business world*, Windesheim University of Applied Sciences. <https://www.windesheim.nl/onderzoekpublicaties/hybride-professionals-in-de-techniek-naar-een-sterke-verbinding> (accessed on 29 September 2025); Brainport Eindhoven (2019^[52]), Pilot ‘Hybride Tech Docenten Brainport Eindhoven’ [Pilot Hybrid Tech Teachers Brainport Eindhoven]. Eindhoven: Brainport Development, [Informatieflyer Pilot Hybride Tech Docenten Brainport Eindhoven.pdf](#) (accessed on 29 September 2025).

Furthermore, incentives and recognition mechanisms for practitioner teachers and employer partners are still unclear. Collaboration of this type works best when it is win-win. Companies that allow employees to teach part-time could gain closer links with local VET institutions, better visibility for recruitment, and the opportunity to influence the training of future graduates to meet their skills needs. Initiatives of this type can also strengthen employee motivation and professional recognition, especially when participation is publicly acknowledged or supported by formal partnerships. However, at this early stage in Bulgaria, engagement depends largely on existing relationships and voluntary commitment. This early pattern helps explain the uneven readiness reported by schools and points to areas – such as recognition, timetabling solutions, and simple cooperation templates – where further attention could support greater take-up.

Finding 18. Strong uptake of mentoring workshops for external practitioners highlights their perceived value among schools, but objectives vary (relevance, coherence)

As of August 2025, Activity 5.2 (mentoring training) stands out as the most widely implemented component of Activity 5, with 955 external practitioners trained, in workshops lasting one to three days (Ministry of Education and Science, 2025^[46]). This extensive rollout reflects strong engagement across schools that offer VET programmes, and several VET professionals interviewed for this evaluation highlighted the activity’s importance for improving pedagogical skills among external practitioners.

“Industry practitioners don’t have the methods to present students with skills and knowledge. We teach them how to communicate with the students. The way a task is presented needs to be pedagogical.” – VET professional

While the flexibility of Activity 5.2 has facilitated adaptation to local needs, the lack of specific guidance on intended objectives has led to diverging interpretations and, in some cases, weaker alignment with the project’s strategic goals. Schools implement the workshops, which are run by teachers, for different purposes. In some cases, the workshops prepare practitioner teachers who will later deliver instruction in VET programmes under Activity 5.1, which is the stated goal of this activity. However, the most common approach is training company staff to supervise students during internships or work placements. In other

cases, the trainings are used to prepare business or industry employees as regular part-time teachers employed directly by the school, independent of project funding. This variation indicates that objectives and expected outcomes are not yet consistently understood across schools, which in turn affects the coherence of implementation and design.

Bulgaria's approach – offering pedagogical and methodological preparation for external practitioners – is well established in international practice. The previous section highlighted the examples of the Flemish Community of Belgium and the Netherlands, which also integrate practitioners into VET teaching (OECD, 2021^[37]):

- In Flanders, the dual teaching project allows professionals to begin teaching after completing a three-day pedagogical training programme (with exemptions for those already holding a teaching qualification). This training is financed by the government and the European Union, and companies continue to pay the employees' salaries. Employers also receive a lump-sum subsidy per teaching hour to support participation.
- In the Netherlands, hybrid teachers work under the pedagogical oversight of a full-time teacher, who remains responsible for lesson quality and student learning outcomes. This ensures that practitioners without teaching experience are supported and that teaching standards are maintained.

These examples illustrate why structured pedagogical support is a valuable investment. It ensures that students receive high-quality, well-organised learning experiences, helps external practitioners gain confidence in a school setting, and may even encourage more of them to transition into the teaching profession over time.

Finding 19. Participation in modular trainings for teachers is currently not sufficiently incentivised (relevance, effectiveness)

As of June 2025, uptake of Activity 5.3 (workplace training for teachers) remains limited: few schools have chosen to organise and offer such trainings in cooperation with local business partners. Only 110 teachers have participated, with fewer than half completing the training (EAFE, 2025^[1]). Interviews with staff in schools suggest that most teachers feel confident in their practical skills and see the main constraint to teaching quality as the theoretical nature of the curriculum rather than in gaps in their own competencies. Consequently, many schools do not currently see modular workplace training for teachers as a priority. This reflects a potential mismatch between the activity's intent and teachers' perceptions of need, which may limit participation.

The design of the activity – allowing teachers to be trained on new technologies directly in the workplace – is highly relevant for Bulgaria. VET teachers operate at the intersection of industry and education: they must remain up to date with technological and organisational changes in their sector, while also mastering effective pedagogical approaches (OECD, 2021^[37]). However, several barriers have the potential to reduce demand: time conflicts, lack of incentives, and limited recognition are frequently cited by VET teachers internationally as preventing them from investing in professional development (OECD, 2021^[37]). For work-based learning in particular, scheduling can be a challenge, as teachers need to balance school responsibilities with time in industry. Research from England and the United States, for example, highlights that while teachers see great value in short industry placements, participation remains low when programmes are not formally recognised, when schools do not provide protected time for participation, or when small logistical costs create friction (see Box 3.4) (OECD, 2021^[37]).

In Bulgaria, modular workplace training was still at an early stage of implementation at the time of data collection for this evaluation so it is not yet clear how teachers will respond once schools and their partner businesses begin actively offering them. Potential barriers may include lack of formal recognition: VET teachers in Bulgaria must complete 48 hours of CPD per four-year attestation period (Ministry of Education

and Science, 2019^[53]; Cedefop, 2022^[38]), but only programmes in the national register count. Further open questions centre around potential scheduling conflicts and timetable clashes as well as financial support for transport or meals. Resolving these issues is likely to be a valuable investment: modular workplace training could become a promising component of professional development for VET teachers, helping to strengthen their skills in line with current labour-market needs and enhance the practical quality of VET delivery.

Box 3.4. Workplace-based teacher development in the United Kingdom and the United States

Several countries have successfully implemented structured approaches to work-based professional development for VET teachers. In the examples below, teacher participation in this type of training is supported by 1) formal recognition; 2) explicit time/remission arrangements so teachers can be released from duties without penalty; 3) modest funding to offset substitution and incidental costs.

England (United Kingdom): “Industry Insights” within the T Level Professional Development offer

The Education and Training Foundation’s Industry Insights give teachers in post-secondary non-tertiary education short (one-to-five days), structured placements (e.g., work-shadowing or immersive employer days) to refresh sector-specific knowledge. Importantly, they are positioned as part of the national T-Level Professional Development offer and come with practical participation supports. T-Level providers may claim GBP 200 for a half-day or GBP 400 for a full day to help cover release time or substitution and participation costs. These mechanisms lower the time and cost barriers that can often inhibit teacher participation in professional development.

Missouri (United States): Teacher Externships with Professional Development Recognition

Missouri law makes workplace externships directly attractive to teachers by ensuring they count as professional-development contact hours for certificate maintenance. Teacher externships involve supervised periods in a company, where teachers observe and interact with staff to gain practical insight into current industry practices. These hours can be equivalent to graduate-level credit hours, meaning they can contribute to salary advancement or fulfil teacher-licensure requirements. By tying externships to such requirements and potential pay scales, the state directly addresses recognition and motivation.

Source: Education and Training Foundation (2025^[54]), *Industry Insights*, <https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/professional-development/t-levels/industry-insights/> (accessed on 29 September 2025); Missouri State (2018^[55]), *Title XI Education and Libraries*, <https://revisor.mo.gov/main/OneSection.aspx?section=168.024> (accessed on 29 September 2025).

The expansion of student placements

First introduced under the 2014-2020 Operational Programme “Science and Education for Smart Growth”, 240-hour student placements have become an important mechanism in Bulgaria for connecting vocational schools with employers and enhancing the practical relevance of teaching. Under *Modernisation of VET*, Activity 8 encourages students in Grades 11 and 12 to complete 240 hours of workplace learning in local businesses. Although regulations do not prescribe the exact scheduling of this time, most schools implement placements as three-to-four-hour blocks in the afternoons, outside regular lesson time. Students receive a financial incentive of BGN 4.50 per hour (up to BGN 1 080 per placement). Beyond changes in exact stipend rates, interviews suggest the activity has been consistently implemented since the start of the previous programming period in 2014.

Overall, evidence collected for this evaluation indicates that the 240-hour student placements are strengthening links between schools and employers and helping teachers bring workplace practices into

the classroom. Schools report higher student motivation, smoother transitions to work, and more regular employer feedback on what should be taught. At the same time, the current model faces sustainability challenges. Placements are typically scheduled after lessons rather than during school time, which creates an expectation of payment; financial incentives are presently supported by EU project funds which are time-bound; and participation is not compulsory. These findings are presented in detail in the subsections below.

Finding 20. Student placements are perceived positively by VET professionals and are helping to build school-employer links, but the funding model is unlikely to be sustainable (effectiveness, sustainability)

Bulgaria's student placements are a highly popular and well-regarded initiative among VET professionals, consistently receiving positive feedback from school leaders and teachers. Under the *Modernisation of VET* project, since the 2024-2025 school year, and as of August 2025, more than 10 000 students have enrolled – already exceeding half of the project's overall target (Ministry of Education and Science, 2025^[46]). This represents over 20% of all VET students in Grades 11 and 12, excluding those participating in dual training. Of those enrolled, 37% have already completed their placements (EAPE, 2025^[1]).

Interviewees pointed to several perceived benefits of the placements that can help explain their high uptake. First, VET teachers reported that placements improve student motivation and engagement with their vocational track.

"Student practices increase students' motivation even to come to regular classes. They wake them up. They reduce absenteeism, and they motivate them to choose one school over another." – VET teacher

Secondly, the extended placements allow students to gain first-hand exposure to workplace practices, helping smooth the transition from school to work.

"The programme has been good for the students. One-to-two years before they enter the labour market, they are faced with real-life employers. The stipends incentivise the students to work. A few students were later offered employment based on their internships." – VET professional

Moreover – and beyond the intended effects of the programme – schools reported that student placements have strengthened long-term relationships with local employers and based on this, some schools now receive employer feedback to adapt teaching content to local labour market needs.

"The teachers who supervise the placements visit the businesses and learn this way, too. Advanced curriculum material is often prepared in cooperation with our partners, using contacts established through student practices." – VET professional

As a result, the expansion of student placements is a relevant response to several key challenges in Bulgaria's VET system, including low student engagement and insufficient workplace experience in VET pathways, and weak or inconsistent collaboration between schools and local employers (see Chapter 2).

International evidence shows that Bulgaria's use of student placements follows a common European approach to VET: most countries include short, school-organised work placements for vocational students, outside dual apprenticeship models. The aim is to provide hands-on learning and to familiarise students with the labour market without requiring the extensive commitment of an apprenticeship. Table 3.1 offers insight into how these placements are organised in OECD countries, including duration, scheduling, and payment arrangements, showing some important differences with the Bulgarian model. An example are the work placements within Poland's *technikum* schools: vocational students complete four-to-eight weeks of practical training, usually full-time blocks during instruction time or summer holidays. These placements are unpaid, with schools and local authorities responsible for organisation. Across countries, several patterns emerge:

- **Placements are usually unpaid.** Small allowances, when offered, are employer-funded, not state-financed.
- **Scheduling minimises the need for financial incentive.** By holding placements during instruction time, students are not asked to give up paid work or leisure time, which reduces expectations for compensation.
- **Placements are typically mandatory for graduation,** justified by their timing during regular compulsory schooling hours.
- **School responsibility is central.** Schools organise placements, ensure learning objectives, and maintain employer links. Where central or EU funding is involved, it is usually for coordination and insurance, not direct student stipends.

Table 3.1. Short student placements in secondary VET

Country	Programme	Typical duration (hours)	Organisation (Integrated or blocked)	Timing (Outside or during instruction time)	Financial compensation
Bulgaria	Student practices	240	Integrated	Outside (school days or holidays)	Yes, 4.5 BGN per hour (EU-funded)
France	BAC Pro – PFMP	210–420	Blocked	During	Yes, stipend introduced 2023. (50-100 EUR/ week)
Italy	PCTO	200–400	Hybrid (integrated and blocked)	During	Rare, small employer allowance
Netherlands	MBO Level 3–4 (BOL track)	200–320	Hybrid (integrated and blocked)	During	Sometimes small employer allowance
Poland	Technikum	160–320	Hybrid (integrated and blocked)	Outside (school holidays) or during	Rare, small employer allowance
Sweden	Gymnasieskola	Approximately 250	Blocked	During	No
United Kingdom (England)	T-Level Industry Placement	315	Flexible (integrated or blocked)	Outside (school holidays) or during	No

Source: Eduscol (2025^[56]), *Periods of on-the-job training (PFMP)*. <https://eduscol.education.fr/666/periodes-de-formation-en-milieu-professionnel-pfmp> (accessed on 29 September 2025); Todofp (2025^[57]), *In-company training/FCT and intermodular project*, <https://todofp.es/sobre-fp/formacion-centros-trabajo.html> (accessed on 29 September 2025); Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (2018^[58]), *Courses for Transversal Skills and Career: Guidelines* <https://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/1306025/Linee%2Bguida%2BPCTO%2Bcon%2Balleghi.pdf> (accessed on 29 September 2025); Verbakel and Kans (2020^[59]), *Long-term cross-country mobility in apprenticeships, Case Study Report*, https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/2021-10/nl_country_case_study.pdf (accessed on 29 September 2025); Skolverket (2025^[60]), *Work-based learning (WBL)*, <https://www.skolverket.se/styrning-och-ansvar/regler-och-ansvar/ansvar-i-skolfragor/arbetsplatsforlagt-larande-apl> (accessed on 29 September 2025); Department for Education (2025^[61]), *T Level industry placements delivery guidance*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/678a7a302080f65f988bd3a1/T_Level_industry_placement_delivery_guidance.pdf (accessed on 29 September 2025).

Where Bulgaria differs is in timing and financing. While the 240-hour format falls within the typical 200–400-hour range, placements are usually scheduled after lessons, in students' free time, rather than replacing school days or weeks. Interview evidence suggests this approach to scheduling creates an expectation of payment:

“Without the stipends, it is unclear how many would participate. If they work, they expect payment.” – VET teacher

Financial incentives are currently paid from EU project funds, and participation is not compulsory because the hours sit outside the formal timetable. This design has several implications observed by stakeholders:

participation may be sensitive to the continuation of financial incentives; scheduling after school can compete with paid work, family commitments or transport constraints; and take-up may be unequal across regions and student groups.

As an outlier in funding design, the sustainability of Bulgaria's student practices raises concerns. While the financial incentives successfully motivate participation, their recent near-doubling (from BGN 600 to BGN 1 080 per 240-hour placement) puts additional pressure on public budgets. During interviews carried out for this evaluation, Ministry officials and other stakeholders expressed concerns that this model will be financially unsustainable once EU project funding ends.

Feasibility is also a concern: some schools noted that guaranteeing a placement for every student is challenging, especially in rural areas or regions with few employers willing or able to host interns. Scaling up to fully mandatory placements could therefore be difficult.

Section 3: Overall evaluation findings for Activities 1, 2, 5 and 8 of *Modernisation of VET*

This section looks at Activities 1, 2, 5 and 8 of the *Modernisation of VET* project together, providing an overarching assessment of their relevance, EU added value, and coherence. It asks four key evaluation questions:

- **Relevance:** To what extent are the collaborative mechanisms introduced under the project appropriate and well-targeted for strengthening labour market responsiveness in VET? To what extent is the monitoring questionnaire relevant for assessing the outcomes and effectiveness of these mechanisms?
- **EU added value:** What added value has EU support brought to the design and implementation of activities aimed at strengthening collaborative mechanisms in the VET system?
- **Coherence:** To what extent are the reforms aligned with current legal, institutional, and policy frameworks, and with other national and EU-level initiatives?

The overall relevance of Activities 1, 2, 5 and 8 and associated monitoring tools

In terms of overall relevance, the evaluation finds that Activities 1, 2, 5 and 8 are clearly designed to strengthen collaboration between the VET system and labour market actors, helping to address several key challenges facing VET in Bulgaria and aligning with international evidence of good practice. However, gaps in labour-market intelligence and the lack of coordinated skills-forecasting limit the evidence available to those collaborating on curricular updates, creating a reliance on individual professional judgement. While the introduction of a monitoring questionnaire - to collect data from the Ministry to evaluate the impact of project implementation against objectives and expected outcomes at system and school level - represents a positive step toward improving implementation tracking, its current design does not yet fully capture programme effects.

Finding 21: By strengthening collaboration mechanisms between VET professionals and labour market actors, the activities can help address multiple challenges facing VET in Bulgaria (relevance)

By creating opportunities for structured and sustained collaboration between VET professionals and industry practitioners, employer and professional associations and trade unions, at both system and school levels, Activities 1, 2, 5 and 8 offer a targeted response to several persistent challenges in Bulgaria's VET system. These include limited curricular alignment with labour market needs, low practical-orientation in teaching and learning, and the low appeal of vocational pathways (see Chapter 2).

Firstly, the activities have considerable potential to increase alignment between vocational curricula and labour market needs ensuring they are responsive to change over time. All stakeholders interviewed for this evaluation, from VET teachers to business representatives and officials from the Ministry, pointed to a persistent gap between what vocational students are taught and the skills required by employers. This misalignment is not simply a matter of outdated textbooks or equipment shortages, it reflects a deeper rigidity in the curriculum framework that makes it difficult to adapt to evolving labour market demands, particularly in fast-moving sectors like ICT and mechanical engineering.

At system-level, the establishment and use of multi-stakeholder groups, such as the SSCs and the Standards expert teams to revise key documentation, can ensure that the reference framework for the vocational system embeds the expertise and perspectives of VET professionals, industry practitioners and other key stakeholders. Beyond the life of the project, if the SSCs are effectively institutionalised and industry practitioners fully represented and engaged, there is scope for them to become the key mechanism by which representatives from the VET system and the labour market work together to shape teaching and learning in the future. This may include reviewing the implementation of new curricula, overseeing ongoing updates to different components of the VET reference framework and steering greater collaboration at school level.

At school level, Activities 5 and 8 establish collaborative mechanisms, such as the use of practitioner teachers in schools and structured student placements, which bring together local employers and VET professionals, facilitating the transfer of knowledge to inform course and lesson planning. VET teachers in Bulgaria have typically lacked structured opportunities to update pedagogical and technical skills, hindering curriculum implementation. Interviewees noted that two-way learning is the most valuable aspect of school-employer collaboration: teachers gain practical insights from industry and business, and external practitioners understand how to support student learning.

Secondly, the activities help address the limited practical orientation of VET pathways by giving VET teachers and students more opportunities for an applied approach to teaching and learning. Among interviewees, there was broad consensus that vocational programmes are currently too theoretical and often fail to equip students with the skills needed in the workplace. Several VET professionals also noted that content is often too advanced for upper secondary learners, creating barriers to learning and progression, particularly among those with lower academic performance. Meanwhile, VET professionals and representatives from employer associations highlighted a disconnect between curriculum design and practical job demands, undermining students' readiness for work. Employers consistently reported that graduates lack the practical skills required for entry-level roles, particularly in technical sectors such as electrotechnics, transport, and tourism.

"The link between theoretical knowledge and practice is weak – students cannot apply what they learn in real workplace settings." – Employer association representative

The strong relevance of Activities 1, 2, 5 and 8 indicates that the project was well-conceptualised at its outset by the Managing Authority. Including system-level reforms for VET on the scale of Activities 1 and 2 in EU-funded programming had not been tried before in Bulgaria. However, the relevance of these reforms in addressing major challenges in the Bulgarian context provides strong justification for their inclusion.

Finding 22: The project does not address key issues in the VET data infrastructure; this may constrain system-level collaboration (relevance)

During interviews for this evaluation, business representatives and social partners pointed to the lack of a coordinated labour-market monitoring and skills-forecasting system as a key limitation of the planned VET reforms. While the project strengthens employer involvement in revising the reference framework, the absence of structured processes for collecting, analysing, and using labour market data limits the evidence

available to guide curriculum updates and other VET reforms. Several stakeholders highlighted the lack of an integrated system that combines existing data sources and feeds them into regular VET planning cycles as a critical gap in the design of the *Modernisation of VET* project.

Bulgaria already produces several useful sources of labour market intelligence, including the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy's *Analyses and Forecasts for the Labour Market Development* (medium- and long-term projections, employer surveys from the Employment Agency, and sector-specific resources such as MyCompetence) (Cedefop, 2019^[62]; MLSP, 2025^[63]; MyCompetence, 2025^[64]). However, some stakeholders identified important gaps: some data are incomplete or not representative, participation in surveys is low, and information from different sources is not systematically combined. Industry practitioners also suggested that skills forecasting is often treated as a technical add-on rather than a core part of a demand-driven VET system. As a result, these data are not used consistently to inform enrolment planning, curriculum updates, or guidance to schools.

"Everything is project-based; there's no sustainable inter-institutional system to feed labour market data into education planning." – Employer association representative

Without a coordinated and integrated skills-intelligence system that links data to regular five-year planning cycles, policymakers cannot reliably anticipate emerging skill needs, adjust training provision in line with demand, or update curricula to reflect industry shifts. Although it is positive that, via the SSCs, there will be a dedicated multi-stakeholder forum for discussing such issues, without access to reliable and comprehensive data, such discussions rely predominantly on the expertise and engagement of SSC members, which may vary. There is therefore a risk that, despite involvement from labour market actors, enrolment quotas will continue to be out of sync with labour-market needs, curricula may continue to reflect outdated assumptions in certain areas, and resources for teacher training and infrastructure may be misallocated.

Given the scale of VET reforms introduced under the *Modernisation of VET* project, integrating additional efforts to address weaknesses in data infrastructure may not have been feasible. However, it is important to consider the extent to which such weaknesses act as a barrier to effectiveness for planned reforms under the project. This can then help inform discussions around developing related efforts for the next programming periods or as part of nationally funded reforms.

Finding 23: The introduction of a monitoring questionnaire for the project improves implementation tracking, but its current design does not enable assessment of programme effects on school-level beneficiaries or system-level outcomes (relevance)

The Executive Agency has introduced a monitoring questionnaire for the *Modernisation of VET* project to track implementation progress. The evaluation finds that, overall, the questionnaire is a useful tool for tracking implementation, but broadening its scope, incorporating outcome-focused indicators based on a clear theory of change, and refining technical aspects would strengthen accountability and support learning at both school and system levels. Currently, the questionnaire primarily focuses on documenting *what happened* rather than fully exploring *what difference it made*. Capturing evidence on changes and their drivers could help the questionnaire become a more practical instrument for assessing progress towards broader programme goals and effective use of resources. Related questions are explored in more detail in a forthcoming OECD report on Supporting Evaluation Practice (OECD, 2026^[65]). The evaluation team identifies the following design issues:

- **Indicators are activity-focused rather than outcome-oriented.** The monitoring questions are largely designed to capture procedural steps, with about 80% of the indicators classified as output measures (see Annex B). These include the number of proposals submitted by the SSCs to the Ministry for changes to the List of Professions – specifically, proposals for removing or updating professions and specialties – and the number of proposals that were subsequently approved by

the Ministry. Indicators such as “number of professions proposed for update” reflect administrative progress but do not reveal whether updated standards improve instruction and learning. In comparison, the indicator “number of classes taught using updated curricula” represents a more informative intermediate outcome, as it measures not only the direct output of Activities 1 and 2 (updated curricula) but also the extent to which these updated curricula have reached everyday teaching practice. Nevertheless, an intermediate outcome is not an end in itself. Ultimately, impact would be judged based on final outcomes, i.e. outcomes measuring progress toward programme goals, such as student learning gains and employer perceptions of graduate skills.

The current framework does include some outcome-oriented elements, such as tracking average results in State Matriculation Examinations across academic years. This is a useful high-level signal of system performance, but it is a broad measure that is likely not sufficiently sensitive to many of the project’s intended changes, especially in the short term. As a result, it provides limited insight into which activities are contributing to improvements, through which mechanisms, and for which groups of learners. Given the breadth of the *Modernisation of VET* project, the monitoring questionnaire would benefit from additional outcome indicators that are more closely linked to specific activities and expected results.

Ideally, the selection of output, intermediate and final outcome indicators would be anchored in a clear theory of change (illustrated in Figure 2.4, but adapted for specific activities), which maps out the hypothesised causal pathways leading from project activities to broader programme and national goals (see OECD (2026^[65])).

- **Use of absolute numbers reduces comparability across schools at system level.** The questionnaire reports indicators such as “number of classes taught using updated curricula” or “number of students retained in the educational system” as raw counts at school level. Although counts can be useful for school-level monitoring, they are difficult to interpret for system-level comparison because they scale mechanically with school size. Larger schools will tend to report higher numbers even when progress is proportionally similar. This limits capacity to identify which schools are making proportionate improvements and which ones need targeted support. Consistently expressing indicators as shares or percentages, such as *share of classes updated* or *percentage of students retained* – as is currently done for a small number of indicators, could provide a clearer picture of performance trends across different contexts and over time.
- **Narrow scope relative to the breadth of the *Modernisation of VET* project.** The project comprises nine major activities, yet the current monitoring questionnaire includes only seven questions, meaning that the tool currently does not reflect several areas of the project. While it is likely that more detailed activity-level tracking takes place through technical and financial reporting, the questionnaire itself does not capture the key intermediate or final outcomes that would signal progress across each activity. For every activity, it should be possible to identify at least one meaningful dimension where change would be expected. Some outcome areas, such as **employer perceptions of graduate skills**, are inherently cross-cutting. Others, however, are specific to individual activities. For example, under **Activity 9** (information campaigns to increase VET attractiveness), the questionnaire could track **student perceptions of VET** and **the share of students intending to choose VET as a first choice**.

The EU added value and internal and external coherence of Modernisation of VET

The evaluation finds that EU support enables the *Modernisation of VET* project to deliver reforms of a scope and scale that would not be feasible with national funding alone. In addition, the aims and the design of the project are coherent with Bulgaria’s strategic priorities and related policy measures at both national and European level.

Finding 24: EU support enables an unprecedented scale and pace of reform, which can ultimately facilitate greater consistency and alignment across VET pathways (EU added value)

The scale of the system-level reforms introduced under *Modernisation of VET* is unprecedented. The parallel revision of 150 State Educational Standards creates a reform intensity that stakeholders described as unmatched in previous national efforts, which typically supported only one or two revisions per year. For example, the *National Programme 14 Vocational Education and Training* (2023), aimed to align curricula and assessments with industry needs on a pilot scale. It had a modest budget of BGN 1.6 million and covered a small number of schools (Sanderva, 2023^[66]). *Modernisation of VET* scales up this work, embedding curriculum reform in a broader systemic transformation. Other national programmes currently focused on VET typically fund infrastructure renewal or vocational competitions for students as opposed to system-level reforms of content, standards, and qualifications. EU support is therefore helping to fill a critical policy gap in Bulgaria's VET reform capacity.

"This is the only project aiming to change educational content, professions and the [State Educational] Standards comprehensively at the national level. National funding primarily focuses on improving [school] materials and...environment." – Project management team

Beyond scale, the breadth of the project is also notable, with EU support enabling the revision of five key components of the VET reference framework at the same time: the List of Professions, the State Educational Standards, national examination programmes, teaching curricula, and teacher competence profiles. This integrated approach supports a more structured and coherent VET system, ensuring that what students learn (i.e., curricula), how they are assessed (i.e. examination programmes) and what skills teachers have (i.e. competence profiles) align with each other and with the qualifications offered (List of Professions). It also reflects an understanding that curriculum reform as a process requires alignment across qualifications, assessment, and teaching standards. Several interviewees in this evaluation also noted that *Modernisation of VET* is the only policy effort that has sought to revise both the List of Professions and Standards simultaneously, underscoring the added value of EU support.

Moreover, through Activity 8, the project continues and expands extended student placements, which Bulgaria launched in the previous programming period (2014-2021). Students, teachers, and participating businesses value these placements highly for linking classroom learning to workplace experience (IRE, 2024^[67]). Previous evaluation findings indicate that such placements develop a broad set of skills – professional, interpersonal, and safety-related – and help students transition more smoothly from school to employment (IRE, 2024^[67]). However, they are also resource intensive, providing participating students with financial compensation. Their inclusion in the current programming period, with an extended budget, allows Bulgaria to expand participation even further and continue addressing the critical need for VET students to have greater access to work-based learning.

Nevertheless, evidence of the EU added value of the reforms raises important questions about their longevity beyond the current programming period. With regards to the large-scale curricula reforms, it is less likely that Bulgaria will need to embark on such a wholesale update in the future. Continuous review and regular updates will be necessary but would not need to be simultaneous and can therefore more feasibly be integrated under national financing. However, other aspects of the activities, such as the participation of the SSCs and the 240-hour student placements should be maintained beyond the current programming period to have the desired impact on the system.

Finding 25: The project is coherent with previous and current VET efforts within Programme "Education", national strategic priorities, and European policy frameworks (coherence)

Modernisation of VET is one of three core operations under Programme "Education" 2021-2027 designed to improve the quality and labour market relevance of VET in Bulgaria (see Table 3.2). The evaluation finds

that the three operations are complementary, addressing shared areas of intervention through distinct but connected approaches. They also act within a common strategic framework aimed at aligning vocational education with labour market dynamics.

The three operations seek to strengthen employer engagement but at different levels of the VET system. *Modernisation of VET* introduces system-level reforms, revising the List of Professions, Standards, national examination programmes and teaching curricula. Structured collaboration between education and employers, led by SSCs and appointed expert teams are shaping these components of the VET reference framework. In contrast, the *Development of the dual system of training in VET* (hereafter, *Dual VET*) operation focuses on employer engagement at the delivery stage, with companies co-delivering training as part of an apprenticeship model (a more detailed analysis of *Dual VET* will be the focus of forthcoming evaluations in 2026/2027). The *Supporting VET Centres of Excellence* operation seeks to strengthen the overall VET provider network, transforming 28 selected schools (one in each district) into hubs for innovation and knowledge sharing. They also aim to foster collaboration between education, research organisations and businesses to help build capacity for system improvement over time. These two operations will therefore operate principally at district, sector and school level.

Table 3.2. Modernisation of VET has a key role among vocational reform efforts under Programme “Education”, establishing system-level changes that will guide the entire VET system

Comparative overview of VET operations under Priority 3 of Programme “Education” 2021-2027

Operation	Modernisation of VET	Development of the dual system of training in VET	Supporting VET Centres of Excellence
Key activities	- Revises List of Professions, State Educational Standards, national examination programmes and teaching curricula to better align them with labour market needs. - Develops training opportunities for teachers and industry practitioners that facilitate knowledge transfer at local level. - Offers six-month student placements in real work environments	- Further expands the apprenticeship model whereby students alternate between school and employer-based training. - Involves employers directly in teaching and co-delivery of vocational programmes.	- Transforms selected VET institutions into innovation hubs. - Provides advanced teacher training and seeks to develop and disseminate new teaching methods. - Builds local partnerships between schools, businesses, and universities, fostering entrepreneurship, research and development. - Implements graduate tracking in Centres of Excellence using the national quality-indicator framework and surveys, feeding results into the system-wide mechanism. - Supports cooperation and exchanges with other VET Centres of Excellence and European networks to share expertise and strengthen innovation capacity.
Scope	System and school level	Sector and school level	District, sector and school level
Share of total budget (%)	4.8%	4.6%	3.8%

Source: EAPE (2024^[68]), Programme “Education” 2021-2027, <https://sf.mon.bg/?go=page&pagelid=364> (accessed 30 September 2025).

Where potential overlaps exist – such as the expansion of student practices under Modernisation of VET and the expansion of combined school and work-based programmes under Dual VET – there is clear delineation: dual training students do not undertake student practices, and vice versa. However, there may be more scope for synergies between the projects implemented under the three operations. Both Centres of VET excellence and Dual VET introduce collaboration efforts at school level that could both build on and

support the efforts introduced under Modernisation of VET. In the future, there may be scope for the SSCs to play a role in supporting these initiatives, particularly by promoting greater engagement from local employers.

Compared to the previous programme (2014-2020 Operational Programme “Science and Education for Smart Growth”), which, for VET, focused mainly on expanding dual learning and improving practical skills through work-based learning (EAPE, 2020^[69]; 2016^[70]; 2020^[71]), Programme “Education” marks a clear shift in focus. By revising the reference framework that underpins the entire VET system, the project seeks to create conditions for sustained quality rather than short-term participation gains. The timing of these reforms reflects Bulgaria’s wider economic pressures and the need to align vocational education with Industry 5.0 and EU twin transition objectives – essential for ensuring workforce competitiveness in an economy that is changing rapidly. This interim evaluation does not examine the training for digital and green skills delivered under Activity 6 of *Modernisation of VET*; this will be covered in the final evaluation at the end of the programming period. However, in the revision of the List of Professions and the development of teacher competence profile, Bulgaria has placed a clear emphasis on the development of green and digital skills, signalling coherence between the project and national and European strategic priorities.

Indeed, the evaluation finds that *Modernisation of VET* is coherent with national policy priorities. The activities *directly advance Priority Area 7 of Bulgaria’s Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning (2021–2030) which seeks to enhance the overall quality of VET and increase its responsiveness to labour market needs, particularly the digital and green transitions* (Ministry of Education and Science, 2025^[72]). The revision of the reference framework reflects the Strategic Framework’s call for stronger labour-market alignment, making VET provision more responsive to shifting demand. The development of teacher competence profiles and related training in emerging professions address the *Framework’s* emphasis on equipping learners for the professions of the future.

At European level, the project supports core principles from the *Council Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (2020)* and the *Osnabrück Declaration on VET (2020)*, directly embedding these principles into national implementation (European Union, 2020^[73]; Cedefop, 2020^[74]). This includes strengthening the system’s capacity to adapt to labour market changes through establishing the SSCs which move beyond ad-hoc consultation to establish a form of ongoing labour market intelligence. It also includes efforts to make VET a more attractive choice for students and their parents through modernisation. For example, revisions to the State Educational Standards seek to deliver more relevant learning content while closer school-employer collaboration and more work-based learning aim to provide students with more meaningful exposure to practical experience of modern working methods and environments (European Commission, 2022^[75]).

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4 Implications for current and future programming

The final chapter of this report examines the implications of the interim evaluation of *Modernisation of Vocational Education and Training (VET)* for ongoing and future efforts to strengthen collaboration between the VET system and the labour market. First, the chapter summarises the main evaluation findings by evaluation criteria. Next, it identifies some promising practices that emerge from the evaluation and that can provide a basis on which project implementation can build in the future. Finally, it outlines eight recommendations that can help the Executive Agency Programme “Education” (hereafter, Executive Agency), the Ministry of Education and Science (hereafter, Ministry), the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET) and other stakeholders to enhance implementation going forward.

Main conclusions

Relevance: The *Modernisation of VET* project responds to a key need in Bulgaria’s VET system by building stronger, more structured collaboration mechanisms between education and the labour market. It creates opportunities for policymakers, VET professionals and industry practitioners to work together – both at the system level and school level. These mechanisms – in particular, the Sectoral Skills Councils (SSCs), the initiatives bringing external actors into schools, and the 240-hour student placements – are well-aligned with the objective of making VET more relevant to the skill needs of the economy. Collaboration efforts under the project are typically built on strong relationships and individual expertise. While both are important, the project does not address key issues in the VET data infrastructure, such as gaps in available labour market data or insufficient integration and coordination of existing skills intelligence, which could enhance the evidence base informing collaboration. In addition, project monitoring via the dedicated questionnaire is principally focused on activity tracking as opposed to project outcomes, limiting opportunities to learn from implementation and adapt accordingly.

Coherence: The simultaneous revision of the List of Professions for VET, State Educational Standards (hereafter, Standards), national examination programmes, teaching curricula, and teacher competence profiles is a promising step toward more coherent VET pathways and stronger alignment between what students are taught and assessed on, and what the labour market requires of them. The project also shows strong coherence with national and European Union (EU) policy directions, which emphasise strengthening responsiveness to labour-market needs, work-based learning and skills for the future. The three VET-specific operations under Programme “Education” pursue complementary objectives at different levels while contributing to a shared goal of improving alignment with labour market needs. *Modernisation of VET* principally addresses system-level reform, *VET Centres of Excellence* build regional and sectoral capacity and *Development of the dual system of training in VET* strengthens local delivery. As implementation progresses across all three, there will be opportunities to proactively identify synergies, including, for example, regarding school-employer engagement. Regular meetings of the Monitoring Committee are one forum for this; others focused on the technical level can also be developed going forward.

EU added value: Stakeholders consistently reported that the scale and pace of *Modernisation of VET* – notably the parallel revision of 150 State Educational Standards and the simultaneous update of the List of Professions – would not have been feasible without EU support. EU funding enabled cross-institutional coordination and mobilisation of drafting teams, giving the reform momentum beyond what national

budgets have typically allowed (historically, one or two standards have been revised per year). EU support thus complements national programmes – which largely finance VET-school infrastructure and student competitions – by targeting comprehensive curriculum reform and system instruments at a scale and scope unmatched by previous national efforts.

Effectiveness: The project shows early signs of effectiveness where reform and implementation design have promoted coherence and multi-stakeholder partnership. The simultaneous revision of the List of Professions, State Educational Standards, teaching curricula and teacher competence profiles has helped deliver a framework for clearer vocational pathways within and across sectors. The expansion of the 240-hour student placements increase participation in work-based learning and strengthen school-employer links. However, across project implementation, effectiveness is constrained by gaps in key processes and demanding timelines. Draft Standards were widely reported to be of low quality: a tight initial drafting window left little time to research skill needs by profession or consult industry practitioners. Revision processes for the teacher competence profiles and teaching curricula are less comprehensive than those for the List of Professions and the Standards, which may inhibit quality and practical application in the classroom. At school-level, initiatives to enhance collaboration between teachers and external practitioners as well as expand work-based learning for students have been met with enthusiasm. However, limited guidance to schools on the educational intent of collaboration means implementation is inconsistent and may not always fully align with project objectives.

Efficiency: Overall, *Modernisation of VET* demonstrates pockets of good value for money. The SSCs leverage the intrinsic motivation of sectoral experts, with many contributing time voluntarily – an efficient use of under-utilised social capital. By contrast, the public-procurement route for recruiting drafting teams for the new Standards proved onerous and lengthy (reported duration of up to six months). This, along with the criteria for team composition, may ultimately have deterred VET professionals and industry practitioners from participating, skewing teams towards academia. Tight drafting timelines and the sequential “draft then review” involvement of SSCs increased rework and transaction costs. Institutional capacity has been stretched at times (e.g. 4 NAVET coordinators managed 150 standards; 8 coordinators within the Ministry supported 218 SSC members), slowing processes, despite the impressive efforts of these staff members.

Sustainability: SSCs enjoy broad support, and a majority of members signal willingness to stay involved in the next cycle. However, long-term viability hinges on finding a workable contracting approach that preserves the SSC’s independence from the Ministry while securing predictable time commitments from members. Clearer support and realistic timelines will also matter. The simultaneous revision of 150 Standards was an exceptional, one-off effort; keeping them current should be feasible through periodic updates, but this will require attracting more industry practitioners and VET professionals into each revision cycle. The 240-hour student placements are valued by schools and students, but the provision of financial incentives for students is reliant on EU funding and therefore currently time-limited.

Promising practices

Early evidence points to several practices that are working well in the management and coordination of the *Modernisation of VET* project and within the different institutions involved. These provide a platform for Bulgaria to build on as implementation progresses.

Executive Agency “Programme Education”

- **Project design enables joint revision of several components of the VET reference framework, supporting consistency and coherence.** Revising both the entries in the List of Professions and the related State Educational Standards together provides the opportunity to

develop a more coherent sector-wide view, with the potential to better align qualifications, occupational profiles and labour market needs.

- **Monitoring practices offer a solid base for tracking implementation progress.** The introduction of a structured project questionnaire enables systemic tracking of implementation progress and documentation of key activities. This means the Executive Agency can ensure that project delivery aligns with planned outputs and timelines. In cooperation with the World Bank, the Agency has also started to introduce more results-based indicators into both technical reporting and the monitoring questionnaire, for example indicators on the number of participants who obtain a qualification upon completion. This development is still at an early stage, but it signals a gradual shift towards linking implementation monitoring with emerging results, creating a strong foundation for a more outcome-oriented approach in the future.

Ministry of Education and Science

- **SSCs provide a formal platform for cross-sector collaboration.** They bring together industry practitioners, VET and higher education professionals, trade unions and employer and professional associations to collaborate on system-level instruments. The Ministry's coordination of the SSCs is helping to facilitate structured engagement that ensures sectoral actors have real influence over national decisions, improving the labour market relevance of VET programmes.
- **SSCs leverage underutilised expertise in a cost-effective way.** Relying largely on voluntary participation, the creation of the SSCs has mobilised highly motivated experts who contribute deep professional know-how without imposing significant additional cost.
- **Multi-stakeholder revision processes** for the List of Professions and the Standards which included the SSCs, NAVET expert commissions, and public consultation, support comprehensive and inclusive programme development.

National Agency for VET

- **Simultaneous drafting of State Educational Standards and national examination programmes,** executed by the same team, has the potential to tighten the link between learning outcomes and assessment.
- **Efforts to provide supports that foster consistency and quality of the Standards.** The provision of varied support resources (e.g. common templates, sample tools for fieldwork, tailored guidance and central coordination) to drafting teams for the Standards helps lay a baseline for consistent, evidence-informed drafting, when time allows.

VET schools

- **School-employer collaboration is informing instruction in some cases.** Some schools are leveraging long-term partnerships with employers – often built through student placements – to obtain feedback on teaching content and keep programmes relevant to workplace needs.
- **The use of practitioner teachers increases schools' access to current industry expertise.** Schools are actively sourcing external experts to act as practitioner teachers, using mechanisms such as open calls and established partnerships. This approach can widen the pool of current industry expertise available to students.
- **Short pedagogical training has the potential to support safer and more structured work-based learning.** Brief training sessions for external practitioners are building basic instructional and mentoring skills. This could improve the structure and safety of student placements and classes led by practitioner teachers.

Lessons and recommendations

This section sets out recommendations to further strengthen collaboration mechanisms in Bulgaria's VET system – at both system and school level – so that teaching and learning remain responsive to labour-market needs and sustainable over time. The proposed actions build on evidence from this interim evaluation and aim to be practical. Many steps can be initiated within the current programming period, while others may be most relevant for the design of the next programming period or may require legal or budgetary adjustments to be taken forward in the future. Where the implementation of specific measures falls to actors other than the Executive Agency – such as the Ministry, NAVET, Regional Education Departments (REDs) and VET schools – the Executive Agency, in its role as managing authority, can play a central part in initiating, guiding and supporting these changes. This includes using funding instruments, guidance and monitoring to signal priorities, facilitate coordination and encourage take-up of effective approaches across the system.

The recommendations focus on eight areas: (1) institutionalising SSCs; (2) refining the design of future revisions of the State Educational Standards; (3) strengthening quality-assurance processes; (4) better coordinating the review and implementation of teacher competence profiles; (5) enhancing the process for drafting teaching curricula; (6) providing practical guidance on school-level collaboration; (7) exploring sustainable financial models for student placements; and (8) strengthening project monitoring.

Taken together, these measures aim to embed structured collaboration between the VET system and the labour market, continue to enhance consistency across sectors, and strengthen the relevance of teaching and learning. They also aim to facilitate the participation of different stakeholders and safeguard their independence.

Recommendation 1. Institutionalise the SSCs to continue strengthening the VET system's responsiveness to labour market needs over time

SSCs enjoy strong support, yet two challenges risk undermining their long-term contribution to the VET system. First, several SSCs struggled to attract and retain a balanced mix of members, especially among industry practitioners who may have limited time and less familiarity with public procedures. Second, the current mix of voluntary roles and short labour contracts emerged as a pragmatic response to resource constraints and does not suit all groups: unpaid roles are difficult for many VET and higher education professionals, while labour contracts are often impractical for private-sector experts and may blur independence. Although there is a lot of support for maintaining the SSCs beyond the project, this is not something that has been planned for since their inception. A durable institutional and contracting model is therefore needed to secure participation in the SSCs and their effective functioning over the long term. This can be further supported by stronger guidance, clearer timelines, and safeguards for independence.

Possible action steps to further institutionalise the SSCs before their current mandate ends:

- **Anchor the SSCs in law and formally clarify their role.** The Ministry could helpfully set out the SSCs' permanent status, remit (e.g. updates to the List of Professions, Standards and examination programmes), independence safeguards, selection processes (e.g. composition and term limits) and certain working procedures (e.g. decision-making, documentation, conflict-of-interest rules) through legal and regulatory texts. Establishing a clear legal or regulatory framework for the SSCs in this way would signal continuity, reduce ambiguity about authority, and may help employers and professional bodies justify participation. It can also facilitate more consistent implementation across sectors and foster conditions for lighter, standardised administration.
- **Build a standing recruitment pipeline for SSC members that remains competitive but is easier for industry practitioners to enter.** The Ministry could maintain an ongoing open call as the primary route into the SSCs but redesign the process to make it simpler for all prospective

applicants, with a particular view to facilitating the participation of industry practitioners. This may include short, plain-language forms; a brief statement of experience; and clear time expectations per task or cycle. To enhance visibility, the Ministry could run targeted outreach through employer and professional organisations as well as small and medium enterprises, offering short info sessions and a one-page “how to serve on an SSC” guide, for example. Offering light application support (e.g. a helpdesk contact, sample forms) and recognising employer support in recommendation letters could also facilitate participation. While nominations may continue to be necessary for the hardest-to-fill gaps, they should be a last resort and should apply the same minimum criteria and term limits. Together, these steps can help lower entry barriers for industry practitioners, reduce last-minute searches, and make diversity targets more achievable.

- **Apply a clear contracting model from the start of the recruitment period, with a short menu of options to fit different member profiles and preserve independence.** Where feasible, encourage participation via **employer time-release** whereby companies allocate staff time to undertake SSC duties while maintaining their salary. This approach is common internationally (see Chapter 3, Box 3.1) and supports structured commitment without creating an employment link to the Ministry. For cases where members cannot be released by employers (e.g. the self-employed), the Ministry could enable other contract options. This includes **voluntary engagement**, secured by clear time expectations and modest administrative support; **service contracts** (external expert basis) through an adapted legal route for small, expert assignments that avoids full public procurement; and **labour contracts**, principally intended for public-sector educators. The aim is to provide a small menu of fit-for-purpose options – each with light paperwork and clear time commitments – that help the Ministry to fulfil membership quotas while upholding minimum selection criteria. Although it will require some funding, the reduced workload of SSCs in future years, plus the use of service and labour contracts as second-choice options can help to minimise the financial burden.
- **Strengthen the offer to members through greater clarity, support and recognition.** To facilitate the work of the SSCs, the Ministry could helpfully publish an annual SSC work plan with realistic timelines; provide methodological tools, such as evidence templates or decision checklists; and provide secretariat support for minute-keeping and coordination. Moreover, the Ministry could offer non-financial recognition through formal letters or public acknowledgement, for example, as well as covering basic expenses where possible. Providing clear expectations and practical support in this way can make participation more manageable and help retain members between cycles.
- **Consider extending the SSCs’ remit beyond system-level tasks to a light-touch brokerage role that supports school-employer collaboration, especially in areas with weaker local networks.** SSCs could, in coordination with REDs and employer associations, help identify and engage companies, public services and non-governmental organisations as hosts for student placements or as practitioner teachers; or convene sector “matching” sessions. This would widen the pool of placement hosts without duplicating schools’ responsibilities. The Executive Agency could support this by integrating a broader remit for the SSCs under VET efforts within the next programming period.

Recommendation 2: Review the design of future revisions of the State Educational Standards. This may include facilitating the recruitment of industry practitioners, extending the timeframe and involving SSCs earlier

Experience from the current cycle suggests several design features that could be refined in the next round of revisions for the State Educational Standards. Restrictive team composition criteria, together with the public-procurement route for recruiting drafting teams, short bidding windows and extensive documentation appear to have made it harder for some VET professionals and industry practitioners to apply. Drafting teams then worked to tight timelines, with limited time to research skills needs by profession and to consult

employers. Roles were not always clear regarding who specifies skills by profession, and SSCs were engaged mainly at the review stage, which increased later revisions. While the final standards are currently under preparation, these aspects can be strengthened for future revision cycles.

Possible action steps in designing future revisions of the State Educational Standards:

- **Attract a broader mix of industry practitioners and VET professionals through a more accessible recruitment process.** This requires upholding quality safeguards (e.g. on team qualifications, methodology and documentation) while easing entry for experts. Each team should explicitly require the inclusion of at least one VET teacher and one industry practitioner, with selection criteria designed to value recent practical experience in teaching or industry rather than requiring experience in drafting curricula or Standards from each of the members. NAVET could announce calls earlier and keep them open longer, use plain language, provide a helpdesk contact and sample forms and widely disseminate calls through school networks, employer and professional associations. Where procurement is required, NAVET could apply lighter mechanisms (e.g. rosters or framework agreements) to help reduce the administrative demands both for applicants and those appointing them.
- **Clarify responsibility for specifying skills by profession and provide a shared reference before drafting begins.** It would be helpful to clarify, at the start of each revision round, who develops the sectoral skills outline for each profession and how this is coordinated. Depending on operational constraints, this could be led either by the SSC or by the expert drafting teams for the Standards. If SSC-led, the Council might prepare a short outline (key tasks, tools and competencies) and share it with the expert team before drafting begins. If led by the expert teams, the team could prepare the outline early and seek prompt validation from the SSC. In both cases, the Ministry or NAVET could supply a simple template so outputs are comparable across professions.
- **Protect sufficient time for a focused research and consultation phase.** In future schedules, NAVET could include a defined period (for example 4-6 weeks) for field visits and interviews with industry practitioners. At minimum, realistic evidence expectations (e.g. a small number of company visits and interviews plus a brief review of labour-market information) would help guide expert teams to conduct necessary research. To keep the workload manageable, NAVET could limit the number of Standards assigned to each team at one time.
- **Engage SSCs from the outset and structure collaboration to improve workflow.** NAVET or the Ministry could facilitate earlier communication between SSCs and expert teams, for instance by organising an initial coordination meeting or sharing contact details before the start of the drafting phase. A brief mid-point check could be an opportunity to review the early structure and examples, so major issues are caught early. In return, expert teams could make the review process more accessible to SSCs and other reviewers by preparing brief explanatory summaries alongside the draft Standards.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen quality assurance in the development of VET programmes and qualifications by establishing common content standards and minimum expectations for the use of data

Across revisions of the List of Professions, State Educational Standards, teacher competence profiles and teaching curricula, the project activities relied heavily on individual expert judgement and used labour-market evidence unevenly. Procedures were clear, but shared *content* standards and minimum evidence expectations were not. This made it harder to ensure comparable quality across sectors and to show how decisions were reached. Strengthening quality assurance now – lightly and consistently – would support

more evidence-based choices, clearer documentation, and greater confidence that future updates reflect real skill needs.

Possible action steps for strengthening quality assurance in future revisions:

- **Adopt a concise, cross-cutting quality-assurance framework with common content standards.** The Ministry and NAVET could develop a short framework to apply to entries in the List of Professions, Standards, teacher competence profiles and teaching curricula. This framework could set out a small set of overarching content criteria: (i) labour-market relevance supported by evidence; (ii) appropriate breadth and specificity; (iii) clear progression and pathways; (iv) alignment with European Qualification Framework levels and assessment standards. The framework could also require basic documentation, such as a brief rationale and record of decisions to accompany each output. The aim is to give all sectors the same reference points, so outputs are more comparable and have a transparent reasoning. The Executive Agency could explore the feasibility of including the development of a quality-assurance framework for VET under the next programming period.
- **Set minimum expectations that SSCs and expert drafting teams for the new Standards use labour-market data.** In each revision cycle, the Ministry and NAVET could require SSCs and expert teams for the Standards to provide light-touch documentation explaining which indicators they considered and how these informed choices. Useful examples include the Labour Force Survey and administrative statistics by occupation/field, public employment service information on vacancies and hard-to-fill roles, wage trends, regional employment patterns, findings from employer surveys, sector studies, graduate follow-ups where available, and, as a complement, analyses of online job advertisements. When communicating these minimum expectations to SSCs and drafting teams, the emphasis should be on using data that already exists and triangulating expert judgement with data.
- **Enable better data use by enhancing the organisation of what already exists and easing access.** Going forward, Bulgaria can support SSCs and other drafting teams to integrate more data into their work. For example, the newly established Institute of Education – a specialised agency under the Ministry which conducts various research and information activities – could undertake a mapping of existing datasets, identifying who holds what data, how often they update it, and how users can access it. The Institute could publish this mapping as a simple catalogue for SSCs and drafting teams, covering key sources, such as National Statistical Institute (NSI) statistics, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy/Public Employment Service vacancy data, any available graduate tracer results, and relevant sectoral reports. To support consistent use, the Institute of Education could include basic guidance on interpretation in the catalogue (e.g., definitions, cautions, contact points). The Ministry could coordinate simple data-sharing arrangements between itself, NAVET, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and NSI to reduce barriers to access. For the next programming period, the Executive Agency could consider embedding some of these efforts and more into VET project design. For example, future activities could include developing a single integrated platform for labour market intelligence, developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and employer associations and with secure, formalised data-sharing protocols. This system could support sector-level and regional insights on current and projected skill needs, enabling evidence-based decision making on key aspects of VET governance, including enrolment quota-setting, curriculum updates, and teacher training priorities.
- **Plan to fill priority data gaps over time.** Bulgaria should develop a staged plan to address recurring data gaps. This could include, for example, introducing or strengthening a periodic graduate tracer study for VET, running a light employer/establishment survey module on skills needs, improving routine extraction and classification of vacancy information, and, where

appropriate, piloting the use of online job-advert data as a complementary, timely source. This work may be a collaborative effort between the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (or affiliated agencies), the NSI, and employer associations. These steps can start small, focusing on measures that offer the best cost–benefit for decision-making. This is also something that the Executive Agency could explore for inclusion in the next programming period.

- **Build capacity within the Ministry and NAVET and revise the review processes to check quality early, not only at the end.** Short orientations for SSC members and expert teams, focused on accessing and reading available data, writing evidence-based standards, and applying the quality-assurance criteria, would support consistent practice. Integrating early checkpoints into revision timelines – at the outset and mid-way – could confirm that drafts reflect agreed criteria. Structuring revisions by providing reviewers with a brief checklist indicating where to focus could also be helpful. These changes can keep the process manageable while anchoring decisions in evidence and reducing inefficient re-work.

Recommendation 4: Establish a clear, staged review of teacher competence profiles, integrating feedback from education and industry, and develop a comprehensive implementation plan covering initial and continuous teacher development

SSCs have produced teacher competence profiles in priority areas, but systematic review steps were limited. As a result, profiles may differ in quality, scope and format. Furthermore, it is not yet clear how the new competence profiles will shape teacher preparation and professional development beyond the training planned under Activity 5.3. Two linked improvements would be helpful: a clearer, multi-stakeholder review process to ensure that profiles are consistent, realistic and aligned with national frameworks; and systematic integration into teacher education – both initial programmes and continuing professional development – so that profiles inform training curricula, practicum and upskilling offers in a coherent way.

Possible action steps to strengthen the revision processes for teacher competence profiles:

- **Introduce a staged, structured review process for further teacher profiles drafted in the future.** The review process used for the List of Professions offers a helpful model. That process included several rounds of technical review by NAVET expert commissions and relevant Ministry units, followed by a public consultation. The Ministry could apply a similar approach to the teacher profiles, which would not only strengthen quality assurance but also allow for constructive feedback from a wider group of education and sectoral stakeholders. It would be important to ensure broad participation among training providers (both initial and continuous) and the profession itself. In doing so, it could help ensure that the profiles are realistic, relevant, and well-grounded in both policy and practice while at the same time helping to engage potential end-users early on.
- **Embed the approved profiles in initial teacher education (ITE).** A more structured downstream process could make the new competence profiles genuinely influential. For the 26 new profiles which have been approved (as of December 2025), the Ministry could revise the official qualification requirements for vocational teachers by upgrading the State Educational Standard for teacher qualifications. The Ministry can then formally communicate the revised frameworks to all accredited ITE providers. On that basis, training institutions can update their curricula to reflect the new requirements. This typically involves mapping each new competence to a dedicated module and identifying gaps in current provision, formulating revised learning outcomes, and adjusting practicum expectations accordingly. The National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency could support this process by requesting a matrix that shows how updated curricula address each competence before formally approving them.
- **Use the new profiles to frame continued professional development (CPD) of in-service teachers and provide clear incentives and recognition.** To encourage uptake, the Ministry

could integrate CPD linked to the new profiles within the national CPD framework (e.g. inclusion of modular workplace training under Ordinance 15, so that hours count towards the 48-hour requirement per attestation cycle). The Ministry could also issue clear guidance to REDs and schools to schedule protected time for CPD - through timetable cover or designated CPD days - to avoid clashes with teaching. Modest logistical support (e.g. travel or meal allowances) would further reduce participation barriers. Certificates from profile-aligned modules could be formally acknowledged in appraisal and career progression, and – where deeper learning is needed – stackable modules could lead to micro-credentials agreed with higher-education partners. The REDs could actively communicate these incentives to teachers so that the value of participation is well understood and widely recognised. There is scope for the Executive Agency to include related efforts within the VET measures planned for the next programming period.

Recommendation 5: For the development of teaching curricula, clarify the composition of drafting teams and strengthen the support they receive, including establishing a multi-staged review process

Allowing selected VET schools to coordinate the revision of Ministry-published model curricula and subject programmes offers flexibility in assembling drafting teams and inviting external contributors. However, while selection criteria have since been made public, the basis for selecting coordinating schools was not documented in this cycle, and it is unclear to what extent participating schools had well-established professional networks to draw on. In October 2025, the Ministry provided a conceptual framework for linking curricula to State Educational Standards and national examination programmes, but practical tools and structured support for school drafting teams are lacking. As a result, teams may be required to rely heavily on professional judgment, creating scope for uneven practice across sectors. Moreover, tight review timelines suggest that in-depth review may not be feasible. Strengthening transparency of school selection, providing practical design tools and support for drafting teams, and implementing a staged review process would help ensure quality outputs and improve consistency with the List of Professions, State Educational Standards, and examination programmes.

Possible action steps to strengthen the ongoing process for revising teaching curricula:

- **Make the selection of coordinating schools and drafting team composition more transparent, even retrospectively.** The Ministry could publish a short note explaining how criteria were applied when choosing schools to coordinate the teaching curricula revision process (e.g. sector coverage, prior experience, regional balance, and capacity to coordinate a team, including with good representation from industry practitioners). Where nominations were used, the same criteria could apply. Selected schools could submit a one-page plan describing team composition and timelines. While guidelines already require the participation of at least one teacher, drafting teams could also include at least one external sector representative (e.g. an industry practitioner), identified with the support of SSCs. Simple templates for selection and team composition would promote consistency while allowing schools flexibility to organise locally.
- **Strengthen practical guidance and support for school drafting teams.** The Ministry could complement existing guidelines with practical tools for core design tasks such as curriculum sequencing, linking each learning outcome to the specific part of the State Educational Standards it fulfils, and balancing academic and practical content. Sharing sample curricula as reference models would help teams see the expected structure, understand how design principles work in practice, and judge the scope and depth of their own drafts. The Ministry could also explore options to accompany these materials with hands-on training through interactive workshops or webinars. Finally, quick-reference materials, such as checklists and visual guides summarising key steps, could also be developed to support teams during both drafting and review stages.

- **Adapt the existing plan for reviewing the draft curricula into a staged review process with clear steps for quality assurance.** While the Ministry has outlined a review approach in its documents, this could be strengthened by embedding good practices for quality assurance outlined in Recommendation 3. For example, the review process could include an initial exchange with the SSC to confirm scope and practical orientation, followed by a first review to check alignment with the new Standards and national examination programmes, and a second review inviting sector comments (via the SSCs) on feasibility and workplace relevance. Short checklists for reviewers (e.g. links to outcomes in the Standards, progression, and practical content) and a brief record of how comments were addressed would support transparency. Indicative timelines and a single register for approved versions could also be maintained by the Ministry to make processes clearer and ensure the latest curricula are easy to locate. Opportunities for review or consultation with other key stakeholders including VET professionals and learners would also be helpful. This is likely to require an extension to the planned timeline.

Recommendation 6: Provide further guidance to schools on good practice for collaborating with external practitioners from business and non-governmental organisations

Activity 5 offers a valuable bridge between schools and the labour market, but implementation is at an early stage and practice varies. The practitioner-teacher component (5.1) has strong potential and is welcomed by schools, but implementation would benefit from clearer guidance on scheduling, delivery format, and expected outcomes. Schools report uncertainty about how best to use mentoring trainings (5.2). Strengthening guidance for them on how to combine mentoring and pedagogical preparation could better support intended outcomes, ensuring that both learners and practitioner teachers benefit fully from these collaborations. Meanwhile, uptake of workplace training for teachers (5.3) is limited, potentially due to a lack of incentives and timetable pressures. Short, practical guidance for schools – paired with clearer and formal recognition for participation in trainings – would help schools and partners plan collaborations confidently and achieve more consistent results.

Possible action steps to strengthen guidance for involving external experts within the current project implementation period:

- **Clarify the intent and delivery of practitioner-teaching (Activity 5.1).** The Ministry could issue a concise guidance note setting out the purpose of practitioner-teaching, its expected link to the State Educational Standards and curriculum, and the respective roles of the school, the practitioner teacher and a potential supervising teacher. Guidance could also outline workable scheduling formats (e.g. weekly sessions or short intensive blocks), options for delivery on school premises or at the workplace, and simple expectations for preparation, safety and student feedback. To support implementation during the current project period, the Ministry could also provide model documents, such as a short session plan and a basic cooperation agreement, to help schools and companies organise activities consistently while leaving room for local adaptation.
- **Frame mentoring trainings for external experts (Activity 5.2) around core pedagogical aims.** To support a shared understanding across schools, the Ministry could usefully develop guidance for Activity 5.2, which could describe the main objectives of the trainings (e.g. structuring a practical lesson, supporting diverse learners, assessment basics, safety and inclusion) and suggested delivery formats (brief workshops, observation with feedback, or paired teaching with a full-time teacher). Indicating how the trainings connect to practitioner-teaching under 5.1 – and what follow-up support is available – would also help schools plan coherent packages. Finally, the Ministry could prepare a short outline of quality indicators (clear objectives, observed practice, brief reflection) to assist providers without introducing heavy procedures.

- **Organise peer-learning opportunities for schools to exchange experiences of collaboration and address shared challenges.** The Ministry, through its REDs, could organise either online or in-person meetings during which participating schools can share experiences of implementing Activity 5. Scheduling these exchanges at the midpoint of implementation allows schools to share insights based on accumulated experience, while leaving sufficient time to adjust practices before the cycle ends. These sessions could be structured around key themes (e.g. scheduling practitioner-teaching, mentoring approaches). The Ministry can then also use insights from these exchanges to update and refine the guidance on each sub-activity; the guidance could be illustrated by documented examples of shared practices. Disseminating these examples widely across the school network could promote more consistency and help scale innovative models.

Recommendation 7: Explore sustainable options for supporting student placements in the long term, including new approaches to financing, timing and recruiting host organisations

Student practices are widely valued for strengthening links between schools and employers and for improving the practical relevance of teaching. Under the current model, the 240-hour student placements are accompanied by EU-funded financial incentives, which raises questions about sustainability once project funding ends. As participation increases, compensating students through national finances may not be the most efficient use of public resources. Moreover, scheduling placements outside school hours, as is currently the case, increases expectations for compensation and adds organisational complexity. International practice suggests that extended placements can be integrated into vocational programmes and financed in different ways. In Bulgaria, a structured exploration of alternatives would help maintain access and quality, with particular attention to disadvantaged learners and regions with limited employer capacity.

Possible action steps to ensure continuity in student practices before the current funding period ends:

- **Identify or establish a multi-stakeholder working group to develop and test options for alternative financing and organisational models.** The Ministry could helpfully convene a time-bound working group that includes NAVET, REDs, employer associations and school representatives. This could be within an existing forum such as the **Consultative Council, which brings together** REDs, employer associations and school representatives. Alternatively, the Ministry could create a dedicated forum or ad hoc working group. The chosen body would be responsible for coordinating the design, costing and, where feasible, piloting of alternative financing and organisational models (see below). Ideally, this group would aim to publish evidence-based guidance on how to support student placements in the future, one year ahead of the conclusion of Programme “Education” (i.e. by 2030), allowing schools and employers to plan with greater certainty.
- **Rebalance financing towards targeted supports.** The Ministry could explore and develop future financing models that reserve direct financial assistance for students for whom participation in the placements imposes financial or logistical barriers. This could include, for example, financial support to cover transport or meals for disadvantaged learners, support for students with disabilities, or additional costs incurred by those living in remote areas. The Ministry could also helpfully design sample measures to facilitate voluntary employer contributions, for example, by providing model agreements that allow companies to offer allowances or in-kind support, without creating an expectation of universal payment.
- **Integrate the 240-hour student practices into vocational curricula time, at least partially.** Following international examples, the Ministry could explore options to integrate the 240-

hour student placements into the timetable and make them a mandatory part of the curriculum. This could be implemented through, for example, regular day-release during school weeks or short block placements within term time, which would help ensure that work experience forms part of the learning programme rather than competing with students' free time. Such an approach could further increase participation and reduce expectations of **financial compensation**. **However, it will also require streamlining existing vocational curricula, which are often seen as overloaded and overly theoretical by both teachers and students.** Mixed approaches - where part of the practice takes place during curricula time and another part during school vacations – could also be explored, in consultation with employers, VET professionals and students. In regions with limited employer capacity, minimum hour expectations could be met through staggered placement periods during the year, complemented, where appropriate, by simulated practice while additional hosts are identified.

- **Broaden the pool of placement hosts through structured partnerships at national and regional level and stronger supports.** SSCs and employer associations could play a role in helping to identify and engage small and medium-sized enterprises, public services and non-governmental organisations as potential hosts. Moreover, regional coordination – through REDs working with local chambers and municipal services – could facilitate matching, share examples of workable schedules, and encourage multi-employer arrangements that suit smaller firms. The Ministry could lead this effort by developing national-level guidance and tools, such as simple cooperation templates, clear information on insurance and health-and-safety expectations, and brief onboarding materials for supervisors. All of these could help to facilitate the recruitment of first-time hosts. The Ministry could also ensure public recognition of participating employers and establish light-touch feedback mechanisms, which could help sustain participation over time. This will require ongoing efforts that can start now but the Executive Agency could also take this into account when designing VET efforts for the next programming period.

Recommendation 8: Strengthen the monitoring tools for Modernisation of VET to drive learning and effectiveness in the second half of the implementation period

In addition to technical and financial reporting tools, the Executive Agency has introduced a monitoring questionnaire to track progress in project implementation. However, as it is currently designed, the questionnaire is principally oriented towards monitoring the implementation of activities, with less emphasis on outcome-level data which could allow for a clearer assessment of their effects on VET quality or labour-market alignment.

Possible action steps to strengthen the monitoring questionnaire for the current programming period:

- **Expand the monitoring questionnaire to capture both intermediate outcomes and longer-term effects across the project's main activities.** The Executive Agency could revise and expand the monitoring questionnaire to complement existing activity-based indicators with outcome-oriented measures. These should be explicitly linked to the project's theory of change so that they show whether the project activities are achieving their intended effects. The tool could be expanded to cover at least some outcome measures for each of the nine project activities – distinguishing between intermediate results during implementation and longer-term changes in VET performance. Example indicators that could usefully provide insight into the effectiveness of activities include student performance trends and employer satisfaction with curriculum relevance (see Annex D). Intermediate outcomes should include a quality dimension that assesses the strength and quality of implementation processes. For example, employer engagement in curriculum design, durability of partnerships, and student satisfaction with training. Monitoring data could then be used not only for compliance but as a tool for learning, supporting the analysis of

results mid-way through implementation and discussions with beneficiaries on what is working well and what might need adjustments. Insights from these reviews could feed back into programme design, helping refine implementation and improve relevance over time.

- **Shift from using some total-count indicators to consistently using percentage shares to support comparability across schools.** The Executive Agency could revise the questionnaire to consistently use proportions or percentages (see Annex D). For example, the indicator currently defined as “Number of vocational training classes that are trained according to updated curricula in the school” could easily be adjusted to “Share of vocational training classes that are trained according to updated curricula in the school.”

Table 4.1. Overview of key recommendations and their evidence base

Recommendation	Main finding	Rationale	See more
Institutionalise the SSCs to continue strengthening the VET system's responsiveness to labour market needs over time.	Securing qualified industry practitioners with sufficient availability proved challenging for some sectors and the most suitable contracting model to secure the SSCs long-term is still unclear.	SSCs enjoy strong stakeholder support, a clear mandate to improve labour market alignment, and are highly relevant to addressing challenges in Bulgaria's VET system. While the competitive recruitment and selection process run by the Ministry ensured that appointed SSC members had a minimum standard of relevant professional expertise and experience, SSC coordinators encountered challenges appointing suitable industry practitioners resulting in this group being underrepresented. While there is a clear will to ensure the sustainability of the SSCs, the current hybrid contracting model of both voluntary engagement and short-term labour contracts is not intended as a long-term solution and may make it harder to secure predictable time commitments for more demanding tasks in the future.	Findings 1-5
Review the design of future revisions of the State Educational Standards. This may include facilitating the recruitment of industry practitioners, extending the timeframe, and involving SSCs earlier.	Criteria for the composition of drafting teams and the use of public procurement process for appointing them appears to have introduced some barriers to the participation of industry practitioners and VET professionals, limiting practical orientation.	Composition rules for drafting teams for the State Educational Standards reserved most positions for education specialists or academics with prior experience in authoring curricula and standards, with no explicit requirement for practising VET teachers. Meanwhile, public procurement requirements – short bidding windows, complex documentation, and lengthy contracting – added further barriers, particularly for stakeholders less familiar with such procedures. These factors contributed to an overrepresentation of academics and consultants, reducing opportunities for more practical input.	Finding 10
	SSCs were involved too late in the drafting process, limiting their ability to influence content and contributing to a lengthy, inefficient review process.	The delayed involvement of SSCs in the drafting process limited their ability to address gaps in skills coverage, unrealistic requirements, or progression issues. In the OECD's Survey of Sectoral Skills Councils (SSC Survey) only 25% of respondents reported early contact with drafting teams, and most felt poorly informed about revisions. Late involvement contributed to extensive changes, creating inefficiencies and heavy workloads. International practice emphasises early and sustained stakeholder engagement to shape standards effectively.	Finding 11
Strengthen quality assurance in the development of VET programmes and qualifications by establishing common content standards and minimum expectations for the use of data.	Some limitations in the support provided to SSCs and the absence of a common framework for quality assurance during the revision of the List of Professions may have reduced coherence across sectors and limited use of labour market data.	Although members participating in the SSC Survey reported high levels of satisfaction in the support they received from the Ministry and NAVET, the evaluation team identified the absence of a common framework for quality assurance. This resulted in a heavy reliance on individual judgment, with no requirement to use labour market data or structured tools such as occupational analysis or employer consultations. This inhibited consistency and coherence at the national level across sectors.	Finding 7
	The initial draft Standards were widely considered low quality, with overly academic content, for example.	Weaknesses in the drafts stemmed from limited research and consultation. Expert teams often skipped occupational analysis and field engagement, relying instead on legislation or previous curricula. Compressed timelines and the absence of sectoral skills mapping further constrained meaningful research, despite NAVET providing guidance and templates.	Finding 11
Establish a clear, staged	The review of teacher competence	The review of teacher profiles typically involved only the SSC coordinator within the Ministry. There was no requirement for	Finding

review of teacher competence profiles, integrating feedback from education and industry, and develop a comprehensive implementation plan covering initial and continuous teacher development.	profiles was limited, reducing opportunities to obtain broader feedback and build stakeholder support.	consultation with external experts, validation by NAVET structures, or broader stakeholder engagement from teachers and teacher educators. Without such input, important dimensions such as technical accuracy, pedagogical realism, and alignment with national frameworks may not have been fully addressed. Experience across OECD countries suggests that teacher competence profiles are most effective when they are treated as shared professional standards that are co-developed and socialised across the system.	14
	Current plans for implementing the profiles are unclear and narrowly focused on short in-service training, limiting their potential to shape teacher practice.	The modular workplace-based training under Activity 5.3 is innovative but insufficient for system-wide implementation of the teacher competence profiles: it does not reach trainee teachers and participation among in-service teachers is limited to those in schools participating in the project. Furthermore, it has not yet been specified how profiles will be embedded in qualification requirements or communicated to accredited teacher training providers including higher education institutions. Without a comprehensive and staged implementation plan, the profiles risk remaining high-level documents rather than practical tools for teacher development.	Finding 15
For the development of teaching curricula, clarify the composition of drafting teams and strengthen the support they receive, including establishing a multi-staged review process.	School-led drafting of teaching curricula offers flexibility, but gaps in guidance and review, as currently planned, may inhibit the quality of final outputs.	The Ministry has prepared guidelines outlining a formal framework for school selection and team composition for the drafting of new teaching curricula. However, the Ministry published selection criteria after the appointment of school drafting teams, and there is no public documentation of how they selected schools. Although the guidelines offer a conceptual framework for linking curriculum development to the State Educational Standards and national examination programmes, and general recommendations on balancing academic and practical elements, for example, the Ministry has not yet provided clear criteria or examples illustrating what this might look like in practice. As currently planned, the review process exhibits a short timeframe and limited stakeholder involvement; this may constrain the depth of feedback and eventual quality of the outputs.	Finding 16
Provide further guidance to schools on good practice for collaborating with external practitioners from business and non-governmental organisations.	Schools value the involvement of practitioner teachers and mentoring workshops for external practitioners from business or non-governmental organisations, but practices vary due to limited guidance.	By August 2025, over 220 practitioner teacher contracts were initiated and nearly 1,000 external practitioners trained through mentoring workshops, strengthening school-employer links and the practical orientation of instruction. However, interviews with school staff reveal uncertainty about scheduling and roles, inconsistent use of mentoring workshops, unclear incentives for practitioner teachers and employers, and low uptake of workplace training for teachers due to a lack of perceived relevance and incentivisation.	Findings 17-19
Explore sustainable options for supporting student placements in the long term, including new approaches to financing, timing, and recruiting host organisations.	The 240-hour student placements strengthen school-employer links but the current funding model is unlikely to be sustainable.	The implementation of 240-hour student placements has exceeded interim implementation targets thus far, with evidence indicating that it is helping to improve student motivation and school-employer collaboration. However, universal financial incentives for students may not be sustainable without EU support. Bulgaria's approach of scheduling placements outside instruction time is unusual in international comparison and reinforces payment expectations. Meanwhile, guaranteeing placements for all students remains challenging in certain regions.	Finding 20
Strengthen the monitoring tools for <i>Modernisation of VET</i> to drive learning and effectiveness in the second half of the implementation period.	The introduction of a monitoring questionnaire for the project improves implementation tracking, but its current design does not assess the impact of activities at school or system level.	The monitoring questionnaire tracks the implementation of activities but focuses on procedural indicators expressed in absolute numbers. This limits comparability, particularly across schools of different sizes, for example, and does not capture outcomes such as changes in teaching practice, student learning, or employer engagement. The questionnaire also currently omits dimensions critical for assessing systemic change, including the quality and sustainability of VET-employer collaborations.	Finding 23

Annex A. Survey for Sectoral Skills Councils members 2025 – responses

In May-June 2025, the OECD administered an online survey to all members of Bulgaria's Sectoral Skills Councils (SSCs). The survey, delivered via LimeSurvey, was sent to 218 SSC members, who had three weeks to respond. The OECD evaluation team received 111 responses, representing a response rate of 51%.

The OECD's *Survey of Sectoral Skills Councils* combined fixed-response and open-ended questions to capture perspectives on the profile and functioning of SSC representatives, as well as the process for development and revisions of key components of the VET reference framework, including the List of Professions for VET, State Educational Standards, teacher competence profiles and teaching curricula. Headline results from the fixed-response questions are summarised in the tables below, presented as the total number of responses.

Table A.1. Do you have a labour contract for working on the Sectoral Skills Council? (Question 7)

Yes, I have a formal labour contract related to this role	76
No, I participate under a voluntary arrangement	34
Other	2

Table A.2. How did you first hear about the invitation of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) to join the SSC? (Question 8)

I was contacted personally by a professional organisation (employer association, trade union etc.) or their representatives	31
I received a newsletter or group email from a professional association (employer association, trade union etc.)	10
Word of mouth – from someone within my own company, school or university	13
Word of mouth – from someone outside my own company, school or university	9
I found the invitation on the MES' website myself	29
I found the invitation on a different website myself	1
Other	18

Table A.3. Were you supported/nominated to join an SSC by a professional organisation? (Question 9)

Yes, I was supported by an employer association	16
Yes, I was supported by a different professional organisation (e.g. industry body, trade union)	16
Yes, I was supported by an educational institution	25
Yes, I was supported by a public authority or government body	3
No, I applied independently (without organisational support letters)	42
I did not go through the application process – I was invited directly by the MES	9

Table A.4. Which of the following criteria identified by the MES for SSC experts do you fulfil? (Question 10)

	Yes, I fully satisfy this requirement	Yes, I partially satisfy this requirement	No, I do not satisfy this requirement
Higher education degree in a relevant field	94	10	7
VET qualification in a relevant field or a master craftsman's certificate	69	16	26

At least three years of experience in a relevant professional field	107	1	3
Additional qualifications and/or certifications	92	11	8
Experience in projects related to VET and employment promotion	66	29	16
Awards for high achievements in the fields of VET, science, or business	41	17	53
Academic or applied research in the field of VET (as author or co-author)	29	25	57
Experience in developing curricula and training programmes for VET (as author or co-author)	56	31	24
Experience in developing teaching materials for VET (as author or co-author)	38	37	36
Experience in developing national exam syllabi in VET specialisations (as author or co-author)	44	19	48
Experience in developing State Educational Standards (SES) for qualification in a profession	33	32	46
Experience as a reviewer of diploma projects, State Educational Standards, national exam syllabi, or teaching materials	50	29	32
[For business representatives] Participation in partnerships or joint activities with vocational schools or higher education institutions	44	21	46
[For educational representatives] Participation in partnerships or joint activities with employers	66	15	30

Table A.5. What do you hope to gain from your work in the SSC? (Question 11)

	Yes	No
I hope to contribute to improving the quality of VET in Bulgaria, and a better skilled workforce	110	1
I hope to have more qualified graduates for my business / enhanced outcomes for my students	56	61
I hope to maintain or improve the good reputation of my business / school / organisation	55	56
I hope to increase awareness of my business / school / organisation within the sector or public	21	90
I hope to enhance my own professional skills and network	15	96
I hope to increase my own visibility and recognition in the sector	10	101

I value the additional financial remuneration	5	106
Other	1	0

Table A.6. During periods where the SSC was actively working, how often were you in email contact with the other SSC members? (Question 13)

Almost daily (4-5 times per week)	2-3 times per week	Once a week	Several times a month	Once a month or less
29	37	10	15	5

Table A.7. How did your SSC decide which professions to propose for the new List of Professions? (Question 14)

A bottom-up approach (e.g. each member contributed their own opinions and perspectives. We then aggregated and reconciled these individual perspectives)	A systematic approach (e.g. we established key criteria, like past vacancy statistics, and then applied these to determine which professions to include)	Other
58	27	12

Table A.8. Did your SSC use any data to inform the new List of professions for your sector? (Question 15)

Yes, we consulted key individual statistics	Yes, we consulted key datasets (such as employer surveys)	No specific data were used
31	35	31

Table A.9. How would you describe member participation in your SSC's work on the List of Professions? (Question 17)

Everyone contributed actively	Most members contributed actively	A few members dominated the process	Participation was low overall	I am not sure
27	43	20	5	4

Table A.10. How would you judge the support and guidance you received from NAVET and/or the Ministry before and during the process where your SSC drafted the new list? (Question 18)

Very satisfactory	Mostly Satisfactory	Neutral	Mostly unsatisfactory	Very unsatisfactory
39	39	14	3	1

Table A.11. To what extent do you feel that this final List reflects the list that your SSC created? (Question 19a)

It fully reflects the list proposed by the SSC	It reflects the list proposed by the SSC, with minimal changes which don't affect the substance	It reflects the list proposed by the SSC, with moderate changes affecting the substance	It reflects the list proposed by the SSC, with heavy changes affecting the substance	It does not reflect the list at all
54	24	6	5	0

Table A.12. Please rate your agreement with the following statement: “I feel well-informed about the process of revising the State Educational Standards, as coordinated by NAVET.” (Question 21)

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
27	34	18	1	11

Table A.13. Have you had any direct contact with the expert team tasked with developing the State Educational Standards for your sector? (Question 22)

Yes, by email	Yes, in a meeting (online / in-person / phone)	No
8	29	54

Table A.14. Did your first direct contact with the authors happen before or after they submitted the draft? (Question 22a)

Before they submitted the draft	After they submitted the draft
23	14

Table A.15. To your knowledge, what is the current state of the revision of standards for your sector? (Question 23)

The expert team has not yet been recruited / has not yet started work	The expert team has started work but the SSC has not yet received draft standards	SSC has received draft standards, but not yet provided feedback	SSC has provided feedback on submitted draft standards	Don't know
9	27	11	33	11

Table A.16. Please rate the quality of the draft standards that you received according to the following criteria (Question 24)

	Very poor	Poor	Fair	Good	Very good	Cannot judge
Relevance to sector needs: The draft reflects the actual skills and competences required in the sector	3	6	6	8	9	1
Alignment with labour market trends: The draft incorporates emerging trends and anticipated future skill needs in the sector	2	4	9	8	9	1
Practical orientation: The draft focuses sufficiently on practical skills rather than only theoretical knowledge	3	3	11	7	8	1
Clarity and understandability: The draft is clearly written and understandable to VET practitioners and employers	5	7	7	6	8	0
Appropriate academic difficulty: The level of difficulty is appropriate for VET programmes and students	1	4	8	7	10	3
Consistency with VET structure: The draft respects logical progression (e.g., second-degree qualifications build appropriately on first-degree qualifications)	4	2	9	9	8	1
Sector-specific digital competences: The digital competences included are specific and relevant to the sector	3	4	9	9	7	1
Sector-specific green competences: The green competences included are specific and relevant to the sector	1	3	9	12	8	0
Completeness and coverage: The draft covers all essential occupational tasks, skills, and knowledge areas for the profession	4	5	8	6	9	1
Feasibility of implementation: The draft standards could realistically be delivered by VET providers (considering existing resources, facilities, teacher skills)	4	4	5	10	8	2

Table A.17. To what extent do you think the feedback your SSC provided will be or already has been considered in the revision of the draft standards? (Question 24b)

Fully considered and integrated	Partially considered	Not at all	Not applicable (no reply to feedback received yet)
15	14	1	3

Table A.18. Please rate your agreement with the following statement: “The SSCs are appropriately engaged and consulted in the process of revising the state educational standards.” (Question 25)

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
24	32	19	12	4

Table A.19. In your view, who should be designing the state educational standards? (Question 26)

Open teams hired through a public procurement process	Businesses and employers	NGOs	VET schools	Universities	SSCs	Other
23	3	1	12	4	28	20

Table A.20. Has your SSC been asked to draft one or several new teacher competence profiles? (Question 28)

Yes	Yes, several	No
69	11	11

Table A.21. What criteria do you think are the most important when designing the teacher competence profiles for your sector? (Question 30)

	Sector-specific skills and knowledge	Practical experience and hands-on skills	Alignment with the state educational standards	Digital competences specific to the sector	Green skills specific to the sector	Ability to adapt to changing labour market needs	Pedagogical skills and classroom management	Teacher professionalism (e.g. professional development and collaboration)
Rank 1	63	8	3	1	0	6	3	7

Rank 2	11	30	14	7	0	12	8	9
Rank 3	5	7	9	9	2	20	16	23
Rank 4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rank 5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rank 6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rank 7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rank 8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table A.22. Please rate your agreement with the following statements (Question 31)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The SSC has the right skills and competences to be designing the teacher competence profiles	12	28	13	10	28
The SSC has the right skills and competences to be designing the teacher competence profiles	16	25	16	13	21

Table A.23. How long do you envisage staying as a member of the SSC (Question 33)

I will just finish the current round of activities and then stop	I will/want to stay at least one more year	I will/want to stay at least for the next revision round in 5 years	I will/want to stay longer than 5 years
26	8	36	21

Table A.24. Which contracting model would you prefer for future SSC engagements? (Question 34)

Labour contract	Voluntary arrangement	External contract	I don't wish to continue, regardless of contract
45	12	26	8

Table A.25. What, if anything, prevents you from accepting a labour contract? (Question 34a)

	I am legally not allowed to accept a labour contract (e.g. given existing contracts; due to another job)	I prefer to stay independent / I prefer not to be formally employed by a public institution	I prefer to stay flexible with my time commitment	Prefer not to say	Other
Yes	11	11	22	1	3

No	27	27	16	37	0
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Table A.26. If the SSCs continued operating but only with honorary appointments (i.e. without payment), would you be willing to continue to participate? (Question 35)

No, time or financial constraints prevent me from working in the SSC without payment	Yes, I would be happy to work in the SSC in the future even unpaid	No, I would not work in the SSC in the future, regardless of payment
39	42	10

Table A.27. What would help you continue to contribute effectively in the SSC in future years? (Question 36)

	Financial compensation	Better tools or systems for communication/ collaboration	More structured guidance and expectations	Longer deadlines for preparing or revising materials	More data or technical support	Better recognition (outside financial remuneration)	Other
Yes	35	21	30	42	14	12	5
No	56	70	61	49	77	79	0

Annex B. Key indicators for monitoring the Modernisation of Vocational Education and Training project

This Annex provides an overview of the monitoring framework for the *Modernisation of Vocational Education and Training (VET)* project. It presents key performance indicators (KPIs) and activity-level measures used to track project outputs, outcomes, and quality dimensions. In the table, indicators are categorised as follows:

- *Output indicators* capture the immediate deliverables produced through project activities. They reflect tangible products or actions completed, such as updated curricula, revised standards, or developed digital content.
- *Intermediate outcome indicators* measure short- to medium-term changes that occur as a result of these outputs. They signal progress towards the project's intended results, for example increases in student re-enrolment after dropout, teacher uptake of new pedagogical practices, or the strengthening of school–employer partnerships.
- *Final outcome indicators* capture the long-term results that the project ultimately seeks to influence. They reflect sustained improvements at learner, school, system, or societal level, such as higher student achievement, improved completion rates, enhanced equity in learning outcomes, or better alignment of skills with labour market needs.
- *Quality indicators* assess whether the outputs produced meet expected standards (see Table B.2). They focus on the adequacy, relevance, and compliance of deliverables – for example, the ratio of approved versus unapproved digital materials.

Table B.1. Key performance indicators (KPIs) indicators for Modernisation of VET

Indicator	Target 2024		Target 2027		Type
	Region in transition	Less developed regions	Region in transition	Less developed regions	
Participants with lower secondary education or below (ISCED 0–2)	1 242	7 035	6 480	36 717	Output
Updated professions and specialties from VET List and State Educational Standards (at least 10 occupational fields)	Qualitative target: ≥10 occupational fields				Output
Participants with lower secondary education or below (ISCED 0–2)	1 242	7 035	6 480	36 717	Output
Participants with lower secondary education or below (ISCED 0–2)	1 242	7 035	6 480	36 717	Output
Participants with lower secondary education or below (ISCED 0–2)	1 242	7 035	6 480	36 717	Output
Students at risk of dropping out enrolled in additional education/flexible pathways	/	/	/	7 243	Intermediate Outcome

Students completing additional activities and student practices in real working environments	/	/	/	35 954	Intermediate Outcome
Participants from minorities (incl. marginalised groups)	111	632	582	3 297	Output
Teachers/vocational trainers trained under the operation	88	500	441	2 501	Output
Schools teaching according to modernised curricula 2 years after introduction	/	/	/	300	Final outcome
Pupils/students who started looking for a job (within or 6 months after operation)	/	/	3 564	20 194	Final outcome
Participants engaged in education or training when leaving the operation	/	/	1 082	6 134	Final outcome
Participants who qualify upon leaving the operation	/	/	441	2 501	Final outcome
Trained pedagogical specialists applying modern digital technologies 1 year post-qualification	/	/	441	2 501	Intermediate outcome
Participants employed when leaving the operation (incl. self-employed)	/	/	2 592	14 687	Final outcome

Source: Authors own based on Executive Agency “Programme Education” (EAPE, 2022^[1]), Conditions for Application under a direct grant procedure BG05SFPR001-3.001 “Modernisation of VET”, https://www.eufunds.bg/sites/default/files/uploads/opseig/docs/2022-12/01_Guidelines-Modernization%20of%20VET-19122022.pdf (accessed 17 December, 2025).

Table B.2. Indicators collected through the monitoring questionnaire for assessing progress of Modernisation of VET

Activities under Modernisation of VET	Category	Indicator Description	Type
Activity 1	List of Professions for VET	Number of professions proposed by Sectoral Skills Councils (SSCs) to the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) for removal from the State Standards for VET	Output
		Number of specialties proposed by SSCs to MES for removal from the State Standards for VET	Output
		Number of professions approved by MES for removal from the State Standards for VET	Output
		Number of specialties approved by MES for removal from the State Standards for VET	Output
		Number of professions proposed by SSCs for updating	Output
		Number of specialties proposed by SSCs for updating	Output
	Approvals for update of professions/specialties	Number of professions approved by MES for updating	Output
		Number of specialties approved by MES for updating	Output
	Curriculum and State Education Standards	Number of updated State Education Standards proposed by SSCs	Output
		Number of updated State Education Standards approved by MES	Output
		Number of updated curricula and programmes proposed by SSCs	Output
		Number of updated curricula and programmes approved by MES	Output
	National examination programmes	Number of updated national examination programmes proposed by SSCs	Output
		Number of updated national examination programmes approved by MES	Output
Activity 1, 2	Curriculum implementation	Number of vocational training classes that are trained according to updated curricula and training plans in the school within the project for the 2022/2023 school year	Output/ Intermediate Outcome
All activities	Student reintegration/retention	Number of students who returned to school after previously dropping out (Grades VIII-XII) in the respective school year	Intermediate Outcome
		Number of students who remained enrolled in Grades VIII-XII	Intermediate

		in the respective school for the school year	Outcome
Activity 4	Development of digital education content	Number of developed/adapted electronic lessons in general education subjects	Output
		Number of developed e-textbooks	Output
		Number of developed e-aids in academic subjects	Output
		Number of educational applications and games developed	Output
		Number of tests developed	Output
		Number of other forms of digital educational content developed	Output
		Total number of developed forms of digital educational content	Output
		Number of unapproved electronic lessons, e-textbooks, e-aids, apps, games, tests, and other content	Output
		Ratios between approved and unapproved content by type (e-lessons, e-textbooks, e-aids, apps/games, tests)	Quality indicator
Activity 5	School-employer partnerships	Established partnerships between schools and employers (business, science, public, NGO sectors) across years of implementation	Output
		Growth of partnerships between schools and employers compared to the base year 2021/2022	Intermediate Outcome
Activity 8	Student academic performance	Average grade on the State Matriculation Exam in vocational subjects for the 2021-2022 (base year) and for each year during the project implementation period	Intermediate Outcome

Note: The table presents the full list of indicators included in the monitoring questionnaire. Activities 1, 2, 5 and 8 are considered within the scope of this evaluation. Activity 4 is not included within the scope of this evaluation. Some activities do not have defined indicators.

Source: Authors' own based on Executive Agency "Programme Education" (2022^[2]), *Questionnaire for monitoring the implementation of the project*, unpublished.

References

- EAPE (2022), *Conditions for Application under a direct grant procedure BG05SFPR001-3.001 "Modernisation of VET"*,
https://www.eufunds.bg/sites/default/files/uploads/opseig/docs/2022-12/01_Guidelines-Modernization%20of%20VET-19122022.pdf (accessed on 17 December 2025). [1]
- EAPE (2022), *Questionnaire for monitoring the implementation of the project*, unpublished. [2]

Annex C. List of project documents consulted

Table C.1. Modernisation of Vocational Education and Training (VET) project documents consulted in the evaluation process

Document Title	Original Document Title	Date	Source
Conditions for Application under a direct grant procedure BG05SFPR001-3.001 "Modernisation of VET"	Условия за кандидатстване по процедура за директно финансиране BG05SFPR001-3.001 „Модернизация на професионалното образование и обучение“	2022	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
Instructions of the Managing Authority of the Programme "Education" 2021-2027 for the specific beneficiary Ministry of Education and Science regarding the requirements for the formation of the teams for organization and management of projects (Annex VII)	Инструкции на управляващия орган на Оперативна програма „Образование“ 2021-2027 г. за конкретния бенефициент Министерство на образованието и науката относно изискванията за формиране на екипи за организация и управление на проекти (приложение VII)	2022	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
Methodology and criteria for evaluation of a project proposal under the direct grant procedure BG05SFPR001-3.001 "Modernisation of vocational education and training" (Annex X)	Методология и критерии за оценка на проектно предложение по процедурата за директно финансиране BG05SFPR001-3.001 „Модернизация на професионалното образование и обучение“ (приложение X)	2022	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
General terms and conditions for granting financial assistance under the Programme "Education" 2021-2027 (Annex XIII)	Общи условия за отпускане на финансова помощ по програмата „Образование“ 2021-2027 (приложение XIII)	2022	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
Questionnaire for monitoring the implementation of the project (Annex XIX)	Въпросник за мониторинг на изпълнението на проекта (приложение XIX)	2022	Executive Agency "Programme Education"
Instructions for the implementation of project activities BG05SFPR001-3.001-0001 "Modernisation of VET"	Указания за изпълнение на дейностите по проекта BG05SFPR001-3.001-0001 „Модернизация на професионалното образование и обучение“	2023	Ministry of Education and Science
Guidance or Sectoral Skills Councils to develop a new List of Professions for Vocational Education and Training	Насоки за секторните съвети по уменията за изготвяне на нов списък с професии за професионално образование и обучение	2024	Ministry of Education and Science
Invitation to participate in a selection procedure for the members in Sectoral Skills Councils	Покана за участие в процедура за подбор на членове на секторните съвети по уменията	2024	Ministry of Education and Science
List of candidates selected for participation in the Sectoral Skills Councils under the BG05SFPR001-3.001-0001 "Modernisation of VET" project financed under Programme "Education" 2021-2027	Списък на кандидатите, избрани за участие в секторните съвети по уменията по проект BG05SFPR001-3.001-0001 „Модернизация на професионалното образование и обучение“, финансиран по Програма „Образование“ 2021-2027	2024	Ministry of Education and Science
List of Sectoral Skills Councils members participating on voluntary basis under the BG05SFPR001-3.001-0001 "Modernisation of VET" project financed under Programme "Education" 2021-2027	Списък на членовете на секторните съвети по уменията, участващи на доброволен принцип в рамките на проект BG05SFPR001-3.001-0001 „Модернизация на професионалното образование и обучение“, финансиран по Програма „Образование“ 2021-2027	2024	Ministry of Education and Science
Procedure for the development and maintenance of the List of Professions for VET under Article 6, Paragraph 1 of the Vocational Education and Training Act, and the criteria and deadlines for its updating	„Ред за разработване и поддържане на Списъка на професиите за ПОО по чл. 6, ал. 1 от Закона за ПОО, критериите и сроковете за актуализирането му“	2024	Ministry of Education and Science

National Examination Programme for Conducting State Examinations for the Acquisition of Levels of Professional Qualification by Profession (Annex Framework)	Национална изпитна програма за провеждане на държавни изпити за придобиване на степени на професионална квалификация по професия (приложение)	2024	Ministry of Education and Science
Methodological Guidelines for the Development of National Examination Programmes for Conducting State Examinations for the Acquisition of Qualification in Professions	Методически указания за разработване на национални изпитни програми за провеждане на държавни изпити за придобиване на квалификация по професии	2025	National Agency for VET
State Educational Standard for Acquiring Qualification in the Profession (Annex)	Държавен образователен стандарт за придобиване на квалификация по професията (приложение)	2024	Ministry of Education and Science
Methodological Guidelines for Developing State Educational Standards for Acquiring Qualification in Professions	Методически указания за разработване на Държавни образователни стандарти за придобиване на квалификация по професии	2025	National Agency for VET
Internal Rules on the Conditions and Procedures for Developing and Updating State Educational Standards for Acquiring Qualification in Professions	Вътрешни правила за за условията и реда за разработване и актуализиране на Държавни образователни стандарти за придобиване на квалификация по професии	2025	National Agency for VET
Assessment Methodology for the evaluation of expert teams under the BG05SFPR001-3.001-0001 "Modernisation of VET" project (Annex 13)	Методология за оценяване на експертните екипи по проект BG05SFPR001-3.001-0001 „Модернизация на ПОО“ (Приложение 13)	2025	National Agency for VET
Ordinance No. 15 of 22 July 2019 on the Status and Professional Development of Teachers, School Principals and Other Pedagogical Specialists	Наредба № 15 от 22 юли 2019 г. за статута и професионалното развитие на учителите, директорите и педагогическите специалисти	2019	Ministry of Education and Science
Guidelines for Developing Competency Profiles of Teachers/Instructors in Vocational Training	Насоки за разработване на компетентностни профили на учители/ преподаватели по професионална подготовка	2025	Ministry of Education and Science
Competence profile of teachers/vocational trainers – Professional field: Code 0722 “Production technologies: wood, paper, plastics and glass”	Компетентностен профил на учители/преподаватели по професионална подготовка – Професионално направление: Код 0722 „Производствени технологии: дърво, хартия, пластмаси и стъкло“	2025	Ministry of Education and Science
Competence profile of teachers/vocational trainers – Professional field: Code 0724 “Mining and extraction of minerals”	Компетентностен профил на учители/преподаватели по професионална подготовка – Професионално направление: Код 0724 „Добив и преработка на полезни изкопаеми“	2025	Ministry of Education and Science
Competence profile of teachers/vocational trainers – Professional field: Code 0613 “Analysis and software development and software applications”	Компетентностен профил на учители/преподаватели по професионална подготовка – Професионално направление: Код 0613 „Анализ и разработка на софтуер и софтуерни приложения“	2025	Ministry of Education and Science
Ordinance No. 4 of 30 November 2025 on the Curriculum	Наредба № 4 от 30.11.2025 г. За учебния план	2015	Ministry of Education and Science
Guidelines for the organisation and coordination of the development of Standard curricula and curricula for the professions of the vocational education programme – 2024 under the “Modernisation of VET” project	Насоки за организацията и координацията на разработването на стандартни учебни планове и учебни програми за професиите от програмата за професионално образование – 2024 по проект „Модернизация на ПОО“	2025	Ministry of Education and Science
Development of Training Documentation (TUP and UP) for Training in the Professions from the List of Professions for Vocational Education and Training, approved by Order No. RD 09-2230 of 09 August 2024 of the Minister of Education and Science (LPVET – 2024)	Разработване на учебна документация (ТУП и УП) за обучение по професиите от Списъка на професиите за професионалното образование и обучение, утвърден със Заповед № РД 09-2230 от 09 август 2024 г. на министъра на образованието и науката (СППОО – 2024)	2025	Ministry of Education and Science
List of Coordinating Schools for the Organisation and Development of Standard Curricula and Training Programmes for the Professions from the New List of Professions for Vocational Education and Training (Annex to Item 1)	Списък на координиращи училища за организация и разработване на типови учебни планове и учебни програми за обучение по професиите от новия Списък на професиите за професионално образование и обучение (Приложение към т.1)	2025	Ministry of Education and Science

Standard Curriculum (Annex 1)	Типов учебен план (Приложение 1)	2025	Ministry of Education and Science
Table of Alignment of the Subjects in the Standard Curriculum (TUP) with the Learning Outcomes (LOs) in the State Educational Standard (DOS) and with the Topics in the Training Programme (NIP) (Annex 2)	Таблица за съответствието на учебните предмети от стандартния учебен план (ТУП) с учебните резултати (ЕРУ) от държавния образователен стандарт (ДОС) и с темите в учебната програма (НИП) (Приложение 2)	2025	Ministry of Education and Science
Technical Report: Contract No. BG05SGPR001-3.001-0001-C02, Technical Report No. 6	Технически отчет: Договор № BG05SGPR001-3.001-0001-C02 , Технически отчет №6	2025	Ministry of Education and Science
Financial Report: Contract No. BG05SGPR001-3.001-0001-C02, Financial Report No. 6	Финансов отчет: Договор № BG05SGPR001-3.001-0001-C02 , Финансов отчет №6	2025	Ministry of Education and Science
BG05SFPR001-3.001-0001 "Modernisation of VET" project – implementation progress as of 31.08.2025 (cumulative data from the Project Information System)	Проект BG05SFPR001-3.001-0001 „Модернизиране на ПОО“– напредък по проекта към 31.08.2025 (данни от Информационната система на проекта - с натрупване)	2025	Ministry of Education and Science

Annex D. Illustrative indicators for monitoring outcomes

This annex supports Recommendation 8 by providing illustrative indicators that go beyond activity tracking to capture both intermediate outcomes and longer-term effects aligned with the *Modernisation of VET* project's theory of change. The annex includes two groups of indicators: *Illustrative indicators for intermediate outcomes – implementation quality and short-term effects* (e.g. student learning, teacher practices, employer engagement) and *Illustrative indicators for longer-term outcomes – graduate trajectories and programme attractiveness*. These examples offer a practical reference for expanding the monitoring questionnaire so that it assesses not only whether activities are implemented, but whether they contribute to improved VET quality and labour-market relevance.

Table D.1. Illustrative indicators for intermediate and longer-term outcomes

	Outcome area	Indicator
Intermediate outcomes	Student learning and progression	- Average scores in state VET exams and key general subjects, by programme. - Share of students passing state VET exams on first attempt. - Grade-to-grade promotion rate / graduation rate in VET programmes. - Annual drop-out rate in upper-secondary VET, by grade and programme.
	Student experience and engagement	- Share of students in final VET grades who report that (i) teaching is “mostly” or “very” practical and linked to real workplaces, and (ii) they feel motivated to complete their programme. - Share of students who report having discussed their career plans with a teacher or counsellor in the past 12 months.
	Teacher practices and professional development	- Average hours of CPD completed by VET teachers in the school in the past 12 months, by main area (sector-specific, digital, green skills, pedagogy, assessment). - Share of VET teachers who report regularly using: (i) practical tasks or project-based learning, (ii) digital resources or simulation tools, and (iii) examples or materials provided by employers. - Share of teachers who took part in workplace-based training (Activity 5.3) during the last 12 months.
	Employer involvement in programme design and delivery	- Share of VET courses for which employers were consulted when adapting school-based curricula (last 2 years). - Number of formal cooperation agreements (e.g., MoUs) with employers, NGOs or public bodies, by sector. - Ratio of practitioner teachers (Activity 5.1) engaged during the year, divided by number of VET teachers in the school.
	Student placements (Activity 8)	- Share of Grade 11 students who completed a 240-hour placement. - Average number of total work placement hours (incl. production practices) per student, by grade. - Share of placements where: (i) a named workplace mentor was assigned, (ii) the school held at least one structured follow-up (visit, call, or online meeting), (iii) students rate their placement as “useful” or “very useful” for their vocational skills (student survey).
Longer-term outcomes	Graduate outcomes	- Share of graduates who are in employment, further education, or training 6 months after graduation (from graduate tracer surveys). - Among employed graduates, share working in an occupation related to their field of study. - Average time between graduation and first paid job.
	Employer feedback	- For employers hosting placements: rating of (i) how well-prepared students are for their job (Likert scale), (ii) likelihood to host further placements, (iii) likelihood to hire from the school. - From employer surveys: (i) share of employers reporting VET qualifications are relevant for

		entry-level roles, (ii) share satisfied with skills of recent VET hires.
	Attractiveness of VET pathways	- Percentage change in VET enrolment over time, relative to percentage change in overall upper-secondary enrolment, by RED or region. - Share of incoming Grade 8 students who list a VET pathway as their first choice, by RED or region. - Admission score profile of new VET entrants: (i) average Grade 7 National External Assessment results of students newly admitted to VET, relative to national Grade 7 distribution, (ii) share of new VET entrants with an admission score above the national median.

Source: Authors' own.