

The *Modernisation of Vocational Education and Training* project in Bulgaria: Lessons from early implementation

Overview

This document presents a summary of the OECD's interim evaluation of the *Modernisation of Vocational Education and Training* (VET) project in Bulgaria (2023-2029), conducted under the Agreement on multi-year support for the implementation of the Evaluation Plan of Programme "Education". The project recognises VET as a critical lever for strengthening human capital and supporting Bulgaria's transformation towards a more digital, innovative and skills-intensive economy. It seeks to improve the quality and relevance of VET by strengthening structured collaboration with labour-market representatives at system level and local partnerships with employers at school level. The evaluation focuses principally on the provision of initial VET (i.e. upper secondary education) 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 representatives from industry, business, and non-governmental organisations in VET teaching as practitioner teachers; short modular trainings for VET teachers on modern production techniques and technologies.
- Activity 8: Expansion of student placements in real working environments.

The project is implemented under Programme "Education" 2021-2027, financed by the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and national budget. The interim evaluation aims to support the Executive Agency Programme "Education", the Ministry of Education and Science and project teams to better deliver the intended system- and school-level improvements in labour-market alignment.

The evaluation adopted a mixed-methods approach, including analysis of project documentation and activity outputs; an online survey of members of Sectoral Skills Councils (SSCs); semi-structured interviews with staff from the Ministry and the National Agency for VET (NAVET), and representatives from business associations and trade unions; focus groups with SSCs; and site visits to three schools offering VET. The evaluation followed a realist approach, reporting on what works, for whom, in what contexts, and how. Findings are organised according to six criteria (see below); as an interim evaluation, the focus is on early signs of how implementation is progressing across these areas rather than on longer-term results.

Key findings by evaluation criteria

Relevance: *Modernisation of VET* addresses a key need in Bulgaria's VET system by building stronger, more structured collaboration between education and the labour market. It introduces or expands important collaborative initiatives such as system-level Sectoral Skills Councils (SSCs),

the participation of representatives from industry, business and non-governmental organisations in VET teaching in schools, and 240-hour student placements in the workplace. These are strongly aligned with the project's goal of improving the labour market relevance of VET provision. These initiatives are fostering collaboration at system and school level and are typically built on strong personal networks and individual expertise. However, they are less clearly informed by labour-market intelligence which risks limiting their impact. Addressing gaps in labour market data and strengthening the integration and coordination of existing skills intelligence could provide a more robust evidence base for collaboration and decision making. Project monitoring is currently mainly focused on activity tracking as opposed to project outcomes; while this supports implementation progress, it reduces opportunities to learn from implementation and adapt.

Coherence: The parallel revision of the List of Professions, State Educational Standards, national examination programmes and teaching curricula represents a promising step towards more coherent VET pathways and stronger alignment with labour market needs. The project aligns well with national and European Union (EU) priorities, which emphasise labour-market responsiveness and work-based learning, for example. It also complements other VET initiatives under Programme “Education”, by providing reform at system level compared to the regional or sectoral focus of *VET Centres of Excellence* and local focus of *Development of the dual system of training in VET*.

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 – were only made possible by EU support. ESF+ funding has enabled cross-institutional coordination and accelerated large-scale system reform beyond what national budgets could support alone.

Effectiveness: The project shows early signs of effectiveness where reform and implementation design has promoted coherence and multi-stakeholder partnership (e.g. revision of List of Professions), and through the expansion of work-based learning via 240-hour student placements. However, tight timelines left little opportunity for research and consultation with industry experts, which in turn appears to have constrained the quality of draft State Educational Standards. In addition, the review processes for new teacher competence profiles and teaching curricula are less comprehensive than those for the State Educational Standards, for example. This raises concerns about whether these elements will be fully aligned with labour market realities and sufficiently oriented towards practical implementation. At school level, initiatives to strengthen collaboration have been welcomed by staff, but lack of clear guidance on intended roles and objectives has led to inconsistent implementation, which may result in variable benefits for students.

Efficiency: SSCs make good use of the intrinsic motivation of sectoral experts, with many contributing their time voluntarily – an efficient way to tap into under-utilised social capital. However, the evaluation identified some challenges in the revision of the State Educational Standards. Public procurement of expert drafting teams contributed to a long contracting process, the complexity of which seems to have deterred VET professionals and industry practitioners from participating. Meanwhile, tight drafting timelines and late involvement of SSCs increased the need for more extensive revision processes. The efforts of staff within the Ministry and NAVET to coordinate and support major reform initiatives have been impressive although institutional capacity was stretched at times.

Sustainability: SSCs have strong support, but their long-term viability will depend on future contracting models that ensure independence and predictable engagement. To maintain updated Standards, ongoing efforts will require attracting more industry practitioners and applying realistic timelines for revisions. 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 time-limited.

Lessons and recommendations

Based on the key findings, and informed by international evidence, the OECD identifies eight recommendations to strengthen the implementation of *Modernisation of VET* and its effect on labour market responsiveness. This includes possible measures for the next programming period.

1. Bulgaria could **institutionalise the SSCs** by establishing a clear legal framework, flexible contracting options, and simplified recruitment processes to secure their long-term role in aligning VET with labour market needs.
2. The Ministry and NAVET could **enhance future revisions of the State Educational Standards** by facilitating the participation of industry practitioners, extending drafting timelines, and involving SSCs earlier in the process.
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 labour-market data.
4. The Ministry could **establish a clear staged review of teacher competence profiles** and develop 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 for drafting teams, and implement a multi-staged review process** to better foster quality and consistency.
6. The Ministry could **provide further guidance to schools on good practice for collaborating with external practitioners** from business and non-governmental organisations, covering scheduling, delivery formats and expected outcomes, for example.
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.

Further information



This summary is based on findings published in OECD (2026), *The Modernisation of Vocational Education and Training project in Bulgaria: Lessons from early implementation*. The full report is available via the QR code below and at <https://doi.org/10.1787/ad5ceddc-en>.

The report is an output of the OECD's evaluation support under the 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, the Executive Agency "Programme Education" and the OECD. Under this agreement, the OECD will conduct a series of interim and final evaluations of initiatives in five key thematic areas: 1) inclusive education, 2) integration of marginalised communities, 3) digitalisation and competency-based education, 4) vocational education and training, and 5) higher education.



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