

COUNTRY BRIEF – REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Integrated monitoring process of the
EU Council Recommendation on VET
and the Osnabruck Declaration

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INTRODUCTION

The macro-economic policies in North Macedonia in the pre-pandemic years provided fiscal stabilisation; the budget deficit and public debt both decreased, allowing for some expansion of state support for employment, companies and socially disadvantaged groups, and employment rates and wages were slowly rising. However, the pandemic slowed down these processes, resulting in a decrease in the employment rate, including among graduates. The EU-accession process is still being blocked by Bulgaria, due to the dispute over the origin of the Macedonian language and identity. After the local elections in 2021 and consequently the resignation of the Prime Minister Zaev, a new Government (made up of the same parties) was established, with changes of persons in several ministries. Mr. Jeton Shaqiri from the DUI party took charge of the Ministry of Education and Science.

This country brief is part of the process for the integrated monitoring of the EU Council Recommendation on VET and the Osnabruck Declaration, the latter which was adopted by the ministers in charge of the sector of EU Member-states and candidate countries. It is a brief overview of the regulation and governance of initial and continuous VET (including adult education) and current reforms in these sectors, including changes in related legislation.

The objective of this document is to present the country's VET situation and help to identify the main processes, national priorities and main developments in VET, including key statistics. The purpose of the document is also to further assist the development of the National Implementation Plan (NIP) for the integrated monitoring of VET Recommendations and the Osnabruck Declaration and, more specifically, to identify the most significant measures – with indicators – to be monitored in the next few years.

NATIONAL VET CONTEXT

Governance of VET

In accordance with the Law on VET, in addition to the executive mandates of the Ministry of Education and Science, the VET Centre is the main VET governance institution. It is responsible for providing professional support for development and continuous innovation in the VET system, together with the national VET Council – as the main advisory body in the area of VET. The VET Centre carries out analyses of the labour market, is involved in the accreditation of teaching staff and verifying institutions for VET, develops standards for occupations and qualifications, creates vocational study programmes and examination programmes (in agreement with the State Examination Centre) for VET subjects (which are then adopted by the Minister of Education) and develops and suggests programmes for improvements in schools based on the results of the integral evaluation. It also develops standards for VET teachers and in-company trainers.

The process of developing education plans and programmes (including examination programmes) may involve municipalities, VET schools, employers and other relevant stakeholders.

In 2017-18, the VET Centre prepared several methodological guides for the main documents and instruments in the vocational field: a methodology for developing standards for the analysis of sectors; a methodology for developing standards for occupations and standards for qualifications; a methodology for developing study plans for technical education; and a methodology for developing modular educational/study programmes based on competencies. In the past 3 years, the Centre has also developed the following documents: a manual for cooperation between schools and companies for the implementation of quality criteria; fields and forms of cooperation between VET schools and companies; instructions for ferial practice; a guide to VET qualifications.

The public Employment Service Agency (ESA) is responsible for collecting and disseminating information on the labour market, employment counselling and career guidance, and setting up jobs for active jobseekers. It also participates in creating strategies, actions and operational plans for the implementation of employment policies.

The councils of the municipalities are responsible for analysing labour market needs and passing on their opinions to the VET Centre for further consideration, submitting proposals for new qualifications that are identified as needed and submitting proposals for enrolment policies and educational programmes in VET schools at municipality level.

Social partners such as chambers of commerce or trade unions may take part in the process of developing VET qualifications, by submitting proposals to the VET Centre for new educational programmes and for revision of existing ones, or by involvement in the revision and development of the standards for occupations.

Regulation of VET

By law, primary and secondary education in the Republic of North Macedonia is compulsory and free of charge. Formal VET is part of the overall education system. It is mainly regulated by the Law on Secondary Education (LSE) and the Law on VET. The LSE of 1995 (last amended in 2020) regulates the organisation, functioning and governance of general secondary education and partly regulates VET. The Law on VET of 2006 (last amended in 2019) regulates the organisation and types of VET in accordance with NQF levels II to VB: vocational skilling (two-year programme at NQF level II), vocational education for occupations (three-year programme – level III), technical education (four-year programme – level IV), and post-secondary vocational education (level VB). After finishing any of these education cycles, candidates/students need to pass a final exam in order to get a certificate (a public document).

Recently proposed amendments to the Law on VET endorse increased work-based learning (WBL) in study programmes and the establishment of three Regional VET Centres (RVETC) in 2019, covering eight sectors. These changes aim to orient VET to the needs of regional markets and to support the transition into employment through a range of new services: career guidance, traineeship/internship opportunities, new, flexible, initial and continuous training courses and services for validating non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL).

In 2020, the VET Centre prepared a concept note for work-based learning, followed by the guidelines on work-based learning that were developed in 2022.

The Law on the Bureau for Development of Education (BDE) of 2006 (last amended in 2018) states that the BDE is responsible for developing and monitoring the educational process. Together with the Centre for Adult Education, the BDE and the VET Centre have responsibilities in developing adult education programmes.

As stated in the Law on the State Education Inspectorate (SEI) from 2005, this institution is tasked with supervising the implementation of education laws and regulations and education quality. In accordance with EQAVET, the SEI has developed a set of 27 indicators in seven areas, which are used in the self-evaluation of schools (performed by schools under consultation with the BDE) and the integral evaluation of schools (performed by the SEI). The areas and indicators are the same for all secondary schools and do not take into account the specificities of vocational education and training.

The Law on the NQF of 2013, amended in 2016, focuses mainly on qualification standards, the structure of the framework and the authorities in charge of the NQF, and the process of acquiring qualifications. The NQF differentiates between educational qualifications and vocational qualifications. The Law establishes a National NQF Board which is responsible for approving proposed qualifications following a prior opinion issued by the relevant Sectoral Qualification Council. Sectoral commissions evaluate existing qualifications based on changes in labour market conditions, review proposals for new qualifications and revise existing qualifications, and then submit their opinion to the NQF Board for approval.

The Law on Adult Education (AE) of 2008 established the Centre for Adult Education (CAE). The CAE is responsible for assessing the quality of non-formal education programmes through a verification process, while the MoES is responsible for verifying providers of non-formal education programmes. Since 2014, the CAE has developed several strategic, concept and methodology documents on non-formal education and the establishment of a system to validate non-formal and informal learning, which include: The Concept of Non-Formal Education; Roadmap for Realising a VNFIL System; Guide for VNFIL Procedures, etc.

NATIONAL VET PRIORITIES

The Government's main goals are to increase the attractiveness, inclusiveness, quality and relevance of VET, based on learning outcomes, labour market information and work-based learning.

The Education Strategy and Action Plan 2018-2025 includes separate chapters on VET and adult learning. The Strategy defines four priority areas in VET:

Priority I. To harmonise VET with labour market needs, nationally and regionally, by adapting to changing skill needs and a flexible and effective learning process;

Priority II. To improve the learning environment and quality assurance in VET, by developing cooperation between the main educational institutions and the business community, in accordance with EQAVET standards and feedback from students' achievements;

Priority III. To increase enrolment in vocational education and training;

Priority IV. To improve human resources capacities, with a focus on the professional competences of teachers and head teachers in VET schools.

The Strategy stresses the need to set out regular tracer studies and to develop a skills observatory.

The Strategy recognises that adult learning is key for improving the overall education attainment of the working-age population. It prioritises the development of flexible, modular education and training for adults, the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) and related awareness-raising activities.

Taking into consideration these goals, I-VET and CVET priorities can be grouped into several areas, as set out below.

- Reforms of VET and AE legislation in order to provide the conditions for modern, high-quality and relevant VET and AE, and better harmonisation of all related laws.
- Relevant and high-quality VET work-based learning:
 - establishment of a dual education system;
 - cooperation with companies and adaptation to the labour market;
 - professional development of VET teaching staff and mentors in companies.
- Qualifications:
 - further development of the NQF in order to improve relevance to the labour market, with specialisations in sectors with identified demands;
 - quality assurance: improvement of occupation and qualifications standards and schools' self-evaluation and integral evaluation processes.
- Further development of RVETCs towards regional centres of excellence.
- Continuous VET and lifelong learning:
 - improvement of adult education programmes and raising awareness;
 - VNFIL: further development of the VNFIL system and training, with a focus on disadvantaged groups.
- New financing models (formulas) for primary and secondary education (including VET).
- Career guidance and professional orientation¹.

¹ The new National Employment Strategy 2021-2027 with an Action Plan for Employment 2021-2023, Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2021, available at: https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/2021/trud/strategija_vrabotuvanje_2021_mkd.pdf

MAIN POLICY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE LAST YEAR

The main developments in VET over the last year were centred around regulatory reform and building a policy basis for innovation in education provision.

Several new draft laws were prepared, but the adoption process was slowed down by pre- and post-election political activities.

Strategic developments

For the 2020/21 academic year, the MoES decreased the number of available places for students in general secondary education and increased the number of vacancies for students on VET courses. The 2021 budget prioritised investments to improve the quality of primary and secondary education, which will also benefit VET (as part of secondary education).

Further preparations are being undertaken for establishing two additional RVETCs. RVETCs are expected to include both learners with special needs and learners in need of re-skilling and upskilling, and to provide more training that is relevant to regional labour markets. RVETCs will include flexible lifelong learning options, as well as VNFIL arrangements.

For the 2021/2022 academic year, the VET Centre has revised 34 practical education programmes. Changes in the curriculum consist of: gradually increasing the number of hours per week of work-based learning, from 4 hours in the second year, to 8 hours in the third year and up to 10 hours in the fourth year; increasing the number of days for ferial practice: a minimum of 10 days in the first year, a minimum of 15 days in the second year, and a minimum of 20 days in the third year.

Legislation developments

A new draft law on the NQF has been prepared and is in the public consultation phase. The main amendments (compared to the current law) relate to improving standards for qualifications in relation to labour market needs, and evaluating these every 5 years, and developing the system for validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) further, applicable to both formal and non-formal education and training. VNFIL would provide an opportunity to acquire an officially certified qualification.

A new draft law on secondary VET has been prepared. The main changes concern better ways to include students with special needs, and increased levels of work-based learning and practice-based education. The draft law formally introduces the VET dual education model and further specifies the duties and scope of activities of the Regional VET Centres (RVETCs). The initiative for introducing a dual education programme needs to be reviewed and approved by the VET Centre. The draft law stipulates a new set of indicators for integral evaluations of VET schools: 'Cooperation with the labour market'. The Law sets out the conditions which employers engaged in dual education need to meet. Companies engaged in practical training and dual education should be verified for this domain by the Chamber of Commerce, ensuring that they meet the conditions defined by the VET Centre and the chambers. The new law also proposes a new role for the VET Centre in monitoring VET schools provision of vocational education. A Concept Document on Regional VET Centres has been prepared, which further specifies their role and scope of activities.

A new draft law on adult education. Based on the targeted measure in the 2018-25 Strategy, the draft law sets out the conditions for further development of the VNFIL system, which should be also made available in formal VET. During the period 2020-21, the standards for the occupations and qualifications of 'VNFIL Counsellor' and 'VNFIL Assessor' were developed, and the process of validation was successfully piloted on a small number of candidates.

KEY STATISTICS

Formal VET

There are 130 secondary schools, 109 of them public. Among the secondary public schools, 22 are gymnasiums, 46 are vocational schools and 29 are combined gymnasium and vocational education schools. Four schools are for students with special education needs (SEN), four are music schools, and one is a sport academy; there is also one sports gymnasium, one mathematic-computing gymnasium and one art school.

According to the State Statistical Office, 71 811 students were enrolled in secondary education in 2020/21, which is an increase of 2.6% compared to the previous year, and makes a gross enrolment rate of 79%. The early-school-leaver rate fell from 15.5% in 2010 to a record low of 5.7% in 2020.

The proportion of around 60% of VET students in upper secondary education (ISCED level 3) remained constant in the last decade, with about 96% of these enrolled in the 4-year programmes.

In dual (practical) education, in addition to the 11 existing ones, 86 new classes with a dual training component were launched in the 2021/2022 academic year, with 1 400 students enrolled in 44 schools. Agreements were signed with more than 200 companies. The Ministry offered 2 000 scholarships of MKD 3 500 (ca. EUR 55) per month to students enrolling in dual VET programmes. For the 2021/2022 academic year, 34 new educational programmes for qualifications have been verified in consultation with the business community.

More than 350 VET teachers and about 900 mentors from 500 companies have been trained through initiatives by the Chamber of Commerce of the Republic of North Macedonia and other organisations.

Adult education

Adult learning participation in North Macedonia increased slightly to 2.8% in 2019, but fell again to 2.6% in 2020, which compares poorly to the EU average of 9.2%.

Since 2017, the CAE has verified 423 special programmes which lead to vocational qualifications or partial qualifications, and 59 programmes for certain skills of limited scope. 3 856 participants successfully completed adult education programmes and acquired a certificate.

In cooperation with the CAE, six municipalities took part in a governmental project providing a 'second chance' to finish secondary education, with 2 044 participants having participated since 2017.

Employment and young people (NEETs)

North Macedonia's unemployment rate declined continuously from 26.1% in 2015 to 16.4% in 2020. Before the pandemic, the employment rate had been growing steadily, reaching 59.1% in 2020. Women, low-skilled workers and young people are at particular risk of being unemployed.

The proportion of young people aged 15-24 in the total population declined from 22% in 2010 to 17.4% in 2020. After a successful pilot of the Youth Guarantee (YG) scheme, a large rollout followed in 2019 and 2020. In 2019, the YG scheme attracted 5 266 participants (2 694 of whom were women), of whom 2 209 participants (42%) successfully completed it and 1 972 participants found jobs within 4 months (925 women). Of these, 282 participants (187 women) were offered active labour market measures during the same period. The numbers following the YG scheme quadrupled over the next 2 years, with 25 502 (12 863 women) registered by 2020, of whom 7 684 found employment within 4 months and an overall 35% (8 941 participants) completing the scheme. Figures for the first 3 months of 2021 – with nearly 6 000 registered – suggest the scheme continued to be attractive. These efforts contributed towards reducing the proportion of NEETs from 24.1% in 2018 to 19.6% in

2020. The pandemic slowed down this trend. NEET rates stood at 19.6% for the 15-24 age group and 26.2% for the 15-29 age group. The rate of NEETs is higher among women than men. Youth employment in the 15-24 age group increased from 17.4% in 2018 to 19.8% in 2020, while unemployment in the 15-24 age group dropped from 45.4% in 2018 to 35.7% in 2020.

CONCLUSIONS

The traditionally centralised VET system has been undergoing significant developments and reforms in recent years. New draft laws are put out for consultation before being adopted. The main reforms aim to improve the quality of work-based learning in VET, to develop attractive and relevant programmes and standards of qualifications based on regional labour market needs, and to improve professional human resources capacities. The main factor in all developments is the substantive cooperation with the business community.

The main actors in IVET and CVET are the MoES, VET Centre, CAE, ESA, SEI and the Chamber of Commerce. Further support in strengthening the capacities of these entities and mutual cooperation between them is needed.

Priority is currently being given to the further development of RVETCs and dual education, and the improvement of adult education programmes and VNFIL, which all rely on a meaningful cooperation with the business community. The latter is a basis for development in the sphere of QA, resulting in changes in the procedure for the integral evaluation of VET schools. This reform will need to be sufficiently extensive in order to identify specificities relating to VET schools.

The Youth Guarantee scheme has brought excellent results, showing that approaches supporting young people need to be tailored to and congruent with changes in modern society.

These developments and North Macedonia's priorities are in line with the EU Council recommendations on VET and the Osnabruck Declaration, which provides opportunities for cooperation in different VET-related areas and further improvement. They could be used as building elements in the process of preparing the country's NIP, and particularly in defining VET-related measures and identifying indicators that can be monitored in the coming period.

ACRONYMS

BDE	Bureau for Development of Education
CAE	Centre for Adult Education
CVET	Continuous vocational education and training
DUI	Democratic Union for Integration
EQAVET	European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training
ESA	Employment Service Agency
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
IVET	Initial vocational education and training
LSE	Law on Secondary Education
MKD	Macedonian Denar
MoES	Ministry of Education and Science
NEET	Not in employment, education or training
NIP	National Implementation Plan
NQF	National Qualification Framework
QA	Quality assurance
RVETC	Regional VET Centre
SEI	State Education Inspectorate
SEN	Special education needs
VET	Vocational education and training
VNFIL	Validation of non-formal and informal learning
WBL	Work-based learning
YG	Youth Guarantee