Quality Assuring Education for Democratic Citizenship in VET

Summary Report from the EQAVET Peer Learning Activity

24-25 April 2024

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1. Setting the scene

Koen Bois d'Enghien, DG EMPL, European Commission opened the EQAVET PLA by referring to the decline of democracy that can be observed both within EU countries and globally. He went on to underline that the topic of democratic citizenship education is becoming increasingly important in VET and that quality assurance is an instrumental element in ensuring that implemented initiatives lead to impact including development of citizenship competences amongst learners. In general, democratic citizenship education is less prominent in VET than in general education. At the same time, data shows that VET graduates tend to participate on average less in elections compared to graduates from other education sectors, and that they hold on average less democratic beliefs. The specific features of VET, for example the importance of workplace-based learning, require specific measures to integrate democratic citizenship education into teaching and learning processes. These aspects underline the need to address citizenship education within the VET sector in an adequate manner.

Several EU countries have set ambitious objectives in terms of learning outcomes associated with citizenship competence in their educational frameworks. Nevertheless, their experience shows that they often find it challenging to implement these objectives at classroom level, and to achieve the intended learning outcomes. The EQAVET reference framework and quality assurance can help to identify potential implementation gaps – and the EQAVET Network can offer a platform for Member States to share learnings and good practices of quality assuring input, output, outcomes and impact of education for democratic citizenship in VET.

The welcome address concluded by noting that this PLA was a special event, welcoming not only members of the EQAVET network but also participants from the European Education Area Working Group on Values and Equality, as well as experts from the Council of Europe.

2. Objectives of the PLA

The EQAVET Peer Learning Activity (PLA) gathered a range of stakeholders including policy makers, VET providers, national ministries and agencies and research institutions to discuss quality assuring education for democratic citizenship in VET during two half days 24-25 April 2024. The event took place in an online format, with approximately 71 participants attended the event, representing 26 countries: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom, Georgia, Albania and Kosovo.

The objectives of the EQAVET PLA were to:

- Learn from different national and EU-level initiatives and approaches to promote education for democratic citizenship in VET;
- Discuss opportunities and challenges related to different approaches and the conditions in which they work best, including the specificities of work-based learning environments;
- Explore how quality assurance systems can support the development of democratic citizenship competences in VET systems, including the role of EQAVET in this regard;
- Discuss the role and active involvement of stakeholders in the process, including teachers, learners, and training companies.

At the start of day 1, participants were asked to share their main interest in the PLA using a sli.do poll (cf. picture below).

The results of the sli.do poll show that many participants were interested to gain more information and learn about good practices as well as exchanging experiences and views with speakers and participants. In line with these expectations, the first day of the PLA focused on building a shared understanding of education for democratic citizenship in VET in Europe including on-going trends and present opportunities and challenges. The second day of the event focused on quality assurance, including its role in helping to mitigate the implementation gap (i.e., the difference between what is set as learning objectives for democratic citizenship education and how it is implemented in on the ground).

The discussion questions for the two days were agreed as follows:

- How is democratic citizenship education being provided in VET?
- What are the strong areas/cases of democratic citizenship education provision in VET?
- What are the main weaknesses/barriers to adequate provision of democratic citizenship education in VET? How can these weaknesses be mitigated?
- How can the implementation gap (i.e., the difference between what is set as learning objectives for democratic citizenship education and how it is implemented in on the ground) be understood?
- How can QA help to mitigate the implementation gap (e.g., what is needed, evidence-based data, training for teachers/trainers etc.)?
- How can the EQAVET reference framework strengthen democratic citizenship education in VET?

3. Introduction to the PLA topic

To kick off the discussion about a joint understanding of education for democratic citizenship, participants were asked to share what education for democratic citizenship meant to them, using a sli.do poll. As shown in the picture below, participants highlighted key terms such as participation and inclusion as well as empowering learners and democracy.

Collaborative school leadership   Better citizens

Empowred citizens   Civic participation

Future of democracy   Treat other people the way you want to be treated

Involvement   **Inclusion**   Media literacy
engagement   Future

Expert   Freedom
Inclusive societies

Cooperation   # Participation

Critical thinking

Democracy

Keeping Democracy   Empowering learnerd   Possibilities   Civic action

The Golden Rule   living together in peace   Informed judgment

free and responsible human being (Biesta)   Hope for the future

Learning to be a democrat

Better society   Freedom and Democracy for the future

Source: sli.do poll conducted at the event

The first three presentations continued to set the scene by highlighting on-going policy initiatives at EU level, an upcoming guidance document from the Council of Europe and the overall state of play for quality assuring democratic citizenship education in Europe.

The European Commission's actions and initiatives supporting democratic citizenship education

Daria Arlavi, DG EAC, European Commission (coordinator of the [European Education Area Working Group on Equality and Values in Education and Training](#)) introduced an overview of the European Commission's actions and initiatives supporting democratic citizenship education. She explained how the WG has worked on the topic of democratic citizenship education. The WG involves representatives from EU and other participating countries, education and training stakeholders such as European civil society organisation, social partners and international organisations and aims to support development of inclusive reforms that enhance equality of education and training. It is important to highlight that EU Member States themselves decide about their education and training systems, including the curriculum content, and that the Commission can provide a supporting role. Overall, the [EEA strategic framework Working Groups](#) provide a platform for mutual learning and exchange of best practices.

The WG published an [Issue paper on citizenship education in 2023](#) in which one of the conclusions was that despite growing emphasis on the importance of citizenship education, a significant gap persists between policy objectives and their actual implementation. Another message coming out of the paper is about citizenship education being most effective if not only taught as a specific subject but also in a cross-curricular manner, as well as when non-traditional teaching and learning approaches, fostering autonomy, and learner participation are applied. The paper further highlights the importance of supporting teachers via continuous professional development, especially as citizenship education often requires controversial conversations which may be uncomfortable for some teachers but should nevertheless be

addressed, carefully and respectfully. The paper also touches upon whole school approach and points out to some assessment/evaluation related issues.

Concerning related EU policy documents, Daria gave a particular reference to the 2018 Recommendation on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching and quoted: 'a European dimension of teaching should aim to help learners experience European identity in all its diversity and strengthen a European positive and inclusive sense of belonging complementing their local, regional and national identities and traditions.' The 2018 Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning, which features citizenship competence as one of eight key competences for lifelong learning, and describes it in terms of knowledge (e.g., understanding shared values), skills (e.g., media literacy) and attitudes (e.g., to have a responsible attitude). Daria further shared a few highlights from some key reports, such as Eurydice report from 2017 on citizenship education at school in Europe and the recently published IEA ICCS[1] 2022 report. The 2022 ICCS European report and results indicate a rise in students' sense of European identity among 8th-grade students. The results show that compared to less knowledgeable peers, students with higher level of civic knowledge (and from a higher socioeconomic background) display significantly more positive attitudes towards the EU, they are more supportive of mobility within Europe and of sustainable practices.

Daria recalled that participation in democratic life, common European values and civic engagement lie at the very heart of the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes which, together with other programmes, such as the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) provide support to citizenship education. She also mentioned Commission's support provided to community of practices such as eTwinning hosted on the European School Education Platform. Another key example of EU funding support in this area is the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Actions for schools and VETs, which gives opportunity to schools and VET institutions to apply for funding of projects that can enable a better understanding of the EU, its values and the functioning of its institutions. Moreover, the Commission published a set of guidelines for teachers and educators on tackling disinformation and promoting digital literacy through education and training in October 2022. Finally, the EU website Learning Corner was mentioned as it offers a range of free educational tools about the EU and European values.

Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) Guidance document on Vocational Education and Training
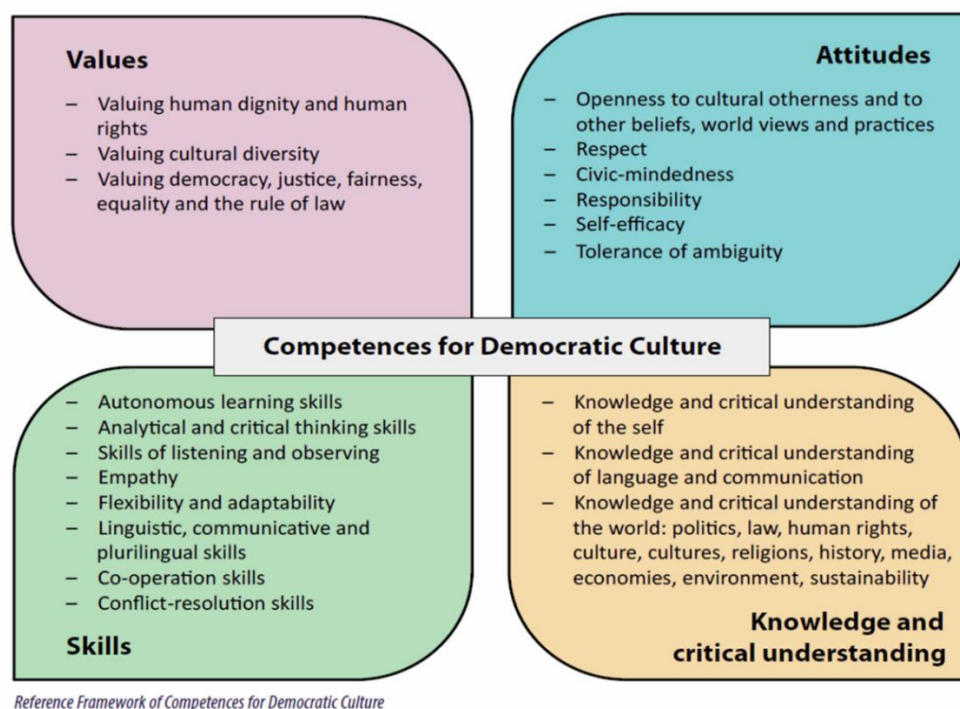
Salvador Sala, Council of Europe, Andrea Laczik, Edge Foundation and Søren Kristensen, Techne presented the forthcoming Guidance document for Vocational Education and Training related to the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) .

Council of Europe has developed a reference framework for competences for democratic culture where competences are divided into four sections including values (e.g., valuing human rights), attitudes (e.g., to be tolerant), skills (e.g., conflict resolution skills) and knowledge and critical understanding (e.g., of self, language and communication). In full, the

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[1] International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, https://www.iea.nl/studies/iea/iccs.

framework includes 447 descriptors and 135 key descriptors linked to learning outcomes and covering both formal and informal education.

The figure below summarises the 20 competences for democratic culture included in the framework:

Values
- Valuing human dignity and human rights
- Valuing cultural diversity
- Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law

Attitudes
- Openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices
- Respect
- Civic-mindedness
- Responsibility
- Self-efficacy
- Tolerance of ambiguity

Competences for Democratic Culture

- Autonomous learning skills
- Analytical and critical thinking skills
- Skills of listening and observing
- Empathy
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills
- Co-operation skills
- Conflict-resolution skills

Skills

- Knowledge and critical understanding of the self
- Knowledge and critical understanding of language and communication
- Knowledge and critical understanding of the world: politics, law, human rights, culture, cultures, religions, history, media, economies, environment, sustainability

Knowledge and critical understanding

Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture

Moreover, the Council of Europe has developed a guidance document building on the above-mentioned framework and this document should be considered as a baseline for understanding democratic citizenship education in VET and should function as a catalyst for future activities on the topic. The document was drafted by two eternal experts (Andrea Laczik, Edge Foundation and Søren Kristensen, Techne – the presenters) in a collaborative process with national policy makers and experts. As VET provision is more diverse across European countries than general and higher education, the document includes definitions of key terms and research on competences for democratic culture in VET highlighting contextual aspects of VET (including curricula, assessments, quality control and teachers and in-company trainers) with a comparing perspective at European level. The guidance document has taken consideration of the different settings of VET, focusing on both school settings and workplaces. Moreover, the document serves as a repository of practical examples, showcasing good practice across Europe, and includes a dedicated chapter about teachers and in-company trainers. In conclusion, the guidance document indicates a need for an integrated approach meaning that democratic citizenship education should be linked with other areas that can function as a catalyst for democratic competences (for example, the student councils and understanding corporate social responsibility in companies).

The authors highlighted that this document has been developed from scratch, meaning that there were no pre-existing templates to base their work on. Thus, this could imply that there are missing angles and topics that should have been included. For instance, quality assurance has so far not received much attention: the document focuses on individual assessment of learning outcomes rather than quality control at system or provider level.

The guidance document should therefore be regarded as a first step, however, there is a need for more research on how democratic citizenship education can be implemented in VET, and how it can be quality assured.

Quality assuring education for democratic citizenship in VET: Introduction to the topic of the PLA

Tomaž Deželan, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, in his presentation provided a thematic introduction PLA, based on his background note drafted for this PLA. He pointed to the urgency of addressing the topic of education for democratic citizenship in the context of rising anti-democratic tendences – even in countries with a long academic tradition, decreasing levels of democratic competence (as observed in the 2022 ICCS survey) and an increasing gap observed between young people and political/state institutions.

He emphasised the importance of strengthening citizenship education in schools despite research findings pointing to a decreasing role of schools in this regard. This is even more important as today's youth will need to deal with challenges like labour market instability, a constant need to reskill, and environmental migration. Citizenship education, and associated quality assurance frameworks, can help to tackle these challenges and to address the gap between young people and political institutions.

Yet, citizenship education in VET to date receives less emphasis than in general education – with reduced diversity, allocated time, financial investment, and overall prevalence.

The presentation identified six clusters of challenges. Some of the key aspects highlighted included the following:

- Strategic orientation: The importance of citizenship education in VET is not sufficiently recognised at policy level. The introduction of citizenship education is often met with resistance from leadership, staff and external stakeholders.
- Capacity/competence: The core themes and concepts of citizenship education are often poorly understood and inadequately taught. Educators' exhibit weak levels of digital literacy and competence in the realm of democratic citizenship online.
- Resources: There is an ongoing systematic lack of resources allocated to the adequate design and implementation of citizenship education. There is a lack of appropriate training for citizenship education teachers, especially regarding teaching and learning methods and assessment methods.
- Participation: Schools and education system often have weak participatory mechanisms and practices, especially in relation to learners and their parents.
- Assessment and evaluation: Citizenship education (in VET) lacks an evidence base and appropriate impact evaluation, which prevents adequate self-assessment and changes in design.
- Context and social structure: Parental hostility towards the treatment of certain topics may limit educator's capacity to implement democratic citizenship education.

The presentation concluded by framing how quality assurance frameworks such as EQAVET can help support the implementation of democratic citizenship education in VET. In more general terms, the use of a quality assurance framework helps generate evidence, which in turn translates into better intelligence that can be used for further improvement. More specifically, the quality criteria and descriptors outlined in EQAVET can act as reinforcers of citizenship education.

Discussion points

Participants mentioned that VET curricula are often so packed that there is very little time and opportunity to bring in democratic citizenship issues into the teaching and learning process.

There is a lack of examples from practice on how integrated approaches to incorporate education for democratic citizenship can be successfully implemented in a VET context. The Council of Europe document, for example, specifically avoids the term 'whole-school approach' and rather speaks of an 'integrated approach' to account for the fact that also enterprises as learning venues and social partner organisations need to be part of the equation.

It was added that the establishment of certain democratic mechanisms that allow for widespread participation at various levels in the education and training process could be one opportunity and starting point to incorporate the topic without 'overloading' the curricula. At the same time, this bears the risk that democratic citizenship is only dealt with at extracurricular level.

4. Quality assuring education for democratic citizenship in practice

Quality assurance for Citizenship in Secondary Vocational Education (MBO) in the Netherland

Chris Holman, ROC Noorderpoort provided an overview of the situation of citizenship education in Secondary Vocational Education (MBO) in the Netherlands. Some of the key challenges identified linked to quality assurance of citizenship education in Secondary Vocational Education include:

- Lack of clear objectives and effective education practices;
- Limited insight into what students learn;
- Absence of control over quality and standards in citizenship education; and
- Focus on student effort rather than on clear outcome expectations.

The Dutch Education Inspectorate has noted that citizenship education is not being effectively integrated, as schools are not systematically promoting democratic citizenship. Research has revealed a lack of clear frameworks for citizenship education in secondary vocational education, making it unclear to what extent schools meet quality requirements. While schools are expected to provide citizenship education, they have significant freedom in how it is implemented, leading to varying approaches across institutions. This variability results in a need for guidance and oversight, as schools do not always have control over the quality or insight into student learning in citizenship education.

An important initiative called the **Citizenship Agenda 2017 - 2021** was launched by the Dutch VET Council, which represents the interests of teachers, students, and schools, with financial support from the Ministry of Education. This initiative was carried out in the VET sector from 2017 to 2021 and aimed to enhance citizenship education by integrating quality assurance into the regular quality assurance cycle. The goal of the Citizenship Agenda 2017 - 2021 and its associated measures is to elevate the quality of citizenship education in the VET sector by focusing on:

- Common principles in citizenship education;

- Continuous learning paths;
- Curriculum development;
- Quality assurance;
- Professionalization, and;
- Collaboration with external parties such as primary education and secondary vocational education.

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the VET Council have worked together on the implementation of the Citizenship Agenda, which has since been evaluated for its effectiveness. Although there have been some positive developments, the quality of citizenship education often remains below standards. This can be attributed to a non-binding framework, minimal supervision, and insufficient demands on schools and students. There is also a lack of urgency, along with excessive reliance on motivated individuals and teachers. Based on the evaluation, the following recommendations were made for policymakers at national level:

- **Establish the highest standards for the quality of citizenship education** in secondary vocational education across all levels, from students to boards, in terms of vision, curriculum, student effort, teacher competence, and quality assurance.
- **Define minimum quality standards** for citizenship education in secondary vocational education. Clarify and set clear requirements that outline the expectations for good citizenship education and encourage schools to meet and surpass these standards.
- **Support schools in achieving higher standards** by placing greater emphasis on the socializing role of VET. Provide schools with adequate support to comply with a more compulsory framework and explore the potential for financial assistance to facilitate improvements.

In response to the evaluation, the Ministry appointed an expert group in April 2022 to advise on qualification requirements and other measures necessary to achieve policy goals. The ongoing MBO Work Agenda aims to improve the quality of secondary vocational education, emphasising increased funding and quality improvement in citizenship education.

Positive developments in the quality assurance of citizenship education in secondary vocational education were noted, but challenges persist in giving citizenship education a prominent place in education. Recommendations from the expert group included:

- Introducing a citizenship exam;
- Promoting democratic values through curricula and;
- Increasing implementation and visibility.

In addition to the above recommendations, the VET Council has established five administrative agreements with VET institutions with the aim to elevate the standard of citizenship education. These agreements include:

- Each school must define and clearly articulate its vision of citizenship education.
- Schools must appoint teachers who meet the required competence profile, bringing them on board as needed.
- Citizenship education must be integrated into the PDCA cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Act).
- Schools must prioritise citizenship education by allocating time and budget for its implementation.
- The *best-efforts* obligation for citizenship education is reinforced in the Examination and Qualification Decree (EKB).

Overall, while there have been positive advancements in citizenship education in the Netherlands, many areas still require improvement, and ongoing efforts are needed to achieve desired outcomes.

Portuguese Strategy for Citizenship Education

Ângela Dionísio (Head of Youth Qualification Department), Isabel Marques, Emília Lopes presented the Portuguese National Strategy for Citizenship Education (ENEC). All three presenters work for ANQEP (National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education and Training).

National Strategy for Citizenship Education and mandatory component at all levels of schooling

The Portuguese National Strategy for Citizenship Education was published in 2017; implementation started with the 2027/2028 school year. The strategy is aligned with EU recommendations and aims to help shape future generations with democratic values to foster equality in interpersonal relations, to integrate difference, to respect Human Rights and enhance concepts and values concerning democratic citizenship. Democratic citizenship education (DCE) in the curriculum of Portuguese schools is mandatory at all levels of education (from grades 1-12). As for the curriculum component of "Citizenship and Development", this strategy proposes that students learn through plural and responsible participation in building citizenship and fairer and more inclusive societies within the framework of democracy, respect for diversity, and the protection of human rights.

Developing Citizenship skills through evidence-based learning in partnership with the community

The curricular approach to DCE happens at both a class and school level. At a class level it takes place in primary, secondary and vocational education courses with the teaching, learning, and assessment process of the Citizenship and Development component reflecting the cognitive, personal, social and emotional skills developed and demonstrated by each pupil based on evidence. At a school level the projects developed linked to the strategy should be developed preferably in partnership with community entities. n upper secondary education the school has autonomy around how it implements Citizenship and Development and can do so as an autonomous subject, via co-teaching within a subject, or overlapping it with another subject. Cross curriculum work is emphasised. The speakers introduced a practical example, the Quinta das Palmeiras public high school, which promotes citizenship and development learning in a cross curricular way. The students organise themselves to work in groups or individually on mandatory topics they have chosen and a teacher guides and moderates each of the groups and their input.

Assuring quality through students' participation in practical projects and continuous dialogue with external stakeholders on VET provision quality

The EQAVET national model is extended to both private and public VET providers. VET providers may be awarded with an EQAVET seal. There are a number of protocols established between ANQEP and Higher Education Institutions for the recruitment and training of external experts with experience in implementing quality assurance systems and carrying out corresponding assessment processes. The EQAVET-aligned quality assurance framework supports the citizenship education requirements through the observation of two criteria – Criterion 2 where students' participate in projects of different scope (local, national, transnational) which facilitates their learning process and autonomy and ii) internal and

external stakeholders participate in a continuous dialogue on the quality of VET provision and its continuous improvement.

Euro4VET: An initiative to develop EU citizenship awareness for both VET teachers and VET students

Sérgio Fernades, Elisabete Marques, and Renato Guiomar work for the non-profit Teaching and Vocational and Training Association, INSIGNARE. It is a public service promoting vocational education and training courses at a local and regional level in response to the qualification needs and as a contribution to local and regional economic development. Its mission is to train young professionals in the skills and aptitudes for technical professions while also educating for citizenship. The aim is to develop key competences for learning for all citizens on how to be a good citizen, covering all ages and all contexts (formal, non- formal, and informal), competences essential for employability, personal fulfilment and health, active and responsible citizenship, and social inclusion.

Nurturing democratic values and behaviours through Student participation in administrative and pedagogical organisation of the school

To do this, the organisation tries to promote activities that encourage attitudes and behaviour within and outside of the school environment, that encourage a sense of belonging to the community, promoting values including, for example, empathy, flexibility confidence, responsibility etc. This is implemented via participation by students in the administrative and pedagogical organisation of the school and in decision making. The organisation promotes active global citizenship and greater awareness of each person's role in building a safe, healthier and more suitable work by trying to educate participatory, democratic, and empathetic citizens.

A consortium to develop citizenship awareness for VET teachers and students

The European Citizenship Education in VET (Euro4VET), co-funded by the European Commission as part of the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Network for VET Schools action, commenced in January 2024. A VET Schools Consortium has been established involving one VET Higher Education Institute for Teacher Training, five VET secondary schools in Portugal, Spain, Finland, Republic of North Macedonia and Turkey, and the European VET umbrella Association (VET4EU2), with a goal to develop EU citizenship awareness for both VET teachers and students, highlighting the impact the EU VET institutions have on daily life and showing the importance of active participation in EU society. Activities involved include the design & implementation of two courses on EU skills – for VET teachers and for VET students, both targeting the EU benefits and its direct impacts on young people's daily life, created collaboratively between the HEI and the VET Schools; a EU skills virtual competition; one day visit to EU institutions in Brussels; three kits for celebrating Day of Europe at schools; monthly podcasts on EU subjects in English and all other languages of the five countries involved. The project will last three years.

Assuring quality with comprehensive monitoring and evaluation throughout project lifespan

Evaluation covers the lifespan of the project starting with a monitoring and evaluation plan (MEP) and consisting of a permanent accompanying monitoring process which supports project management during the implementation of the operation project objectives and strategies, actively involving the whole partnership, and provides continuous use of recording instruments for feedback purposes with tools for data collection and data analysis. Elements of standards such as EQAVET, ISO 9001, IEEE 1490 and ISO 19796 are used. The specific

and dedicated work package focuses not only on evaluating the project itself every six months but evaluating each activity and the goals to be achieved. All project activities have a clear set of key performance indicators defined adapted to suit it. For each activity a short evaluation report is written together with recommendations on how to correct things if goals are not achieved. At the end of the project, the activities will continue in the partner schools with the same evaluation process foreseen.

Slovakia: Developing citizenship skills in VET

Lubica Gállová, Slovak EQAVET National Reference Point and Jana Feherpataky Kuzmová, Institute for Active Citizenship addressed how local initiatives related to developing citizenship skills in VET and GE are implemented and linked to the national quality assurance measurements.

VET in Slovakia has a specific national curricula and key competences for democratic citizenship are included in IVET programmes.

Slovakia has several policies designed to support citizenship skills including a strategy for lifelong learning and guidance 2021-2040 that provides supporting measures. The EQAVET National Reference Point (NRP) has set up a national award for quality in VET where development of citizenship skills is amongst the categories. Slovakia also revised their national VET curricula in 2022 to align with EC recommendations on key competences, including citizenship skills.

The initiative 'Schools changing the world' is a grassroot project implemented across Slovakia in both GE and VET (i.e., 400 schools of which 12 % are VET schools); and provides practical learning related to democratic citizenship and should function as a source of inspiration for teachers and trainers. The project has received the European Citizen's price. The initiative is regarded as a success in Slovakia and the positive impact can be linked to some key factors such as using teachers as role-models, an applied whole-school approach, open governance and collaboration with NGO, academia etc. The education is provided using practical methods as too theoretical approaches easily becomes boring for students. Teachers are provided support including community of practices and easy-to-use tools.

The initiative has a developed quality management approach combining both top-down and bottom-up tools, gathering feedback from students and internal evaluation etc. The project collects feedback from the students in relation to their own self-assessment of competences and confidence. The initiative is flexible enough to adjust to local contexts and ensuring relevance despite difference educational settings. The initiative has showcased that democratic citizenship education can easily be integrated in VET programmes. However, time constraints have often been a challenge for VET programmes and teachers try to squeeze in democratic citizenship education in the programme – thus, it has been important to link the project to relevant situations (for example the war in Ukraine) and encourage extra-curricular activities.

Doing democracy - Democratic citizenship education from the perspectives of student unions

Albert Janssens, Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU), presented democratic citizenship education from the perspective of student unions. OBESSU represents 36 national student unions across 24 European countries. Albert sees three main context factors to take into account regarding the participation of VET students in democratic citizenship education:

- According to Eurobarometer surveys, in 2014, 28% of the young aged 16 to 24 years old voted in European Parliament elections. This number increased to 42% in 2019.[1] It appears that youth is becoming increasingly more motivated to participate in formal politics but many may lack the tools to get involved. In Denmark, 57% of the young aged 16 to 25 years old who are not members of any association reported a lack of democratic confidence, while only 46% of the young members of an association declare so.[2]
- VET learners are familiar to a 'learning-by-doing approach'.

There is a structural need to ensure that VET students are targeted specifically for activities related to democratic citizenship education. Two main avenues to get VET students involved were mentioned:

- **Develop a democratic culture in classrooms and empower students**: Students should be included in the decision-making process within the learning environment, for instance by doing projects where they are in charge of every step, with little supervision. Mutual respect and acknowledgement between learners and teachers will lead to the creation of a safe space and increase students' eagerness to participate in activities and discussions. High participation in democracy in Denmark is linked to the activity of the youth in organisations where they have the opportunities to attend debates, vote and develop their own opinion.
- **Organise interactive dissemination activities**: while more formal information on participation in democracy is also necessary, bearing in mind the profile of VET students, the activities proposed should account for this need of interactivity to pass the message. For instance, in Denmark, the Danish Youth Council organises the Democracy Day where student union volunteers/staff and politicians come to VET schools, give workshops on current issues, provide information on vote and take part in political debates.

Quality Assuring Education for Democratic Citizenship in VET in Georgia

Kakhaber Eradze, of the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement of Georgia, presented how education for democratic citizenship is being organised and quality assured in the Georgian VET system. Given Georgia's post-Soviet background, developing citizenship skills is considered challenging, especially since the generation of parents still grew up in a time where democratic citizenship was not an issue at all. The emphasis is thus on schools becoming agents of societal change by nurturing students as ambassadors for democratic values.

All national VET curricula in Georgia integrate the eight key competences as proposed by the EU Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning – including citizenship competence. VET curricula include a specific module on citizenship education with an overall volume of 250 hours, which is mainly delivered through project-based learning. The citizenship education module emphasis active participation and contribution to society. This being said, it was noted that citizenship competence cannot be delivered within this one module alone but also needs to be embedded into other subjects and activities within VET schools.

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[1] European Commission, *The 2019 European elections: Have European elections entered a new dimension?*, see: https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/the-2019-european-elections-have-european-elections-entered-a-new-dimension?locale=en

[2] Danish Youth Council's annual 'Youth and Democracy report'

The national quality assurance standards require vocational schools to illustrate how they develop democratic citizenship competences with their own activities and resources (i.e. from their school budget). This may include, amongst others, involving learners and community members in the process of strategy and operational planning; promoting extracurricular initiatives of learners and their practical implementation; and promoting the creation and functioning of student unions.

VET schools' compliance with the quality assurance standards is assessed through the authorisation process of VET providers and through regular monitoring. Schools are obliged to engage in an annual self-assessment with the participation of learners and community members.

The presentation concluded by stating that given the comparatively short duration of VET programmes, developing and assessing learning outcomes related to citizenship education poses a challenge. While it is easier to develop knowledge and skills, shaping attitudes can pose a significant hurdle.

5. Workshop discussions

Day 1

The PLA participants went on to discuss how to collect information (what is the status of democratic citizenship education in VET across Europe) by addressing the three questions below:

- How is democratic citizenship education being provided in VET?
- What are the strong areas/cases of democratic citizenship education provision in VET?
- What are the main weaknesses/barriers to adequate provision of democratic citizenship education in VET? How can these weaknesses be mitigated?

Contributions from several participants kicked off the discussions with examples from their contexts, raising questions for further discussion:

In **Portugal**, citizenship development is integrated across all subjects rather than being a standalone topic. The national system makes the subject mandatory in both GE and VET and this is understood as very beneficial as it ensures that these competences can be certified and validated. Schools have the flexibility to implement citizenship education as a separate subject if they choose. Attainment goals for citizenship education are emphasised. A good way to motivate students to engage in the topic could be to focus on issues that are important for them, for example, focusing on sustainability has been good starting point in Portugal.

Denmark approaches democratic citizenship education in VET schools as both, a standalone subject and a cross-curricular theme. Schools frequently organize events and initiatives to engage students in this area.

The **Czech Republic** employs a bilateral system for citizenship education in VET. The extent of learners' exposure to citizenship education depends on their specific curricula.

In **Slovakia** DCE is in the curriculum of the transversal subjects. There are opportunities to offer projects if they wish but on a relatively small scale.

In **United Kingdom**, citizenship education is well-embedded in the curricula, but the issue is more related to ensuring that the initiatives lead to youth empowerment (for example expressing their views) and engagement in a systematic way.

In **Spain**, teaching democratic citizenship in VET is mandatory. The Spanish education system includes subjects on career counselling, training, and entrepreneurship as part of its citizenship education.

The Netherlands calls for more guidance and direction from policy and school boards. There is a need for increased supervision and enforcement of citizenship education. The country advocates for higher standards and outcome obligations to measure and improve citizenship education. A measurement instrument has been developed to assess students' citizenship knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

The Council of Europe encourages member states to share successful practices of NGOs providing citizenship education in VET. It seeks insight into effective practices and areas for improvement, including identifying strong areas and potential weaknesses in democratic citizenship education provision.

Belgium-fl plans to discuss the topic of 'homeland history' in the context of citizenship education at the upcoming Council of Europe meeting in Tbilisi, Georgia. This is seen as an important issue, particularly given the rising trends of nationalism.

In **Italy**, civic education has been linked to the subject of history since 2019 via the national legislative reform (from primary until university). When it comes to VER, citizenship education is a cross subject where each VET teacher needs to put specific emphasis on this subject.

Romania has introduced initiatives such as first aid courses in the school curricula, as well as the introduction of civil and criminal law concept.

During the discussion, several key weaknesses and barriers to providing adequate democratic citizenship education in VET were identified:

- A need for clearer guidance and direction from school boards and policymakers.
- The necessity of monitoring citizenship education, including assessing students' citizenship competencies.
- The autonomy schools have in decision-making can be both an advantage and a challenge.
- The perception of VET as a secondary track compared to higher education poses a challenge.
- Civic education is often too theoretical, lacking practical application.
- Building partnerships with companies, civil society organizations, and NGOs is essential.
- Greater visibility and sharing of successful country examples from the Council of Europe would be beneficial.
- There is often a lack of overview and data on the results and progress of implemented democratic citizenship education.
- There is often insufficient support to teachers (training, continuous professional development, community of practices and easy-to-use tools). For the VET context, it is important to not forget about in-company trainers as they often receive less support than teachers.
- It is important to ensure that the teaching material remains relevant to on-going situations to make it practical and interesting for students.
- There is often a lack of time for develop teaching methods and integrated approaches related to democratic citizenship education.

- Overall, it was discussed that it is easier to develop skills related to voting, but it is more challenging to ensure competences that lead to empowerment overall – for example in future workplaces.

Day 2

The PLA participants discussed the democratic citizenship implementation gap, what it entails and how QA can help addressing it.

How can the implementation gap be understood (i.e. the difference between what is set as learning objectives for democratic citizenship education and how it is implemented on the ground)?

Participants discussed the challenges of linking learning outcomes. Teachers and schools need to reflect on the content of democratic citizenship education and design adequate learning outcomes, with a methodology and assessment. However, measuring students' improvement might be complicated, as attitudes are not objectives criteria. It was also flagged that a way forward might lack in case students fail in the module if it is compulsory.

While teachers are the key stakeholder to implement democratic citizenship education, there are often capacity issues, as other subjects are considered more important and teaching staff have many roles to play. The involvement required to develop such activities in an effective manner often ends up on the free time of teachers, and therefore only very motivated ones will get involved.

The implementation gap is really a missed opportunity - in many cases framework exist but are just not implemented. Attention needs to be given to schools as they are seen as the main agents but they need resources and time. Teachers needs to be properly prepared and implementation needs to be based on a whole school approach. Practicing this type of education is important and schools need to be democratised and new ways found to include student voices.

How can QA help to mitigate the implementation gap (e.g. what is needed, evidence-based data, training for teachers/trainers etc.)?

Moving on to discussing QA measures to mitigate gap, students should be involved through student councils so they can really live democratic citizenship. Approaches need to be meaningful and go beyond window dressing. Focus needs to be placed on the workplace learning part of VET. Data is required and champions need to be made visible to stakeholders. Democratic citizenship needs to be spelled out through the policy cycles and implemented through QA measures in place.

In the Netherlands, data is collected on democratic citizenship education and helps to analyse how it can be further developed and improved and feed evidence-based decision making. The Ministry focuses on monitoring policies, getting insight on citizenship skills of learners and the effectiveness of citizenship education in schools. Additional modules on citizenship have been incorporated for teachers in their training, but they are not binding. Questionnaires are currently under preparation to 1. Assess knowledge, skills and attitudes of students in secondary VET and 2. Gather intelligence on school practices regarding democratic citizenship education.

Targeted capacity building for teachers and trainers was stressed as a key success factor to ensure the implementation of democratic citizenship education. In Czechia, the national pedagogical institute supports teachers by providing summer schools on citizenship, but

schools are responsible for organising teacher trainings. The institute focuses on supporting schools and headmasters, through cooperation and projects, notably funded by Erasmus+. Municipalities can also be a driver of the democratic citizenship education, if they are active in the area, they can support schools, including financially.

Projects were mentioned as one tool to activate democratic citizenship education. For instance, in Georgia, the European Training Foundation organises peer visits, which topic could focus on democratic citizenship education. Schools can also apply for funding to implement side projects.

Participants also suggested that platforms to share experience could be helpful. In Czechia, teacher associations exchange good practices.

6. Concluding remarks

Tomaž Deželan and Monika Auzinger provided concluding remarks on behalf of the EQAVET Secretariat, highlighting the key discussion points from the two morning sessions. Their summary reflected on various insights shared during the event, highlight both challenge an innovative practice identified in democratic citizenship education.

Discussions on the first day highlighted the **diverse forms** in which democratic citizenship education can be integrated into vocational education and training, not limited to separate subjects or cross-curricular activities but also through participatory initiatives and social dialogue, especially considering the workplace-based component.

There is **need for an integrated approach** to democratic citizenship education both in the national context and institutional/organisational context: Having a curricular subject on citizenship education is important, but the development of citizenship competence should be linked also to other means like participation in student councils. It was noted that the term whole-school approach falls short in a VET context and that companies should also be included as places of learning. This is why we speak of integrated approaches in this case.

One of the key success factors of integrated approaches is the **collaboration with the wider community of the VET institution** – such as companies, sector organisations or NGOs. Featured initiatives at the PLA could serve as instructive example, such as the 'Day of Democracy' practiced in Danish VET systems where political representatives visit schools to talk about and experience democracy.

It was noted that learners still perceive to have **little agency** about the environment in which they learn. Such a challenge can only be tackled through strengthening the **participatory mechanisms and practices** at various stages of the education and training process.

The need for **capacity building at provider level** was expressed at various times throughout the PLA – both for subject-specific educators but also for teachers of other subjects and for in-company trainers, to equip them with the competence to integrate the topic in a cross-curricular way. Capacity building needs have also been identified for the level of school leadership and administration.

Discussions on the second day focused in particular on **quality assurance** aspects and on how to address the implementation gap between national standards/requirement and actual practice.

National policy levels often struggle to **gather evidence** on how democratic citizenship education is being taught at provider level, with little known on what methods are effective.

This is also linked to the fact that the topic in many countries is not a curricular priority, and little has been done so far to measure the development of citizenship competence among VET learners.

At the same time, VET institutions reportedly struggle to meet nationally set standards/requirements for democratic citizenship education, as they are faced with already packed curricula that often leave little to nor space to infuse democratic citizenship issues into the teaching and learning process. This **evident time constraint** is one of the aspects where an urgent need for further exchange of good practice and examples has been identified; also to make sure that developing democratic citizenship competence does not compete with developing professional/occupation-related competences.

The **EQAVET framework** can function as a valuable tool for nurturing quality and guiding stakeholders in addressing some of the challenges highlighted during the PLA discussions. Quality assurance frameworks should play an important role in monitoring the implementation of education for democratic citizenship, by generating evidence for continuous improvement and further development. This could help address the discussed lack of an evidence base and appropriate impact evaluation, which currently frequently prevent adequate self-assessment processes and resulting adaptations in design.