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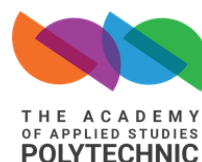


WP2

PROJECT NAME: InclusiVET: Bridging Skills and Accessibility in Vocational Training for the Hearing-Impaired

Project ID:2023-2-TR01-KA220-VET-000170645

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InclusiVET

KA220-VET - Cooperation partnerships in vocational education and training

InclusiVET: Bridging Skills and Accessibility in Vocational Training for the Hearing-Impaired

Project ID: 2023-2-TR01-KA220-VET-000170645

PARTNERS:



Yıldız Technical University is one of Türkiye's leading public universities, renowned for its strong tradition of academic excellence, innovation, and research. With over 25,000 students across diverse disciplines, the university provides internationally oriented education in engineering, natural sciences, architecture, economics, and social sciences. Committed to sustainable development, interdisciplinary collaboration, and industry partnerships, YTU equips students with the knowledge and practical skills needed to contribute to technological advancement, global competitiveness, and societal transformation.

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Epomeni Stasi is a social cooperative café dedicated to promoting inclusion, solidarity, and equal opportunities for young people with disabilities. By providing a supportive work environment for deaf and hard-of-hearing youngsters, the organization encourages social integration and access to the labor market through innovative experiences such as ordering in Greek sign language. Combining responsible consumption, cultural diversity, and community engagement, Epomeni Stasi hosts accessible cultural events and supports local products while fostering multicultural dialogue and social participation. Its experienced team actively contributes to youth work, inclusion, and international cooperation through various European training programs and initiatives.



Eu&Pro is a Prague-based educational and training organization with over 20 years of experience in vocational education, Erasmus+ mobility, and lifelong learning. Specializing in digital transformation, entrepreneurship, social inclusion, and environmental education, the organization develops innovative e-learning platforms, VR-based training materials, and international mobility projects. Through collaboration with universities, NGOs, municipalities, and private sector partners across Europe, Eu&Pro promotes inclusive education, cross-border cooperation, and the development of key competencies for both young people and adults.

<https://www.eupro.cz/>



Academy of Applied Studies Polytechnic is a respected public higher education institution offering more than 30 study programs in technical, technological, artistic, medical, and socio-humanistic fields. With a strong focus on academic excellence, innovation, and lifelong learning, the Academy equips over 3,500 students with contemporary knowledge, practical skills, and professional competencies through accredited vocational, specialist, and master programs. By fostering close cooperation with national and international institutions as well as industry partners, the Academy promotes creativity, research, and hands-on experience, preparing graduates to contribute to societal development and succeed in dynamic global labor markets.

www.politehnika.edu.ro



St. Mary High School for Hearing Impaired is a public special education institution in Bucharest providing inclusive education and support for children and young people with hearing impairments and associated disabilities. Offering preschool to high school education, including unique vocational training in Printing Techniques and Tourism & Food, the school combines academic excellence with practical skill development. Equipped with modern educational facilities and supported by experienced special education professionals, the institution actively promotes equal opportunities, innovation, and international collaboration through Erasmus+ and eTwinning projects.

www.scoolasurzi2bucuresti.ro



Altındağ Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School is a well-established vocational education institution providing high-quality technical and professional training since 1954. With modern workshops, laboratories, and specialized learning facilities, the school offers education in fields such as Information Technologies, Machinery, Electrical and Electronics, Metal Technologies, Furniture Design, and Special Education for hearing-impaired students. Combining academic excellence with practical experience, cultural activities, and sports, the institution aims to educate creative, skilled, and socially responsible individuals prepared for higher education, industry, and lifelong learning.

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WP2: Material Development



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Inclusive learner engagement has emerged as one of the defining priorities of contemporary European education policy, particularly within vocational education and training (VET), where participation, accessibility, learner agency, and successful educational progression are increasingly understood as essential dimensions of educational quality. Across Europe, policy discourse has progressively shifted from viewing inclusion primarily through the lens of access toward a broader understanding that emphasizes meaningful participation, institutional responsiveness, learner representation in governance, recognition of diverse learning pathways, and equitable opportunities for success across heterogeneous learner populations. This transition reflects wider European commitments to social cohesion, democratic participation, labour-market inclusion, and lifelong learning, as articulated in the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Skills Agenda, and quality assurance frameworks promoted through European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training.

Within this policy landscape, Romania, Serbia, Türkiye, Greece, and Czechia represent five education systems with distinct institutional histories, governance traditions, and developmental trajectories, yet with strikingly convergent reform challenges. Each country has undertaken substantial modernization efforts aimed at aligning national systems with European principles of learner-centred education, competence-based curricula, labour-market responsiveness, digital transformation, and broader educational inclusion. Romania represents an important regional case due to its sustained reforms in vocational education modernization, expansion of dual education pathways, increased investment in digital learning infrastructure, and progressive strengthening of inclusive education policy. Romanian education policy has increasingly emphasized access, learner-centred pedagogy, quality assurance, and labour-market relevance. At the same time, operational challenges remain regarding institutional accessibility, integration of learner support systems, recognition of transversal competences, and more systematic embedding of inclusion indicators into institutional quality assurance frameworks. Romania's inclusion in the comparative analysis significantly strengthens the regional perspective by adding an EU Member State with rapidly evolving VET modernization capacity and growing relevance for transferable good practices.

Comparative analysis reveals several shared structural challenges. First, learner participation in educational governance remains predominantly formal rather than substantive, with representation mechanisms often operating as consultative structures rather than vehicles of meaningful co-decision. Second, accessibility frameworks—while increasingly recognized—remain unevenly operationalized, particularly in relation to digital accessibility, pedagogical flexibility, and support for diverse learner pathways. Third, learner support systems remain fragmented, with mentoring, counselling, financial aid, and career guidance often functioning as parallel rather than integrated institutional structures. Fourth, recognition of extracurricular engagement, civic participation, and transversal competences remains weakly embedded in qualification systems despite growing policy emphasis on competence-based education. Fifth, teacher preparation for inclusive pedagogy remains inconsistent, particularly in vocational sectors undergoing rapid digital and labour-market transformation. Finally, quality assurance systems, while increasingly sophisticated, still lack robust inclusion metrics that would enable systematic monitoring of participation, diversity, retention, accessibility, and learner voice.

These common challenges create an important policy opportunity. Because Romania, Serbia, Türkiye, Greece, and Czechia are navigating similar structural reforms under comparable European policy influences, they are well positioned to pursue regional harmonization of inclusive learner engagement standards. Such harmonization would not imply institutional uniformity or disregard for national context. Rather, it would establish a common normative and operational framework for defining, measuring, and supporting inclusive learner engagement across diverse educational systems.

This policy paper proposes precisely such a framework. Drawing on comparative analysis of national systems and wider European educational policy, it argues for a shared regional approach centred on six interrelated dimensions: inclusive governance and learner representation; accessibility and equitable participation; integrated learner support systems; recognition of extracurricular and transversal competences; educator capacity for inclusive pedagogy; and measurable inclusion indicators embedded in quality assurance systems. Together, these dimensions form the basis of a comprehensive policy architecture capable of moving inclusive learner engagement from rhetorical commitment toward institutionalized practice.

The recommendations presented here position inclusive learner engagement not merely as a social policy objective, but as a strategic driver of educational quality, labour-market resilience, democratic participation, and long-term socioeconomic cohesion across South-East and Central Europe. In this regard, the consortium partnership established through provides an important platform for advancing regional policy dialogue and demonstrating how collaborative policy development can strengthen inclusive educational reform.



1. Introduction

The transformation of vocational education and training across Europe has increasingly been shaped by a broad recognition that educational systems must become more responsive not only to labour-market needs, but also to the diverse social realities, life trajectories, and learning needs of contemporary learners. The demographic diversification of student populations, technological transformation of learning environments, widening participation agendas, migration flows, changing labour-market structures, and the growing strategic importance of lifelong learning have fundamentally altered the educational landscape in which vocational institutions operate. In this context, inclusive learner engagement has emerged as a central organizing principle of educational reform.

Inclusive learner engagement extends beyond traditional understandings of educational inclusion. Historically, inclusion policy was frequently framed in terms of access—ensuring that learners from disadvantaged groups could enter educational systems and that formal barriers to admission were reduced. While access remains an indispensable foundation, contemporary educational policy increasingly recognizes that admission alone does not guarantee meaningful educational participation, successful learning experiences, or equitable outcomes. Learners may formally access education while remaining structurally marginalized within institutional cultures, pedagogical practices, governance systems, and support structures. True inclusion therefore requires a broader conception—one that encompasses representation, participation, agency, accessibility, belonging, recognition, and support throughout the learner journey.

From this perspective, inclusive learner engagement can be understood as the extent to which educational systems actively create the conditions for all learners to participate meaningfully in learning processes, institutional life, decision-making structures, and professional development opportunities, regardless of social background, disability status, age, gender, migration experience, economic disadvantage, or other characteristics that may shape educational opportunity. This broader conception integrates social inclusion with educational quality. It recognizes learner engagement not simply as an individual disposition or behavioural outcome, but as a systemic product of institutional design, governance culture, pedagogical practice, and policy architecture.



European policy frameworks increasingly reflect this understanding. The European Pillar of Social Rights emphasizes equal opportunities and inclusive access to education as fundamental social rights. The European Skills Agenda highlights widening participation in upskilling and reskilling opportunities as essential to economic resilience and social fairness. The European Qualifications Framework promotes recognition of diverse learning pathways, while European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training embeds participation, responsiveness, stakeholder involvement, and continuous improvement within quality assurance approaches to VET. Similarly, the European Training Foundation has repeatedly emphasized that inclusive VET systems must address structural barriers affecting learner participation and transition opportunities, particularly in candidate and neighbouring countries undergoing systemic modernization.

Within South-East and Central Europe, these policy developments intersect with complex reform environments. Countries across the region are simultaneously modernizing qualifications frameworks, strengthening labour-market alignment, digitalizing educational provision, expanding work-based learning, and adapting governance systems to contemporary European standards. Yet these reforms unfold within contexts marked by resource asymmetries, institutional heterogeneity, demographic change, and varying implementation capacities. As a result, policy ambition frequently exceeds operational capacity, producing implementation gaps that are especially visible in inclusion policy.

The experiences of Romania, Serbia, Türkiye, Greece, and Czechia illustrate this dynamic clearly. Despite substantial differences in educational governance traditions and institutional structures, all five countries face common challenges: ensuring meaningful learner voice in institutional governance; building accessible physical and digital learning environments; developing integrated support systems responsive to diverse learner needs; recognizing non-formal and extracurricular learning; strengthening educator preparedness for inclusive pedagogy; and embedding measurable inclusion indicators into quality assurance systems. These shared challenges create fertile ground for collaborative policy development and regional standard-setting.

This paper therefore argues that inclusive learner engagement should be treated as a common regional policy priority and approached through coordinated policy harmonization. Rather than viewing inclusion as a narrow social measure, the paper positions inclusive learner engagement as a multidimensional quality framework capable of improving educational effectiveness, labour-market responsiveness, learner well-being, and democratic institutional culture. Regional cooperation offers a practical pathway for translating this vision into operational policy standards.

2. Comparative Overview of National Systems

The five partner countries involved in this comparative policy analysis—Romania, Serbia, Türkiye, Greece, and Czechia—represent distinct educational systems shaped by different political histories, institutional legacies, governance arrangements, and socioeconomic trajectories. Nevertheless, comparative examination reveals substantial convergence in policy direction, particularly regarding modernization of vocational education, stronger alignment with labour-market needs, widening participation, and growing recognition of inclusion as a quality dimension within education reform.

In Romania, vocational education has undergone substantial modernization over the past decade, driven by labour-market transformation, EU cohesion policy priorities, digital transition agendas, and stronger alignment between education and regional economic development. Dual education pathways have expanded, employer partnerships have strengthened, and quality assurance systems have become increasingly sophisticated. Romania has also progressively advanced inclusive education policy, particularly regarding accessibility, disability rights, learner-centred teaching approaches, and widening participation. However, implementation remains uneven across institutions and regions. Learner participation in governance is still developing, institutional support systems remain fragmented in many providers, recognition of extracurricular and transversal competences is inconsistent, and inclusive pedagogical practice remains strongly dependent on local institutional initiative rather than systemic standardization. Nevertheless, Romania demonstrates significant innovation potential and provides an important comparative example of rapid vocational modernization under strong European policy

In Serbia, educational reform has been strongly influenced by European integration processes, qualification framework modernization, and strategic efforts to strengthen professionally oriented higher education and dual education models. Serbian legislation increasingly reflects European principles of learner-centred learning, participation, and accessibility. However, implementation remains uneven, especially in relation to institutional support services, accessibility standards, recognition of extracurricular learning, and operational mechanisms for learner voice. In Türkiye, large-scale educational modernization has focused on expanding participation, strengthening technical and vocational education, and improving labour-market alignment through competency-based curricula and digital transformation strategies. Türkiye has developed substantial institutional infrastructure for student support and access expansion. At the same time, the scale and diversity of the education system create implementation disparities, particularly regarding inclusive pedagogy, learner participation in governance, and consistent support mechanisms for vulnerable learner populations across regions.

In Greece, reforms have increasingly emphasized quality assurance, modernization of vocational pathways, lifelong learning, and stronger alignment with European educational frameworks. Greece has made important advances in accessibility policy and learner rights. Nevertheless, institutional fragmentation, uneven regional capacity, and persistent structural pressures associated with broader socioeconomic challenges continue to affect implementation of fully integrated inclusion systems, particularly in learner support and recognition of non-formal competences.

In Czechia, a comparatively mature education governance environment and stronger institutional capacities have facilitated more advanced implementation of quality assurance systems, competence-based curricula, and learner support structures. Czechia demonstrates strong potential as a regional model in institutional quality management and labour-market integration. However, challenges remain regarding inclusive participation of marginalized groups, learner representation in governance, and more systematic recognition of diverse forms of learner engagement beyond formal curriculum achievement.

Comparatively, all five systems reveal a common pattern: strong policy convergence at normative level, combined with fragmented operationalization of inclusive learner engagement at institutional level.

3. Shared Structural Challenges in Inclusive Learner Engagement



Although the education systems of Romania, Serbia, Türkiye, Greece, and Czechia differ significantly in institutional organization, funding models, administrative traditions, and the maturity of policy implementation mechanisms, comparative analysis demonstrates that they face a remarkably similar set of structural challenges in achieving genuinely inclusive learner engagement. These challenges are not merely administrative or technical; rather, they reflect deeper tensions between policy aspiration and institutional reality, between formal inclusion and meaningful participation, and between legislative modernization and operational transformation. Across all five countries, inclusive learner engagement is increasingly recognized rhetorically as a strategic objective linked to educational quality, social cohesion, labour-market participation, and democratic governance. Yet the practical systems through which institutions engage learners, recognize diversity, and support participation remain uneven, fragmented, and frequently underdeveloped. This creates a policy paradox common across transitional and reform-oriented educational systems: inclusive education is strongly affirmed in normative frameworks, but inconsistently embedded in institutional architecture.

One of the most persistent shared challenges concerns the limited depth of learner participation in institutional governance. In each of the five national systems, learners formally possess channels of representation, whether through student councils, representative assemblies, consultative committees, or participatory quality assurance mechanisms. These structures provide important symbolic recognition of learner voice and create opportunities for dialogue between institutional leadership and student communities. However, formal representation does not necessarily translate into substantive influence. In practice, learner participation often remains peripheral to strategic institutional decision-making. Students are consulted on operational matters—teaching schedules, facilities, student standards, extracurricular activities—but are rarely positioned as co-creators of policy related to curriculum modernization, institutional inclusion planning, accessibility strategies, digital transformation, or systemic quality reform.

This limited participatory depth has important implications for inclusion. When learner voice remains symbolic rather than transformative, educational systems lose an essential source of institutional intelligence regarding barriers to participation, unmet support needs, accessibility challenges, and emerging learner expectations. Vulnerable learner groups—students with disabilities, migrant learners, adult learners, learners from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, and minority communities—are particularly likely to remain underrepresented in formal governance structures, thereby reproducing patterns of exclusion even within systems formally committed to democratic participation.

A second shared challenge concerns fragmented approaches to accessibility. All five countries have progressively strengthened legal commitments to educational accessibility, particularly regarding disability rights, anti-discrimination frameworks, and broader principles of equal educational opportunity. Physical accessibility standards have improved in many institutions; digital learning environments have expanded significantly; and awareness of inclusive teaching approaches has grown. Nevertheless, accessibility remains unevenly operationalized. The challenge lies partly in the tendency to conceptualize accessibility narrowly—as infrastructure adaptation or legal compliance—rather than as a comprehensive institutional design principle.

Inclusive accessibility requires simultaneous attention to physical environments, digital platforms, pedagogical flexibility, communication practices, assessment systems, and support mechanisms. Yet many institutions continue to approach these domains separately, without integrated accessibility strategies. A building may be physically accessible while digital learning content remains inaccessible. Digital systems may be available while pedagogical design remains rigid and poorly adapted to diverse learner needs. Formal accommodations may exist while institutional cultures continue to stigmatize support-seeking behaviour. The result is a fragmented accessibility landscape in which formal compliance coexists with persistent practical barriers.

Third, all five national systems face challenges related to fragmentation of learner support services. Modern inclusive education depends on coordinated support ecosystems that address the academic, psychological, financial, social, and professional dimensions of learner experience. Mentoring, counselling, tutoring, disability services, financial support, career guidance, and peer-support mechanisms are increasingly recognized as core institutional functions. However, in practice these services frequently develop as isolated interventions rather than integrated systems.

Institutions may provide scholarships without counselling support, mentoring without structured referral systems, career guidance without psychological support, or disability accommodations without broader inclusion planning. Coordination across services remains weak. Information about support opportunities is often poorly communicated. Institutional responsibilities are frequently dispersed across multiple offices without strategic integration. Learners, especially those from vulnerable groups, may struggle to navigate fragmented systems and therefore remain underserved despite the nominal existence of support structures.

A fourth structural challenge concerns limited recognition of extracurricular learning and transversal competences. Contemporary labour markets increasingly value communication skills, teamwork, digital collaboration, civic engagement, problem-solving, entrepreneurial initiative, intercultural competence, and adaptive learning capacity. These competences are often developed outside formal classrooms—through volunteering, student leadership, project work, peer mentoring, mobility experiences, community engagement, and extracurricular initiatives. Yet educational systems across the five countries remain heavily oriented toward formal curriculum achievement as the primary source of recognized educational value.

This creates a mismatch between educational recognition systems and contemporary competence realities. Learners actively participating in civic initiatives, peer-support networks, innovation projects, or social entrepreneurship may develop highly valuable competences that remain institutionally invisible. Such invisibility weakens learner motivation, narrows definitions of achievement, and disproportionately disadvantages learners whose strengths emerge through applied, collaborative, or experiential learning rather than traditional academic performance alone. Although micro-credentials, digital badges, competence portfolios, and recognition of prior learning are emerging policy tools, systematic implementation remains limited.

A fifth challenge concerns teacher preparedness for inclusive pedagogy. Inclusive learner engagement ultimately depends not only on institutional policy, but on everyday pedagogical interaction. Teachers shape participation, belonging, learner confidence, classroom accessibility, and educational responsiveness through curriculum design, assessment practices, communication styles, and relational engagement with learners. Across Romania, Serbia, Türkiye, Greece, and Czechia, educator professional development increasingly includes digital pedagogy, learner-centred teaching, and competence-based instruction. Yet inclusive pedagogy remains inconsistently embedded in professional standards and teacher preparation systems.

Many educators continue to operate within pedagogical paradigms optimized for homogeneous learner groups, standardized learning pathways, and conventional assessment structures. Skills related to differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning, intercultural competence, trauma-informed pedagogy, accessible digital teaching, and learner engagement facilitation remain unevenly distributed. This creates variability not only across institutions, but often within institutions themselves, where inclusive practice depends heavily on individual teacher commitment rather than systemic pedagogical standards.

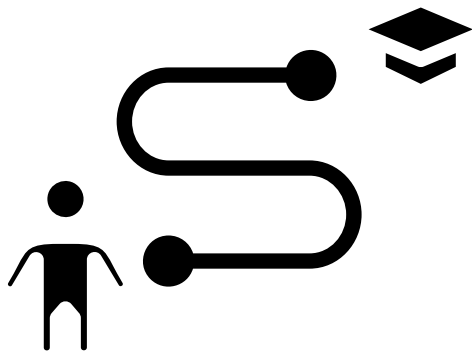
Finally, a cross-cutting challenge concerns the absence of robust inclusion metrics within quality assurance systems. The five countries have all invested significantly in quality assurance modernization, accreditation systems, learning outcomes frameworks, and institutional evaluation procedures. However, inclusion is rarely treated as a measurable quality domain with clearly defined indicators, comparable benchmarks, and accountability mechanisms.

Retention of vulnerable learner groups, accessibility compliance, learner participation in governance, use of support services, recognition of extracurricular competences, inclusion training of staff, and learner perceptions of belonging are seldom systematically measured. Where data exist, they are often fragmented, inconsistent, or weakly integrated into institutional improvement processes. Without measurable inclusion indicators, educational systems struggle to move from declarative commitment toward evidence-based inclusion governance.

Taken together, these structural challenges reveal that the core policy problem facing Romania, Serbia, Türkiye, Greece, and Czechia is not the absence of inclusion policy, but the incomplete institutionalization of inclusive learner engagement as a coherent operational framework. This shared reality creates strong justification for regional cooperation in developing common standards, shared indicators, and collaborative policy learning mechanisms.

4. Policy Pathways toward Regional Harmonization

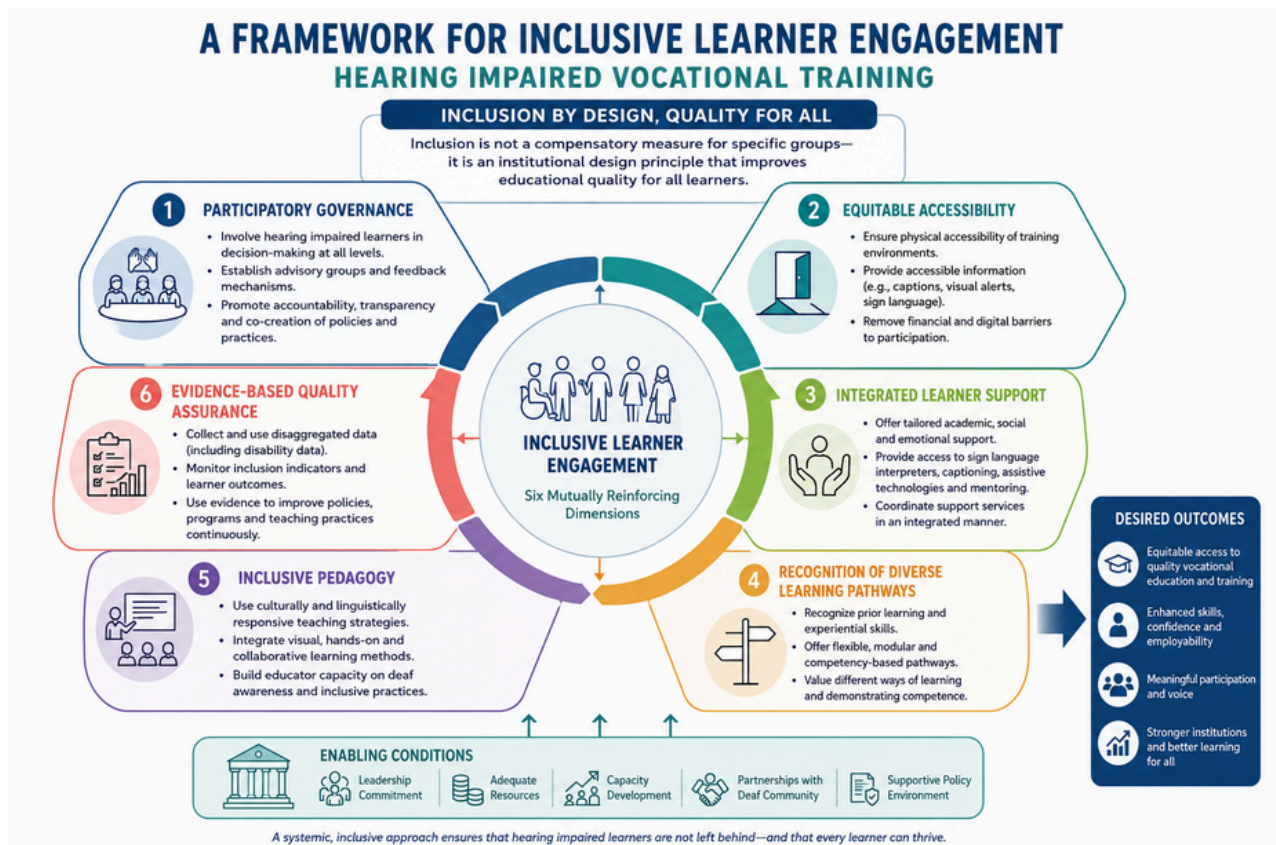
If inclusive learner engagement is to become a genuine quality standard within vocational education and professionally oriented higher education across the region, policy development must move beyond isolated national reforms toward coordinated regional harmonization. Such harmonization should not be understood as policy uniformity or administrative centralization. Rather, it should be conceived as the creation of a common normative framework, shared operational standards, and mutually recognized indicators capable of guiding institutional reform while respecting national specificities.



The first pathway toward harmonization lies in establishing a shared conceptual framework for inclusive learner engagement. At present, inclusion across Romania, Serbia, Türkiye, Greece, and Czechia is frequently interpreted through narrow or sector-specific lenses—most commonly as accessibility policy, anti-discrimination compliance, social support provision, or widening access initiatives. While each of these dimensions remains important, they do not by themselves constitute a comprehensive model of inclusive learner engagement. A regional framework should therefore adopt a broader understanding in which inclusion is conceptualized as the systematic capacity of educational institutions to ensure that all learners can participate meaningfully in learning, governance, institutional life, and professional development, while receiving equitable opportunities for success and recognition.



Such a framework should explicitly define inclusive learner engagement as encompassing six mutually reinforcing dimensions: participatory governance, equitable accessibility, integrated learner support, recognition of diverse learning pathways, inclusive pedagogy, and evidence-based quality assurance. The strength of such an approach lies in its systemic character. Rather than treating inclusion as a compensatory measure for specific groups, it positions inclusion as an institutional design principle that improves educational quality for all learners.



The second policy pathway concerns the strengthening of learner participation in governance as a substantive institutional practice. Across the region, educational systems must move beyond symbolic consultation toward meaningful co-creation of educational policy. This requires both regulatory and cultural change. At regulatory level, ministries and accreditation bodies should encourage or require institutions to demonstrate how learner voices influence strategic decision-making—not merely operational student affairs. Learners should be systematically involved in curriculum design discussions, digital transformation planning, institutional accessibility reviews, quality assurance cycles, and the co-development of learner support strategies.

A third pathway toward harmonization concerns the development of comprehensive accessibility standards as a shared regional benchmark. Accessibility must be reconceptualized from a legal compliance obligation into a multidimensional quality standard. Regional cooperation can be particularly valuable here because institutions across the five countries face similar implementation challenges and can benefit from common guidelines, benchmarking, and peer learning.

A harmonized accessibility framework should include at least five domains: physical infrastructure accessibility; digital accessibility of platforms and learning materials; pedagogical accessibility through flexible learning design; accessible communication systems; and accessible transition pathways into employment and lifelong learning opportunities. Importantly, accessibility should be framed proactively through universal design principles rather than reactively through individual accommodations alone. Educational systems designed for flexibility, multiple pathways of participation, and varied modes of demonstrating competence are inherently more inclusive, resilient, and learner-centred.

The fourth pathway concerns the institutionalization of integrated learner support systems. One of the clearest lessons emerging from comparative policy review is that learner support remains too fragmented across the region. Inclusive engagement requires institutions to move toward coordinated learner support ecosystems in which academic guidance, mentoring, counselling, disability support, financial aid, peer assistance, career services, and workplace mentoring are strategically connected rather than administratively isolated.

This requires governance innovation within institutions. Rather than locating support functions in separate offices operating independently, institutions should develop integrated learner support strategies coordinated through central inclusion or student success frameworks. Digital case management systems, shared referral mechanisms, interdisciplinary support teams, and proactive outreach to at-risk learners could significantly improve access and effectiveness. Importantly, learner support should no longer be framed solely as remedial assistance for struggling students, but as a universal educational infrastructure that strengthens engagement, belonging, and successful progression for diverse learner populations.

A fifth and particularly transformative pathway concerns the recognition of extracurricular learning and transversal competences. Regional labour markets increasingly reward adaptability, initiative, communication, collaborative problem-solving, intercultural competence, and digital agility—competences frequently developed beyond formal curriculum structures. Educational systems that fail to recognize these forms of learning risk maintaining narrow conceptions of achievement that neither reflect labour-market realities nor adequately value learner agency.



Regional harmonization offers an opportunity to establish common approaches for validating such learning. Shared frameworks for competence portfolios, digital badges, structured co-curricular transcripts, and modular micro-credentials could allow institutions across Romania, Serbia, Türkiye, Greece, and Czechia to recognize extracurricular engagement in comparable and transferable ways. Such recognition would strengthen learner motivation, encourage civic and institutional participation, and create stronger bridges between educational experience and employability.

A sixth pathway concerns professional development of educators for inclusive pedagogy. No inclusion strategy can succeed unless teaching staff possess the competences necessary to engage diverse learners effectively. Regional cooperation can significantly strengthen educator capacity by developing shared professional standards, collaborative training modules, joint certification frameworks, and communities of pedagogical practice focused on inclusive teaching innovation.

Inclusive pedagogy should be embedded in teacher education, professional accreditation, and continuing professional development systems. Competence areas should include differentiated instruction, accessible curriculum design, intercultural pedagogy, digital accessibility, learner engagement facilitation, inclusive assessment, and strategies for supporting diverse participation patterns. In vocational education specifically, employer mentors and workplace supervisors must also be recognized as pedagogical actors requiring inclusion-oriented professional development.

Finally, regional harmonization requires a common evidence framework for measuring inclusive learner engagement. What is not measured rarely becomes systematically improved. Ministries, quality assurance bodies, and institutions should collaboratively develop comparable indicators capturing learner participation in governance, diversity representation, accessibility compliance, use of support services, recognition of extracurricular competences, retention patterns, learner well-being, and perceptions of belonging and institutional responsiveness.

Such metrics would allow benchmarking across institutions and countries, transform inclusion into a measurable quality domain, and support evidence-based policy refinement over time. More importantly, they would reposition inclusive learner engagement from aspirational discourse to accountable institutional practice.

Together, these pathways form the foundation for a coherent regional policy architecture capable of strengthening educational inclusion, institutional responsiveness, and learner success across South-East and Central Europe.

5. Building a Common Regional Standard for Inclusive VET

The logical next step in advancing inclusive learner engagement across Romania, Serbia, Türkiye, Greece, and Czechia is the development of a Common Regional Standard for Inclusive Vocational Education and Training. Such a standard would provide a shared reference point for ministries, accreditation agencies, VET providers, professionally oriented higher education institutions, employers, and learner organizations, creating a common language and operational framework for inclusion across diverse national systems.

Historically, educational standardization in Europe has focused primarily on qualifications frameworks, curriculum comparability, learning outcomes, and quality assurance mechanisms. Inclusion, while frequently referenced as a policy objective, has rarely been operationalized through equivalent regional standards. As a result, inclusion often remains interpreted through broad normative principles rather than through concrete institutional expectations. A common regional standard would close this implementation gap by translating values into operational benchmarks.

The proposed standard should be built around a set of minimum institutional commitments that all participating educational providers would progressively adopt. These commitments should include: institutional inclusion strategies formally integrated into governance structures; mechanisms for meaningful learner participation in decision-making; accessibility audits covering physical, digital, and pedagogical environments; integrated learner support systems; recognition frameworks for extracurricular competences; mandatory professional development pathways in inclusive pedagogy; and structured monitoring of inclusion indicators.

However, standardization should not be limited to compliance architecture. To be transformative, the regional standard must also embody a developmental philosophy. Inclusion should be framed not merely as a regulatory obligation, but as a strategic institutional asset linked to educational quality, learner success, labour-market adaptability, innovation capacity, and social legitimacy. Institutions that successfully engage diverse learners are more resilient, more responsive, and better positioned to navigate demographic and technological change.

A particularly innovative element of such a regional standard would be the introduction of Inclusive Learner Engagement Maturity Levels, allowing institutions to assess their developmental stage. Rather than a binary model of compliant/non-compliant, institutions could be evaluated across progressive levels—emerging, developing, advanced, and exemplary—across each inclusion dimension. This would encourage continuous improvement, peer learning, and realistic developmental pathways tailored to institutional capacity.

The standard should also include learner voice as a core validation mechanism. Too often, inclusion is measured through institutional reporting rather than learner experience. A genuinely inclusive regional standard must therefore integrate learner feedback, participatory evaluation, and direct consultation as central components of quality monitoring.

By establishing such a common standard, the region would create not only greater policy coherence, but also a shared reform identity centred on inclusive excellence in vocational education.

6. Governance and Implementation Mechanisms

The development of a regional framework for inclusive learner engagement requires governance arrangements capable of translating policy ambition into sustainable institutional practice. One of the principal lessons emerging from comparative analysis of Romania, Serbia, Türkiye, Greece, and Czechia is that educational inclusion cannot be effectively advanced through isolated institutional initiatives alone. Nor can it rely exclusively on legislative declaration. Rather, successful implementation depends upon coherent multi-level governance in which responsibilities are clearly distributed across ministries, quality assurance agencies, educational institutions, employers, learner organizations, and civil society actors, while maintaining sufficient flexibility for contextual adaptation.

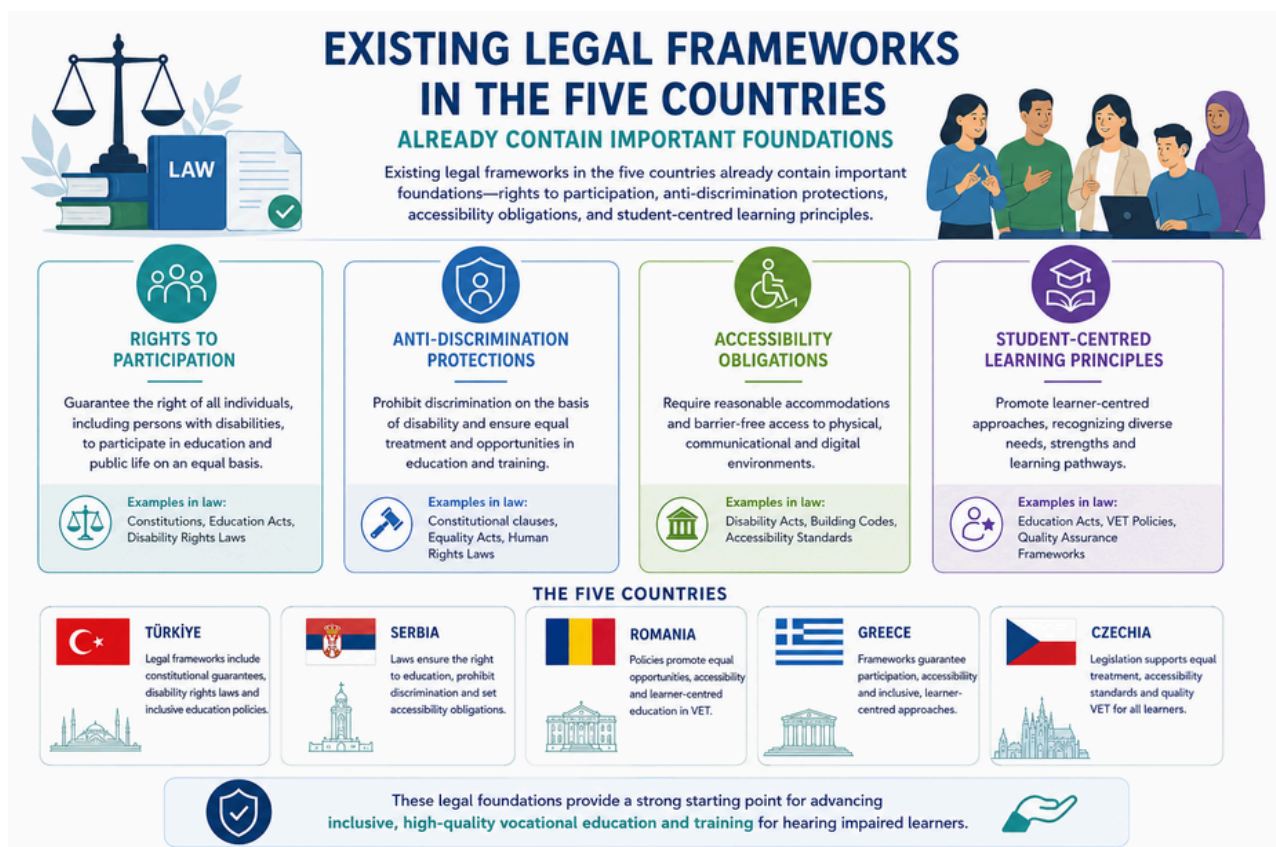


PRACTICE
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At the highest governance level, national ministries responsible for education and vocational training must provide strategic leadership by embedding inclusive learner engagement explicitly within national education reform agendas. This requires moving beyond broad commitments to equality and access toward operational policy frameworks that define expectations regarding learner participation, accessibility, support systems, staff competences, and inclusion monitoring. Ministries should position inclusive learner engagement as a strategic pillar of educational modernization rather than as a supplementary social policy agenda. Such positioning is essential because it reframes inclusion from a compensatory obligation into a core component of educational quality, workforce preparedness, and democratic institutional development.

National policy leadership should also be reflected in legislative refinement. Existing legal frameworks in the five countries already contain important foundations—rights to participation, anti-discrimination protections, accessibility obligations, and student-centred learning principles—but these provisions are frequently dispersed across multiple policy domains and lack operational coherence. Ministries should therefore encourage the development of integrated national guidelines or policy frameworks specifically addressing inclusive learner engagement in vocational and professionally oriented education. Such frameworks would provide institutions with strategic direction while preserving institutional autonomy regarding implementation modalities.



A second critical governance actor is the system of quality assurance and accreditation agencies. These institutions possess unique leverage because they define institutional legitimacy, shape strategic priorities, and influence resource allocation. If inclusion remains peripheral within accreditation frameworks, it is unlikely to become central in institutional planning. Conversely, if inclusion becomes embedded within quality assurance criteria, institutions gain strong incentives to develop systematic approaches.

Regional reform should therefore encourage accreditation systems to integrate explicit inclusion criteria, including evidence of learner participation in governance, accessibility planning, institutional support ecosystems, recognition of diverse learning pathways, staff development in inclusive pedagogy, and measurable inclusion outcomes. Importantly, such criteria should be developmental rather than punitive, supporting institutional learning and continuous improvement. Peer-review approaches, self-assessment frameworks, and evidence-based improvement cycles aligned with European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training principles could provide particularly effective mechanisms for operationalizing this governance function.

At institutional level, leadership commitment becomes decisive. Educational institutions are where inclusion either becomes lived reality or remains rhetorical aspiration. Institutional leadership—boards, rectors, directors, deans, and senior management teams—must therefore position inclusion within strategic planning, resource allocation, staffing models, infrastructure development, and organizational culture. Inclusion should not be delegated solely to student affairs offices or disability support units. Rather, it must become a whole-institution responsibility embedded across governance, teaching, services, and community engagement.

One particularly important governance innovation would be the establishment of institutional inclusion councils or learner engagement boards composed of leadership representatives, teaching staff, learner representatives, employer partners, student support professionals, and where appropriate civil society organizations representing vulnerable learner groups. Such bodies could provide strategic coordination, monitor progress, and create a formal governance platform through which learner experience directly informs institutional reform.

Within vocational education, employers and workplace learning partners represent an additional governance layer that is often neglected in inclusion policy. As work-based learning, apprenticeships, and dual models expand, employers increasingly function as co-educators. Yet many workplace environments remain insufficiently prepared to support diverse learners, accommodate accessibility needs, or adopt inclusive mentoring practices. Regional policy frameworks should therefore recognize employers as inclusion stakeholders and encourage the development of inclusive workplace learning standards, mentor training frameworks, and partnership agreements that explicitly address learner diversity, support, and equitable participation.

Finally, learners themselves must be recognized as governance actors rather than policy beneficiaries. Inclusive learner engagement cannot be designed exclusively for learners; it must be designed with learners. Participatory policy design, learner consultation platforms, co-creation workshops, and representative learner networks should become institutionalized components of governance architecture. Importantly,

learner voice mechanisms must deliberately include underrepresented learner populations rather than reproducing existing participation inequalities.

Only through such multi-level governance alignment can regional inclusion standards become operationally sustainable.

7. Regional Cooperation Platform and Policy Transfer

The shared structural challenges identified across Romania, Serbia, Türkiye, Greece, and Czechia demonstrate that national reform alone is insufficient for achieving transformative progress in inclusive learner engagement. While each country must adapt policy to its institutional context, regional cooperation offers substantial strategic advantages: accelerated policy learning, reduced duplication of reform effort, shared development of tools and standards, benchmarking opportunities, and the creation of a stronger collective voice in wider European educational policy dialogue.

For these reasons, this paper proposes the establishment of a Regional Platform for Inclusive Learner Engagement in Vocational Education and Training, building initially upon the collaborative foundation established through . This platform should be conceived not as a temporary project consortium mechanism, but as a durable policy cooperation infrastructure linking educational institutions, ministries, quality assurance agencies, employers, learner organizations, and civil society actors across the participating countries.

The first function of such a platform should be policy observatory and comparative monitoring. Educational systems frequently lack structured mechanisms for systematically comparing inclusion practice, monitoring reform trajectories, and identifying emerging policy innovation. A regional observatory could collect comparative data on learner participation, accessibility standards, learner support models, recognition systems, and inclusion indicators, creating an evidence base for policy refinement and benchmarking. Comparative visibility often serves as a powerful reform driver because institutions and systems become more aware of both their strengths and their developmental gaps.

The second function should be peer learning and institutional exchange. Many effective inclusion practices already exist across the region, but remain localized and poorly transferred. Institutions have developed innovative mentoring systems, digital accessibility approaches, learner participation mechanisms, recognition models for extracurricular competences, and professional development practices in inclusive pedagogy. Regional cooperation can transform isolated institutional innovation into shared regional knowledge through study visits, policy dialogues, communities of practice, thematic workshops, and collaborative pilot initiatives.

Third, the platform should support joint development of regional tools and standards. Shared accessibility frameworks, inclusion self-assessment instruments, educator competence frameworks, learner engagement surveys, competence recognition templates, and inclusion KPI dashboards could be co-created regionally and adapted nationally. This would reduce development costs, strengthen comparability, and create common operational language across systems.

Fourth, regional cooperation should foster joint advocacy within broader European policy arenas. South-East and Central European educational systems often face similar structural pressures but are underrepresented in shaping wider European discourse on inclusion in vocational education. A coordinated regional voice can strengthen policy influence within European networks, contribute regionally grounded perspectives to emerging frameworks, and attract greater strategic investment in inclusive educational reform.

Most importantly, regional cooperation creates a cultural shift: inclusion ceases to be framed as a national administrative obligation and becomes understood as a shared regional modernization project linked to educational excellence, social cohesion, democratic participation, and economic resilience.

8. Conclusion: A Shared Vision for Inclusive VET in South-East and Central Europe

The future of vocational education and professionally oriented higher education in Europe will depend not only on technological modernization, labour-market alignment, or curricular innovation, but equally on the ability of educational systems to engage increasingly diverse learner populations in meaningful, equitable, and empowering ways. Inclusion is therefore no longer a peripheral social concern. It has become a defining dimension of educational quality and institutional legitimacy.

The comparative experiences of Romania, Serbia, Türkiye, Greece, and Czechia reveal both progress and unfinished transformation. Each system has developed important policy foundations. Each has strengthened access, modernized institutional frameworks, and advanced learner-centred educational reform. Yet across all five contexts, inclusion remains insufficiently institutionalized as a coherent operational framework shaping governance, pedagogy, support systems, recognition structures, and quality assurance.

This paper has argued that the path forward lies in regional harmonization—not as standardization of national systems, but as the creation of a shared framework of principles, operational benchmarks, governance mechanisms, and evidence-based indicators capable of guiding inclusive reform across diverse contexts. Such a framework should be built around meaningful learner participation, comprehensive accessibility, integrated learner support, recognition of diverse competences, educator preparedness for inclusive pedagogy, and measurable institutional accountability for inclusion outcomes.



The opportunity is significant. By acting collaboratively, Romania, Serbia, Türkiye, Greece, and Czechia can position themselves not merely as adopters of European inclusion policy, but as active contributors to shaping its future operational direction. Through shared standards, policy cooperation, comparative learning, and coordinated advocacy, the region can become a laboratory for inclusive excellence in vocational education and training.

The central policy message is therefore clear: inclusive learner engagement must be understood not as accommodation at the margins of educational systems, but as a foundational principle of educational quality, democratic participation, and sustainable socioeconomic development. Institutions that successfully engage all learners are stronger institutions. Systems that build inclusion into their core design are more resilient systems. Regions that cooperate around inclusive reform create stronger educational futures for all.

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