

The EQonomist

CLOSING THE GAP

**Bridging vocational education and the
labour market through the VET LOOP**

Why skills mismatch persists across Europe
From analysis to implementation
A new approach to VET alignment



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EQAVET 4.0

for quality in outcome-oriented VET

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Word from the Coordinator

As we approach the completion of Work Package 2 on the sectoral analysis, and move into Work Package 3, focused on aligning curricula with occupational qualifications profile, we reach an important milestone in the EQAVET 4.0 project.

The findings from our research confirm a challenge shared across Europe: while labour market needs increasingly evolve in response to technological, economic, and societal changes, their translation into education and training curricula remains fragmented and inconsistent. Bridging this gap requires not only evidence-based analysis but also a systematic approach that can support continuous dialogue between education providers and the labour market.

EQAVET4.0 aims to contribute to this objective by developing a transferable methodology for identifying occupational needs and translating them into curriculum development. At the same time, the project recognises the diversity of national education systems and labour markets, providing recommendations for adapting this methodology to different country contexts.

We hope that the work presented in this issue will contribute to the ongoing discussion on improving the responsiveness of education to labour market needs.

**YULIA
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Lviv EQAVET Lab to Become Ukraine's First National Centre for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education



Ukraine is preparing to launch the **Lviv EQAVET Lab**, the country's first dedicated centre for quality assurance in vocational education and training (VET). The initiative is being established within the **EQAVET 4.0** project through a partnership between **Google for Education**, the **European Institute of Social Educational Innovation (EU InnolInstitute)**, and the **Interregional Higher Vocational School of Automobile Transport and Construction** in Lviv.

Although Ukraine already participates in the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) Community of Practice, the Lviv EQAVET Lab represents an important next step. Rather than simply engaging with the European framework, the Lab will provide a permanent national platform where its principles can be translated into practical tools, professional expertise, and day-to-day institutional practice.

According to Vitalii Sapozhnik, Vice-Director of the European Institute of Social Educational Innovation (EU InnolInstitute):

"The Lviv EQAVET Lab is exactly the kind of practical initiative Ukraine needs at this stage of its education reform. It is one thing to discuss principles and indicators within a European community of practice; it is another to create a physical space where teachers, students, and institutions can apply those principles in their everyday work. At EU InnolInstitute, we believe sustainable reform depends on strong partnerships that extend beyond individual projects. Together with Google for Education, we hope the Lab will become a long-term bridge connecting the European EQAVET framework with the realities of Ukrainian vocational education."

Designed as a centre of excellence for quality assurance, the Lab will support teachers, school leaders, students, policymakers, and employers by providing practical guidance, assessment instruments, professional development opportunities, and collaborative learning aligned with European quality standards.

Beyond its contribution to the EQAVET 4.0 project, the Lviv EQAVET Lab is expected to play a broader national role by:

- delivering Ukraine's first Train-the-Trainers Programme dedicated to EQAVET and preparing a new generation of EQAVET Ambassadors;
- organising awareness-raising events and professional forums promoting quality assurance across the Ukrainian VET sector;
- supporting vocational schools and learners through modern self-assessment methodologies and quality improvement tools;
- strengthening cooperation between vocational education providers, industry, policymakers, and European partners to ensure that qualifications respond to labour market needs.

The Lab is intended to become a meeting point where European policy frameworks, educational innovation, and industry expertise come together to improve the quality and relevance of vocational education in Ukraine.



For the Interregional Higher Vocational School of Automobile Transport and Construction, hosting the Lviv EQAVET Lab represents a major strategic milestone. The initiative positions the institution as a national reference centre for quality assurance in the automotive transport and construction sectors—two industries that are fundamental to Ukraine's reconstruction, economic development, and European integration. Teachers will gain access to advanced professional development programmes, including specialised Train-the-Trainers courses, innovative assessment methodologies, and European quality assurance practices. Students will have opportunities to benchmark their competences against recognised European standards, improving both their employability and international mobility. Employers, meanwhile, will benefit from graduates whose qualifications are developed and assessed through transparent, internationally recognised quality assurance processes. Ultimately, the Lab transforms European quality frameworks into practical improvements in workshops, classrooms, and workplaces—where the real impact of vocational education is measured.

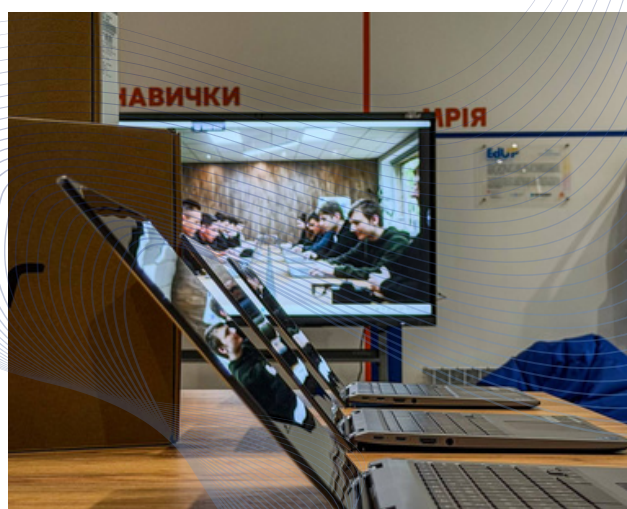
Sviatoslav Vytvytskiy, Deputy Director for Education and Production Work at the Interregional Higher Vocational School of Automobile Transport and Construction, explains:

"For our school, the Lviv EQAVET Lab is far more than another project—it is recognition of the long-term work we have invested in aligning vocational education with the real needs of the transport and construction industries. As one of Ukraine's first members of the EQAVET Community of Practice, we have experienced the gap between European quality standards and everyday educational practice. The Lab enables us to bridge that gap by providing a space where trainers can be prepared, institutions can strengthen self-assessment, and quality assurance becomes part of daily teaching and learning. It is an investment in our institution, in our graduates, and in the confidence of the employers who rely on their skills."



Looking Ahead

Supported by Google for Education and the European Institute of Social Educational Innovation, the Lviv EQAVET Lab is expected to become a long-term national resource for the Ukrainian vocational education sector. By strengthening institutional capacity, promoting a culture of continuous improvement, and fostering collaboration between education and industry, the Lab will contribute to building a more resilient, innovative, and internationally connected VET system.



Belgium's VET Paradox: Why Quality Must Move Closer to the Workplace



Belgium is an interesting case for anyone thinking seriously about the future of vocational education and training. VET is not a secondary or marginal pathway in the country. According to the European Commission's Education and Training Monitor 2025, 57.3% of pupils in medium-level education in Belgium were enrolled in programmes with a vocational direction in 2023, compared with an EU average of 52.4%. Yet the same source points to a persistent weakness: in 2024, only 48.8% of Belgian VET graduates had experienced work-based learning during their programme, below both the EU average of 65.2% and the EU-level target of at least 60% (European Commission, 2025).

This is the Belgian paradox. VET is widely present, but the bridge between training and the workplace is still not strong enough. The question, therefore, is not only whether learners enter vocational pathways. The deeper question is whether those pathways give learners enough exposure to the real tasks, tools, expectations and working conditions of the occupations they are preparing for.

Belgium also shows why this is not a simple problem to solve. Cedefop describes the Belgian VET landscape as one where citizens can access three different VET systems: Flemish, French-speaking and German-speaking. Brussels is a specific case because French-speaking and Flemish systems coexist there. Education, training and employment responsibilities are also distributed across different Regions and Communities, which means that coordination is not an administrative detail; it is part of the core challenge (Cedefop & Bruxelles Formation, 2022). At the same time, Belgium does not lack labour-market information. In Brussels, Actiris published its 2026 official list of critical functions, including professions with labour shortage, highlighting occupations where employer demand exceeds the number of qualified jobseekers (Brussels Economy and Employment, 2026). In Flanders, VDAB's 2026 shortage occupation analysis identifies 227 shortage occupations and notes that recruitment difficulties are not always caused by a lack of candidates, but often by a mismatch between available profiles and employer needs (VDAB, 2026). In Wallonia, Le Forem's 2026 list includes 144 shortage occupations and introduces a new criticality index to measure recruitment difficulties more precisely (Le Forem, 2026).



This raises an important point for VET quality assurance: labour-market intelligence is useful only if it changes what happens inside training systems. A shortage list can tell us where pressure exists. It cannot, by itself, define what should be taught, how competences should be assessed, or how quickly curricula should adapt. Without this translation step, evidence risks remaining outside the classroom.

This is where EQAVET 4.0 becomes particularly relevant. The project focuses on developing sectoral mapping, job profiles and assessment tools to align VET programmes with labour-market needs. It also places emphasis on evaluating graduates' performance from the perspectives of employers, educators and learners, which is essential if quality assurance is to become more than a compliance exercise.

The Belgian case reminds us that quality in VET cannot be measured only by the existence of programmes, the number of learners enrolled, or the formal completion of training. These indicators matter, but they are not enough. A truly outcome-oriented approach must ask a more demanding question: are learners able to do what the labour market actually requires, and how do we know?

For Europe, this is the value of EQAVET 4.0. It encourages VET systems to move from general statements about employability to concrete evidence about tasks, competences and outcomes. In a country like Belgium, where strong VET participation coexists with regional complexity and persistent recruitment difficulties, this shift is not theoretical. It is exactly the kind of quality conversation that VET systems need.

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BRIDGING THE SKILLS GAP IN GREECE THROUGH EQAVET 4.0

The gap between the skills available in the workforce and those required by the modern labour market remains one of the most significant challenges facing Greece today. According to the European Skills Index 2024, Greece ranks among the lowest-performing countries in Europe in terms of skills matching, highlighting persistent difficulties in aligning workforce competences with labour market needs. Despite the continuous growth of several sectors of the economy and the increasing demand for qualified personnel, many businesses still struggle to find employees with the appropriate technical, digital, and transversal skills.

The rapid pace of technological development, the green transition, and evolving business models are continuously reshaping labour market needs. Employers are increasingly looking for professionals who, beyond technical expertise, also possess adaptability, teamwork, problem-solving abilities, communication skills, and digital competences. Research by CEDEFOP highlights the growing importance of skills anticipation and the need for more responsive Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems capable of adapting to economic and technological change. However, VET systems often face difficulties in responding quickly and effectively to these constantly changing market demands.

In this context, strengthening cooperation between businesses, VET providers, and institutional stakeholders becomes essential. The Association of Thessalian Enterprises and Industries (STHEV), as the leading institutional representative of the business community in Thessaly, actively contributes to bridging the gap between education and employment by promoting initiatives that support skills development and employability.

Through its participation in the European project EQAVET 4.0, STHEV utilizes tools and methodologies aimed at improving the quality and effectiveness of Vocational Education and Training. The project promotes the mapping of occupational profiles and competences, the development of learning outcomes aligned with real labour market needs, and the creation of feedback mechanisms between employers and educational providers.



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At the same time, particular emphasis is placed on strengthening work-based learning, fostering cooperation with businesses, and encouraging the active involvement of employers in identifying emerging skills needs. Through this process, VET providers can better adapt training programmes to the current and future demands of the labour market and the economy. Strengthening dialogue between employers and training providers is essential to ensuring that curricula remain relevant and capable of preparing learners for the realities of a rapidly evolving workplace.



EQAVET 4.0 demonstrates that addressing the skills gap cannot be achieved without strong and continuous collaboration between education and the labour market. The ongoing exchange of knowledge, the participation of businesses in training design, and the development of flexible quality assurance mechanisms are key prerequisites for creating a more modern, resilient, and effective VET system in Greece. By supporting closer alignment between skills development and labour market requirements, EQAVET 4.0 contributes to building a workforce better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the digital and green transitions.



Sources

- CEDEFOP – European Skills Index 2024
- CEDEFOP – Skills Anticipation in Greece (2023 Update)
- OECD – Skills and Labour Market Reforms in Greece

Closing the Gap in Lithuania: From Personal Initiative to Systemic Solutions

At Tech-Park Kaunas, we witness firsthand the rapid evolution of digital skills required by the modern labour market. Bridging the distance between Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems and dynamic industry needs is the core mission we are tackling through the EQAVET 4.0 project.

In Lithuania, the Kaunas School of Information Technology (KITM) stands out as an example of excellence. However, their success in closing the skills gap relies heavily on informal teacher initiatives and personal enthusiasm. For instance, KITM's computer network programme was developed by a dedicated educator who proactively aligned the curriculum with world-class CISCO training materials. Similarly, their junior programmer curriculum maintains its edge because the lead teacher actively works in the IT sector. To ensure market-readiness, educators organize national web development competitions with business-designed tasks, integrate Agile and Scrum frameworks to mirror real company environments, and individually coach students on crucial soft skills like LinkedIn networking.

While this dedication is highly effective locally, relying on individual initiative is not a sustainable, scalable strategy. Lithuanian VET providers face structural bottlenecks, formal curriculum updates can take up to three years, making the system too slow for the tech sector. Furthermore, a historical lack of formal methodologies for determining training needs leaves schools dependent on informal market observations. There is an urgent national need to transition from ad-hoc adaptations to a structural approach.

Through EQAVET 4.0, Lithuania is actively seeking a scalable, systemic blueprint to align macro-level educational governance with the fast-paced realities of the market. This is precisely where the project's VET-LOOP methodology serves as a vital instrument. By implementing rigorous sectoral mapping and continuous 360-degree feedback mechanisms connecting learners, providers, and employers, the methodology offers a data-driven framework designed to foster high-level institutional adoption. Tech-Park Kaunas is committed to leveraging these innovative tools to bridge the gap between innovation and national educational systems, ensuring VET frameworks can structurally and responsively close the distance between the classroom and the workplace.



TECH-PARK
K A U N A S

Bridging the Practical Divide: Work-Embedded Assessment on the Production Line

If a few years ago, enterprises reported a shortage of qualified personnel, today this message has transformed into an urgent request: “We need employees with any level of knowledge or lack thereof.” The problem is exacerbated by the fact that not all enterprises have the opportunity to train on the job and appoint mentors. Furthermore, the duration and quality of such training at an “unprepared” enterprise can have a negative impact on the relationship between the employer and the job seeker.

To develop a roadmap for solving this problem, the NGO “Mentor Center”, together with a vocational education institution, began cooperation with an automotive industry enterprise: Spheros-Electron. Four students, one mentor, drawings, instructions, equipment, and a production plan - this is exactly what the “educational and production” process of the arc welding section looked like within the framework of the EQAVET 4.0 project.





This initiative served as a live Work-Embedded Assessment (WP4). Guided by Yaroslav Kolodii, a mentor who has been working at a manufacturing enterprise for over 20 years as a top-level welder, the students' work was evaluated every day. This continuous assessment made it possible to timely adjust the work plan for the next day in accordance with their level of mastering new skills. Importantly, this provided a direct measurement of EQAVET Indicator 6, assessing the actual utilisation of acquired skills directly at the workplace. Students were able not only to gain new knowledge in practice but also to manufacture actual products for international enterprises.



It was thanks to cooperation in this format with an automotive industry enterprise that the NGO “Mentor Center” received operational information about the “existing gaps” in students’ skills, what to pay attention to, and how skills are tested directly in production. This is valuable information from “field” conditions that creates an effective feedback loop. By channeling these findings back to the educational providers, we are actively implementing the VET Quality LOOP.

This collaborative approach will help improve educational processes in vocational training institutions in order to reduce the time of “entry” into a position. In conditions of a severe shortage of workers, a trained specialist is a “gift of fate” for the employer, and for the employee, it means true confidence in one’s knowledge and skills“.

Close the Gap: Skills Gaps Identified in Greece



In Greece, the EQAVET 4.0 national mapping reports show that the skills gap is not only about missing technical knowledge. It is also about how well VET curricula respond to the changing expectations of employers. Findings from the tourism and construction sectors highlight the need for graduates who combine technical expertise with digital, green and transversal skills.

In the tourism sector, both culinary and hospitality professions show a strong demand for soft skills alongside practical knowledge. Employers recognise that graduates often have a good technical foundation in areas such as food preparation, hygiene and safety, guest service, hotel procedures and operational tasks. However, gaps remain in teamwork, communication, adaptability, customer orientation, problem-solving and leadership. These skills are essential in kitchens, hotels and other tourism workplaces, where employees must cooperate with diverse teams, respond to customer needs and perform effectively under pressure. The reports also point to the growing importance of sustainable gastronomy, food waste reduction, digital kitchen management, digital hospitality tools and the ability to respond to changing customer expectations.



In the construction sector, focusing on thermal installations, petroleum and natural gas technology, the skills gap is closely linked to the green and digital transition. Employers need technicians who can install, maintain and repair heating and gas systems, but also understand energy efficiency, environmental regulations, smart heating systems, digital diagnostics and safety compliance. The findings show that professional progression in this sector is increasingly responsibility-driven. Workers are expected not only to complete technical tasks, but also to assess risks, follow regulations, solve problems independently and, at higher levels, take technical and legal responsibility for installations.

A common finding across both reports is that Greek VET curricula are centrally designed. This supports national consistency and quality, but it can also slow down adaptation to new labour market needs. Emerging topics such as sustainable tourism, green technologies, smart systems, digital tools and updated safety standards are not always integrated quickly enough into training programmes.

Another important gap concerns feedback mechanisms. Work-based learning, internships and employer cooperation already provide useful insights, but graduate tracking and systematic employer feedback remain limited. Strengthening these mechanisms would help VET providers better understand how graduates perform in the workplace and where further improvements are needed.

Overall, the findings suggest that closing the gap in Greece requires more flexible curricula, stronger employer involvement, better integration of soft skills, and faster adaptation to the digital and green transitions.



Close the Gap in Cyprus: Keeping VET Aligned with a Greener and More Digital Labour Market



In Cyprus, the gap between VET provision and labour market needs becomes most visible when job requirements change faster than training can adapt. Current developments illustrate this clearly in two areas highlighted through the EQAVET 4.0 national mapping work: automotive engineering with an emphasis on electric and hybrid vehicles (EV/HEV), and hospitality within the broader tourism ecosystem.

In the automotive sector, the Cyprus report notes a notable increase in electric and hybrid vehicles over the last two to three years, linked to factors such as fuel prices, growing environmental awareness and initiatives supporting green transportation. This shift is changing occupational requirements from conventional vehicle technologies toward more complex electrical and electronic systems. The report identifies a clear skills gap, as training programmes remain largely focused on conventional technologies while demand is rising for competences in high voltage systems, battery management, power electronics, regenerative braking and electric drivetrains. Beyond technical capability, employers also emphasise reliable work practices and behaviours, including disciplined adherence to procedures, high quality documentation, professionalism, teamwork and clear communication across roles such as Master Technician, Maintenance Technician and Technical Advisor.



In hospitality, the Cyprus report frames tourism as a major pillar of the national economy and positions hospitality as the operational core shaping visitor experience and competitiveness. The report also documents the accelerating role of digital tools, including property management systems (PMS), customer relationship management (CRM) platforms, revenue management systems and AI supported analytics, in reshaping occupational profiles. Automation of routine front office tasks through chatbots and self-service systems shifts competence needs toward higher value interpersonal interaction, emotional intelligence and complex problemsolving, alongside ethical data handling and regulatory compliance expectations, including GDPR related secure information practices. The mapping focuses on Hospitality Manager, Hotel Administration and Receptionist roles and highlights hybrid competence profiles that combine operational expertise, digital literacy, behavioural competences and quality-system awareness.

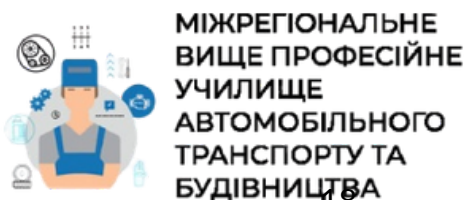
Across both sectors, the reports point to structural challenges that affect alignment in practice. In automotive, these include the absence of a standard OCNA process, inconsistent employer engagement, limited access to modern EV/HEV equipment and weak systems for graduate tracking and employer feedback. In hospitality, providers report difficulties future-proofing curricula under rapidly evolving requirements, limited placement availability and limited capacity for systematic graduate follow-up.

Within this context, EQAVET 4.0 supports a structured approach to competence mapping and stakeholder input, strengthening the feedback loop between VET providers and the labour market to inform curriculum review and continuous improvement.





The EQAVET4.0 family





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