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The thematic perspectives series complements the general information on vocational education and training (VET) systems provided in '[VET in Europe](#)' reports. The themes presented in the series feature high on the European agenda.

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ReferNet is a network of institutions across Europe representing the 28 Member States, plus Iceland and Norway. The network provides Cedefop with information and analysis on national vocational education and training (VET). ReferNet also disseminates information on European VET and Cedefop's work to stakeholders in the EU Member States, Iceland and Norway.

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Introduction

The development of key competences is included in the national strategies, for example human and social capital and long-term national development strategies. They mainly refer to the need to develop key competences in general and to prepare learners for changes in the economy and the labour market without defining separately each key competence.

The lifelong learning strategy 2013-20 (2013) states that vocational education and training (VET) should equip young students with the skills most sought in the labour market, such as e-skills to combat high unemployment of young people.

The human capital development strategy 2020 (2013) promotes key competences and creativity in education, including VET. It also promotes lifelong learning and readiness to meet ecological, economic and social challenges that have an impact on the labour market needs. The lifelong learning strategy aims at raising the level of competence and skills of citizens and emphasises improving the quality of education and training at all levels, as well as development of learner creativity and innovation. It promotes moving from schematic towards individual education targeted at the acquisition of key competences and skills.

These policies are implemented through the national core curriculum for general education (2014) that is compulsory for VET, including apprenticeship schemes ⁽¹⁾. It emphasises the importance of mathematical skills, science, communication in the mother tongue and foreign languages, effective use of modern information and communication technologies, critical analysis of information, teamwork and recognition of students' own learning needs. The development of key competences is implemented through subjects (for example, basics of entrepreneurship, native language, foreign language, computer science, mathematics) and as integrated transversal skills (for example, citizenship through civic education and extracurricular activities; social competence through projects and teamwork, cultural expression through history and arts). The core curriculum for VET qualifications (2012) ⁽²⁾ defines learning outcomes common to all qualifications, such as setting up and running business, foreign languages, professional, social and organisational competences.

The implementation is supported by ESF 2007-13 projects expanding access to education, improving ICT skills, acquiring key competences required in the changing economy and the labour market and extracurricular activities for equal opportunities for

⁽¹⁾ Apprentices have to complete general education as part of their training.

⁽²⁾ Compulsory for upper secondary vocational schools and apprenticeships.

development of key competences (e.g. by modernisation of VET and making adjusting it to the labour market needs, as well as additional activities (extracurricular and out-of-school) for students, aimed at developing key competences with focus on ICT, foreign languages, entrepreneurship, mathematics and natural sciences). One such project (implementation model and dissemination of lifelong learning) has created standardised profession descriptions, including tasks and competence profiles. The booklets were produced, distributed to regional and local labour offices and published online ⁽³⁾.

In 2014-20, ESF projects focus on increasing the capacity of the education system to shape key competences, including interpersonal and social skills for adult learning. They also aim at supporting schools in shaping students' key competences for the labour market (ICT, maths, science and foreign languages), creativity, innovation and teamwork. The projects also support an individualised teaching approach through training and counselling of teachers and school managers as well as increase the use of the modernised content, tools and resources. At regional level, activities focus on strengthening key competences of adults. The measures apply to both general and vocational education. VET-specific objectives are:

- (a) adjustment of VET to the labour market needs by involving employers' and employees' representatives in the programme design;
- (b) better use of the content, tools and resources in VET;
- (c) sustainable cooperation between universities and VET (technical and vocational) schools;
- (d) continuous feedback on the transition from VET to the labour market.

⁽³⁾ Kwalifikacje.praca.gov.pl; section 'standards of professional competence'.

1. Key competence: communication in the mother tongue

The acquisition of the key competence at upper secondary VET is promoted at national		Yes
How is it promoted?		
• national policy document(s)	No (specific strategies supporting this competence)	
• national/regional law(s), regulation(s)	No	
• national curricula, standards and qualifications	Polish is a compulsory subject in upper secondary VET. National core curriculum in general subjects for upper secondary VET states that the ability to communicate in the mother tongue is among the most important skills acquired at this level of education. The core curriculum defines learning outcomes that should be achieved at the end of the education cycle. Shaping proficiency in using the Polish language, especially enriching vocabulary is among the main tasks of VET schools.	
• training VET teachers trainers	No	
• centralised assessment of the key competence in VET	<p>Yes, through the 'maturity exam'.</p> <p>Polish language is a compulsory subject for the maturity exam which students of upper secondary VET may take. The exam consists of an oral part assessed by teachers at the school and the written one assessed by external examiners.</p> <p>In addition, this key competence is assessed during the entire path of education according to the government rules (2015) on public schools. In upper secondary schools teachers have autonomy in applying different methods and instruments to check the level of competences acquisition through the various types of tests, quizzes, and verbal responses. Marks obtained during the semesters affect the estimation of the end of the course and have an impact on student promotion to the next grade. The marks also appear on the school leaving certificate.</p>	
• other instruments (e.g. ways of working, teaching/learning methods)	No	
The progress of improving key competence levels/learning outcomes among upper secondary VET students is monitored		Yes
How is it monitored?		
• through international or national statistical data	The Central Examination Board publishes the results of maturity exams in all schools, including upper-secondary VET.	
• survey(s)	No	
• benchmark(s)	No	
• other instrument(s)	No	
Key competence level improved among upper secondary VET students since (+/-) 2010	Yes. The results of maturity exams of upper secondary VET learners on average increased from 50% in 2010 to 54% in 2015.	

2. Key competence: communication in foreign languages

The acquisition of the key competence at upper secondary VET is promoted at national/regional level		Yes
How is it promoted?		
• national/regional policy document(s)	No (specific strategies supporting this competence)	
• national/regional law(s), regulation(s)	No	
• national/regional curricula, standards and qualifications	Foreign languages (two; one is 'vocationally oriented' ⁽⁴⁾) are taught as compulsory subjects in upper secondary VET. National core curriculum for general education subjects in VET states that ability to communicate in foreign languages is among the most important skills acquired at this level of education.	
• training VET teachers trainers	The government rules (2012) on teacher education stipulate that all teaching staff in VET should command at least one foreign language.	
• centralised assessment of the key competence in VET	<p>Yes, through the 'maturity exam'.</p> <p>A foreign language is a compulsory subject for the maturity exam which students of upper secondary VET may take. The exam consists of an oral part assessed by teachers at the school and the written one assessed by external examiners.</p> <p>In addition, this key competence is assessed during the entire path of education according to the government rules (2015) on public schools. In upper secondary schools teachers have autonomy in applying different methods and instruments to check the level of competences acquisition through the various types of tests, quizzes, and verbal responses. Marks obtained during the semesters affect the estimation of the end of the course and have an impact on student promotion to the next grade. The marks also appear on the school leaving certificate.</p>	
• other instruments (e.g. ways of working, teaching/learning methods)	No	
The progress of improving key competence levels/learning outcomes among upper secondary VET students is monitored		Yes
How is it monitored?		
• through international or national statistical data	The Central Examination Board publishes the results of maturity exams taken all over the country and in all types of	

⁽⁴⁾ 'vocationally oriented' is the term used in the core curriculum and it means that students should learn and use the vocabulary linked to their qualification (e.g. a car mechanic should be able to name all car parts, equipment and tools, etc).

	schools.
• survey(s)	No
• benchmark(s)	No
• other instrument(s)	No
Key competence level improved among upper secondary VET students since (+/-) 2010	Yes. English is the most popular foreign language taught in VET. The results of upper secondary VET students taking maturity exam increased from 48% in 2010 to 63% in 2015.

3. Key competence: competences in maths, science and technology

The title(s) in the national context	Maths, biology, physics and chemistry
The acquisition of the key competence at upper secondary VET is promoted at national/regional level	Yes
How is it promoted?	
• national/regional policy document(s)	No (specific strategies supporting this competence)
• national/regional law(s), regulation(s)	No
• national/regional curricula, standards and qualifications	Maths, biology, physics and chemistry are compulsory subjects in upper secondary VET. National core curriculum in general education subjects for upper secondary VET states that the ability to use mathematical tools and science to identify and solve problems is among the most important skills acquired at this level of education. Mathematics is taught during the whole educational cycle while biology, physics and chemistry only in the first grade.
• training VET teachers trainers	No
• centralised assessment of the key competence in VET	Partly, through the 'maturity exam' for maths. Mathematics is a compulsory subject for the maturity exam which students of upper secondary VET may take. Biology, physics and chemistry are optional for the maturity exam. In addition, these key competences are assessed during the entire path of education according to the government rules (2015) on public schools. In upper secondary schools teachers have autonomy in applying different methods and instruments to check the level of competences acquisition through the various types of tests, quizzes, and verbal responses. Marks obtained during the semesters affect the estimation of the end of the course and have an impact on student promotion to the next grade. The marks also appear on the school leaving certificate.

• other instruments (e.g. ways of working, teaching/learning methods)	No
The progress of improving key competence levels/learning outcomes among upper secondary VET students is monitored	Yes
How is it monitored?	
through international or national statistical data	The Central Examination Board (CKE) publishes the results of maturity exams taken all over the country and in all types of schools.
survey(s)	No
benchmark(s)	No
other instrument(s)	No
Key competence level improved among upper secondary VET students since (+/-) 2010	The progress based on the results of maturity exams is not very clear since only maths is a compulsory subject for the maturity exam. Since 2010, the results for physics did not change, for biology increased by one percentage point and for maths and chemistry – decreased by five percentage points each.

4. Key competence: digital competence

The title(s) in the national context	Information technology
The acquisition of the key competence at upper secondary VET is promoted at national/regional level	Yes
How is it promoted?	
• national/regional policy document(s)	No (specific strategies supporting this competence)
• national/regional law(s), regulation(s)	No
• national/regional curricula, standards and qualifications	Information technology is a compulsory subject in upper secondary VET. National core curriculum in general education subjects for upper secondary VET states that the ability to efficiently use modern information and communication technologies is among the most important skills acquired at this level of education.
• training VET teachers trainers	The government rule (2012) on teachers education stipulate requirements for basic knowledge and skills in IT, including text editors, calculation tables, presentation and graphic applications, databases, gathering and processing information. The teaching staff in VET should be able to use IT tools in everyday pedagogical work. Specialised In-service teacher training centre (OELiZK) offers ICT training for teachers of different subjects.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> centralised assessment of the key competence in VET 	<p>Partly IT can be chosen by upper secondary VET students as an extra subject on the maturity exam.</p> <p>In addition, this key competence is assessed during the entire path of education according to the government rules (2015) on public schools. In upper secondary schools teachers have autonomy in applying different methods and instruments to check the level of competences acquisition through the various types of tests, quizzes, and verbal responses. Marks obtained during the semesters affect the estimation of the end of the course and have an impact on student promotion to the next grade. The marks also appear on the school leaving certificate.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> other instruments (e.g. ways of working, teaching/learning methods) 	No
The progress of improving key competence levels/learning outcomes among upper secondary VET students is monitored	No
How is it monitored?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> through international or national statistical data 	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> survey(s) 	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> benchmark(s) 	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> other instrument(s) 	No
Key competence level improved among upper secondary VET students since (+/-) 2010	No data (some data are available but not comparable over time)

Example

The combined upper secondary general and technical school in Warsaw (*Zespół Szkół Licealnych i Technicznych nr 1 w Warszawie*) offers instruction in two occupations: IT technician and mechatronics technician. The school has introduced extracurricular certification system for digital literacy of students in the form of internal and external ECDL, Cisco, and Linux certificates valued by local and European labour markets. The introduction of the certification required specialised teacher training, equipping schools with hardware and software and cooperation with universities and colleges, employers, national and international partners. Incorporation of the international standards into the teaching process was not easy. Certification of skills using world-recognised standards (especially Cisco CCNA certification) requires time and money. The school had to provide at least two teachers with preliminary training as Cisco CCNA instructors and purchase Cisco equipment for the computer lab in order to be accorded the status of a Cisco Local Academy and begin training. One additional difficulty lies in the fact that the training materials are available in English, so as all tests and exams held during the training. Young people who undergo training must have relevant language preparation. Likewise, specialised preparation had also to be provided to teachers preparing the

students for ECDL, Linux CLA and Linux CLP certification. A significant advantage of the incorporation of the system is the fact that the training materials are frequently updated and keep up with rapid changes in IT and new technologies. At the implementation stage of validating students' skills through the international certificates, a team of the computer teachers interested in professional development were selected, initially two teachers in each area: ECDL, Cisco and Linux. Teachers were sent for a training to qualify as instructors and trainers. The certificates were implemented gradually, first ECDL, then Cisco and Linux. Currently, the school has 5 ECDL examiners, 7 Cisco instructors and 3 Linux instructors. The school management team was responsible for implementing certificate system and the training was piloted by school vice director in cooperation with the manager of practical training. The school receives positive feedback about the validity of certificates confirming students' skills in regards to the actual professional tasks during meetings with employers and interviews conducted with them.

5. Key competence: learning to learn

The title(s) in the national context	Learning competence
The acquisition of the key competence at upper secondary VET is promoted at national/regional level	Yes
How is it promoted?	
• national/regional policy document(s)	No (specific strategies supporting this competence)
• national/regional law(s), regulation(s)	No
• national/regional curricula, standards and qualifications	National core curriculum in general education subjects for upper secondary schools VET states that ability to recognise own educational needs and to learn effectively is among the most important skills acquired at this level of education. However, the core curriculum does not define particular learning outcomes neither advises on how to include this competence into teaching of subjects. It does not define ways to monitor or assess progress.
• training VET teachers trainers	The government rules (2012) on teachers' education stipulate that all teachers should have psychological and pedagogical knowledge of teaching-learning processes, including the knowledge of modern pedagogical theories. The rules do not mention any practical skills in shaping pupils/students' learning competence. Some NGOs offer training for teachers on how to teach students to learn but training is not compulsory and only a small group of teachers uses such opportunity.
• centralised assessment of the key competence in VET	No There is no centralised or any other assessment of the key competence – not many teachers analyse if low achievements of students may result from lack of this competence.

• other instruments (e.g. ways of working, teaching/learning methods)	No
The progress of improving key competence levels/learning outcomes among upper secondary VET students is monitored	No
How is it monitored?	
• through international or national statistical data	No
• survey(s)	The survey carried out by ReferNet Poland (FFW) in January 2015 among teachers and headmasters of VET schools (around 300) shows that they are aware of the need to shape students learning competences but there is no understanding what this implies in practice and how to combine them with teaching subjects. Less than 1/3 of respondents (and they were all general subject teachers in VET) carried out a regular programme including many elements of the learning competence such as memory techniques, effective notes, motivation, time management, selection of information, etc.
• benchmark(s)	No
• other instrument(s)	No
Key competence level improved among upper secondary VET students since (+/-) 2010	No data

6. Key competence: interpersonal, intercultural and social competences, and civic competence

The title(s) in the national context	Personal, social and civic competences
The acquisition of the key competence at upper secondary VET is promoted at national/regional level	Yes
How is it promoted?	
• national/regional policy document(s)	No (specific strategies supporting this competence)
• national/regional law(s), regulation(s)	No
• national/regional curricula, standards and qualifications	National core curriculum in general education subjects for upper secondary VET states that a school should shape attitudes facilitating individual and social development such as respect for others, responsibility, self-esteem, creativity, taking initiative and team work. These attitudes should be shaped as part of other subjects and additional extracurricular activities such as projects, charity work, work for pupils' self-governments etc. Participation in civic society is supported by obligatory 'Knowledge about society' subject. The national core curriculum for VET qualifications mentions personal and social

	competences that should be shaped as part of other subjects.
• training VET teachers trainers	No
• centralised assessment of the key competence in VET	No Personal, social and civic competences are assessed in a decentralised way during the entire path of education according to the government rules (2015) on public schools. It is a part of assessment of learners' behaviour and achievements in subjects. Assessment of the behaviour is important and determines the student's promotion to the next grade with mark appearing on a school leaving certificate.
• other instruments (e.g. ways of working, teaching/learning methods)	No
The progress of improving key competence levels/learning outcomes among upper secondary VET students is monitored	No
How is it monitored?	
• through international or national statistical data	No
• survey(s)	No
• benchmark(s)	No
• other instrument(s)	No
Key competence level improved among upper secondary VET students since (+/-) 2010	No data

7. Key competence: entrepreneurship

The title(s) in the national context	Entrepreneurship basics, setting up and running own business
The acquisition of the key competence at upper secondary VET is promoted at national/regional level	Yes
How is it promoted?	
• national/regional policy document(s)	No
• national/regional law(s), regulation(s)	No
• national/regional curricula, standards and qualifications	'Entrepreneurship basics' is a compulsory subject in upper secondary VET. 'Setting up and running own business' is the learning outcome common for all VET qualifications.
• training VET teachers trainers	No
• centralised assessment of	No

the key competence in VET	Entrepreneurship competence is assessed in a decentralised way during the entire path of education according to the government rules (2015) on public schools. In upper secondary VET teachers have a wide autonomy in applying different methods and instruments to check the level of competence acquisition through tests, quizzes and verbal responses. Marks obtained during the semesters affect the estimation of the end of the course and have an impact on student promotion to the next grade. The marks also appear on the school leaving certificate.	
• other instruments (e.g. ways of working, teaching/learning methods)	No	
The progress of improving key competence levels/learning outcomes among upper secondary VET students is monitored		No
How is it monitored?		
• through international or national statistical data	No	
• survey(s)	No	
• benchmark(s)	No	
• other instrument(s)	No	
Key competence level improved among upper secondary VET students since (+/-) 2010		No data

Example

The School of practical economics – youth mini-enterprise is a competition for upper secondary VET school students, in the framework of the foundation for Youth Entrepreneurship. The project introduces innovative tools for the subject 'entrepreneurship basics' in upper secondary VET and increases the effectiveness of school education through the development of key competences such as initiative and entrepreneurship. Students acquire competences in a school-based environment through participation in the competition.

This ESF project aims to prepare young people for a successful entry into the labour market, to show the opportunities and threats arising from self-employment, successful development of entrepreneurial attitudes and learning by doing. It also aims at increasing students' interest in continuing education in the fields of key importance for the economy.

Students participate in an educational game which involves establishing their own business organised on the model of a general partnership: looking for an idea for a product, prepare a business plan, accumulate capital, take marketing efforts, produce and sell their products or services, keep financial records, take business risks.

Participation in the game engages students intellectually and emotionally, triggers activity and increases self-confidence, they develop skills needed in adult life such as teamwork, problem solving and planning. It also provides them with direct experience of running own business and allows evaluating practice opportunities and risks of running a business.

In 2015/16, there were 327 youth mini-enterprises in Poland. The participation in the programme allows participating in the national youth competition for the best mini-enterprise. Winner of the grand prix competition in domestic competition represents Poland in Europe.

8. Key competence: cultural expression

The acquisition of the key competence at upper secondary VET is promoted at national/regional level		Yes
How is it promoted?		
• national/regional policy document(s)	No	
• national/regional law(s), regulation(s)	No	
• national/regional curricula, standards and qualifications	National core curriculum in general education subjects for upper secondary VET states that a school should shape attitudes facilitating participation in social and cultural life such as good manners, respect for own and other traditions and cultures. This competence is shaped through the 'knowledge about culture' and 'history of art' subjects.	
• training VET teachers trainers	No	
• centralised assessment of the key competence in VET	No Cultural expression competence is assessed in a decentralised way during the entire path of education according to the government rules (2015) on public schools. In upper secondary VET teachers have a wide autonomy in applying different methods and instruments to check the level of competences acquisition through tests, quizzes and verbal responses. Marks obtained during the semesters affect the estimation of the end of the course and have an impact on student promotion to the next grade. The marks also appear on the school leaving certificate.	
• other instruments (e.g. ways of working, teaching/learning methods)	No	
The progress of improving key competence levels/learning outcomes among upper secondary VET students is monitored		No
How is it monitored?		

• through international or national statistical data	No
• survey(s)	No
• benchmark(s)	No
• other instrument(s)	No
Key competence level improved among upper secondary VET students since (+/-) 2010	No data

Example

In 2012/13, students from a photo technicians VET school and a photography VET school in Warsaw followed an extracurricular and interdisciplinary ‘Still dreaming of Warsaw’ programme. The programme was initiated by the school management and combined the development of vocational skills and key competences, especially cultural expression. Local governments, museums, centres of culture, the embassy of Germany, partner schools in Amsterdam, Bochum and Iskenderun supported the project.

Preparations for the implementation of the programme began with the analysis of the needs of the local community: the needs of local government agencies and cultural institutions, calendar of events organised by the city, celebrations of anniversaries and historical events. The participating students were divided into groups working on different activities, learning about cultural diversity and history of their city and employing their vocational skills to meet the cultural needs of the local community and its institutions. Resources for the project were provided by schools supported by the cooperating institutions.

The ‘Still dreaming of Warsaw’ programme undertook various activities and initiatives associated with Warsaw, adding novel elements to its cultural offer, such as: photographic projects (‘Young faces of Warsaw’, ‘Wola – a district of many religions, as seen by young photographers’, ‘German Embassy in Warsaw in pictures’, ‘Rhythm and harmony of the Royal Castle’), a film ‘Social roles of young people’, meetings with public and distinguished figures, theatre shows on topics associated with Warsaw, photo exhibitions in the local community, concerts of MUZA, the school’s singing and dancing ensemble, photo competition about the highlights of Warsaw for the region’s school students, picture stories for local government agencies and other local institutions. The programme turned out to be a great success. Although it was thought to show students how they can apply and improve their vocational skills and develop cultural expression, it also shaped other key competences such as interpersonal, intercultural and social competences and civic competence. This was possible while planning, managing, implementing and disseminating particular projects.

The programme was planned for 2012/13, but due to the wealth of initiatives and ideas, coming both from the school and the local community, it continued and expanded with new areas and objectives.

Conclusions

Key competences are mentioned in the national policy documents and included in the national core curriculum for general education subjects in VET. However, implementation is not even.

Most key competences are acquired through subjects. Polish, foreign languages, maths and science are compulsory for maturity examination. They are regularly assessed and monitored and some progress can be observed.

The situation is different with the transversal competences such as interpersonal, intercultural and social competences, and civic competence, cultural expression and learning to learn which should be shaped as part of other subjects and extracurricular activities. The core curricula do not give any specific guidelines on how to implement them. There are no unified mechanisms or criteria for assessment and the progress is not monitored. The real implementation depends on good will of teachers and school management. In some VET schools more extracurricular activities are available than in others. This means that students of different schools do not have equal opportunities to shape their key competences.

Learning to learn competence varies by VET school. As presented by the survey done by ReferNet Team in 2015, 92% of respondents-teachers (of both general and vocational subjects) declare undertaking activities connected with shaping learning to learn competence while teaching their subjects. However, most of them could not indicate relevant examples. Only 10% of respondents assessed that their students have acquired learning competence to a large extent, while 25% stated that the level of this competence among their students is very low. Teachers of general subjects in VET are more involved in shaping the competence than vocational subject students. This is confirmed by interviews with VET school principals who admit that vocational subject teachers are usually less prepared for tasks connected with shaping learning to learn competence and less interested to do so.