

Proceedings of ReferNet 2026 Partnership Forum in Bonn

20-21 May – Bonn, Germany



ReferNet
partnership
forum

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#ReferNet



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Foreword

These proceedings document the [2026 ReferNet Partnership Forum](#), part of ReferNet's series of Partnership Fora. The event took place on 20–21 May 2026 in Bonn, Germany, and was jointly organised by Cedefop and the [Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training \(BIBB\)](#), home of the [ReferNet Germany team](#). The Forum brought together members of the ReferNet network and invited stakeholders to exchange knowledge, engage in peer learning and reflect on key challenges and developments in vocational education and training (VET) across Europe.

The [partnership forum agenda](#) combined strategic policy discussions with practical insights into the German VET system. Sessions explored topics including permeability between secondary and tertiary education, the recognition of foreign professional qualifications, and the role of BIBB in supporting VET policy and research. Thematic discussions focused on excellence in VET, illustrated through examples from Germany, Bulgaria and Finland, while dedicated sessions examined the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in VET and international mobility through German case studies. A study visit to the mechanical engineering company [Kuhne](#) provided participants with first-hand experience of apprenticeship training within a company setting.

The Forum once again demonstrated ReferNet's unique role as a pan-European platform for knowledge sharing and mutual learning. By bringing together national experiences and European perspectives, the network supports the exchange of practices, fosters policy dialogue and contributes to a better understanding of the diversity and ongoing evolution of VET systems across Europe. These proceedings aim to capture the richness of the discussions, preserve the knowledge shared during the event and support future cooperation within the network.

Cedefop's sincere thanks go to BIBB and the ReferNet Germany team for their excellent hospitality and organisation of the event. The organisers also extend their gratitude to all speakers, moderators and participants for generously sharing their expertise and experiences, and to the editors of this publication for compiling these proceedings. This volume could serve as a valuable reference for the ReferNet community, inspire continued reflection and collaboration, and contribute to shaping responsive, inclusive and future-oriented VET systems across Europe.

Ioannis Katsikis
Expert - ReferNet Coordinator
Cedefop



1. ReferNet 2026 Partnership forum agenda

DAY 1 – Wednesday 20 May 2026 (all times are CET)

09.00 – 09.30	Participant arrival and registration
09.30 – 10.00	Welcome and opening
Meeting room	Chair: Ute Hippach-Schneider, <i>ReferNet Germany, BIBB</i> ▪ Nils Klagge, Head of Section, <i>Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMBFSFJ)</i> ▪ Ioannis Katsikis, <i>ReferNet Coordinator, Cedefop</i>
10.00 – 10.30	Presentation of the German VET system: Focus on permeability
	▪ Ute Hippach-Schneider, <i>Division: International VET Comparison, Research and Monitoring, BIBB and ReferNet Germany</i>
10.30 – 10.45	Introduction to BIBB
	▪ Janine Grobe-Rath, <i>ReferNet Germany, BIBB</i>
10.45 – 11.00	<i>Coffee break and family photo</i>
11.00 – 12.00	Current hot VET topics in the partners' countries: Open discussion
	▪ Chair: Ute Hippach-Schneider, <i>ReferNet Germany, BIBB</i> (Input from all partners, max. 3 minutes each, no presentation required)
12.00 – 12.30	Recognition and other instruments used in Germany for qualifications obtained abroad
	▪ Jessica Erbe, <i>Division: Recognition of foreign professional qualifications, BIBB</i>
12.30 – 13.30	<i>Light lunch</i>
13:30	Bus transfer to the company
14.00 – 16.00	Company visit - apprenticeship in practice
	KUHNE Maschinenbau Professioneller Maschinenbau;
16:00	Bus transfer to the BIBB
18.00 – 19.00	Guided tour (city centre)
19.15	Dinner



DAY 2 – Thursday 21 May 2026

09.00 – 09.30	Participant arrival
09.30 – 11.00	Excellence in VET Chair: Silke Gadji, <i>Country Manager, Cedefop</i> SMEs in VET – Initiative for excellent inter-company training (Inex-ÜBA) - Nina Jung, <i>Division: Inter-Company Vocational Training Centres, BIBB</i> Latest legislative developments in Bulgaria in modernising the VET system - Adelina Borisova, <i>Directorate in the National agency for vocational education and training, Bulgaria (NAVET)</i> New national policy guidelines for the development of VET in Finland - Laura Jauhola, <i>Senior Adviser, Finnish National Agency for Education, Vocational education and training</i>
11.00 – 11.15	<i>Coffee break</i>
11.15 – 12:45	Artificial Intelligence in VET and international mobility in VET Chair: Adrienne Huismann, <i>ReferNet Germany, BIBB</i> AI in the German VET system - Mortimer Schlieker, <i>Division: Competence Development, BIBB</i> Strengthening international mobility in German VET - Corinna Porsche, <i>National Agency Erasmus+ for VET, BIBB</i>
12:45 – 13:15	ReferNet activity on AI in VET: The way forward Ioannis Katsikis, <i>ReferNet Coordinator, Cedefop</i>
13:15 – 13:30	Final reflections of all participants and close of event Moderation: Ute Hippach-Schneider, <i>BIBB / ReferNet Germany</i> and Ioannis Katsikis, <i>Cedefop</i>
13:30 – 14:00	<i>Light lunch</i>



2. Welcome and opening

2.1 Mr Nils Klagge, Head of Section, Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMBFSFJ)

In his opening remarks, Mr Klagge praised the ReferNet network and highlighted its central role in supporting evidence-based VET policy across Europe. He also emphasised that mutual learning and the exchange of reliable evidence among European countries are indispensable for further strengthening VET systems. Mr Klagge also welcomed the participants to Bonn and expressed his appreciation that experts from across Europe had gathered in Germany to continue their close cooperation.

He then went on to emphasise that Germany's well-established VET system is currently facing simultaneous challenges. As the first major pressure point, he identified the strained economic situation. The current economic slowdown is increasingly affecting the training market. This is evidenced by a decline in the demand for labour and a drop in the number of training places in 2024 compared to the previous year. The paradox of this situation, however, is that shortages of skilled workers simultaneously continue to intensify across many professions. With the retirement of the so-called baby boomer generation, this trend will intensify significantly in the coming years due to demographic factors.

In this context, Mr Klagge referred to the policy responses, particularly the federal government's skilled labour strategy launched in 2022. Measures to improve access to initial VET have been expanded for a wide range of target groups — such as young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs), refugees, or high-achieving school leavers — citing the introduction of the training guarantee in 2023 as a prime example. Efforts to support the upskilling and qualification of low-qualified individuals have also been intensified through flexible continuing VET (CVET) offers, including the launch of the online one-stop CVET platform '[mein NOW](#)' in 2024. Finally, he highlighted that the recruitment of apprentices and skilled professionals from abroad has been eased through the [second Skilled Immigration Act in 2023–2024](#).

Secondly, Mr Klagge stressed that improving the matching of young people's interests and competences with companies' skills needs remains one of the key challenges for the German apprenticeship market. Difficulties in this area are increasing due to regional disparities and fragmented information channels. Frequently, the occupational interests and individual skills of young people do not align with the available apprenticeship positions. As a key measure supporting the primary target group — small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) — he highlighted the chambers' '[Perfect Match](#)' (*Passgenaue Besetzung*) programme.

The third and most forward-looking point of his contribution was dedicated to the digital and sustainable transformation. Digitalisation, AI, and sustainability are currently fundamentally transforming both the economy and vocational training. Mr Klagge explained that VET research must play a vital role here in identifying future skills needs early on and developing the digital, AI-related, and sustainable competences of learners, VET teachers, and trainers. As occupational profiles become increasingly demanding, the focus is placed on providing additional and advanced VET qualifications. This transformation requires continuous adaptation of training regulations and curricula, alongside investment in the skills of learners, teachers and trainers.



In conclusion, Mr Klagge strongly reaffirmed the importance of ensuring equal esteem for vocational and academic education. The federal government reinforced its measures to ensure an excellent and attractive VET system through its Excellence Initiative for VET in 2022. As examples of the extended support for innovative and modern VET, he concluded by mentioning the funding for excellent inter-company training launched in 2024, as well as the [‘InnoVET PLUS’](#) programme.

In closing, Mr Klagge expressed his sincere appreciation for the outstanding work of the ReferNet network and its valuable contribution to the European VET community as well as the pivotal role the BIBB has played in this context. He thanked all participants for their continued commitment and wished them a productive meeting and every success in their future cooperation.

2.2 Ioannis Katsikis, ReferNet Coordinator, Cedefop

Mr Katsikis welcomed the ReferNet partners to the second ReferNet Partnership Forum of 2026 in Bonn, hosted by BIBB, and thanked the German ReferNet team for their preparation and hospitality.

He noted that Partnership Fora differ from formal reporting meetings by allowing structured reflection, peer exchange and honest discussion across diverse national contexts. The speaker argued this is timely because VET in Europe is undergoing profound change and must be rethought to support economic resilience, technological change, social inclusion, strategic autonomy and competitiveness.

He highlighted that ReferNet’s combination of comparative intelligence and deep national expertise is crucial for interpreting evidence and understanding how policies play out locally. This knowledge positions the network to inform EU initiatives such as Skills Portability Initiative, the European agenda for VET teachers and trainers, and the new European VET strategy.

Finally, he acknowledged the long-standing contributions of many network members to reporting, analysis, dissemination and peer learning, and invited participants over the next two days to exchange ideas, forge collaborations and explore new approaches to VET, skills and qualifications. He closed by wishing everyone a productive and inspiring forum.

3. The German VET system: focus on permeability

Ute Hippach-Schneider, Division: International VET Comparison, Research and Monitoring, BIBB and ReferNet Germany

The German education system is traditionally characterised by high differentiation, but increasingly also by a pronounced degree of permeability. For graduates of vocational training, excellent, legally anchored development opportunities exist, which dissolve the classic separation between vocational and academic education:

- role of FOS and BOS: technical secondary schools (*Fachoberschule* – FOS) and upper vocational schools (*Berufsoberschule* – BOS) play a vital role in vertical permeability. They offer a systematic, institutionalised route for individuals to obtain higher education entrance qualifications (such as the *Fachhochschulreife* or the general/subject-



restricted *Abitur*) either during or after completing their vocational training, effectively bridging the gap between vocational practice and higher education;

- higher education access for vocationally qualified individuals: even without a traditional *Abitur*, master craftsmen (*Meister*), technicians, and certified commercial specialists (*Fachwirte* – DQR Level 6) are granted direct, general access to universities. Furthermore, individuals with at least two years of vocational training followed by three years of professional experience receive subject-restricted access to universities and universities of applied sciences;
- equivalence of qualifications: through the German Qualifications Framework (DQR), advanced vocational qualifications (e.g. *Bachelor Professional*) are formally placed on par with academic Bachelor's degrees, boosting the attractiveness of vocational pathways.

Core principles of dual study programmes

Dual study programmes (*Duales Studium*), leading to a Bachelor's or Master's degree, combine academic theory with corporate practice. This model is essentially based on three pillars:

- dual structure: a systematic, alternating cycle between academic lectures at a university of applied science, dual university or cooperative state university (*Berufsakademie*) and practical phases within a partner company;
- contractual binding: students sign a binding training contract with the company, ensuring integration into the business from day one;
- close cooperation: curricular and organisational alignment between the educational content taught at the university and the practical tasks carried out within the company.

Why dual study programmes are an attractive educational option

This model offers significant benefits to both students and employers:

- financial independence and certainty: students receive a fixed monthly salary throughout the entire duration of their studies, and in many cases, tuition fees are fully covered by the employer;
- excellent career and retention prospects: due to early integration and socialisation within the company, alongside the acquisition of firm-specific expertise, retention and employment rates after graduation are exceptionally high;
- theory-practice transfer: academic knowledge gained in the classroom is directly applied and consolidated in real-world workplace projects, fostering a high level of professional and practical competence.

Conclusion: the qualification system demonstrates that vocational and academic education in Germany are not contradictory but rather work in synergy to guarantee maximum flexibility and excellent career opportunities.



4. The Federal Institute for VET (BIBB)

Janine Grobe-Rath, Federal Institute for VET (BIBB)

Institutional profile and legal status

BIBB is a public-law institution with its own legal personality. It operates under the legal supervision of the Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMBFSFJ). BIBB's original legal basis was on the Vocational Education Promotion Act (*Berufsbildungsgesetz*, BBiG) from 1969. The current legal basis was enacted in 2024 and entered into force on 28 October 2025.

Historical development and locations

The geographical and legal evolution of the BIBB is detailed in the following chronological progression:

- 1969: enactment of the Vocational Training Act (BBiG), providing the statutory basis for the institute;
- 1970: originally founded under the name 'Federal Institute for Vocational Education Research' (BBF). Establishment of the inaugural office in Berlin;
- 1976: opening of the second office in Bonn;
- 1999: consolidation into a single joint office in Bonn as part of the broader reorganisation following the German government relocation;
- 2020: BIBB celebrated its 50th anniversary.

Statutory tasks under the Vocational Training Act (BBiG)

In accordance with the BBiG, the BIBB executes a diverse range of mandates categorised into the following functional areas. Part 5 of the Act defines the functions, responsibilities, financing, and governing bodies of the BIBB:

Regulation and administration

- development and modernisation of training regulations;
- maintenance of the Register of Recognised Training Occupations.

Research and analysis

- comprehensive VET research;
- execution of pilot studies supported by scientific research;
- compilation of VET statistics and the publication of the annual VET report.

Support and cooperation

- facilitation of international VET cooperation and counselling;
- structural support for inter-company training centres (*überbetriebliche Berufsbildungsstätten*, ÜBS);
- administrative oversight of the Distance Learning Protection Act and the Nursing Professions Act.



Governance: executive management

The governing bodies of the BIBB are defined in Section 91 of the Vocational Training Act.

The institute has two main executive bodies, the Board and the President. Together, they are responsible for the strategic direction and management of the institution.

The governance of the BIBB is defined by its paritarian structure, ensuring balanced representation between social partners and the 'Länder' and the state.

The Board (§ 92)

- statutory function
 - acts as the official advisory body for the federal government;
 - provides high-level expertise on all issues relevant to German VET.
- strategic significance
 - known as the 'Parliament of Vocational Education' due to its consensus-driven model;
 - ensures that VET policy is co-determined by the stakeholders who implement it (employers and trade unions) and the state (federal and regional).

Board composition and voting distribution: the Board consists of 32 total votes, distributed with eight votes across four equal benches: employers, trade unions (employees), federal government, federal states (*Länder*).

Advisory representation: additional non-voting expertise is provided by:

- one representative of the federal employment agency;
- one representative of municipal associations at the federal level.

Management (§ 93)

- President: Prof. Dr Friedrich Hubert Esser retired on 30 June 2026 after more than 15 years in office. He is succeeded by Dr Sandra Garbade, who becomes the first woman to head the BIBB. Her appointment was approved by the Federal Cabinet on 1 July. Sandra Garbade will take up her post on 1 August 2026.
- Vice President: Prof. Dr. Hubert Ertl serves as the Vice President and the Director of Research.

Financial scale and human resources (as of 2026)

Budgetary breakdown:

- total annual budget: approximately EUR 463 million;
- basic budget: approximately EUR 70 million (allocated for staff and administrative costs);
- programme/operating resources: approximately EUR 393 million (dedicated to projects and initiatives).



Human capital:

- total staff: approximately 855 employees;
- apprentices: the institute demonstrates its commitment to the dual system by employing 20 apprentices within its own administration.

Organisational structure and functional departments

The institute is structured into four primary pillars, supplemented by the National Agency Education for Europe:

- VET research and monitoring: focuses on VET supply and demand, the economics of vocational education, competence development, and the Research Data Centre;
- structure and regulation of VET: manages the development of training regulations, digital learning initiatives, and the Office of the Nursing Professions Act;
- vocational training initiatives: oversees the transition from training to the workforce, further education, and inter-company training centres (ÜBS);
- international VET cooperation: responsible for comparative research, the recognition of foreign qualifications, and international cooperation/counselling.

National Agency Education for Europe hosted within the BIBB, this agency manages European programmes including Erasmus+ and EPAL (Adult Education), alongside Learning Mobility and Europass initiatives.

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5. Recognition and other instruments used in Germany for qualifications obtained abroad

Jessica Erbe, Division: Recognition of Foreign Professional Qualifications, BIBB

The session provided an analytic overview of the variety of instruments being used for international credentials in Germany.

German as well as other national, and European, legislators have established such instruments as a response to a phenomenon observed in most OECD countries: foreign trained persons have more difficulties in performing well on the labour market of a host country than locally trained persons. Academics suggest that the signalling effect of credentials obtained in a foreign higher education or VET system on employers is lower – compared to the signalling effect of credentials obtained in the domestic system. At the same time, statutory requirements in regulated professions such as in the medical or the educational sector may hinder the transferability of human capital.

Policy instruments such as the German recognition procedure therefore aim at improving integration of migrants in the labour market by:

- fulfilling statutory requirements in regulated professions where recognition is a mandatory prerequisite for practice;



- providing a reliable ‘competence signal’ to employers during recruitment across all sectors;
- facilitating targeted further training by creating legal equivalence.

In addition, the German recognition legislation aims at migration steering by making recognition statements – or participation in measures for obtaining full recognition – a central instrument for qualified labour migration.

The German legislation consists in one Federal and 16 Federal State *Acts on Recognition* (*Anerkennungsgesetze, Berufsqualifikationsfeststellungsgesetze, BQFG*) which on the one hand implement EU Directive 2005/36/EC and on the other hand widen the scope of application to other professions (regulated and non-regulated) and to credentials obtained outside the EU and/or by third country nationals. These Acts are therefore the most far-reaching instruments, but not the only ones applicable.

As systemised in the session, further instruments are used:

- for certain types of qualifications such as the *Statement of Comparability* (*Zeugnisbewertung*) for non-regulated academic diploma, on the basis of the Lisbon Convention;
- for a limited set of qualifications determined in *bilateral agreements* on mutual recognition with Austria, Switzerland, and France;
- for certain types of holders of a qualification in the case of the *Federal Expellee Act* (§10 *BVFG*);
- for a specific purpose, i.e. the admittance of third country nationals holding non-regulated VET qualifications, for the purpose of labour migration; the newly adopted instrument *Statement on a Foreign Vocational Qualification* (*Auskunft zur Berufsqualifikation, DAB*) of 2024.

Statistical analysis on usage of the instruments

- over the 13-years period 2012–2024, almost one million applications (approximately 920 000) were submitted for recognition or statements of comparability:
 - nearly half a million under the recognition Acts (498 000 applications: Federal Law: 383 000 and Federal State Law: 115 000), plus
 - 423 000 applications for Statement of Comparability at ZAB for non-regulated higher education;
- top 10 reference occupations (i.e. highest volume of applications) for recognition (under Federal or Federal State Law): topmost frequent occupation is registered general nurse / qualified nurse with a total 144 315 applications, followed by doctor 87 345, engineer 29 544, and by teacher, nursery schoolteacher, physiotherapist, dentist, electronics technician, pharmacist, office manager;
- the geographic origin of applications for recognition shows a truly global reach, with a total of 33 276 applications handed in alone for qualifications obtained in Syria, and 32 568 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, followed by qualifications from Turkey, Romania, Poland, Ukraine, Serbia, Philippines, Tunisia, Russian Federation, India, Iran, and numerous other countries;



- trends in recognition applications:
 - shift from EU to third-country applications;
 - increase in applications submitted directly from abroad (new immigration);
- procedural outcomes of recognition procedures are technically categorised as:
 - positive: full equivalence;
 - partial equivalence: applicable only to non-regulated occupations OR Imposition of a compensation measure: applicable only to regulated professions (e.g., adaptation periods/exams);
 - negative: no equivalence.

Empirical evidence on employers' perspectives (BeReAgIn Research)

Analysis from the BIBB Training Panel 2024 (representative of companies with at least one employee subject to social security) provides insights into company engagement with international talent:

- one in five German companies (19%, corresponding to approx. 400 000 establishments) employ staff with foreign qualifications. Engagement is considerably higher in medium and large companies. The share of companies with foreign trained staff is highest in the manufacturing sector (25%), which has seen a notable increase compared to 2021. Medical services and personal services are above average as well (21% each), with lowest shares among companies in the public services sector (15%);
- because achieving 'full recognition' often requires foreign trained staff to participate in further training or compensation measures, employer support is a vital integration component. Currently, 21% of employers fund training for full recognition. This support manifests in three ways:
 - internal training provisions;
 - financing of external qualification measures;
 - granting time off for training.

Read more:

- BIBB Research: www.bibb.de/bereagin and Erbe, Jessica: When companies fund continuing training for professional recognition. What is the significance of regulation and adherence to a collective wage agreement? In: BWP 55 (2026) 1; Pages 39-41 URL: <https://www.bwp-zeitschrift.de/dienst/publikationen/en/20969>
- BIBB Monitoring: www.bibb.de/aner kennungs monitoring Factsheet with Recognition statistics: https://www.anerkennung-in-deutschland.de/assets/content/Medien_Dokumente-Fachpublikum/2025-faktenblatt-aner kennungs monitoring-en.pdf
Report on the Recognition Act
[https://www.bibb.de/dokumente/pdf/891996 Bericht zum Anerkennungsgesetz 2023 en.pdf](https://www.bibb.de/dokumente/pdf/891996_Bericht_zum_Anerkennungsgesetz_2023_en.pdf)
- Portals: Anerkennung in Deutschland: www.anerkennung-in-deutschland.de; anabin database: www.anabin.kmk.org; BQ-Portal: www.bq-portal.de



6. Company visit – apprenticeship in practice

The owner's grandson and a current apprentice at the mechanical engineering company [KUHNE](#) welcomed the group and presented the company including a tour through the factory premises. A main focus was explaining how the apprenticeship programme is implemented in practice.

Mr Kuhne, who himself completed an apprenticeship at KUHNE, described his experience and emphasised the benefits of apprenticeship programmes from his perspective. These included the opportunity for apprentices to earn their own income early on, membership in the vocational school network and the company's professional network, and the possibility to build on the qualification for a successful career. He also highlighted the important role of intercompany training centres, which apprentices often attend at the start of their training to learn basic craft skills. Overall, the group valued the visit and took the opportunity to ask many questions about how apprenticeships are implemented in practice.

7. SMEs in VET – Initiative for excellent inter-company training (INex-ÜBA)

Nina Jung, Division: Inter-Company Vocational Training Centres, BIBB

Ms Jung's presentation introduced the role of Inter-company Vocational Training Centres (IVTCs) in Germany's dual VET system and depicted the Initiative for Excellent Inter-company Training (INex-ÜBA), which aims to enhance quality, innovation, and future readiness in vocational training.

In Germany's dual VET system, training takes place primarily in companies and vocational schools. Inter-company Vocational Training Centres function as a third learning venue, particularly supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that cannot fully provide all training content required by national training regulations. These centres broaden and deepen vocational training, ensure consistent training standards, and facilitate the transfer of innovation into VET. They also help maintain the competitiveness and training capacity of SMEs. Providers of IVTCs are often chambers (e.g. of industry and commerce, craft and trade, or agriculture), professional associations or (non-profit) legal educational institutions.

To promote these centres, the German government funds an initiative focusing on infrastructure (since the 1970s), and on competences (since 2000). Currently, there is an additional fund focusing on excellence. This flagship programme, the so-called Initiative for Excellent Inter-company Training (INex-ÜBA), seeks to improve the quality of inter-company training through innovative concepts, future-oriented technologies, and organisational development. Its key objective is to transform IVTCs into attractive, excellent learning environments that can meet future labour-market and technological demands.

INex-ÜBA endorses excellence in six key areas: organisational development, cooperation and networking, trainer recruitment and competence development, modern learning environments and equipment, innovative training content and methods, and the exploration of new future-oriented topics. Projects also take into account learner diversity, trainer needs, and insights gained from international cooperation. The current funding phase (2025–2028)



supports 28 projects involving 67 subprojects across crafts, construction, industry, commerce, and agriculture. Most projects are collaborative and include research institutions as partners.

A major focus of the programme is responding to recent transformation trends in vocational training. These mainly consist of digitalisation and AI, flexible and individualised learning, sustainability, and (international) cooperation. Examples include AI-powered multilingual learning assistants (ALINA), simulation-based learning environments for maritime occupations (ISAmare), learning factories that replicate real industrial settings (LernGo), self-organised and agile learning concepts (NextGenLearn), sustainability-focused energy-transition training (ILNET), and electromobility training for boatbuilding professions (E-Mobi_Boot). Ms Jung's presentation also highlighted the growing importance of international partnerships and knowledge transfer. Projects such as ECHA and EXKAIA demonstrate how international collaboration can support trainer development, benchmarking, innovation, and the dissemination of best practices across vocational sectors.

In conclusion, Inter-company Vocational Training Centres are key actors in strengthening vocational education for SMEs. Through the Initiative for Excellent Inter-company Training (INex-ÜBA), they can evolve into centres of excellence that enhance training quality, drive innovation, support technological and societal transformation, foster cooperation, and contribute to making VET more attractive and future-proof.

For further information (in German) on INex-ÜBA and the projects consult www.bibb.de/inex-ueba.

8. Latest legislative developments in Bulgaria in modernising the VET system

Adelina Borisova, Directorate in the National agency for VET, Bulgaria (NAVET)

Legislative framework updates (2024)

The strategic focus of the 2024 reform is the comprehensive realignment of the Bulgarian VET system with global economic shifts. This modernisation is anchored in the March 2024 updates to the VET Act, which established the legal foundation for a new List of Professions for VET (LPVET) and a significant revised format for State Educational Standards (SES), including the identification and definition of partial qualifications training in terms of combination of units of learning outcomes.

Legislative milestones and relevance

The approval of the new LPVET in August 2024 marks a critical administrative milestone. Unlike previous iterations, this list is specifically designed to reflect the rapid dynamics of the labour market, with a proactive focus on the 'skills of the future.' To achieve this, a significant number of professions have seen their names and core content updated. This ensures that the qualifications provided are not only recognisable by employers but are also modernised to include the digital and green competencies required in the current industrial landscape.

To facilitate a seamless transition for educational institutions and stakeholders, a Comparison Table between the current and the new LPVET has been developed. This technical tool is essential for mapping the specialties from LPVET 2003 and professions from the LPVET 2024 to the updated professional qualification levels and professional titles,



ensuring administrative continuity during the re-licensing of Centres for vocational training and curriculum-mapping development process.

Implementation timeline and institutional oversight

The implementation of the new LPVET is structured in two stages to balance the needs of adult learners with the academic cycles of the secondary education system:

- 1 January 2026: full commencement for adult learners (persons over 16 years of age) within centres for vocational training licensed by the National Agency for VET (NAVET);
- academic year 2026/2027: full commencement for secondary students admitted to Grade VIII in vocational high schools.

It should be noted that, within the framework of the Modernisation of VET project, the National Agency for VET (NAVET) was responsible for developing and providing the system with State Educational Standards (SES) and National Examination Programmes (NEPs) for 155 professions. Outside the scope of this large-scale national project, the development and approval of NEPs fall within the responsibilities of the Ministry of Education and Science.

The NAVET remains the primary authority responsible for the development of the new SES format ensuring a unified national standard for professional excellence.

Strategic modernisation project (2023–2027)

Launched in 2023, the national project 'Modernisation of VET' represents the primary vehicle for system-wide reform. The Ministry of Education and Science serves as the lead organisation, with NAVET acting as a mandatory partner to ensure regulatory compliance and standard-setting across all project activities.

Financial breakdown: the project's scale is reflected in its robust financial structure, primarily supported by European Union investment:

Funding component	Amount (EUR)
Total budget	47 036 271
EU funding (European Social Fund)	38 757 948
National co-funding	8 278 323

Analysis of key project activities (1–9): the project activities are designed to create synergy between regulatory tools and pedagogical innovation:

- activity 1 and 3 framework and mobility tools: activity 1 focuses on the development of the LPVET, digital LPVET, the new state educational standards, national examination programmes, study plans and curricula. The design of the new LPVET has been supported by the Sector Skills Councils, which provide a critical evaluation of existing professions to ensure they meet industry needs. An important contribution to the development of the new LPVET was made by the expert commissions established within NAVET, as well as by the broad public consultation process conducted by the Ministry of Education and Science. This works in tandem with Activity 3, which introduces flexible learning pathways, allowing for greater professional mobility and shorter, competency-based learning intervals;
- activity 2, 4 and 6 competency profiles and learning innovation: these activities introduce modern competency profiles for teachers that emphasise the green



economy, VR, and AI. This is supported by the creation of interactive educational materials. The goal is a blended-learning approach in which theoretical instruction is delivered via digital environments, while practical skills are developed in physical settings;

- activity 5 mentorship and external expertise: this activity bridges the gap between education and industry by providing mentoring training for teachers. Crucially, it recruits external trainers from the business, public, and NGO sectors, providing them with the pedagogical and methodological skills for the effective delivery of high-quality VET programmes;
- activity 7, 8 and 9 student competencies and attractiveness: to improve the 'human capital' output of the system, Activity 7 focuses on transversal and key competences such as entrepreneurship, teamwork, and financial literacy. Activity 8 places students in real work environments for additional professional training, while Activity 9 focuses on national information campaigns to increase the overall attractiveness of VET pathways.

Digital and green transition initiatives

The integration of future-oriented skill sets is no longer elective but a legislative requirement within the Bulgarian VET ecosystem:

- standardised integration: health and safety, environmental protection, economics and entrepreneurship skills are now explicitly integrated into the State Educational Standards for all professional qualifications, ensuring every learner is equipped for the real work environment;
- instructional flexibility: VET legislation now officially supports online and hybrid vocational training models. This flexibility is particularly applied to the theoretical components of VET courses, allowing institutions to utilise modern distance-learning technologies;
- adult education and distance learning: legislative amendments have introduced distance learning in electronic environments for persons over 16, facilitating lifelong learning. Additionally, a new definition for 'qualification for part of a profession' has been codified, requiring a minimum of three units of learning outcomes (ULOs) derived directly from the State Educational Standard (SES). At least one of these ULOs must belong to the specific vocational training component of the SES; however, a qualification for part of a profession may comprise more than three ULOs, including additional ULOs from the specific vocational training component;
- digital skills and foreign language skills interrelated with the specific profession needs: digital skills and foreign language skills are embedded in the specific vocational training preparation in terms of learning outcomes within the ULO's specific to the particular profession. This ensures that training curricula reflect professional situations and terminology relevant to the specific profession;
- technological guidance: recognising the disruptive potential of AI, the Ministry of Education and Science issued official guidelines for AI for teachers in 2024 to assist in the ethical and effective integration of AI tools in the classroom.



Quantitative progress and achievements

Administrative data from late 2025 demonstrate a high level of institutional readiness for the upcoming 2026 implementation deadlines.

Administrative reissuance and regulatory synchronisation

A critical administrative milestone was reached following the §63 VET Act Amendments. As of 31 December 2025, the system has successfully transitioned most of its VET providers to the new regulatory framework. Out of 839 active VET centres, 823 licenses were automatically reissued during the November–December 2025 period. Furthermore, the completion of 155 State Educational Standards and 155 National examination programmes represent a total synchronisation of the new system's regulatory base.

Significant achievements in numbers (2025)

The figures presented below reflect progress achieved as of 28 February 2026, according to the official information published on the website of the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science (MES). Project activities remain ongoing, with continued efforts directed towards meeting the indicators and targets established in the project framework.

The following statistics illustrate the scale of student and teacher engagement within the modernisation project:

- 18 681 students participated in additional work-based learning placements in real working environments;
- 9 401 students participated in training for transversal and key competences (entrepreneurship, leadership, etc.);
- 3 805 teachers participated in training programmes for digital and green skills;
- 3 277 students participated in additional motivational training programmes;
- 1 174 business representatives were trained to acquire pedagogical and methodological skills;
- 772 teachers participated in modular training programmes in real working environments;
- 281 professionals from outside the educational system were recruited as VET teachers;
- 234 students acted as assistant mentors, fostering a peer-to-peer learning culture;
- 199 teachers supported students through formal mentoring programmes;
- 20 competency profiles developed specifically for VET teachers.

Strategic shift in adult learning pathways

The presented data from the information system of NAVET on the number of adult learners trained between 1 January 2026 and 5 May 2026 reveal a strategic shift towards modular, competency-based certification:

- 386 learners trained in single units of learning outcomes;
- 4 823 learners trained in combinations of units (representing 'part of a profession').

The significantly higher target for 'combinations of units' indicate a clear policy shift towards flexible, modular qualification pathways that allow adults to gain certified knowledge, skills and competencies more rapidly than traditional full-profession models.

Emphasis should be placed on the considerable efforts of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) and VET schools in preparing the full set of educational documentation,



including curricula, training programmes and related materials, required to ensure the effective implementation of the updated VET framework at the beginning of the school year.

Institutional contact information

For technical documentation regarding the new list of professions and access to the digital VET tools, please consult the official NAVET resources:

- digital LPVET Tool: <https://is.navet.government.bg/DI.SPPOO.Web>
- official website: www.navet.government.bg
- email contact person: napoo@navet.government.bg
- institutional phone: +359 971 20 70

9. New national policy guidelines for the development of VET in Finland

Laura Jauhola, Senior Adviser, Finnish National Agency for Education, VET

Overview of the Finnish VET system context

The Finnish education system operates under a strict 'No dead-ends' philosophy, ensuring that every educational choice maintains a viable pathway to higher-level studies. This seamless hierarchy begins with Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and progresses through pre-primary, primary, and lower secondary education in comprehensive schools.

Vocational education offers flexible pathways at the upper secondary level:

- initial vocational qualifications (ISCED 3, EQF 4): entry-level qualifications providing basic professional skills;
- further vocational qualifications (ISCED 3, EQF 4): a bridging tier for those seeking more specific or additional vocational competencies;
- specialist vocational qualifications (ISCED 4, EQF 5): advanced qualifications representing mastery in a specific field.

All vocational paths provide full eligibility for further studies at universities or universities of applied sciences, leading through Bachelor's and Master's degrees to Doctoral levels. The Senior Educational Policy Analyst for the Finnish National Agency for Education guides these providers to ensure that implementation and quality development align with national standards and labour market requirements.

The societal and demographic imperatives for reform

Strategic reform is essential to address converging demographic and educational challenges that threaten the sustainability of the current VET model.

Demographic shift

Data from the 2050 foresight projections indicate a severe contraction of the youth population. By 2040, the size of youth age groups in the majority of Finnish regions will plummet to 80% or less of 2024 levels. This decline, coupled with regionally uneven population development, necessitates a fundamental reorganisation of VET provision to ensure nationwide accessibility.



Educational retention

Despite the extension of compulsory education to the age of 18, retention remains a critical policy concern. While standard dropout rates after three years have historically hovered between 7% and 10%, students with special needs face a more precarious path, with dropout rates between 15% and 17%. Crucially, Finnish policy recognises that ‘dropping out’ is often not final, as many of these students can and do continue their studies later.

Employment outcomes

Recent graduate placement statistics indicate a softening labour market for initial VET graduates. While employment was robust at 69% in 2019 and 2022, it fell to 63% in 2024, signalling an urgent need for enhanced labour market responsiveness. The statistics describe the situation one year after graduation in December of the statistical year.

Year	Employed	Unemployed	Full-time student
2019	69%	14%	9%
2020	62%	20%	9%
2021	68%	15%	9%
2022	69%	14%	9%
2023	68%	16%	8%
2024	63%	18%	10%

Core strategic objectives

The new national guidelines integrate three primary objectives to modernise the VET system:

- labour market responsiveness: reducing skills mismatches by tightening the alignment between education and industry requirements;
- social inclusion: specifically targeting the reduction of young people outside education and employment (NEETs);
- educational quality: guaranteeing high standards for teaching, student guidance, and specialised support.

Pillar 1: reform of learning support (effective August 2026)

This reform integrates legislative levers to unify the support chain from early childhood through upper secondary education. It establishes a statutory ‘Right to learning support,’ ensuring every student receives the assistance necessary to achieve their specific qualification objectives.

- standard support: delivered through remedial teaching from teachers and comprehensive guidance from counselling staff.
- special needs support: a defined right triggered when standard measures are insufficient, ensuring intensive intervention for those who require it.

Pillar 2: Vocational Education Funding Act restructuring

Commencing in January 2026, the funding model transitions to a heavily outcome-oriented logic. The most significant shift is the allocation for ‘Employment and Further Studies,’ which will more than double from 7% to 18%, signalling a radical move toward rewarding graduate success.



Comparative funding allocation targets

Funding category	Pre-2025 model	2026 model targets*
Student years	70%	50%
Qualifications and units	20%	30%
Employment and further studies	7%	18%
Feedback	3%	3%
*Note: These targets reflect a projected policy allocation total of 101%.		

Incentive mechanisms

The reform introduces the 'initial-level coefficient' to prevent 'creaming' — the practice of only admitting high-performing students. This mechanism financially rewards providers for admitting students with lower starting levels and ensuring their progress. Additionally, funding now prioritises students without prior upper secondary qualifications and incentivises flexible, micro credential-based learning pathways.

Pillar 3: pilot for operational steering (2026–2033)

The operational steering pilot empowers 40 selected providers with increased autonomy to adapt their qualification offerings to local labour market needs. This pilot involves two four-year periods (2026–2029 and 2030–2033) and a longitudinal study spanning 2026–2036.

Steering is managed through rigorous negotiations between the Ministry of Education and Culture and VET providers, utilising four indicator categories:

- performance: including employment rates and module completion;
- economy: comprehensive review of the provider's financial health;
- quality: assessment of teaching hours and the share of training and apprenticeship in skills acquisition;
- operating environment: analysis of regional population projections and anticipated industry shifts.

Implementation timeline and evaluation

The reform measures integrate legislative, financial, and operational levers to form a coherent whole. The implementation follows this strict chronological path:

- January 2026: commencement of the restructured Vocational Education Funding Act;
- August 2026: activation of legislative changes regarding the right to learning support;
- 2026–2029: first four-year period of the operational steering pilot;
- 2030–2033: second four-year period of the operational steering pilot;
- 2026–2036: execution of a 10-year longitudinal study to evaluate the long-term impact of steering and funding changes on graduate outcomes and system efficiency.

10. AI in the German VET system

Mortimer Schlieker, Division: Competence Development, BIBB

Session overview and definition of AI scope: The analysis provides a systemic look at the digital transformation of vocational education, emphasising the period of accelerated change following the emergence of advanced generative models.



Definition of AI categories:

- generative AI: characterised by Large Language Models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, this category has demonstrated the strongest transformative power since late 2022 due to its unprecedented pace of adoption and broad scope of application;
- classical AI: encompasses established technologies such as AI voice assistants (Siri, Alexa), translation software, and machine learning models that have been integrated into industrial and service workflows for several years.

Categorised impact areas: AI technology is actively reshaping the German VET system across five primary dimensions: work processes, occupational profiles, teaching methodologies, learning environments, and institutional governance.

Initial training - the dual system perspective: the session identified three primary observations regarding the integration of AI within the German dual system, highlighting a widening 'adaptation gap' between different types of establishments:

- observation 1: relevance across all occupations: AI is significant for the full spectrum of training occupations, from high-tech IT roles to traditional skilled trades like hairdressing. However, the intensity of adoption varies by sector;

Sector grouping	Specific sectors	AI usage/impact level
More impact	Other services (29.2%), industry (21.1%), public sector (19.8%)	High to medium-high
Less impact	Retail and trade (11.6%), skilled trades (9.2%)	Moderate to low

- observation 2: uneven pace of adoption - there is a stark contrast between firms already utilising AI and those that are not. Data reveal that 39.5% of AI-using firms systematically review and update company-specific training content, compared to only 16.9% of firms without AI experience. This delta suggests a growing structural disadvantage for apprentices in non-AI firms. Among youth (12–19-year-olds), usage has surged to 91% (up from 62% in 2024), yet 71% of these users remain self-directed due to inconsistent guidance at the school level;
- observation 3: technology-open training regulations - German VET regulations are designed to be 'technology-open', providing schools and companies the autonomy to implement specific AI use cases:
 - common baseline: the standard training position (*Standard-Berufsbildposition*) titled 'digitalised world of work' serves as the mandatory foundation for all occupations;
 - implementation support: the Leando portal provides dedicated AI-specific modules to facilitate these standards.

Address occupational shifts: the analysis rejects the 'replacement discourse' (job abolition). Instead, it identifies a shift in competence requirements, prioritising knowledge transfer, problem-solving, and critical reflection as necessary complements to AI tools.



Continuing VET (CVET): the German CVET sector is a large, deregulated, and non-formal landscape where companies serve as the primary providers. Consequently, the company environment is the most decisive factor for lifelong learning.

The ‘Double Barrier’ to AI upskilling access to AI competence development is hindered by two sequential hurdles:

- organisational barrier: the requirement to be employed by an establishment that actively adopts AI and offers training;
- individual barrier: the ability to gain actual access to those tools and training opportunities within that specific company.

Informal adoption and the inclusion challenge approximately 60% of employees currently use AI tools that were not officially introduced by their employers. This ‘bottom-up’ adoption is driven primarily by highly qualified workers. From a policy perspective, this represents a significant challenge for inclusion; there is an urgent need to transition from individual experimentation to structured company strategies that focus on the entire workforce.

Empirical findings: barriers and facilitators - current research (Nahm/Isenmann, 2026) highlights a divergence in institutional readiness:

- institutional maturity: vocational schools currently exhibit a higher ‘AI maturity’ than many companies, resulting in efficiency gains in teaching and learner communication; However, there is a less positive assessment regarding AI’s impact on critical thinking and reflection among students;
- implementation barriers: adoption is slowed by skill gaps among staff, legal and data protection uncertainties, and severe time pressure;
- enabling conditions: success factors include the structured exchange of good practices, targeted staff training, and the establishment of clear organisational rules.

The inequality gap and systemic concerns: a central concern is that AI adoption may reinforce existing professional disparities. Training disparities (2019–2023) data from the BIBB-Establishment-Panel show that participation in continuing training in AI-adopting firms is increasingly concentrated at the top.

Occupational task level	Participation trend (2019–2023)
High-skilled tasks	Rose from 41% to 51%
Skilled tasks	Dropped from 57% to 45%
Basic tasks	Almost no participation

The logic of cumulative disadvantage: this trend creates a negative feedback loop: Missing qualifications → restricted training access → restricted AI access. This cycle threatens to permanently marginalise workers in basic task categories.

AI as a strategic pivot point: The ‘INVITE’ programme (2020–2025) utilises AI as an instrument for improvement, testing adaptive learning paths and personalised course matching. This represents a critical area for longitudinal monitoring to determine if these tools will successfully bridge the inequality gap or inadvertently widen it.



Outlook: vocational action competence - as the technology evolves toward AI agents (capable of multi-step autonomous task execution) and deep integration into software ecosystems, the VET system must move beyond anecdotal 'replacement' theories.

Summary conclusions:

- centrality of context: while national regulations provide the frame, the school or company context determines the actual quality of AI integration;
- systemic inequality: the prevalence of informal, unguided AI adoption poses a major risk to equitable training access;
- evidence-based analysis: policy must be driven by data rather than broad predictions of occupational replacement.

Final statement on competence: 'Vocational action competence' remains the decisive complement to AI. Human expertise — specifically involving context-specific judgment, social interaction, and practical physical skills — remains essential. AI excels at automation, but human judgment is required for the effective, ethical, and creative application of technology in professional contexts.

11. Strengthening international mobility in German VET

Corinna Porsche, National Agency Erasmus+ for VET, BIBB

International mobility has become an increasingly important aspect of VET in Europe and is supported by a range of European and national policy initiatives. The presentation provided an overview of the strategic rationale, policy objectives, and funding programmes and its support structures that promote international mobility in German VET.

Why international mobility matters

International learning experiences create benefits at several levels. For learners, they foster not only occupational skills but also broader competences that are increasingly important in today's labour market. Key benefits include:

- development of professional, personal, and intercultural competences;
- improvement of foreign language skills and future-oriented competences, including democracy and sustainability;
- reflection on different working methods and cultural contexts;
- increased employability and personal development.

International mobility also generates positive effects for organisations. Vocational schools benefit from internationalisation processes, while companies gain new perspectives for training through exchanges with international partners. In-company trainers participating in mobility activities bring innovative ideas back to their organisations, contributing to the continuous development of training practices.

Beyond these educational benefits, international mobility supports stronger international economic cooperation by fostering long-term partnerships between companies, educational institutions, and organisations.



European policy objectives

The promotion of international mobility is firmly embedded in European education policy. Under the Council Recommendation *Europe on the Move*, the European Union aims for at least 12% of all VET learners, including apprentices, to participate in an international mobility experience by 2030.

While participation has increased significantly over recent years, further efforts are required to reach the European target. Meeting this objective requires more than additional funding. It also depends on supportive framework conditions.

Erasmus+: the main European funding instrument

Erasmus+ is the principal European programme supporting international mobility in VET. Between 2010 and 2024, the number of funded mobility activities for both VET learners and vocational education staff increased substantially in Germany, with particularly strong growth since 2022 following significant budget increases.

This expansion has made an important contribution towards the European participation target. Nevertheless, Erasmus+ alone will not be sufficient to achieve the 12% mobility objective. Complementary national programmes and additional support mechanisms remain necessary to reach a broader range of learners and companies.

VETworldwide: complementing Erasmus+

To complement Erasmus+, Germany operates the national funding programme VETworldwide, financed by the Federal Ministry of Education.

The programme offers flexible funding for:

- internships abroad for VET trainees (three weeks to three months);
- in-company job-shadowing for qualified trainers in VET (five to 15 days);
- preparatory visits for professionals (two to five days).

Since its launch in 2018, more than 4 000 international stays have been funded.

A distinctive feature of VETworldwide is its strong business orientation:

- nearly two-thirds of applications are submitted directly by companies;
- around 80% of participants are apprentices in the German dual VET system;
- mobility projects take place in more than 60 countries across all continents.

The programme supports the acquisition of skills for international business, promotes participants' personal development, and strengthens companies' employer branding. It also reaches occupational sectors that are less frequently represented within Erasmus+, thereby broadening access to international mobility.

Activities of the National Agency

The National Agency at the BIBB supports international mobility through a comprehensive range of activities that go beyond administering the two funding programmes Erasmus+ and VETworldwide. Its work includes:

- providing information and guidance across different funding programmes;
- networking mobility-related support structures throughout Germany;
- conducting research and monitoring on international mobility;



- collecting examples of good practice from other countries, and
- contributing to the improvement of framework conditions for international mobility.

Current research activities include the 'Stays Abroad in VET 2026' study, which aims to provide reliable data on the participation of apprentices in international mobility and to identify factors that facilitate or hinder mobility. Further surveys examine issues such as international partner search and company engagement in mobility activities.

Information and advisory services

To facilitate participation in international mobility, the National Agency provides tailored advisory services for two target groups.

Learners

Through www.MeinAuslandspraktikum.de trainees, young people, and vocational school students receive:

- information on available funding programmes,
- practical guidance for planning and organising stays abroad,
- referrals to regional advisory services,
- practical examples and testimonials from former participants, and
- individual advice via email and telephone.

VET professionals

Training supervisors in companies, vocational schools, chambers, and inter-company training centres receive specialised guidance through www.Auslandsberatung-Ausbildung.de. The advisory service supports organisations in selecting appropriate funding opportunities, preparing mobility projects, and implementing international activities successfully.

Conclusion

International mobility has become an important instrument for strengthening VET in Germany. It enhances learners' competences, supports innovation within schools and companies, and strengthens international cooperation.

Although substantial progress has been achieved through Erasmus+ and complementary programmes such as VETworldwide, further efforts are needed to increase participation and achieve the European target for 2030. Alongside sustainable funding, effective advisory services, strong partnerships, research-based policy development, and supportive framework conditions will remain essential for expanding international mobility in German VET.

Institutional signature

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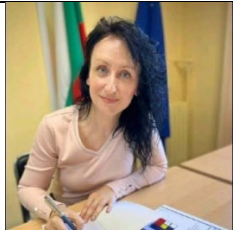
12. Key messages and takeaways

The ReferNet Partnership Forum in Bonn provided a platform for national partners and Cedefop to exchange experiences and reflect on current developments in VET, with a particular focus on excellence in VET, apprenticeship programme, AI in VET, international mobility in VET, permeability and recognition of qualifications obtained abroad. The key messages below summarise the main insights and lessons emerging from the presentations, thematic sessions, and peer exchange activities:

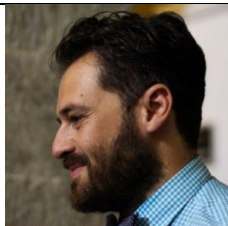
- **permeability and parity:** Germany's VET system increasingly supports vertical mobility between vocational and higher education through legal routes (FOS/BOS, Meister, technician routes) and qualification comparability via the German Qualifications Framework (DQR), improving attractiveness of VET pathways;
- **dual study model strengths:** dual study programmes (integrating university study and company practice) provide students with income, strong employer links and high retention after graduation, demonstrating effective theory–practice transfer valued by employers;
- **institutional role of the BIBB:** BIBB remains central for regulation, research, quality assurance and international cooperation, operating with a significant budget and broad remit to steer VET policy and monitor labour market needs;
- **recognition and labour market integration:** Germany uses a variety of recognition instruments (Recognition Acts, Statement of comparability, Statement on foreign vocational qualification) to integrate foreign-trained professionals; nearly 920 000 recognition/comparability applications were filed in 2012–2024, showing high demand and the policy importance of employer support for compensation measures and re-skilling;
- **SMEs and inter-company training centres:** inter-company Vocational Training Centres (IVTCs) are vital to support SMEs' training capacity; the INex-ÜBA excellence initiative (2025–2028) funds projects across sectors to modernise equipment, trainer competence and innovative curricula (AI, simulation, sustainability);
- **national reforms and modernisation (Bulgarian example):** large-scale legislative and programme reforms (illustrated by Bulgaria's LPVET and Modernisation of VET 2023–2027 project) show how states are updating occupational lists, state standards, and digital/green curricula to align VET with labour market transformation;
- **responsive, inclusive, and outcome-oriented VET (Finnish example):** in the face of demographic decline and weaker VET graduate employment, Finland's reforms aim to ensure that vocational education keeps strong pathways onward, supports learners more effectively, and is steered and funded more directly by results such as employment, further study, and local labour market needs;
- **AI and institutional readiness:** German vocational schools have a higher AI maturity than many companies. About 60% of employees use AI tools not officially introduced by their employers, and these are mainly highly qualified workers. This highlights an inclusion challenge and the need for company-wide AI strategies;
- **international mobility and skills portability:** international mobility is key to strengthening VET in Germany, but participation must increase to meet the 2030 target. This will require sustained funding, advisory support, partnerships, research-based policy, and supportive conditions.



13. Speakers and contributors

 Adelina Borisova, Directorate in the National agency for vocational education and training, Bulgaria (NAVET)	Adelina Borisova, Ph.D. is a chief expert in 'Professional qualification and licensing' Directorate in the National agency for vocational education and training, Bulgaria (NAVET). She has 15 years' experience in adult learning, development of State educational standards (SES) for acquisition of professional qualification, counselling, conducting trainings and methodological support to SES working groups, development and maintaining the List of professions for vocational education and training (LPVET). She has been represented NAVET in Teachers and trainers working group of the European Commission. She has Ph.D. in Politics with subject 'Bulgarian system of performance appraisal of civil servants in 2002-2012'. Adelina has experience as researcher and coordinator of Erasmus+ projects in the field of VET qualifications, Sectoral qualifications development, mobility projects, etc.
Jessica Erbe Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB)	Dr. Jessica Erbe coordinates research within the 'Recognition of Foreign Professional Qualifications' division at the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB). Over several years, she has built up and managed continuous monitoring of the implementation of federal legislation in this field.
 Silke Gadji Policy officer - VET policies and systems, Cedefop	Silke Gadji is a policy officer in the Department for VET and Qualifications at Cedefop. She worked on the study visits programme and has been a member of the VET policy and system teams since 2014. In this role, she analyses developments and implementation of national VET policies aligned with EU priorities and coordinates the National News on VET.



 Ute Hippach-Schneider Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, Germany (BIBB)	Ute Hippach-Schneider is Senior Researcher at Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (<i>Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung</i>, BIBB). Ute is a member of BIBB's 'International VET Comparison, Research and Monitoring' Section, where she is examining the dynamics and flexibility of VET systems. Her focus is on governance and mainly on the role of actors. The current interest is particularly focussed on the perspective of learners in vocational education and training and their role in the governance systems of VET systems. Furthermore, she is national coordinator of the European network ReferNet.
 Nina Jung Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB)	Nina Jung is a researcher at Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) in the division of 'Inter-company Vocational Training Centres'. She is responsible for the promotion of and service for inter-company training centres, particularly within the scope of the Initiative for Excellent Inter-Company Training (INex-ÜBA). Her focus lies on conceptional innovations that contribute to quality improvement and development in inter-company vocational training. She has been working with inter-company vocational training centres for over 20 years. Prior to joining BiBB she also engaged in regional economic development supporting SMEs in terms professional labour and VET.
 Ioannis Katsikis Expert - ReferNet coordinator, Cedefop	Ioannis N. Katsikis is the ReferNet Coordinator at Cedefop. He holds a PhD in Management Science and Technology from the Athens University of Economics and Business, an MPhil in Architecture and Spatial Planning from the National Technical University of Athens, an MSc in Environmental Policy and Management and an MBA, both from the University of the Aegean. Prior to joining Cedefop in 2013, he worked as a Researcher at the Athens University of Economics and Business, as an academic tutor at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and as an independent Strategic Management Consultant. He has also taught at the National School of Public Administration and at the International Hellenic University. He has participated in major international research and innovation projects and has provided consulting services to the governments of Greece, Romania, Georgia and Turkey, as well



	as research and policy advice to international organisations, including the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the European Commission. His research focuses on strategic management, human capital, organisational capabilities, innovation and vocational education and training. He has published extensively in peer-reviewed journals, edited books, and leading international conferences. His research has received international awards from the Academy of Management, the British Academy of Management, and the European Regional Science Association.
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 Corinna Porsche Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB)	Corinna Porsche, Ph.D. is researcher at the National Agency at the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (NA beim BIBB). She works in the unit ‘Strengthening International Mobility/VET worldwide’ and is mainly responsible for research on international mobility in VET in Germany and other countries.
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 Mortimer Schlieker Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB)	Mortimer Schlieker is a sociologist at the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) in Bonn. His research focuses on continuing vocational education and training, with a particular emphasis on inequalities in access to workplace learning and the role of employers in shaping training opportunities. He currently investigates the interplay between inequalities in continuing training and the adoption of AI technologies and teaches and delivers training on the use of generative AI in research and as a professional tool.
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14. Meeting presentations

The following presentations were held during the PAFO meeting:

- Session 1 - Presentation of the German VET system - Focus on permeability Ute Hippach-Schneider.pdf
- Session 2 - Introduction to BIBB Janine Grobe-Rath.pdf
- Session 4 - Recognition and other instruments used in Germany for qualifications obtained abroad Jessica Erbe.pdf
- Session 5 - Latest legislative developments in Bulgaria in modernising the VET system Adelina Borisova.pdf
- Session 5 - New national policy guidelines for the development of VET in Finland Laura Jauhola.pdf
- Session 5 - SMEs in VET – Initiative for excellent inter-company training Inex-ÜBA Nina Jung.pdf
- Session 6 - AI in the German VET System Mortimer Schlieker.pdf
- Session 6 - Strengthening international mobility in German VET Corinna Porsche.pdf
- Session 7 - AI in VET Ioannis Katsikis.pdf
- Session 7 - Information Session Ioannis Katsikis.pdf
- Regulation Governance - 2025 - Thies - State Intervention in Vocational Education Training for the Digital and Green.pdf