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Beyond Zoom Position Papers No. 2

BY MULLINGAR EMPLOYMENT ACTION GROUP

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

Comparative Research Network:

BEYOND ZOOM

Published in 2024 by the Comparative Research Network e.V. Berlin

The publication was edited in the frame of the Erasmus+ Partnership Beyond Zoom 2021-2-DE02-KA220-VET-000049017

Partnership:
Comparative Research Network e.V. (Germany),
Ireforr (Italy),
Changemaker Education (Sweden),
Mullingar Employment Action Group (Irleand),
Stowarzyszenie na Rzecz Spoldzielni Socjalnych (Poland),
Innoved (Greece),
University of Cyprus
Author; Michael Ward
Visual elements: Canva, Freepik

www.beyzo.eu

Contact Address:

Comparative Research Network e.V.
www.crnonline.de
central@comparative-research.net
Müllerstraße 70B
13349 Berlin, Germany

Last update: 15th of November 2024

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DIGITAL TRANSFOR-MATION

Digital Transformation in Vocational Education and Training (VET) for Supporting Social Enterprises in Europe

The digital revolution is reshaping every facet of our world, including how we educate and empower social enterprises. Digital transformation in Vocational Education and Training (VET) has emerged as a pivotal tool for preparing educators and enterprises to thrive in a rapidly evolving economic landscape. Social enterprises, which tackle complex societal challenges through innovative and sustainable practices, are in urgent need of digital competencies to stay competitive. The recent push for digital readiness, resilience, and capacity in VET is not just about education; it is about creating a more inclusive, adaptive, and future-ready workforce that can support the growth of social enterprises in Europe.

This position paper explores why VET educators must lead the digital shift by equipping social enterprises with necessary digital skills. Drawing from current needs and questions arising from webinars and consultations with educators and enterprises, the paper argues that digital transformation is crucial for enhancing access to lifelong learning, supporting social innovation, and increasing inclusivity.

These needs form the foundation of our position: digital readiness within VET education is a fundamental enabler for the long-term sustainability and impact of social enterprises across Europe.

DIGITAL TRANSFOR-MATION

Digital Transformation as a Key to Lifelong Learning

The integration of digital tools in VET has revolutionized access to lifelong learning for social enterprises. Digital learning platforms provide flexible, continuous education that allows social enterprises to upskill and reskill their workforce in response to emerging technologies and new business models. This is particularly important as many social enterprises are mission-driven and must adapt quickly to address societal challenges such as climate change or social inequality.

A recent survey of social enterprises using digital VET tools revealed that over 70% experienced an increase in employee productivity and adaptability, directly linked to the ability to learn at their own pace through online and hybrid platforms. Additionally, the shift to digital learning has allowed enterprises to offer consistent training across geographically dispersed teams, increasing the scalability and sustainability of their operations.

Digital transformation is reshaping the working world and, by extension, VET systems. Theintegration of new digital tools and technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) helps improve the professional development of VET teachers, enabling them to guide students in a digitally transformed workplace (Attwell et al., 2021).

SOCIAL INNOVATION

Social Innovation through Digital Competencies

Social enterprises are at the forefront of addressing societal challenges, and innovation is key to their success. Digital competencies—such as data analysis, digital marketing, and entrepreneurial thinking—are essential for driving social innovation. VET educators equipped with these digital skills can train future leaders to think critically and develop creative solutions for complex problems.

VET programs that have embraced digital pedagogies, such as project-based learning and gamification, have seen significant improvements in student engagement and problem-solving skills. According to data from a recent pilot program, social enterprises that participated in digitally-enhanced VET programs were able to launch innovative projects addressing community needs 30% faster than those relying on traditional educational methods. This underscores the role of digital competencies in accelerating social impact.

VET is increasingly recognized as a support mechanism for the European Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE). This linkage demonstrates how VET programs can contribute to social enterprises by equipping individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary for sustainable and ethical business practices (Apostolopoulos et al., 2021)

INCLUSITIVITY

Inclusivity and Accessibility in Digital Education

Digital transformation in VET also promotes inclusivity by breaking down traditional barriers to education. Many social enterprises work with marginalized groups, including migrants, people with disabilities, and disadvantaged youth. A digitally empowered VET system ensures that these groups have access to quality education tailored to their needs, regardless of geographic or socio-economic constraints.

Supporting fact: Digital VET tools have proven to be highly effective in reaching marginalized learners. For example, in a program designed for disadvantaged youth, 85% of participants completed digital skills training that they would not have been able to access in a traditional classroom setting. Furthermore, VET educators with strong digital and inclusive pedagogical skills can develop customized learning paths for diverse groups, ensuring that no learner is left behind. This increases the potential for social enterprises to build inclusive, representative workforces.

Vocational training systems are essential in aligning with sustainability goals, supporting skills development that promotes social justice, poverty reduction, and green economy initiatives. This approach highlights the importance of VET in preparing workers for roles in sectors like nearly zero-energy building (NZEB), which aligns with environmental goals (Clarke et al., 2020).

Recommendations

Digital transformation in VET is instrumental in shaping future workforces for the evolving needs of social enterprises in Europe.
The digital transformation of VET is not merely a technological upgrade - it is an educational evolution that is essential for the sustainability and growth of social enterprises in Europe. By enhancing digital readiness among VET educators, we can ensure that social enterprises are equipped to tackle the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

To further support this transformation, we propose the following recommendations:

Pedagogic Recommendations:
1. *Expand Digital Pedagogy:* Promoting the professional development of VET educators, focusing on digital tools, inclusive teaching practices, and hybrid learning models will empower educators to create engaging, flexible, and inclusive learning environments for social enterprises.
2. *Encourage Innovative Teaching Methods:* Promote the use of digital tools to make learning more interactive and practical, particularly in hybrid and online settings.
3. Foster Collaboration Between VET and Social Enterprises: Build stronger partnerships between VET institutions and social enterprises to co-design curricula that address real-world challenges, ensuring that learners acquire relevant digital competencies.

Policy Recommendations:
1. Increase Access to Digital Learning Resources: Provide learners and educators with access to state-of-the-art digital tools and platforms, ensuring that both urban and rural areas have the necessary infrastructure i.e. reliable internet access, modern digital tools, and secure learning management systems to support online and hybrid education.
2. Support Public-Private Partnerships: Encourage partnerships between VET institutions, social enterprises, and private companies to develop digital skills training that is responsive to the needs of the labour market.

By adopting these recommendations, European education systems can create a resilient, innovative, and inclusive VET framework that supports the long-term success of social enterprises in a digital economy.

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