

Focus on feasibility or on ideals?

The development of needs-based
policy recommendations for LGBTIQ+
inclusion by the UNIQUE project

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1. Executive summary

The UNIQUE project aimed to promote the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ learners in Vocational Education and Training (VET). VET teachers were trained as ambassadors for this cause and piloted training and implementation of activities in their institutions and countries. An international advocacy group developed a set of recommendations to help guide future projects and policies.

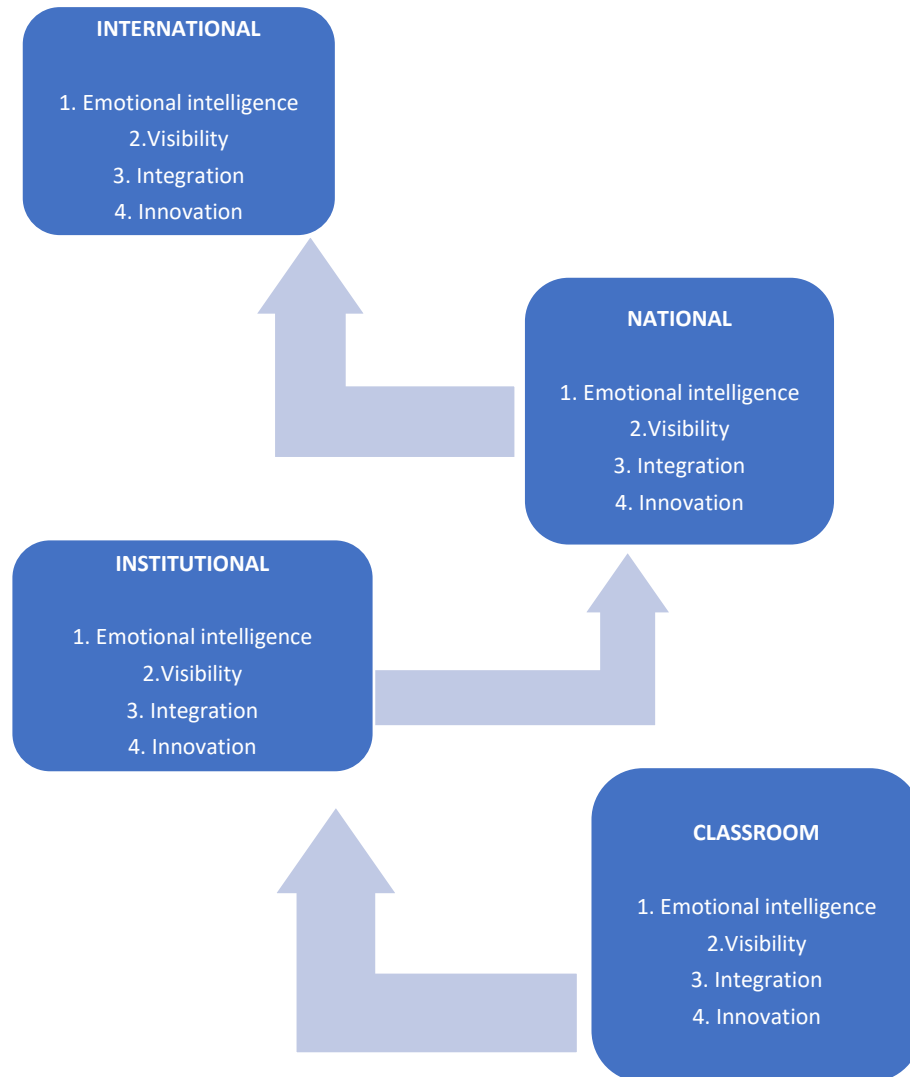
During the project we encountered a number of serious challenges and obstacles. The pilot countries are not among the most supportive countries in Europe for sexual and gender diversity¹, and the social and cultural context of a work was often hostile or indifferent. After careful consideration, the UNIQUE partnership identified four areas of contention. Rather than formulating a long series of concrete recommendations, we have chosen to discuss these four areas, which represent dilemmas that innovators will encounter when they engage in LGBTIQ+ inclusion in schools in general and specifically in vocational education.

The four areas are:

1. Emotional intelligence
Rather than *informing* and *telling* students, teachers and other stakeholders on what to think and do, effective attitude change needs to be reached by developing emotional intelligence.
2. Visibility
Visible representation of sexual and gender diversity is one of the key demands when it comes to creating inclusive environments, but *feasible* implementation in VET requires a careful consideration of the type and degree of visibility that is workable and effective in each stage of implementation.
3. Integration
Full inclusion of sexual and gender diversity in VET institutions requires *going beyond specific attention* and needs mainstreaming as a common subject among other topics.
4. Innovation strategy
The knowledge among mainstream partners and LGBTIQ+ activists about adoption of innovation processes is limited. Making stakeholders aware of how gradual innovation works *as a process*, helps them to see and plan more realistically.

¹ We use the term “sexual and gender diversity” to refer to the entire spectrum of diversities related to sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual and others), gender identity (transgender, non-binary and others) and sexual characteristics (intersex conditions).

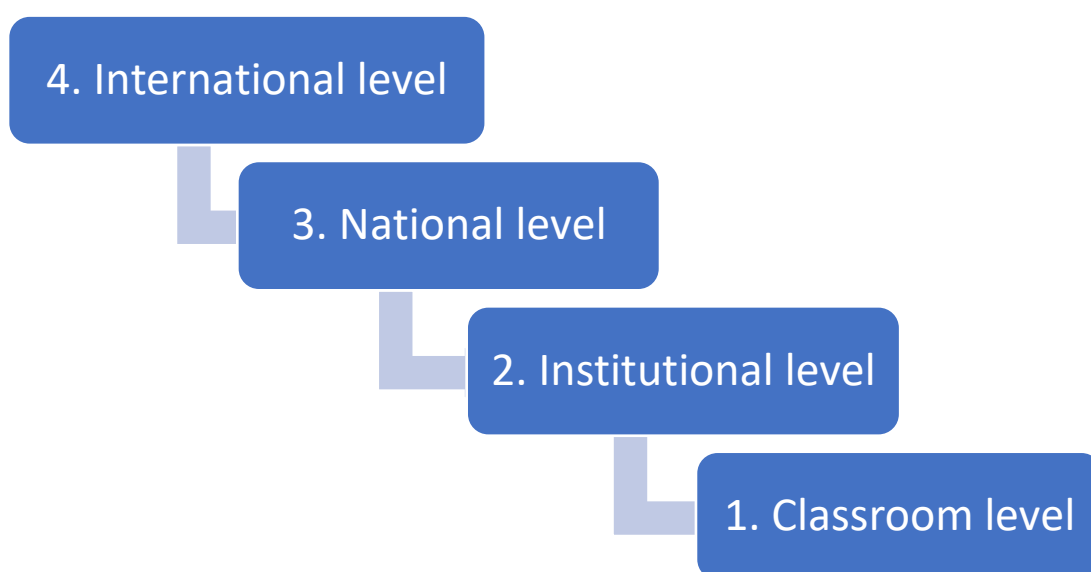
Overview of the final recommendations:



2. Introduction

The UNIQUE project aimed to promote the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ learners in VET. This has been done by inviting international experts on LGBTIQ+ issues and convene them in an international Advocacy Working Group. The experts were trained during an international training in Amsterdam, they co-developed an international MOOC resource to train VET teachers and recruited and trained VET teachers to become UNIQUE ambassadors for this cause. During the pilot phase, the ambassadors experienced in practice how to further the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ learners in VET. This document is partly a report on their experiences.

The intention of the document is to make recommendations for future work on this topic. We aimed to classify the recommendations on both the concrete level of teaching in VET, as well as on the necessary supporting condition that are necessary on the team, school, national and European level.



To support UNIQUE ambassadors in formulating concrete recommendations during the pilots in their institutions, we developed a “track sheet” to note good practices and suggestions.

Because most VET teachers don’t have enough information to develop original recommendations on the national and European levels, we based draft recommendations on these levels on a literature study of relevant research and previous recommendations. Then we put these suggestions forward to VET teachers. In this way, we established a logical cascade of recommendations, in which recommendations for concrete activities in classes directly link to higher level recommendations.

Because we expected most ambassadors and members of the advocacy group don’t have much time, we constructed an online survey which allowed them to comment on the draft recommendations and make other recommendations.

In the past, a multitude of recommendations have been made to improve the situation of LGBTIQ+ students and to make schools safer for them. Likewise, the UNIQUE project participants came up with a range of suggestions for recommendations. Rather than to simply list all these recommendations in a complete compendium, we decided to make a summary to improve readability and usability. In this document, we limited the number of recommendations and focus on a logical framework that is less general and more focussed

than previous recommendation documents. Still, we find it worthwhile to mention all the suggestions made, so they are integrated in chapter 3. The final recommendations are published as a separate report (Activity 3.4).

3. Activities of the Working Group

The UNIQUE project set up an “Advocacy Working Group” of experts to develop a set of policy recommendations for the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ issues in VET. The members of the working group were the participants in the Train the trainer training in Amsterdam, which was held in May 2022. These trainers and experts were tasked with training VET teachers in their countries, who in turn would stimulate other teachers to become “UNIQUE ambassadors” and they would train and coach them. It was hoped the training and coaching experiences would provide input to make the policy recommendations practically feasible and implementable in the participating countries and beyond.

The Advocacy Working Group members have:

- participated in the Train-the-Trainers’ Activity in Amsterdam (May 2022)
- recruited ambassadors (together with the project staff)
- guided the ambassadors to the online training
- trained the ambassadors in real life
- helped to organize and speak at the round tables and national events
- offered input for and reviewed the advocacy recommendations
- undertook one or two external advocacy activities focused at the regional and national level
- some of them participated and spoke at national events, like the international Demonstration Workshop and conference in Brussels
- some of them were interviewed by the external evaluator for the impact evaluation

Experiences and suggestions for the classroom level

During the development of the online course, the partners authoring the course came up with a broad range of possible interventions that could be implemented in the classroom.

Concrete suggestions

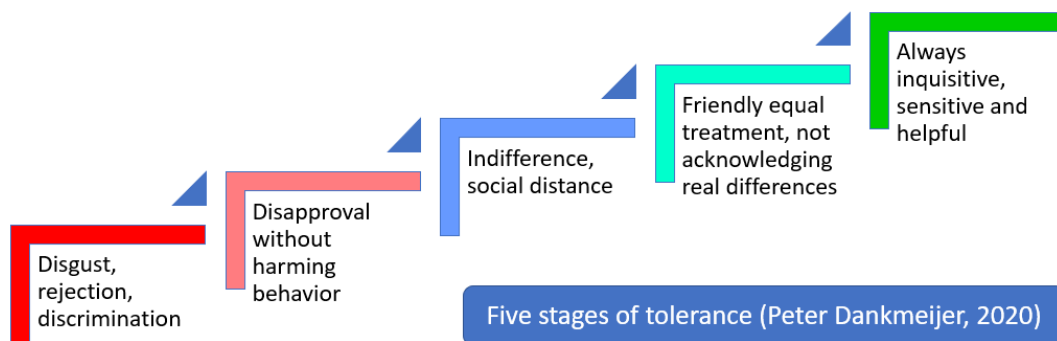
Such practical suggestions include:

- Create a safe classroom environment in which it is possible to discuss inclusion and to show emotions related to exclusion
- Cooperate with students to set concrete classroom rules to ensure safety
- Understand bullying mechanisms in class and act up to break up classroom clique formation in which (LGBTIQ+ and other) students are marginalized or harassed
- Notice which students may need support because they may be LGBTIQ+
- Show in explicit or less explicit ways you are open for diversity including LGBTIQ+ diversity, and willing to help if needed (be a role model)
- If possible, make clear your classroom or office is a “LGBTIQ+ safe zone”
- Be sensitive to gender stereotypes and use gender-neutral language to avoid stereotyping

- Discuss with the students ways to be respectful for transgender and non-binary students, including sensitive use of pronouns
- Develop lessons that fit the level of tolerance and acceptance of your students
- Provide basic information on sexual and gender diversity and dispel myths and stereotypes
- Make sure students understand that respect for classmates and client-friendliness to all clients and customers (including LGBTIQ+ clients) is both a social and a professional requirement

Levels of engagement

When we developed the course design, we recognized that we needed to distinguish between different levels. In the first place, we recognized that not only students, but also teachers and VET administrators would have different attitudes towards sexual and gender diversity. GALE presented an outline with five levels of tolerance that would influence the reception and adoption of the course. In addition, we used the EQF categorization in 8 levels of expertise to design the course.



Eventually, this crystallized into a thematic design which focussed on LGBTIQ+ related topics, which each topic being divided into 3 levels: aspirant, novice and senior (we combined some of the planned “expert” level items with the lessons on senior level). The aspirant level is a pre-EQF level and focuses on the willingness of participants to engage with the topic of sexual and gender diversity. If they feel severe objections, this cannot be overcome by giving information; the first step of the course is to give them space to get acquainted with the subject and to encourage them to engage with the subject.

Focus on information or attitudes

In the partnership there were different convictions about whether giving information on this “novice” level would be beneficial. Some partners believed that misconceptions are a main reason for objections and negative attitudes toward sexual and gender diversity, and offering basic information and correcting misconceptions would overcome this challenge. GALE promoted the perspective that objections and negative attitudes are emotionally based, and that it is likely that teachers (and others) with such emotions may be unwilling to accept any information when they are not open to it. A solution for this challenge would be to focus the “novice” lessons on careful exploration of own feelings and putting LGBTIQ+ issues in the broader context of emotional intelligence and more general inclusion to make participants more willing to engage with the topic on higher levels of acceptance and action.

These different views on how education on LGBTIQ+ issues would be effective are also mirrored in the VET institutions themselves. Education in general, but also specifically VET, is traditionally focussed on transferring knowledge and teaching concrete “hard” skills. Emotional “soft” skills are often not included in the curriculum, nor have teachers been trained on how to implement emotional intelligence. If this happens, it usually depends on the individual interest and quality of single teachers. But many teachers in VET would consider attention to emotions in their lessons as a risk or even as a sign of professional incompetence.

Cultural change and skills

During the pilots, we encountered regularly that teachers felt challenged to implement the suggestions given in the course.

- Some teachers felt that the UNIQUE project went too far, suggesting that a classroom culture change was necessary to provide adequate safety for LGBTIQ+ students
- Other teacher felt that classroom culture change was necessary indeed, not only to secure safety for LGBTIQ+ students but also for all students and in connection with their personal and professional development
- An important consideration was if the teacher felt confident enough to deal with objections raised by students; learning how to do this in theory in the course is a different thing than doing it in reality
- Many teachers expressed the fear that parents would come to school to object to the UNIQUE project; however, this did not happen (during the project lifetime)

Ongoing support for teachers to implement LGBTIQ+ supportive interventions in class may be needed.

Experiences and suggestions for the institutional level

Throughout the project and the pilots, we continued to have discussions on the tensions between the preference to focus on “knowledge” or on “attitudes”, which also played out beyond the classroom. If teachers were willing to focus on attitudes, we had to provide significant support on how they could do this. If teachers were *unwilling* to engage with the topic at all (which we encountered numerous times), we had to find careful and sensitive ways to engage then on a level that was tailored to their level of tolerance. We cannot say that we feel very confident we could adequately deal with intolerance on the levels of disgust or disapproval. It may be wise to develop new projects to learn how to engage with such “traditional homophobic and transphobic” participants.

Start with innovators and early adopters

Still, we think that the UNIQUE strategy to focus on the *innovators* and *early adopters* (Rogers, 1962) was a good choice. Other ‘groups’ that have been identified as team stakeholders in organizational innovation, like the *early majority* and the *late majority* can be involved in later stages of innovation, a phase that does not fit within the two-year lifetime of Erasmus+ projects. The most conservative team members (*laggards*) may not be willing to change at all – which means it is tactical to avoid them during the innovation processes.

Organizational change starts with the engagement of the willing. This project has been successful in engaging both innovators and early adopters. An example of an innovator is Theodor Grassos (director AKMI, secretary EVBB). As the director of AKMI, he agreed with the submission of the UNIQUE proposal and he promoted the objectives strongly throughout the project in AKMI. As secretary of EVBB, he started to develop plans to disseminate attention for LGBTIQ+ inclusion in VET in its network of associated VET partners. Examples of early adopters are the project partner staff and VET teachers who developed, facilitated and took the course and started to work on implementation in their institutions. During these efforts, they were confronted with many forms of resistance. In many cases, the level of resistance was so offensive that it was emotionally taxing for the involved staff. However, we have the impression that – despite some temporary drawbacks – such experiences also strengthened the resolve of the involved staff and teachers to address LGBTIQ+ inequalities. The more offensive objections were, the more it became clear how important and urgent it is to end this injustice.

The challenge of ‘limiting convictions’

The UNIQUE course contained some lessons on how to map institutional risks and on how to handle them, as well as specific lessons on how to disentangle realistic objections and “limiting convictions²” (attitudinal moral resistance) and how to diplomatically deal with them. However, here again, theory is easier than practice. And VET team leaders and managers often did not take the course. A suggestion may be to develop specific quick reference material to inform or train in school managers. Another recommendation would be to ask *innovators* (teachers or students who are the first to raise the need for LGBTIQ+ inclusion) to involve managers to become *early adopters* and to help them by jointly running through some likely real-life scenario’s which can prepare them for potential risks. This could help to not act on a *fight-or-flight instinct* when biased stakeholders launch unreasonable objections and complaints, but develop a prepared and rational response.

Experiences and suggestions for the regional and national level

The UNIQUE project took place in national contexts that were not always supportive and, in some cases, outright hostile.

Bulgarian developments

The political climate in Bulgaria has become increasingly hostile towards LGBTQI people since 2018. In June 2018, the Constitutional Court ruled that the Istanbul Convention was based on ‘gender ideology’ and therefore incompatible with the Constitution. Despite repeated calls by the Council of Europe and the European Parliament to ratify the treaty, political leaders have repeatedly vowed not to. The anti-gender discourse has become ever stronger and is commonly used by political leaders. Hate crimes continue to be common and are in some cases committed against young people. In 2020, local NGOs Bilitis and Single Step published the survey ‘Attitudes towards LGBTI students in Bulgarian high schools’, finding that a staggering 71% of LGBTQI student respondents had been verbally harassed,

² We label such resistance ‘limiting convictions’ to stress that they can be changed by the people who hold them, and to avoid the stigma that comes with the labels ‘resistance’ or ‘prejudice’; which make it difficult to connect to people.

34% physically harassed, and 19% physically assaulted. More than half of the respondents heard anti-LGBTQI remarks from teachers (IGLYO, 2022).

During the 2020–2021 Bulgarian protests against corruption and growing totalitarianism by one party, there was a rise in anti-LGBTIQ+ rhetoric and discrimination, as right-wing and far-right groups and organizations attempted to put the topic of gender (through the anti-LGBT trope of gender ideology) at the forefront over the COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria and the protests themselves. *Gender* became a slur for non-binary people or any person perceived to be LGBTIQ+ (IGLYO, 2022).

Nonetheless, acceptance of LGBTIQ+ people among the more educated, middle-class Bulgarians has increased, as the efforts of LGBT-rights organizations were paying off, such as the biggest LGBTIQ+ pride in the country's history, the first LGBTIQ+ exhibition (the Balkan Pride) outside Sofia, and the recognition of a same-sex marriage between an Australian and French citizen in a Bulgarian court (ILGA-Europe, 2023).

Such changes are forced through the courts, but not very strongly. In 2022, the Sofia court fined the neo-fascist party leader Boyan Rasate for attacking the office of the Rainbow Hub, destroying office equipment and furniture and slapping a staff member in the face. But the fine was low and he was not condemned for hate speech, which is not yet part of the Bulgarian legislation. Hate speech legislation is being made but sexual orientation, gender identity or sexual characteristics are not mentioned as legitimate grounds. Instead, the Prime Minister Kiril Petkov is publicly making hateful comments on social media himself (ILGA-Europe, 2023).

The workshops of the UNIQUE project for VET staff were an addition to other workshops for teachers by Bilitis, for company staff by the Work It Out network of the Glas Foundation and for police officers by Deystvie. This proved that such workshops are possible, but that at this time, such trainings are dependent on NGOs and activists and willing individual participants (ILGA-Europe, 2023).

Croatian developments

The general population in Croatia is not very positive about LGBTIQ+ issues. A recent example of this was the announcement (June 2022) of two public figures, an actor and a psychiatrist that they would organise a 'straight pride march' and spoke harshly about LGBTIQ+ people, particularly trans people. The organisers demanded that children be protected from so-called 'gender ideology' and that gender-affirming healthcare only be available for those aged 21 and up. The event was eventually cancelled (ILGA-Europe, 2023).

The study 'Experiences and needs of young LGBTIQ persons' found that over half of the respondents heard negative comments in high school classes at least once; 20% were verbally abused by teachers or staff; 77% did not know where they could report violence. The majority said that a curriculum, including sex education, that covers LGBTIQ topics, would be the best support. This was the first study in Croatia that focuses on young LGBTIQ people. Another study found that over half of high school graduates thought 'homosexuality' was an illness, which some described as the failure of the education system (IGLYO, 2022).

The Anti-Discrimination Act (2008) promotes equality and provides protection against discrimination, including on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. It covers

education and develops special legal actions for protection against discrimination with a central body, the Ombudsman's Office, to tackle it. Croatia has passed a Protocol on the procedure in case of abuse and neglect of child (2014) which provides that the treatment of children, as well as the exercise of their rights, shall be ensured without discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other status (IGLYO, 2022).

In addition, the Government of Croatia adopted in February 2020 an Action Plan for Violence Prevention in Schools 2020-2024. This action plan is geared towards changing the perception of schools as key protective environments, especially regarding the prevention of bias-motivated violence amongst youth based on sexual orientation as well as gender identity. However, it is unclear to what extent this plan is actively being implemented and to what extent it faces opposition in schools. The Action Plan for Violence Prevention in Schools highlights the necessity to conduct teacher education programs on the topic of bias-motivated violence based SOGIGE and offers preventive programs in schools in relation to the latter (IGLYO, 2022).

The National Curriculum Framework establishes that sexual orientation and gender identity should be discussed as part of secondary education. The country has a national education curriculum, however, it does not include compulsory sex and relationships education. Some elements of reproductive health are included in the cross-curricular topic of 'Health'. In practice, this means that sexuality is mainly approached through a medical and moral lens. Sex education is partially outsourced to religious education classes where sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, as well as sex characteristics, are likely to be portrayed in a negative manner. (IGLYO, 2022). In June 2022, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended Croatia introduce a more comprehensive sex education (IGLYO, 2022).

In 2018, the Minister of Education established guidelines which requires educational institutions to reissue certificates and diplomas after students change their name or legal gender. Currently there are no national or regional guidelines allowing students to use their preferred names in schools or universities before obtaining legal gender recognition (IGLYO, 2022).

Schools provide direct support and relief services for victims of bullying. The service providers are usually psychologists and pedagogues specifically trained in general violence prevention in schools, including bullying. However, they often lack knowledge regarding prevention of bullying based on SOGIGESC, as well as general information regarding the LGBTIQ community (IGLYO, 2022).

Croatia is also a country where change is in part driven by legal action, despite the unwillingness of the government to support LGBTIQ+ citizens. In 2022, the Supreme Court in Croatia ruled against an ultra-conservative NGO "Vigilare" anti-LGBT petition, sustaining the appeal made by Rainbow Families Croatia against a lower court ruling, and found that "Vigilare" had "incited discrimination and harassment of LGBTIQ persons and their families". In May 2022, the High Administrative Court issued a landmark ruling establishing that same-sex couples have the right to adopt children. The ruling ended the six-year legal battle of a gay couple. The Court upheld the 2021 ruling of the Zagreb Administrative Court and struck down the appeal filed by the Ministry of Labour, Family, and Social Policy. The High Court dismissed the Ministry's argument that allowing same-sex couples to adopt would in any way violate the best interest of the child (ILGA, 2023).

These slow and mainly legal developments do not easily sink in on the level of attitudes or students or teachers. For example, during the UNIQUE contest for students, the Algebra staff had to be very careful in what type of visibility could be given to the competition. This happened in a very subtle way, by focusing in general inclusion while adding a small rainbow armband to one of the young people in a campaign photo with a circle of young people. The students did participate in the contest but all the submissions remained very implicit about LGBTIQ+ inclusion.

Training of the VET teachers (UNIQUE project ambassadors) in Croatia was held during May 2023 in the online environment because it enabled Croatian VET project partner responsible for organizing the training (Algebra University College) to provide training also for the teachers who live in different parts of the country and work in different VET institutions. The goal of spreading the word about the project more broadly and training ambassadors from different parts of the country (both urban and rural, open-minded and more conservative) was achieved this way.

In general, the agenda of the training encompassed some presentational parts during which main project ideas were highlighted and selected units from MOOC platform were presented. Additionally, agenda also predicted many discussion moments. The training facilitator noticed that training participants were more likely to engage in the discussion in the central and the final part of the training. In the beginning of the training, they obviously found it harder to open, discuss and share their experiences, but after sharing some practical concepts about dealing with discrimination in the classrooms, teachers felt empowered to share their previous experiences and concerns.

After the training implementation, VET teachers who participated on the training evaluated the training by filling in the online questionnaire. The majority of the training participants pointed out that their personal goals were to acquire knowledge about LGBTIQ+ topics, share experiences with colleagues and become more aware of LGBTIQ+ topics in order to deal with discrimination in their classrooms more successfully in the future. Majority of the training participants (63,2 %) highlighted that their goals were accomplished. Even though training participants pointed out that they have learned a lot about this new topic during the training, some of them expressed doubt about implementing new practices in their classrooms even though they acquired new skills – these teachers are very interested for some kind of individual mentorship in the future.

Cypriot developments

Although the context for LGBTIQ+ students in the Cypriot capital Nicosia is relatively better than in the countryside, the general population remains quite conservative. This includes students and teachers.

There continues to be no anti-discrimination law applicable to education that would protect against discrimination on grounds of SOGIESC. However, in 2016, the Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus published a Code of Conduct against Racism and Guide for Managing and Recording Racist Incidents, which is addressed to school authorities, teachers, pupils and their families. The Code notes that zero tolerance should be shown regarding incidents of racism or any form of discrimination due to nationality, appearance, community, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability. In addition, the National Strategy for the

Prevention and Management of Violence in Schools (2018-2022) has continued to be in force. The National Strategy has inter alia introduced legal and administrative measures to prevent and manage violence in schools, to ensure better access to rehabilitation and support services to promote the respect of diversity, equality and non-discrimination (IGLYO, 2022).

Still, SOGIESC issues are not part of curricula. On the contrary, some school books include anti-LGBTIQ+ content, as noted by the Cypriot Ombudsperson in 2020. Sex education, nor civic education do include information on SOGIESC issues. Only 'Home Economics' has included these topics to some extent. Teacher training on how to address them is not mandatory. In the past years, training to a few hundred teachers has been conducted. These training were developed by the European HOMBAT project and then taken over by the Teacher Training Department of the Ministry of Education. ACCEPT Cyprus (LGBTIQ+ NGO) also offers workshops for teachers. The Ministry of Education published a Teachers' Guide to Responding to Homophobia and Transphobia in 2019 (IGLYO, 2022). But the trainings are not compulsory and were, up to the UNIQUE project, not given in vocational training.

Cyprus collects data on violence in school, but does not disaggregate that data on the basis of SOGIESC. The Observatory on Violence in School, in charge of data collection promotes cooperation with teachers, NGOs, and other stakeholders. In 2018, ACCEPT Cyprus launched a website where anti-LGBT assaults can be reported (IGLYO, 2022)

Like in Croatia, the inclusion art contest for students remained quite implicit about LGBTIQ+ issues, with a few exceptions. One student depicted a kissing couple and a teacher dressed in semi-drag during the award ceremony, which was held during a Christmas reception of the school. However, no LGBTIQ+ students sent in submissions. Later, KES College staff heard that LGBTIQ+ students shied away from the contest and felt vilified by the actions of the heterosexual allies at the award ceremony. This shows how sensitive the topic is.

In 2021, the project received a complaint by an ex-high school student, who was disturbed that an employee of the Cypriot Ministry of Education shared an anti-LGBT meme on his personal Facebook page. The meme depicted threatening 'rainbow' claws reaching out to grab some innocent children. The project looked into this and into what could be done. It turned out the meme was shared from a Latin American website, which republished it from an American neo-Nazi 'artist'. When the poster of the meme was alerted by the complainant about the discriminatory content of the meme, the complainant was blocked. Because the meme was posted to 'friends' and not to the public, the project had only a screen print as evidence. The Cypriot LGBT Association ACCEPT could not give priority to follow this at the time, so we had to drop the case. However, it was worrying that such extreme homophobia, and the myth that gay people are child abusers are alive and thriving even among some government employees.

In 2023, the online curriculum was tested and face-to-face workshops were given to KES College teachers. A wide range of teachers were invited, again with the PR being more about inclusion than explicitly on the LGBTIQ+ topic. However, for some teachers this did not fall well. Some teachers did not want to be associated with the LGBTIQ+ topic at all. Some decided not to sign the attendance list and to walk out. Others stayed, but made in abundantly and offensively clear that "this topic does not belong in schools".

It should be noted that the workshop took place at the same time as a discussion on a government proposal to criminalize ‘conversion therapy’ (psychological treatments that attempt to change a person’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity and which have been proven to be ineffective and harmful). The Greek Orthodox Church (which is one of the parties offering such ‘therapy’) protested against proposal in the most crude way by repeating a number of lies and prejudiced myths about LGBT people. The far-right party Elam took over the Church rhetoric to oppose the proposal in parliament. The party equated the law with criminalizing prayer and regular religious practices. On 25 May 2023, the law was passed with the Elam amendments rejected. Still, the Church will be allowed to continue some of these practices under the guise of ‘hearing confession’. Two days after the adoption of the law, there was a Pride demonstration, with some opponents on social media repeating the offensive comments of church leader that LGBTIQ+ people are ‘perverse’ and some even jokingly supporting ‘Vladi’ (Putin) ‘to put on the gas’ (comment on a message by [Dialogos on Facebook](#), 27 May 2023). The religious and the right-wing resistance show how tenuous the social support is.

After the events, one of the project staff members commented that although the UNIQUE project is very laudable, Cyprus could also benefit from a much more basic tolerance campaign targeting the *late majority* section of the population, which is quite conservative and where outdated myths are still alive, while being fed by the Church and far-right political parties.

Greek developments

In Greece, support for LGBTIQ+ issues is gradually growing, but amidst other developments that hinder progress. Young people are more in favour of LGBTIQ+ rights. Anti-discrimination legislation on the grounds of SOGIESC does not extend to the area of education, only employment and access to goods and services. However, shortly after the start of the UNIQUE project (17 March 2021), the Greek government formed a commission to prepare a ‘National Strategy for Equality of LGBTIQ+ people’ (2021-2023), including MPs, academics, and civil society representatives. On 29 June 2021 the commission published the strategy which includes a chapter on addressing exclusion from education. The commission expressly identified a number of issues hindering the access of LGBTIQ+ people to education and recommended several measures including inclusive curricula, strong support systems, and specific guidelines for LGBTIQ+ learners and teachers. Regrettably, there has not been significant progress in implementing these recommendations in the context of education (IGLYO, 2022).

Attitudes in more rural areas remain conservative. A few years ago, the Cretan Department of Education took part in a European project on prosociality, but refused to publish the manual’s chapter on diversity because it contained attention to LGBTIQ+ issues.

The murderers of the LGBTIQ+ activist Zacharias Kostopoulos (2018) were finally convicted in 2022, but the police officers who did nothing to protect the activist from the attacking mob were acquitted. Such issues remain controversial for the LGBTIQ+ community, but also in the UNIQUE project. When the project partnership discussed which ‘role models’ would be useful to mention in the UNIQUE course, it was proposed to choose American and English historic and current famous LGBTIQ+ people. When it was suggested to choose more local (Greek) heroes like Zacharias Kostopoulos, Alexander the Great or Sappho, this was rejected

because such role models might turn out to be too sensitive for otherwise more or less supportive stakeholders on high levels in Greece.

During the first pride march in Rhodes in 2022, young people wearing neo-Nazi symbols were reported to threaten, spit on and throw eggs at the participants while the police stood by (ILGA-Europe, 2022)

Previous efforts to tackle bullying, including training, awareness raising, and prevention, were not inclusive of SOGIESC grounds. In 2018, the government planned a permanent antibullying structure. Maybe as a consequence of this, there was a 2021 ministerial decision that starting in the 2021/2022 academic year, all primary and secondary schools should have adopted a policy to prevent violence and bullying in school. However, the decision does not mention any specific protected grounds and it is not clear to what extent school actually do this. In any way, VET was not included in this requirement (IGLYO, 2022).

The national curriculum does not include references to SOGIESC issues, nor is there any mandatory or inclusive sex education or human rights education. It is up to the willingness of each school to remedy this. Some have included LGBTIQ+ topics in their classes, but others have only made hostile references. In 2020, local NGO Colour Youth published the results of GLSEN's School Climate Survey, which found that 65% of LGBTIQ+ students had not heard anything positive about LGBTIQ+ people in class, and 54% heard negative things. 60% shared that none of their school books contained information about LGBTIQ+ people (IGLYO, 2022).

The ambiguous attitude of the Greek government on LGBTIQ+ issues showed again in 2020, when the Ministry of Education cancelled the thematic week on 'Gender, bodies, and sexual orientation', following a suggestion of the Institute of Educational Policy. The Ministry failed to provide justification. It seems that the thematic weeks may be replaced by a series of 'Skills Laboratories'. One of these 'Skills Laboratories' titled 'Live better' would include sex education as a topic, but this 'Laboratory' is just one of the many that schools may or may not choose to host (IGLYO, 2022). Furthermore, the teachers who are responsible for implementing the laboratories receive no specialised training/support from the Ministry or at a local level, and often feel unprepared to address these topics.

The school environment also leaves much to wish for. The School Climate Survey findings (2020) showed that one-in-three LGBTIQ+ students had been verbally harassed in school, one-in-seven physically harassed or assaulted, and one-in-three sexually harassed (IGLYO, 2022).

Although the law states that a person's gender identity is an element of their personality there are no policies or consistent practices in place allowing trans students to use their correct name and gender in schools.

Data on LGBTIQ+ students' experiences is only collected by civil society organisations.

On the other hand, our coordinating partner AKMI has been very active in the project, which its director Theodor Grassos playing an important role both in proposing the project and in facilitating the implementation of the training and pilots in AKMI itself. This top-level support greatly facilitated the implementation process.

In 2022, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) recommended that Greece would be more active in anti-LGBTIQ+ bullying in schools and to train teachers on this. The UNIQUE project provided a timely response to this, at least in the area of VET.

We believe that most parts of the UNIQUE online course could also be useful for high school teachers.

Polish developments

The Act on Equality (2010) only prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation in the area of employment and vocational training. It appears this clause has been adopted during the accession to the European Union, but the recent governments do not implement this any more and on the contrary are now adopting legislation and making remarks that contravene European human rights standards. Poland has grown increasingly hostile towards LGBTIQ people. Starting from 2018, Polish towns began declaring themselves 'LGBT-free zones' or adopting 'Family Charter' resolutions - the latter also being an implicit attack against LGBTIQ people and organisations. Countless anti-LGBTIQ rallies have taken place since 2018, featuring hateful slogans, signs, and chants (ILGA-Europe, 2023).

In 2021, the European Parliament adopted a resolution declaring the European Union as an 'LGBTIQ Freedom Zone'. Since June 2020, the European Union has stopped funding municipalities that have adopted "LGBT-free" declarations and therefore are in violation of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. In June 2022, a top appeals court in Poland ordered four of the so-called "LGBT-free zones" to be scrapped. Maybe because of this, seven municipalities withdrew these declarations in 2021. Still as of June 2021, 92 towns (a third of Poland) still have one or both declarations in place (IGLYO, 2022, ILGA-Europe, 2023).

Hostilities have been ever present in the area of education as well. In 2018, local LGBTIQ+ organisation KPH's annual school campaign 'Rainbow Friday' received serious backlash and had to be called off. The campaign aimed to ensure the safety and well-being of LGBTIQ+ students, but was attacked by political and religious figures. The education superintendent in Małopolska Voivodeship, Barbara Nowak, ordered school inspections, and teachers reported being threatened if they welcomed LGBTIQ+-related content in their classes. Civil society organisations petitioned for the removal of Nowak from the superintendent position, but were unsuccessful. The Minister of Education also condemned KPH's campaign and called it a violation of Polish law (IGLYO, 2022).

At the very moment this report was written (May 2023), the Polish Law and Justice (PiS) party proposed a bill that would prohibit NGOs from activities that "sexualize children". In primary education, any kind of sexual education that conforms to the international UNESCO quality guidelines for sexual education would become criminal. In VET, such education would become dependent on parental permission. In effect, the adoption of such a law would put our Polish partner in a difficult situation. The specific attention for LGBTIQ+ issues in our course could easily fall within the vague definition of "sexualizing children" due to the quest of PiS to eradicate all information – even neutral – to sexual and gender diversity.

This proposal is not a change in Polish policy. The Polish government has been limiting diversity and sexual education for years. The national "Preparation for Family Life" curriculum currently taught in schools includes misinformation about reproductive health and sexuality and perpetuates myths and discriminatory stereotypes rather than provide evidence-based sex education in line with international and regional standards. Poland's "Preparation for Family Life" course constitutes "abstinence-only" education, meaning its primary or exclusive purpose is preventing premarital sexual intercourse. Previous Ministry

of Education guidance on the curriculum discouraged contraceptive use, misinformed students that masturbation is linked to “addiction to pornography and addiction to sex” and erroneously said that emergency contraception is an “early pregnancy termination drug because conception occurs in the fallopian tube and not in the uterus.” (ILGA-Europe, 2023).

Poland has legal gender recognition procedures in place, but they are conditional upon abusive requirements which violate regional and international human rights standards. These include mandatory psychiatric diagnosis, medical examinations, divorce, and others. LGR is only possible through a court procedure whereby a trans person must sue their own parents stating that they wrongfully indicated their gender at birth. In 2015, ECRI harshly criticised the process and called on Poland again in 2018 to abolish such requirements (IGLYO, 2022).

On the positive side, Anti-discrimination programs took place in 2020 in some school districts in Warsaw, Pozna and Krakow, the latter being expanded to include more schools in the future. Still, a negative political environment like this is bound to have a limiting effect on the sustainability of this project in Poland.

At the same time, the experiences from the Polish UNIQUE teacher trainings were more positive. They attracted an interested audience, who had very little experiences and where therefore interested in a range of subjects. How to create a safe environment and how to use sensitive gender or neutral language were among the most asked for topics. The trainers were asked by some people that couldn't participate within the given period if IBP will repeat the training. On the other hand, they were told by participants that some other people wanted to join but were too scared to “be outed” or feared consequences they may face in their workplace.

Good practices that participants mentioned were:

- Using anti-LGBTIQ+ comments as “teachable moments” – addressing them when they happen and use them to teach group how to handle controversial diversity
- Creating “teachable moments” yourself, for example by initiating a discussion by presenting a rainbow and asking what it can mean, or watching movies that show variety of sexual orientations and gender diversity
- Finding solutions for problems created by school environment, for example to allow a girl in a process of transition to use teachers changing room
- Using visual symbols to show teacher support – like rainbow pins and stickers.

Experiences and suggestions for the European level

For the preparation of the UNIQUE final conference, the partnership discussed the European context and how the conference and the recommendations could play a role on this level.

It is clear that the European Union can have a positive influence. The human rights standards are clear and just have to be implemented with sensitive but straightforward inclusion regarding LGBTIQ+ issues. The interventions of the European parliament – mostly on formal exclusion of LGBTIQ+ in general, like on ‘LGBT Free Zones’ – are examples, as well as the withholding of funding for municipalities that are clearly ignoring the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Direct intervention in the area of education is more challenging. We should note that the European Community does not have a formal competence in the area of education. Based on the *subsidiarity principle*, education policy is delegated to the member states. The key competence of the European Union is in the area of employment and the economy. The strategy of equality is primarily based on this, in addition to the more general strategy on human rights. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the European Union is not doing anything in the area of education. The equality strategy and the more specific LGBTI equality strategy embrace all social domains including education. These strategies focus on promotion of equality and their influence is limited to awareness and financial support. As long as the European Union does not adopt a horizontal directive which raises education to the same level of protection as employment, advocacy on the European level for structural change will bounce back on the subsidiarity principle.

Abusive curricula can be challenged by taking a State to the European Court, as the European Social Charter case “Interights versus Croatia” has shown ([European Social Charter: Interights vs Croatia 2007, nr. 45:2007](#)). But such strategies take a lot of time, and do not secure that a government will follow up a judgement with a more adequate curriculum.

Therefore, any (current) substantial change on the EU level can best to be tailored not to the political level but to the administrative level. This could be related to the adoption of guidelines on monitoring, research, training, good practices and inclusion of those in the policies of European supportive institutions. For example, CEDEFOP, EVBB and EfVET could include attention for sexual and gender diversity in their newsletters, projects and policies, umbrella LGBTIQ+ organizations like ILGA Europe and IGLYO would have more attention for VET, and other related mainstream umbrella organizations like OBESSU and ETUCE could have more targeted attention for both sexual and gender diversity and VET.

The prime focus of the UNIQUE project was inclusion of LGBTIQ+ learners in VET institutions. “Inclusion” *in general* is not a controversial issue. The specific LGBTIQ+ aspect is not that controversial any more on the EU level. Almost all (progressive) European partners would agree with this and with the LGBTIQ+ equality strategy it is established policy. This means that on the EU level it should not be challenging to focus our recommendations specifically on the principle of inclusion of *LGBTIQ+ learners*. However, a next challenge starts with implementation of this policy *in the VET sector*. For European representatives of VET, sexual and gender diversity still seems to be somewhat of a blind spot or not yet a priority. On the other hand, for LGBTIQ+ organizations, VET seems to be a somewhat of a blind spot.

The SENSE project – which was also about LGBTIQ+ issues in VET – developed competence frameworks for VET students and teachers. The original idea of this project was to discuss on national and international levels if people agreed with such competences and what the possibilities were to structurally update the formal competence standards with LGBTIQ+ inclusion. However, at the time, experts on the European level were not ready yet to discuss specific mentions of sexual and gender diversity in European competence standards. Anyway, during the dissemination and the final conference debate of the SENSE project, it became clear that competence standards for VET are widely different in Europe and that the debate on them on the European level is mostly restricted to a few experts, while politicians and LGBTIQ+ international representatives have little awareness about VET or how they can improve this sector.

More or less by accident, the SENSE project came across an announcement about the CEDEFOP policy on early school leaving. The project jumped on this opportunity to ask CEDEFOP to include attention to LGBTIQ+ learners in this policy. This was partly successful, because the coordinator of this strategy changed her mind from “there is no proof of early school leaving of LGBTIQ+ learners” to “if research in secondary education shows that LGBTIQ+ learners have a higher dropout rate, then it is likely that this can also be the case in vocational training” and she allowed an article on this to be published in a CEDEFOP newsletter.

The UNIQUE project built on this contact and willingness and was invited to submit the UNIQUE project as a good practice in the CEDEFOP toolkit on early school leaving.

If we want to change something in the minds and communication of the international LGBTIQ+ organizations, we would need to clearly highlight how vocational training is different from high schools and why and how a strategy to improve inclusion in the sector should work. The key message could be that every LGBTIQ+ client or customer will at several points in their life be confronted with vocational practitioners, which shows the needs for LGBTIQ+ client friendliness and the need to integrate this in vocational training. The next question would then be how to do this. In the UNIQUE project, the debate has been about the tension between integration and visibility, and between learning information and practical skills versus attention for emotions and emotional intelligence. A convincing specific advocacy for LGBTIQ+ inclusion in VET should give a concise advice on which level or type of visibility is required and how to include attention for emotional intelligence in VET – in the face of VET traditions that focus on concrete technical skills. The final question would be how to translate such advice about teaching in VET to feasible institutional changes. The UNIQUE policy recommendations should give an answer on this question.

4. The policy recommendations survey

The training and pilot experiences did not yield the input for policy recommendations like we hoped. This seemed to be for two reasons: (1) the participating VET teachers mostly did not have any practical experiences with LGBTIQ+ issues and most of the course material was completely new to them, and (2) VET teachers already invested a lot of time in taking the course, and they did not have much time to formulate recommendations.

Construction of the survey

To fill this gap in concrete advocacy input, the partnership decided to develop a set of draft recommendations ourselves and to ask different stakeholders for feedback. The formulated draft 17 recommendations were inspired on a recent global expert meeting on LGBTIQ+ safety in schools convened by UNESCO (October 2022). We organised the recommendations in four levels: the classroom level, the institutional level, the national level and the European/international level. The intention was to formulate these *bottom-up* to ensure that higher level recommendations would be in line and supporting the recommendations on the classroom level.

To facilitate feedback on the draft recommendations, we set up a short survey. This survey asked a range of stakeholders for their rating and input on the recommendations. The

questionnaire contained 26 questions, 17 of which were asking the respondents to rate to what extent they agreed with each recommendation. In addition, we added open feedback questions for each recommendation level, where respondents could inform us about their ideas, criticisms and other feedback. We only asked for one independent variable: the role of the respondent (student, teacher, institutional administrator, LGBTIQ+ activist, national politician or government official or international stakeholder). When we analysed the findings, we realised that we should also have asked for the country of the stakeholders. But because we made separate online questionnaires for each country (and some country questionnaires were translated) we could relatively reliably infer which respondents were from which country.

Recruitment of the stakeholders

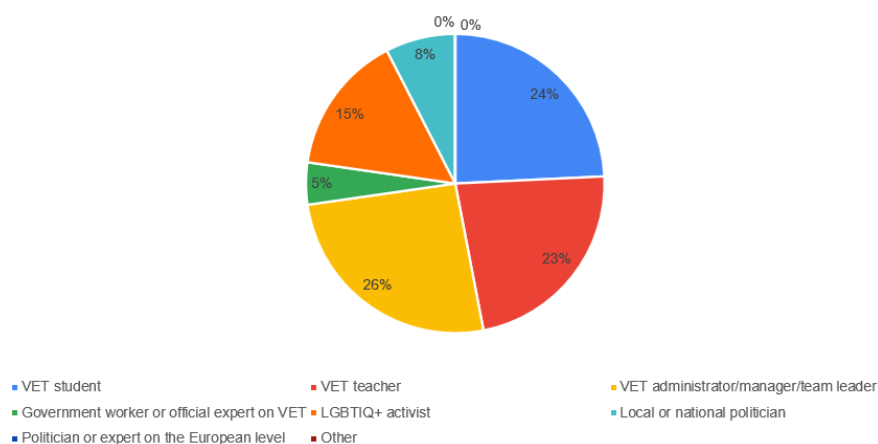
The members of the Advocacy Working Group were asked to recruit at least two national stakeholders from each of their countries (and GALE for some international stakeholders). Preferably, the stakeholders should be government officials or politicians, LGBTIQ+ experts/activists, or leading experts in educational organisations in the field of VET.

It turned out to be very challenging to reach out to national stakeholders. Instead, some working group members decided to reach out to more LGBTIQ+ experts and to involve VET teachers and students as well. They reasoned that the original intention of the Advocacy Working Group was to involve teachers in the development of recommendations. The draft recommendations also included recommendations to involve students in decision-making; so it was no accident that some partners decided that VET students also should be involved in offering feedback on the draft recommendations.

Results: respondents

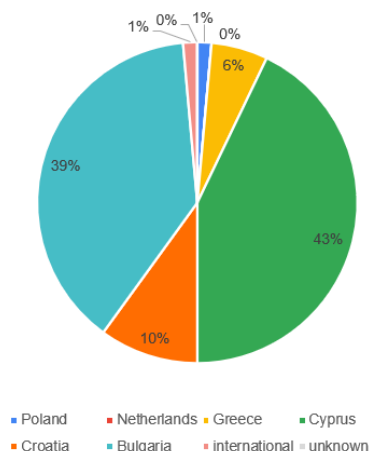
A total of 70 respondents filled in the survey(s). Of this total, 26% were VET administrators, 23% were teachers, 24% were students, 15% were LGBTIQ+ activists, 8% were national or local politicians, 5% were government officials and there was one international transgender activist. Seven respondents did not fill in this question.

Respondents on the draft Policy Recommendations Survey



Most respondents were from Cyprus (43%) and Bulgaria (39%); 10% were from Croatia. From Poland and Greece we had 1 and 4 respondents. There was one international respondent.

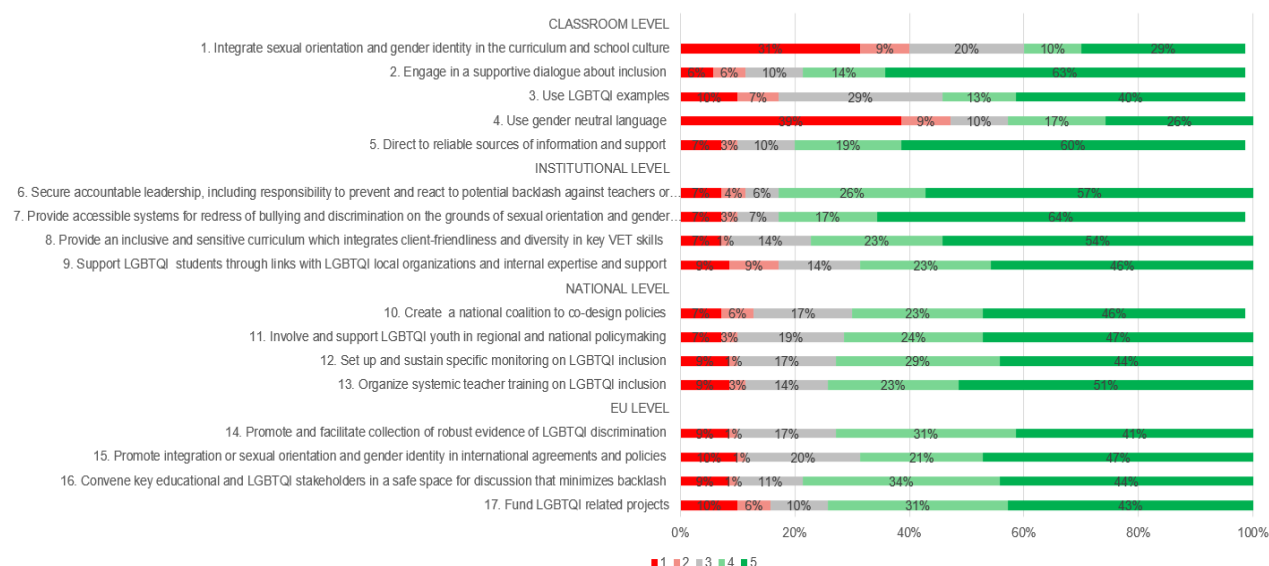
Where respondents come from



Results: overview of the responses on recommendations

We made diagrams of how the stakeholders rated each recommendation. This overview shows that most of the recommendations got reasonable positive ratings which ranged between 60-80% for each recommendation. In the diagram, light green and dark green represent moderate to high agreement, grey represents doubt and orange or red represent moderate to large disagreement.

Feedback on UNIQUE *draft* Policy Recommendations



It is clear that recommendations 1, 3 and 4 create more doubt and resistance among stakeholders.

1. Integrate SOGIESC in the curriculum and culture (40% disagreement, 20% doubt)
2. Use LGBTIQ+ examples (17% disagreement, 29% doubt)
3. Use neutral and supportive language (47% disagreement, 10% doubt)

These are three of the five recommendations on the most basic classroom level. The doubt and disagreement on these is worrying because we believe that effective policy on higher levels needs to build on the fundament of concrete classroom level action. The three more negatively rated recommendations are the ones that point to the need to *real* and *specific change* on the classroom floor, while the other two (engage in a dialogue on inclusion and refer to reliable sources of information) are more traditional educational actives and formulated in such a general way that it is difficult to disagree with them.

The disagreement with these three recommendations connects to the experiences we had in the project. Within the partnership and also in the pilots we regularly encountered fear and apprehension to discuss LGBTIQ+ issues explicitly. It was preferred to talk about “inclusion” in general without labelling this is specific target group. This illustrates the taboo on the topic. This “taboo” is not (just) an irrational fear of UNIQUE partners or of VET teachers; it also represents a fear of rigid opinions of students, of complaining parents, of risks to the ‘neutral’ professional institutional VET image and the risk of populist and conservative political backlash.

The three most disagreed recommendations also represent the need for institutional change, like the first recommendation states specifically. This recommendation has regularly been made in the past by researchers and activists, who note that “heteronormativity” pervades schools; not only through individual attitudes of students and some teachers, but also in curricula and formal school regulations. If such a “heteronormative” school culture does not change, then incidental measures quickly become superficial symbols that do not provide real safety or inclusion. But experiences in training and coaching schools shows that there is a much higher resistance against systemic change of schools than to paying lip-service to inclusion.

An important discussion is then whether policy recommendations should be idealistic (projecting the desired future) or realistic (projecting the next steps in implementation). This was also a discussion in the partnership. We noted a division between partners who approached this question theoretically and chose for an idealistic strategy and partners who had to deal with this question on the work floor and chose for realistic strategies. As a partnership we value both approaches and we have tried to find bridge between them. In this report, we aim to give the idealistic perspective but at the same time to identify the first steps that need to be made to make realistic progress. Considering the objections against some of the most basic classroom strategies, we need to be clear how such objections can be overcome.

Results: differences between stakeholders

In order to be more clear about ideals and feasible next steps, we need to look in to more details of the results. Although the number of respondents does not allow a reliable statistical comparative analysis, we made some more superficial comparisons to get some impressions of differences within our group of respondents. We don’t present statistics here to avoid the impression that our impressions based on a few respondents are reliable trends. Please take these comments as us questioning some impressions.

First, we looked at the classroom level. Here it appears there are differences between the rating of recommendations by teachers and students. Students rate most recommendations

more negative than teachers. Still, on the three key recommendations for the classroom level, the teachers appear to be as negative as we saw before for the entire group of stakeholders. If there is a fear among teachers that students may not accept specific LGBTIQ+ inclusion interventions, this fear may not be unrealistic, but based on real negative convictions among students.

If the teachers – the prime target group of this project – have to deal with limiting convictions from students, will they then have support from their institutional team leaders and managers? We compared the responses from teachers with the responses of VET administrators. Here we see that VET administrators – at least the ones who filled in this survey – seem to be a little bit more progressive than their teachers. This may represent a bias among the respondents (partners may have recruited mostly supportive managers), but we could conclude there are at least *some* VET administrators who are willing to support their staff on this topic. However, here we see again that the three controversial classroom recommendations also get less support by administrators. Is this a trend? Are all stakeholders against a systemic cultural change in school to support LGBTIQ+ inclusion?

We could look into this on the national level by comparing politicians and government officials versus LGBTIQ+ activists. This comparison shows that politicians and government officials seem to be even more against cultural change in schools than other stakeholder groups. And while we would have expected that LGBTIQ+ activists would subscribe to all recommendations (and have a few more), we find that there are even a few LGBTIQ+ activists who doubt or oppose gender neutral language in the classroom. One Croatian activist does not believe national or European monitoring of discrimination in VET is necessary or that Europe needs to take specific action on VET education.

These overviews could of course be biased because of the small numbers of respondents or because opinions differ widely across countries. So we had a specific look at the five pilot countries.

Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, we notice a similar resistance against the policy recommendations as in the general overview, but the rejection of the three controversial classroom recommendations is even higher in Bulgaria. We wondered if the results were unbalanced because of the possibly more extreme feedback of Bulgarian students (negative) and Bulgarian activists (positive), so we compared the general Bulgarian results with the results minus their students and activists. But this did not make much of a difference. It may be Bulgarian stakeholders oppose cultural change in the classroom more than other countries.

Croatia

In Croatia, there were 6 respondents; 4 activists and 2 teachers. Although this is a very small sample and we cannot base conclusions on these opinions, we did make a comparison between the two groups. It became immediately clear activists are more supportive for the recommendations than teachers. Still, the 2 Croatian teachers did not oppose gender neutral language in class. Their resistance is against being explicit about LGBTIQ+ and they are far more negative on most recommendations on the higher levels (national or European) policy. This may point at a fear to be explicit about LGBTIQ+ issues (which was also clear

from comments of respondents in the Croatian pilot) and a resistance against interference of politics in VET practice.

Cyprus

In Cyprus, no LGBTIQ+ activists filled in the survey. So here we compared the results of all respondents in Cyprus with a sample without the students. We then noticed that the general results are comparable with the overall results across countries, and that the opinions of the stakeholders without students are more supportive for most recommendations. So it seems the students had a negative influence on the Cypriot results. Still, here again the three controversial classroom recommendations remain controversial even after removing the students.

Greece and Poland

We could not compare groups of stakeholders in Greece and Poland, which had respectively 4 and 1 respondent. Two of the Greek respondents were activists and two were teachers; one of the teachers rated the recommendations more critically than the others who agreed with all of them.

The Polish respondent was a politician, who was unanimously supportive for all recommendations. While it is good to see a Polish politician being supportive, this is clearly an exception because the Polish parliament has repeatedly voted for rather extreme anti-LGBTIQ+ proposals.

5. Final formulation of the recommendations

This chapter discusses how we formulated the final policy recommendations. The recommendations themselves are published in a separate report.

Previous projects and researches have offered long lists of recommendations, some directly following project or research results, and some in a more generalized way like: “provide teacher training” and “provide LGBTIQ+ inclusive curricula” without going into what such general recommendations actually mean. The UNIQUE project wanted to make a next step in this and provide recommendations that together form a logical framework in which recommendations on different levels interact with each other and strengthen each other. We also were intent on basing our recommendations on the real needs on the classroom level and to make the recommendations feasible in the realities of our participating countries.

Cascade approach

To do this, we linked our recommendations to the “cascade approach” used in the project. Our fundament is to support what happens in the classroom. The next level is the VET institutional level, which needs to support LGBTIQ+ students and teachers to be safe and

comfortable and to adequately integrate LGBTIQ+ sensitivity on the classroom level. The third level is the national (and local) level, which incorporates the political and cultural environment of VET institutions. The top level is the international and European level which may or may not influence the national policies and practices.

To make our framework more coherent, we have chosen to focus on 4 key issues. Each issue is repeated on each level, but filled in with how these key issues could be elaborated into concrete recommendations. The four key issues are (1) emotional intelligence, (2) visibility, (3) integration, and (4) innovation strategy.

Key issue 1: Emotional intelligence

In this project, we took care to link LGBTIQ+ needs like a specific need for tolerance and sensitivity toward sexual and gender identity with more general horizontal skills like emotional intelligence, being able to deal with diversity and client-friendliness. We did this because throughout the project we noticed considerable support for inclusiveness, but a bit more hesitance towards “diversity” and great hesitation to specifically mention sexual or gender diversity. This illustrates an incongruity on how students and teachers deal with inclusion. As the quote from *Animal Farm* (George Orwell) went: “All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others.” Somehow, LGBTIQ+ diversity is less acceptable than general diversity. Our basic goal is to eradicate this incongruity when working on inclusion. This can be done by focussing on the general skill to handle adverse emotions when confronted with diversity that is different from our own expectations. And to label this more specifically: to be able to handle alternative to heteronormativity. This is the most basic red line we intend to capture throughout the 4 levels of our recommendations.

Key issue 2: Visibility

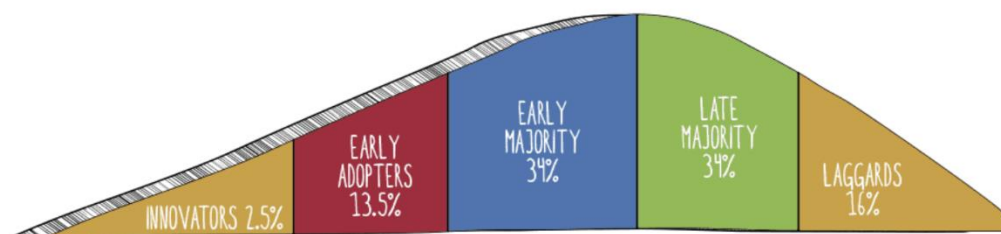
The most controversial point we encountered in the UNIQUE project pilot countries is visibility. Although we agree that some degree of “visibility” is necessary to make “integration” possible, certain levels and types of visibility make cisgender heterosexual students (and also adults and professionals) insecure. They may even feel that the “traditions” they value are being under attack, which gives their insecurity an angry political dimension. Our discussions on our online course, the realities of our pilots and the feedback on our draft recommendations made it abundantly clear that a *feasible* implementation strategy needs to negotiate different types and various levels of visibility to be successful. In our recommendations we offer suggestions, but do not give simple guidelines for types of visibility, because we are convinced that visibility depends on a proper risk-assessment and strategies on how to be visible should be tailored to each situation and be feasible to use by each implementing person. We acknowledge this point of view may disappoint LGBTIQ+ activists who favour proper representation and who fear that teachers and other stakeholders may abuse this perspective by choosing too implicit messages. We encourage stakeholders not to fall into this trap of continuing the taboo. But we also recognize that the type and level of visibility needs to be tailored to real risks and opportunities.

Key issue 3: Integration

Our ultimate goal is not just visibility and representation. We think visibility is a tool towards the ultimate goal to attain full inclusion of sexual and gender diversity in VET classes, institutions and policy. Visibility is an aspect of inclusion, but on its own, it is more a symbol than real integration. *Real* integration is including LGBTIQ+ visibility without making it special. Heteronormativity is now considered the *norm* and therefore *normal*, but we would like to see that (currently) non-conforming aspects of sexual and gender diversity become part of the norm. This is what inclusion should look like. Sexual and gender diversity should be part of all the curriculum subjects, throughout the vocational training and it should be included in the standards for exams, in administrative procedures and the welcoming environment of the VET institute. Only then will VET institutions be sustainably safe and really inclusive. Integration means that sexual and gender diversity becomes a matter-of-fact, rather than a special topic. The controversial nature and categorization of the topic needs to be neutralized. This also requires different kinds of visibility, depending on the situation and the phase of implementation.

Key issue 4: Innovation strategy

A common mistake made by naive innovators is to demand *immediate* change *now*. Such demands are understandable because they are based on many years of taboo, marginalization, exclusion, suffering and trauma. But the proposed changes related to the mentioned three key issues cannot be implemented overnight. The innovation expert Everett Rogers (Rogers, 1962/1983) showed how work teams commonly include innovators, early adopters, early and late majorities and laggards.



Effective adoption of innovations in an institute (and probably in society as a whole) requires a careful strategy that gradually involves a larger number of participants in the workplace. In this process, external innovators (LGBTIQ+ activists) and internal innovators (like UNIQUE ambassador-teachers) need to take into account that each of Rogers' groups will respond on different cues and strategies. A focus on *laggards* in the early phases of a school introducing LGBTIQ+ inclusion will definitely fail. But a focus *only on innovators* and not trying enough to involve other potentially willing early adopters, will fail just as well. We agree with Rogers that sustainable innovation (in this case LGBTIQ+ inclusion) can only be effective when the innovation leaders develop a plan that gradually involves more and less willing groups in schools and in society. On each level, we need tailored strategies to raise awareness, secure commitment and 'organize' integration and sustainability of LGBTIQ+ inclusion. This perspective makes clear we cannot give one straightforward advice or recommendation on how to reach LGBTIQ+ inclusion. This process-oriented approach makes it necessary to develop a tailored plan for each class, VET institute and society.

6. Annexes

6.1. Original Recommendations

This annex gives the original draft recommendations we formulated in April 2023, and which functioned as a starting point for the survey and discussions on the final recommendations. To enable a logical framework for our recommendations, we have looked at existing publications with recommendations for LGBTIQ+ inclusion in schools. The most recent document focussing on this is the UNESCO “Safe and Seen” report (2023), which is a summary of an international discussion among experts around the world in 2022.

Classroom level

The UNESCO “Safe and Seen” report does not specifically go into classroom practice, but mentions a few important tips. We have edited these to better link into the learning experience from the practice of the UNIQUE pilots: integrate SOGIESC in the curriculum and school culture, engage in a supportive dialogue about inclusion, use LGBTIQ+ examples, use neutral language, and direct to reliable sources of information and support.

Integrate SOGIESC in the curriculum and culture

Having specific lessons dedicated to SOGIESC is important, but LGBTIQ+ inclusivity needs to be woven into all school topics and in the school environment. Think of offering Comprehensive Sexuality Education, refer to different types of relationships, and use a variety of pronouns when discussing topics such as comfortable or uncomfortable relationships and consent. Such a positive attitude towards feelings, supportive communication, relationships, sexuality and diversity should be reflected in the entire school culture. This ‘hidden curriculum’ may be even more important than the formal curriculum.

Engage in a supportive dialogue about inclusion

In the UNIQUE project, which played out in countries and institutions where discussion of SOGIESC was new and unusual, and where social and political backlash was expected, there was a hesitation to address LGBTIQ+ topics explicitly. However, we learned that students are often less homophobic and transphobic than expected and more understanding of diversity. We recommend other teachers and schools not to get overwhelmed by irrational fears of backlash.

We also learned that most students are really interested in diversity and relationships and can easily understand why this has a direct relationship with their future vocations and linked vocational skills, like feeling safe, openness to others and client-friendliness. Teachers can use this interest for motivation and to upskill horizontal competencies.

There will always remain a minority of students who do express a degree of homophobia or transphobia. This is often influenced by their family and their cultural and religious context. Sometimes such students can be pretty loud in expressing their prejudice, which may frighten other students and also their teachers. We have learned it is unwise to avoid or

neglect such remarks. As a teacher, it is better to try to overcome your fear of backlash and to engage in a friendly but nonetheless critical conversation. Such a conversation could be organized as a dialogue (rather than as a discussion or debate), with the goal to learn to understand each other's feelings and situations. In this dialogue the teacher should set ground rules to prevent students becoming offensive or creating an unsafe learning environment.

Another learning point is that many teachers are used to 'transfer knowledge', which may cause them to present students with correct definitions of LGBTIQ+ identities and requiring them to memorize such information. We have learned that this type of teaching is not conducive to help students to adopt more positive attitudes towards (LGBTIQ+) diversity. Lessons are far more effective when they create a space to exchange experiences and feelings and to explore how they can be more inclusive and professional to all people – even when this collides with personal views and principles. It is professional to celebrating differences and to move beyond a default position where heterosexual/cisgender relationships and experiences are automatically seen as the norm.

Use LGBTIQ+ examples

Teaching is more engaging, motivating and empowering for young people if it is relevant to their identity and experience. Young people should be able to see themselves, as well as seeing difference, in the examples used in the classroom. It is important to use scenarios that include a wide range of sexualities, gender identities, pronouns and relationships.

Use neutral and supportive language

Using 'partner' instead of 'boyfriend' and 'girlfriend' is an easy way to include all types of relationships. Using 'they' instead of 'she' and 'he' can similarly include everyone. This may feel difficult initially, but becomes easier with practice, just as anything does. The words we use can make a huge difference to someone's comfort levels and feelings of inclusion. Some LGBTIQ+ students would like to be addressed with gender-neutral pronouns. This may be more challenging if you are not used to it. But it is preferable to try to honour this, while ignoring or depreciating such needs will be experienced by such students as rejection.

Proactively ask students the name and pronouns by which they wish to be referred, and ensure these are respected by staff and students, even if they don't match the students' official legal documents (Trans activist)

Direct to reliable sources of information and support

Teachers are not expected to know everything, and it is okay not to know the answer to every question that arises. The important thing is to be able to 'signpost' by redirecting students to reliable, age-appropriate information in your context. It is also okay to say that you will research the answer and let them know, or to encourage students to do research themselves and to guide them how to do this.

Institutional level

The UNESCO “Safe and Seen” report points at the key importance of good school leadership, which set the tone for inclusion. School leaders set such a tone through their own behaviour and use of language as well as through institutional policies, provision of and support for relevant training, and codes of conduct for staff and learners.

Transparent and accessible systems for redress, in cases of bullying, violence or discrimination on SOGIESC-grounds, are important.

Good links with LGBTIQ+ organizations, support networks and sources of reliable information, along with clear referral pathways to external adolescent- and youth-friendly services, will further bolster your school’s inclusion efforts.

Accountability at leadership level should also include the responsibility to prevent and react to backlash against teachers or LGBTIQ+ students, when necessary.

National level

The UNESCO “Safe and Seen” report proposes that national policy makers should ask themselves:

- How are we ensuring that LGBTIQ+ learners are **safe**, both physically and emotionally?
- How are we ensuring that the realities of the lives of LGBTIQ+ learners are **seen** and reflected in the curriculum and school environment?
- How are we ensuring that LGBTIQ+ learners are **included** as a full and equal part of the school community?

The report notes that high-level political ‘championing’ of the LGBTIQ+ cause can be a key driver, but is never sufficient on its own.

It is essential to build a broad-based coalition that includes all relevant stakeholders. This connects to the earlier recommendation of the NESET II European antibullying report, which also suggests to build a broad national coalition on youth with includes adequate attention on LGBTIQ+ issues. Especially civil society organizations and young LGBTIQ+ community groups need to be included and financially supported to be part of such a coalition. Such coalitions should work together to design, help approve and implement solid and stable policies for the provision of SOGIE-inclusive educational school policies and other key actors.

Effective monitoring and training of staff is essential. Governments need to invest in these and not leave this to the ‘free market’ or incidental project funding.

International level

The UNESCO “Safe and Seen” report recommends that international bodies and donors should make resources available to guarantee the production and application of robust evidence.

International agencies and organizations that have the capacity and legitimacy to convene different actors should bring together key players (even those with conflicting arguments) in a safe space for discussion that will ultimately lead to cooperation on inclusive policies and which will help to avoid or minimize backlash.

Like on all levels, international bodies should involve LGBTIQ+ young people.

Entities funding LGBTIQ+ related projects or engaging in SOGIESC-inclusive policies should consider doing so with discretion when this is necessary to avoid anti-rights backlash. However, avoiding visibility at all costs all the time will support the very taboo that anti-rights movements are looking for. It is important to avoid this trap and to find a proper balance.

6.3. Survey version for feedback on recommendations

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfh4wEPJMjIWIePzgwB5sI8qWVMUWybv9NfWxS4Ndx_bZqQ/viewform

Introduction

You can use this form to rate and suggest improvements to the proposed UNIQUE policy recommendations for Vocational Education and Training (VET). The draft recommendations are partly based on a recent worldwide expert meeting on combating LGBTQI bullying, organized by UNESCO, and partly based on the limited experiences we have until now in the UNIQUE project (mainly while developing the online course). The survey has 26 questions. If you don't fill in personal suggestions, it will take you 10 minutes to fill in.

By filling in this form, you agree to handling your private data in accordance with the GALE GDPR policy (<https://www.gale.info/en/foundation/privacy>). We ask your email so that - if you want - you can change your answers at a later date and if you indicate so, to send you the final policy recommendations report. Your answers in this survey will remain anonymous unless you explicitly mention that you want your recommendation to be credited with your name.

Section 1: Basic information

1. E-mail address*
2. I am a:
 - VET student
 - VET teacher
 - VET administrator/manager/team leader
 - Government worker or official expert on VET
 - LGBTQI activist
 - Local or national politician
 - Politician or expert on the European level
 - Other

Section 2: Recommendations for priority action in the classroom

The following 5 recommendations are focused on what teachers should do on the classroom level. Indicate to what level you disagree (1) or agree (5) with each recommendation.

3. Integrate sexual orientation and gender identity in the curriculum and school culture
4. Engage in a supportive dialogue about inclusion
5. Use LGBTQI examples
6. Use gender neutral language
7. Direct to reliable sources of information and support

8. Do you have suggestions to edit one of the suggested recommendations for the classroom level, or do you have another recommendation that you would like to see included for this level? We especially would like to receive additional recommendations that are based on your concrete experiences in class. (If you would like to be quoted, please add your name and profession here.)

{paragraph}

Section 3: Recommendations for priority action in your VET institute

The following 4 recommendations are focused on what VET institutions should do. Indicate to what level you disagree (1) or agree (5) with each recommendation.

9. Secure accountable leadership, including responsibility to prevent and react to potential backlash against teachers or LGBTIQ
10. Provide accessible systems for redress of bullying and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity
11. Provide an inclusive and sensitive curriculum which integrates client-friendliness and diversity in key VET skills
12. Support LGBTIQ students through links with LGBTIQ local organizations and internal expertise and support

13. Do you have suggestions to edit one of the suggested recommendations for the institutional level, or do you have another recommendation that you would like to see included for this level? We especially would like to receive additional recommendations do you think that could improve your own institute. (If you would like to be quoted, please add your name and profession here.)

{paragraph}

Section 4: Recommendations for priority action in your region/country

The following 4 recommendations are focused on supportive policies in your region and your country. Indicate to what level you disagree (1) or agree (5) with each recommendation.

14. Create a national coalition to co-design policies
 15. Involve and support LGBTIQ youth in regional and national policymaking
 16. Set up and sustain specific monitoring on LGBTIQ inclusion
 17. Organize systemic teacher training on LGBTIQ inclusion
18. Do you have suggestions to edit one of the suggested recommendations for your region or country, or do you have another recommendation that you would like to see included for this level? Our suggestions are general and apply to most countries, we would appreciate if you can suggest specific additional recommendations for your country. (If you would like to be quoted, please add your name and profession here.)

{paragraph}

Section 5: Recommendations for priority action on the European level

The following 5 recommendations are focused on should be done on the European level to support states, VET institutes, teachers and students. Indicate to what level you disagree (1) or agree (5) with each recommendation.

19. Promote and facilitate collection of robust evidence of LGBTIQI discrimination
20. Promote integration or sexual orientation and gender identity in international agreements and policies
21. Convene key educational and LGBTIQI stakeholders in a safe space for discussion that minimizes backlash
22. Fund LGBTIQI related projects
23. Involve LGBTIQI VET students in the development of European policy in the area of VET

24. Do you have suggestions to edit one of the suggested European recommendations, or do you have another recommendation that you would like to see included for this level?
We would especially like to receive recommendations that we could include in the panel discussion of the final conference in Brussels. (If you would like to be quoted, please add your name and profession here.)

{paragraph}

25. Would you like to receive the final UNIQUE Policy Recommendations Report? {yes/no}

26. Thank you so much for time and effort! If you have any other questions or suggestions, please leave them here. (If you would like to be quoted, please add your name and profession here.)

{paragraph}

6.4. Suggestions by respondents

This annex offers the complete feedback of all respondents on the survey.

- 7. Do you have suggestions to edit one of the suggested recommendations for the classroom level, or do you have another recommendation that you would like to see included for this level? We especially would like to receive additional recommendations that are based on your concrete experiences in class. (If you would like to be quoted, please add your name and profession here.)**

Teachers themselves should learn to identify and tackle their own stereotypes and biases

Suggested additional recommendation:

Proactively ask students the name and pronouns by which they wish to be referred, and ensure these are respected by staff and students, even if they don't match the students' official legal documents.

Suggestion to no.3: It would help to elaborate exactly what you mean by this. Integrate where and in what way? Also, if we are talking about LGBTQI people and issues collectively then it's important to include all the grounds that correspond to these groups, i.e. add gender expression and sex characteristics. This comes up in other recommendations and I have noted there as well.

Question to no.4: What exactly does this mean? 'Engage with students in a support discussion about inclusion'. But what is the goal here?

Question to no. 5: what exactly does this mean? Some further elaboration is needed here. Do you mean something like 'when using examples of people or family life, ensure examples of LGBTQI people and families are used'?

Amendment to no. 6:

Use gender-neutral language wherever possible when referring to people and professions, especially when talking about unknown people.

High level

Only 2 genders

No, this subject should stay out of schools

- 13. Do you have suggestions to edit one of the suggested recommendations for the institutional level, or do you have another recommendation that you would like to see included for this level? We especially would like to receive additional recommendations do you think that could improve your own institute. (If you would like to be quoted, please add your name and profession here.)**

Additional recommendation:

Organise LGBTI-specific sensitisation training for all staff on being supportive and inclusive of LGBTI students and the topics relating to LGBTI diversity in the curriculum, to ensure they understand the content well and are prepared to answer questions by students. The training should preferably be run by an external specialist.

To slightly amend no.9, or to add as an additional point:

Ensure LGBTI-inclusive goals are promoted and modelled by senior management and that it takes responsibility to prevent and react to potential backlash against teachers or LGBTQI students.

Amendment to no. 10:

Provide and make accessible systems for redress of bullying and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics.

(Note to explain: if we are talking about LGBTQI then it's important to include all the grounds that correspond to these groups, i.e. also gender expression and sex characteristics. Also it is important the

systems not only exist but are safely accessible for students who need them.)

(As a note, LGBTQI should be used as an adjective, not as a stand-alone noun. They can be LGBTQI people LGBTQI issues, LGBTQI students etc. but not just 'LGBTQI'.)

High level

Public and clear display of support towards all sexual orientations and gender identities on their institutional level (e.g. statement on their website or in their official policy), as well as clear public statement on zero tolerance for hate speech based on SOGI

18. Do you have suggestions to edit one of the suggested recommendations for your region or country, or do you have another recommendation that you would like to see included for this level? Our suggestions are general and apply to most countries, we would appreciate if you can suggest specific additional recommendations for your country. (If you would like to be quoted, please add your name and profession here.)

Suggestion for additional recommendation:

Ensure funding is provided for conducting LGBTQI sensitisation training and supporting institutions in integrating LGBTQI perspectives in their curricula.

A suggestion to amend no. 14, as it is a bit ambiguous as it is (I have not given it a score because it very much depends what the recommendation is to whether we would support it or not)

'Ensure thorough consultation and involvement of LGBTQI civil society and other relevant organisations with knowledge of issues related to LGBTQI students in policy making processes.'

(This is distinct from no. 15, which seems to recommend including LGBTQI youth representatives in the process - also a valid recommendation, along the lines of 'nothing about us without us'. This may be the same as the civil society mentioned in my amendment to no. 14 above, or it may not)

Research experiences of LGBTIQ youth in the educational system and frame future activities based on the research results

For recommendations for priority action in Croatian context, but I believe it is applicable elsewhere:

It would be good that the entire burden does not fall onto civil society organisations (in recognising the problem, addressing it, advocating the changes, creating recommendations, implementing educational activities, monitoring the state etc.), but that the Ministry of Science and Education take that initiative, in collaboration with human rights organisations. UNESCO, European Union, Council of Europe, European Commission, European Parliament and other relevant bodies for over a decade have acknowledged the importance of tackling homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in educational system, and they have designed clear guidelines for countries and governments how to do it. The problem in Croatia is that the Ministry does nothing in that direction. Though, in its Action plan for prevention violence in schools (2020 - 2024) for the first time it explicitly states the obligation to develop and implement a programme to prevent homophobic and transphobic violence experienced by LGBTIQ youth due to not fitting into traditionally established social norms about sex, gender and sexuality.

Antonija Stojanović Almesberger, Programme Coordinator in Lesbian Organisation Rijeka - LORI

24. Do you have suggestions to edit one of the suggested European recommendations, or do you have another recommendation that you would like to see included for this level? We would especially like to receive recommendations that we could include in the panel discussion of the final conference in Brussels. (If you would like to be quoted, please add your name and profession here.)

Suggestion to amend no. 20:

Promote integration of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics as protected grounds from discrimination and grounds for additional support and protection in international agreements and policies.



(Note to explain: if we are talking about LGBTIQI then it's important to include all the grounds that correspond to these groups, i.e. also gender expression and sex characteristics. Also it would help to explain exactly what we mean by adding these grounds - what is the purpose.)

Question to no. 22: What kind of projects do you mean? This is very and needs elaboration.

Suggestion for an additional recommendation:

Ensure funding is provided for research, producing materials, and conducting LGBTIQI sensitisation training.

Research on public opinion towards different LGBTIQ topics (gender identity, family life, healthcare...)

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6.5. Project information

Project Acronym	UNIQUE
Project Title	Equal Inclusion of LGBTIQ students in VET
Agreement Number	621478-EPP-1-2020-1-EL-EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN
EU Programme	ERASMUS+ KA3 Support for Policy Reform
Project Website	https://uniqueproject.eu/
<hr/>	
Authoring Partner	GALE, Peter Dankmeijer, with contributions of the partnership
Date	31-5-2023
Version	5, final
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Dissemination Level	Public

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