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# VET Teachers' and Schools' Capacities to Tackle the Challenges of Vulnerable Students in the Baltic Countries and Norway

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**Annotation.** This paper explores the institutional, organizational, and individual level capacities of VET teachers and schools in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway to support vulnerable students to help them to complete their education. Documents and secondary statistical analysis carried out in and across the four countries, revealed pronounced differences between Norway and the Baltic countries and across the latter. The implications of the findings are discussed within the analytical framework and the two models of skills formation.

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**Keywords:** *VET teachers, vulnerable youth, VET student empowerment, vocational integration, youth labor market integration.*

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## Introduction

The capacities of vocational education and training (VET) teachers and schools form the core input into VET quality and play a crucial role in combating youth exclusion.

Prevention, intervention, and compensation of early leaving from education and training (ELET) is a long-term focus of the policies of the European Union (EU) and the member states, being also one of the structural indicators for monitoring education and training systems in Europe since 2015 (Eurydice, 2022). The EU-level target of ELET is 9% by 2030, and reforms and policies are being adopted to this end in several areas in European countries. Addressing ELET is one of the initial teacher training and continuing professional development (CPD) areas, and a key focus of our study from the VET perspective was emphasizing “teachers’ awareness of the underlying causes, the main triggers and early warning signs and strengthening their capacity to take action in both preventing early leaving and supporting students who are at risk” (Eurydice, 2022, p. 44).

The high quality of initial and continuing VET provision has been strongly attributed to the professional competence of VET teachers by the EU (Cedefop) and the OECD (Antera, 2021, p. 463). On average, almost half of all pupils in upper secondary education are enrolled in VET programs, but this rate is lower in the Baltic countries, varying between 24,8% in Lithuania to 39,3% in Latvia and 39,9% in Estonia (51,3% in Norway) (EC, 2022). However, shortages of adequately trained teachers and trainers in VET are common (OECD, 2022). In this study, we shall examine the capacities of VET teachers and schools in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway to support vulnerable students in completing their education. The countries choice is based on their collaboration in the large European Economic Area (EEA) project, under the Baltic Research Program, Vocational education and workplace training enhancing social inclusion of at-risk young people (EmpowerVET), of which this study is a part of.

With vulnerable students and youth, we refer to learners who are vulnerable to exclusion, thus, following the definition of the concept as one “representing better [than special education needs (SEN)] the broader vision and rights-based approach of including all learners in education” by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) (2022; Kefallinou, 2022). This is neither a homogenous group of students, nor easily defineable. They often, but not always, need special support in the context of education, and duly special competence from the teaching and/or other staff, against their often “uniquely complex” life situations. Their risk of societal marginalization and of exclusion is often related to school dropout/ELET. In Norway, three background factors, sometimes intertwined, characterize youth vulnerable for marginalization: migration, history of child welfare services, and psychological problems (Sletten & Hyggen, 2013, p. 23). In the Baltics economic hardship and living venue often add to these. A wide range of supportive policies and practices, based on national and EU policies and initiatives, have been set in place: “(re)integration; psychosocial support, and guidance targeted at populations at risk of exclusion, such as early leavers and NEETs (not in employment, education, or training), refugees, with a special focus on refugees from the recent Ukrainian student refugee wave; and young students with disabilities and SEN” (Cedefop, 2022, p. 71).

Labels, categories, and definitions of VET teachers vary across countries and datasets, such as teacher, trainer, and instructor (Andersson & Köpsén, 2015; OECD, 2021). We refer to VET teachers primarily as teachers in VET schools and centers, unless otherwise specified, and to trainers in connection to an apprenticeship or in-company training. The profession of “vocational teacher” is based on dual professionalism (Andersson & Köpsén, 2015), on the one hand, with competence and identity geared to their vocational subject, and on the other hand, to pedagogy, their teaching competence. Their teacher identity and pedagogical skillfulness are of core importance when it comes to meeting the learning and development needs of vulnerable students.

This article consists of six sections. After presenting the research objective and the theoretical perspectives in sections two and three, we describe the research methodology. Section five presents the findings. Finally, we discuss the findings against the analytical framework and compare the countries within the two institutional models of skills formation, with implications for VET development regarding vulnerable students.

## Research Objectives

In the present study, we have explored the capacities of VET teachers and schools in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway to support vulnerable students to help them to complete their education. The state of VET teachers and trainers have been widely addressed in studies by the EU (Cedefop, 2022) and the OECD (2021; 2022). Our perspective is narrower. Our research question is, what characterizes VET teachers’ and schools’ capacities to support vulnerable students in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway, in the light of their different political-economic models of skills formation. Besides describing the capacities, we have compared them across the four countries.

To answer to the research question, we have loosely applied the UNESCO (2012) analytical framework for capacity building in education and, accordingly, structured our exploration into capacities on three levels: individual, organizational, and institutional. On the individual level, we describe availability of VET teachers, support staff, and trends in these, based mainly on European comparable statistics. As factors on availability, potentially affecting teachers’ capacity to support their vulnerable students, we have used the volume of teachers, their job contract (full-time/part-time), their age and gender profile, education level, and teacher-student ratios. The analysis on organizational level covers the support available to VET teachers at schools, enabling them to provide extended help to vulnerable students, and challenges in providing such support. Finally, the institutional level analysis examines policies and practices in initial VET teacher training and in CPD. The analysis of the latter two levels builds on national documents from each of the four countries.

# Conceptualizing VET Teachers' and Schools' Capacities in Supporting Vulnerable Students

Conceptualizing VET teachers' capacities to support vulnerable students can be approached from different theoretical perspectives and frameworks. In this paper, we apply elements from the UNESCO (2012) analytical framework for capacity building in education and the theories of institutional systems of skills formation (Busemeyer & Trampush, 2011; Bürgi & Gonon, 2020). Within the former, we focus on three types of capacities: institutional (national level), organizational (VET schools), and individual level (teacher competence) – i.e., capacities “embedded in institutions and practices, organizational structures and individuals” (UNESCO, 2012, p. 20). Accordingly, we define the complex concept of capacity as comprising “several types of tangible and intangible elements that contribute to achieving an organization's or society's goal” (UNESCO, 2012, p. 20).

## *Institutional and organizational perspective*

VET and VET teacher training in the Baltic countries is strongly influenced by the EU, while in Norway, the development builds on the Nordic education model, but also on collaboration with the EU and OECD. Thus, the countries represent different socio-economic and political regimes and two types of strategic priorities in the development of the VET systems, with different implications to vulnerable students (Cedefop, 2020). One is typical to Baltic countries (“liberal skill formation regime”, Cedefop, 2023, p. 80), with an emphasis on fixing demand-supply skills gaps through VET and a strong focus on teachers' vocations-related and practical skills, at the expense of broader theoretical knowledge (Tütlys et al., 2022; Buligina & Sloka, 2022; Loogma, 2022). The other is typical to the Nordic countries (“collective skill formation system”, Cedefop, 2023, p. 69), emphasizing equal access and opportunities for learning and skills development to all, and having a balanced view to VET teachers' vocational and pedagogical skills and their development (Nylund & Rosval, 2019; Helms Jørgensen, et al., 2019). We shall use these orientations as a heuristic to understand and explain differences and similarities in the four countries, when it comes to the capacities of VET teachers and schools to support vulnerable students. The results from this study are expected to contribute to policy learning across them.

## *Individual level capacities: VET teacher's competence - a complex, “Moving Target”*

Teacher's capacities are comprised of their professional competence and practice, enabled by their organizational and national VET context for a high-quality job performance. VET teachers' competence is the sum of their initial teacher training, professional and

vocational experience, and CPD. We build our conceptualization on the comprehensive review of research (covering years 2010–2018) on professional competence (PC) with reference to vocational teachers by Antera (2021). It showed that although the definitions of the concept of PC vary and that a unanimous or exhaustive definition does not exist, researchers do agree on its components and main attributes: knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values (Antera, 2021, p. 467, 473). However, these are continuously evolving, attributed to their situatedness and developmental and action-related character.

The above implies that teachers' PC is a moving target, affected by emerging new roles, challenges, and developments (Antera, 2021; Cedefop, 2022). Current major challenges in the VET landscape are related to meeting the learning needs of more heterogeneous groups of learners with greater diversity, and challenges in teacher recruitment and attracting competent people, along with the relatively low social status, wages, and working conditions of this teaching and training profession (Cedefop, 2022). Another challenge to overcome is the call for updates of pedagogical approaches, classroom technology, and meeting the realities of the workplace (OECD, 2021, p. 4).

The complexity of the roles of VET teachers and trainers has also been increasing due to new requirements in the teacher profession. VET tends to be a second-choice solution for students with previous lower educational outcomes and/or with economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Loogma et al., 2019). On average, almost 20% of disadvantaged but less than 8% of advantaged students are enrolled in VET programs across the OECD (OECD, VET /Education GPS website). Following this, VET teachers increasingly perceive social work as a part of their workload (Sirk et al., 2019), challenging their socio-pedagogical and psychological competence.

The analysis by the OECD (2021) points out that while initial training “is crucial to prepare and develop VET teachers, many countries struggle to cover the full mix of skills they need. Moreover, VET teachers often face barriers to accessing training due to a lack of support or incentives, and conflicts with their work schedule” (OECD, 2021, p. 4). VET teachers' “diversity competence”, closely related to challenges with inclusion, also, training in digital learning environment (“vulnerable learners can become even more vulnerable online” as noted by Psifidou and Treves, 2022) are increasingly questioned.

The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) by the OECD in 2018 showed that compared to teachers in general education, VET teachers have lower skills from their initial teacher training in both general (about 85/90%) and subject specific pedagogy (about 77/86%), as well as in classroom practice in the subjects they teach (73/82%), while their skills in teaching in a mixed ability setting were about the same in both groups (57%) (OECD, 2021, p. 95). Teachers' competence and qualification shortcomings were pointed out among the most important ones by the expert group evaluating the situation in Norway from the perspective of inclusion (Nordahl et al., 2018). The evaluation underlined the crucial role of good, competent teachers in making a difference in the lives of children and youth with SEN by helping them to overcome their difficulties and challenges related

to ordinary learning offers. To help VET teachers to face these competence challenges, high-quality CPD (Psifidou & Pevec Grm, 2021) and providing necessary support and assistance in their work with students (Daukilas et al., 2016) is a necessity.

## Methodology

The study is both descriptive and comparative. It is based on a document analysis, complemented with analysis of national and international statistical data, aimed at identifying VET teachers and schools' capacities on three levels (institutional, organizational, and individual). These capacities were explored by applying loosely UNESCO (2012) analytical framework for capacity building in education. The analyzed documents covered mainly national but also international policy documents, and research reports, and articles. The main source for the statistical information was Eurostat, supplemented with the OECD and some national databases data.

The study was carried out in three phases. First, the researchers prepared a joint framework of the factors covering the institutional, organizational, and individual levels of capacities. Table 1 shows an overview of the joint framework and data sources used.

The framework specified two core perspectives: (i) VET teachers and assistance staff (social pedagogues and psychologists working in VET institutions, career guidance specialists, and alike), their volume and trends during the last decade or so, and (ii) VET teacher training systems, covering initial and continuing education, and major related developments in the last 10 years. The first one addressed the numbers of the VET teachers and other pedagogical staff (support staff available in VET schools) and their education and age profiles, the number/share of the VET students, and student-teacher ratios. VET teacher profiles, along with these factors can play a crucial role in theirs and VET schools' capacities to support vulnerable students. The low attractiveness of the profession and teachers' retirement, due to their high average age, are shrinking the pool of available teachers. Consequent employment of unqualified teachers, due to recruitment problems (Cedefop, 2022; OECD, 2021; 2022), makes a poor match with the student population diversity and their vulnerability, as well as with an increasing need for support in parallel. Initially, we were aiming to explore the scope of at-risk VET students, but comparable statistics were not available.

The second core perspective addressed VET teacher training, including major trends during the last decade, formal qualification requirements, and education and training pathways (initial training, continuing training). Here, the main data source were national VET policy documents and VET teacher training, as described in the four national reports.

**Table 1**

*Research Question, Overview of the Joint Framework for the Country Reports, and Data Sources*

<b>Research question</b>	<b>Level of analysis</b>	<b>Issues covered</b>	<b>Specifications</b>	<b>Data sources</b>
What characterizes VET teachers and schools' capacities to support vulnerable students in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway, in the light of their different political models of skills formation?	Individual	Availability of VET teachers and support staff, trends in these over the last 10 years.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- teacher volume and trends in the last 10 years</li> <li>- teachers' age and gender profile, education level, type of employment</li> <li>- numerical information about support staff availability</li> <li>- background information of VET students</li> </ul>	Eurostat  Some complementary information from the National reports*.
	Organizational	Support is available to VET teachers at schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- main support staff</li> <li>- other support available</li> <li>- challenges in organizational support</li> </ul>	National documents, as described in the National reports.
	Institutional /national	Policies and practices in VET teacher training and major changes/ trends during the last decade.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- initial VET teacher training</li> <li>- continuing professional development (CPD)</li> </ul>	National documents on VET teacher education policies, as described in the National reports.

\* Tikkanen, 2022; Tütlys et al., 2022; Ümarik et al., 2022; Sloka et al., 2022

Second, national reports were compiled accordingly by each national research team (Tikkanen, 2022; Tütlys et al., 2022; Ümarik et al., 2022; Sloka et al., 2022). After the reports were completed, we carried out an additional analysis of the national VET teacher training curriculum and professional standards (PSs) in each of the four countries to explore more closely the development of VET teachers' pedagogical competence to support vulnerable students.

Finally, a comparative synthesis was compiled following the joint framework and presented in this article. Since the national reports were based on national statistics, which were not always comparable across the four countries, we used Eurostat data for more reliable comparisons, when describing the issues at the individual level of the analysis. Indeed, the randomness and scarcity of data available on VET teaching professionals

were pointed out already more than 15 years ago by Cedefop (2009), repeated also by more recent research (Hiim, 2020).

## Findings

### *Availability of VET teachers and support staff*

To answer the first research question, we explored availability of VET teachers, support staff (addressed under “organizational” capacities), and trends in these. This will provide a rough basis to assess VET capacities to develop a skills/competence foundation enabling vulnerable students to learn and VET capacities to provide socio-psychological support to vulnerable students. As points of reference, we also present some indicators of “vulnerability” of VET students, to the extent of available comparative statistics. The exploration is based on available statistics at the country level with results presented in Table 2.

*Teachers and teacher-student ratios.* The number of VET teachers in 2020 was quite similar across the Baltics – around 1800 in Estonia and Latvia, and somewhat higher in Lithuania, while in Norway it was more than seven times higher, almost 14,000 (table 2). Thus, VET teacher density is the highest in Norway, as the population in Norway is only around 2–4 times higher than in the Baltic countries (table 2). The number of VET teachers was decreasing in all four countries between 2015 and 2020, albeit with great variation across them, most in Estonia and least in Norway (correspondingly 20,7, and 3 percentage units). Student-teacher ratios were clearly higher in Latvia and Estonia than in Lithuania and Norway (table 2).

**Table 2**

*Individual Level and Contextual Information About VET Teachers and Students in Estonia (EE), Latvia (LV), Lithuania (LT) and Norway (NO): Latest Statistics and Trends Where Available, 2015–2020/2021 (Source: Eurostat, Unless Otherwise Specified)*

	<b>EE</b> <b>P<sup>1</sup>= 1.365</b> <b>MIO</b>	<b>LV</b> <b>P= 1.883</b> <b>MIO</b>	<b>LT</b> <b>P= 2.857</b> <b>MIO</b>	<b>NO</b> <b>P= 5.489</b> <b>MIO</b>
VET funding total (2020), MEur <sup>2</sup>	103.1	140.3	140.2	1.519,6
VET teachers <sup>3</sup>				
2021 (n)	1 837	1 754	1 934	13 886
% female	60.3	74.1	70.7	56.2
2015 (n)	2 257	2 084	2 386	14 237
% female	62.2	71.5	70.5	52.7



	<b>EE</b> <b>P<sup>1</sup>= 1.365</b> <b>MIO</b>	<b>LV</b> <b>P= 1.883</b> <b>MIO</b>	<b>LT</b> <b>P= 2.857</b> <b>MIO</b>	<b>NO</b> <b>P= 5.489</b> <b>MIO</b>
Change (n) 2015-2021 (%)	-18.6	-15.8	-18.8	-2.5
Part-time, all upper secondary education teachers. % . 2021	48.2	63.3	44.0	25.6
Higher education (2020). %	72	93	86	93.7
Age <sup>4</sup>				
2021 25–34 years (%)	13.2	15.2	10.7	17.6
50+ years (%)	51.1	53.4	56.4	41.8
2015 50+ years (%)	51	52.6	54.5	43.8
Student-teacher ratio (2021) <sup>5</sup>	19.3	16.9	9.4	10.5
VET students (2021) <sup>6</sup> (%)	40.3	40.1	25.6	51.5
Student financial aid (2020) <sup>7</sup>	3.7	9.1	1.8	12.8
VET Students (n) <sup>8</sup>				
2021	19 353	24 120	15 393	131 969
2015	14 541	24 847	21 579	124 816
Change 2015-2021 (%)	+33.1	-2.9	-28.7	+5.7
Early leavers from education and training (2022) <sup>9</sup> % (18–24 years)	10.8	6.7	4.8	13.2
NEET (2022) <sup>10</sup> % (15-24 years)	10.7	8.6	9.7	6.4

<sup>1</sup> P=Population in 2023 - <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TPS00001/default/table>

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/educ\\_uae\\_fin02/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/educ_uae_fin02/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>3</sup> Eurostat:

<sup>4</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/educ\\_uae\\_perd01\\_\\_custom\\_9460250/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/educ_uae_perd01__custom_9460250/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>5</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/educ\\_uae\\_perp04\\_\\_custom\\_9459351/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/educ_uae_perp04__custom_9459351/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>6</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Vocational\\_education\\_statistics#Enrolled\\_pupils](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Vocational_education_statistics#Enrolled_pupils)

<sup>7</sup> A % of total public expenditure in upper-secondary and post-secondary, non-tertiary education. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/educ\\_uae\\_fina01\\_\\_custom\\_9463244/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/educ_uae_fina01__custom_9463244/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>8</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/educ\\_uae\\_enrs04/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/educ_uae_enrs04/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>9</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat\\_lfse\\_14/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfse_14/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>10</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat\\_lfse\\_18\\_\\_custom\\_9464389/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfse_18__custom_9464389/default/table?lang=en)

*Part-time work.* VET teachers' employment and status varies between countries, from state employed civil servants to employees of the IVET provider (e.g., in Lithuania and Norway), to freelancers or part timers (Keurulainen, 2014). Depending on the type of their job contract, their capacity to provide support to their vulnerable students varies. The numbers above include both full time and part-time positions (Table 2). The real numbers of full-time positions, for example, in Estonia was significantly lower (n=928), because some teachers work parallel in enterprises. Part time work in upper secondary education appeared roughly twice as common in the Baltic countries (almost 50%, in Estonia 62,9%) than in Norway (25%) (EU27 average 25,6%).

*Gender.* Most of the VET teachers in all countries are females (table 2), with the highest rate in Latvia, at over 70%, and the lowest in Norway at 55,7% in 2020. However, vocational areas are strongly gendered in all countries (Aavik & Ümarik, 2019; EC, 2022; Holgersen et al., 2017): males dominate in ICT and technology, production, and construction, and females in social sector, health, and wellbeing. Between 2015 and 2020, there has been a decreasing trend in Estonia's in the overall female teacher dominance, while their share has been slightly increasing in the other three countries.

*Age.* The age distribution of VET teachers in all countries is skewed, contributing to challenges in the recruitment of qualified teachers. In the Baltics, more than half of the teachers were over 50 years of age in 2020, the rate being somewhat lower (42%) in Norway (Table 2). The average age is especially high in some vocational areas (Holgersen et al., 2017). Between 2015 and 2020, the 50+ rate had slightly decreased in Latvia and Norway, while increased in Estonia and Lithuania.

*Education.* VET teachers' education level is increasing in all four countries, with a great majority of them holding a bachelor' degree. In 2021, around of 40% VET teachers in Norway and 46% in Estonia held a master's degree. About 95% of VET teachers in Norway (Statistics Norway, ssb.no) had studied pedagogy in 2021. In Lithuania, the rate was 100% (46% held a pedagogue's qualification and 54% had completed a course in pedagogical-psychological knowledge) (Eurostat and Cedefop country reports). In Latvia, the share of VET teachers with some pedagogical competence was 61% in 2017/2018 (Strode et al., 2022).

### ***VET teacher training policies and frameworks***

To address the institutional capacities, we explored the extent to which the national policies and frameworks address the development of VET teachers' pedagogical competence (initial teacher training, and CPD) and cover topics related to the risk of student vulnerability (e.g., student diversity/inclusion, health, and wellbeing).

A challenge in VET in all four countries is its status and quality, and consequent problems in recruitment into initial teacher training. To improve the attractiveness and quality of VET, policy initiatives have been launched towards setting formal qualification requirements for all types of VET teachers, defined by national legislation and national

standards or qualifications frameworks (Keurulainen, 2014), designed in dialogue with social partners and relevant multipartite bodies. Thus, VET is strongly state regulated in all four countries. In Norway, where VET is an integral part of the formal upper secondary education system, the political goal in the last decades has been to achieve equal status among VET and academic programs (Hiim, 2020, p. 228). In the Baltic states, where VET is a parallel but separate part within the national education system, the PSs for vocational teachers have been adopted for roughly the last couple of decades (EE 2010, LV 2018, LT 2019). In Norway, these have been in place longer, with latest revision in 2018 (National Council for Teacher Education, 2018). In contrast to Norway and Estonia, in Latvia and Lithuania properly functioning higher education (HE) study programs, which would provide VET teacher qualification, do not exist, thus, a HE degree is not obligatory for them.

Further, the broadening competence and qualification requirements for VET teachers add to the importance of coupling vocational and teaching competence (pedagogy) in the EU (Keurulainen, 2014; OECD, 2021) and in Norway (Holgersen et al., 2017). For example, in Estonia, the new Requirements for Teachers' Qualifications in 2002 increased pedagogical skills to the HE level from the previous level of in-service training. In Norway, VET teachers are required to have a formal pedagogical education (30 ECTS and 30 ECTS in subject didactics) within a bachelor's degree, before they can start to work as teachers (National Standard for VET Teacher Training by the National Council for Teacher Education, 2018). In the Baltic countries, the tendency is the same, but the timing and extent of studies required in pedagogy vary between them. In Lithuania, short-term pedagogical-psychological courses (180/120 hours) follow vocational studies, while in Latvia, studies in pedagogy are required for a minimum of two ECTS or at least 72 hours after vocational studies.

### *Initial teacher training*

With a diverse student population, VET teachers' studies in pedagogy play a key role in high quality teaching. To explore the development of pedagogical competence in the area of supporting learning and the development of vulnerable students, we analyzed learning outcomes (LOs) in the national curriculum frameworks for IVET teachers and PSs (overview of the outcomes available upon request), valid in 2023. The results showed that there is very little, if anything, in these addressing explicitly vulnerable students. However, they are implicitly covered by diverse statements regarding SEN, student diversity, and inclusive education. LOs and PSs are structured into knowledge, skills, and general competence in Norway and Lithuania, with attitudes added in Latvia, while such a structure is not specified in Estonia. When it comes to knowledge and skills regarding SEN, "diversity" and "inclusive education" are mentioned in LOs and PSs to Estonia and Norway, "inclusion" also in Latvia, while "individual needs" in Latvia and Lithuania, the latter emphasizing "individualization". In terms of general competence, skills regarding

“creating a good learning environment” (all four countries), in “communication” (Lithuania), “relationship building” (Norway), and “collaboration” (Estonia, Latvia, Norway) are mentioned as of key importance in supporting vulnerable learners in VET. The PSs in Latvia and Lithuania also address students’ health and safety, in Latvia with specific reference to students’ risky behavior and violence. Only LOs in Norway are explicit about teacher competence regarding children and youth “in difficult life situations, thereunder violence [by adults] and sexual abuse” (Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2013 – under §2, translated from Norwegian by Tikkanen) as well as knowledge about children’s rights, from national and international perspectives.

### ***Continuing professional development (CPD)***

The limited competence in IVET makes CPD a key to prepare VET teachers to meet their needs for pedagogical and other support for vulnerable students, as also indicated by the findings from the OECD TALIS 2018 survey. The availability of systematic CPD of VET teachers varies in the four countries, as does the provision of professional capacity building to be better equipped to address the needs of vulnerable youth. An overview of the main characteristics of CPD for VET teachers in the four countries and CPD providers is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Characteristics of the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for VET Teachers and CPD Providers in the Four Countries*

<b>Country</b>	<b>Level of systematic nature in CDP</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>CPD providers</b>
Estonia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- lack of a systematic approach</li> <li>-upon teachers’ own initiative</li> <li>- general state-level CPD requirement for all teachers upskilling every 3 years for a min. 2 months</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- teachers themselves are responsible for self-monitoring and obligatory annual self-assessment of their CPD, upskilling according to needs experienced</li> <li>-lack of targeted provision to tackle challenges with vulnerable students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- mainly universities</li> <li>- VET providers</li> <li>- private enterprises (periodical internships)</li> </ul>
Latvia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- lack of a systemic approach</li> <li>-mainly project-based, national, targeted capacity building through ESF-funding (PUMPURS)</li> <li>- participation in a 36 hours CPD program generally required every 3 years</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- teachers themselves are responsible for their CPD</li> <li>- PUMPURS aimed at specifically tackling early school leaving problematic in Latvia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- national project, most recently</li> <li>- regional programs, general and targeted to at-risk related challenges</li> <li>-private actors</li> </ul>

Country	Level of systematic nature in CDP	Characteristics	CPD providers
Lithuania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- no national legally binding regulation</li> <li>- school-based 'methodical groups' having main responsibility for CPD</li> <li>- national coordination of networking and cooperation for CPD in the VET curricula and training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CPD provision lacks relevance to the specific context of vulnerability faced in VET schools</li> <li>- reasonably good CPD provision in larger cities</li> <li>- better access to external CPD providers</li> <li>- insufficient provision in rural areas, even if student vulnerability presents a larger challenge there and schools have less resources, mostly reliant on in-school CPD provision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a range of different providers</li> <li>- universities,</li> <li>- NGOs</li> <li>- adult education</li> <li>- VET providers/schools</li> </ul>
Norway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- large governmental investments for almost 25 years to build a robust national system of continuing and further education (CET)</li> <li>- targeted CET strategy for VET teachers since 2015</li> <li>- national initiative to competence development in special education and inclusive practice</li> <li>- yet, much depends on teachers' own initiative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- teachers are expected to participate in high-quality, flexible, and practice-relevant CET</li> <li>- plenty of opportunities in general, participation supported financially</li> <li>- challenges in matching CPD needs and provision: very limited provision targeted to tackle challenges with vulnerable students</li> <li>- recently more common within special education via collaborative learning in local multi-agency and professional partnerships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- universities and colleges</li> <li>- various other CET providers</li> <li>- courses by private actors</li> <li>- private enterprises (staff visiting-periods)</li> <li>- via local collaboration in partnerships (work-based learning)</li> </ul>

In Estonia, the existing VET Teacher Professional Standard, based on the Vocational Educational Institutions Act (Kukk, 2022), makes teachers themselves responsible for their CPD through self-monitoring, obligatory annual self-assessment of professional competence, and upskilling according to their needs, i.e., through self-directed learning. However, the general state-level CPD regulation "Framework Requirements for Teacher Training" (Õpetajate koolituse raamnõuded, 2019) also applies to them. Accordingly, teachers CPD is to take place as their "independent work in a state or municipal institution, a private school with a training permit, a private or public legal entity or a self-employed person [...]. Every three years, a VET teacher undergoes continuing professional training for at least two months." (Õpetajate koolituse raamnõuded, 2019). Teachers and schools can freely choose topics for training. Moreover, the self-development of a vocational teacher includes an internship in a company to follow the developments in the world of work. CPD is provided mainly by universities, followed by VET providers, private companies, and in centralized courses (Kukk, 2022).

In Lithuania, the national coordination of the CPD of VET teachers is focused on the enhancement and development of their networking and cooperation in matters concerning the quality of VET curricula and training. There is no national, legally binding regulation of the CPD of the VET teachers. The main responsibilities for CPD are delegated to the VET schools, in so called methodical groups of the VET teachers to enable their cooperation in CPD (Kvalifikacijų ir profesinio mokymo plėtros centras, 2022). The national methodical groups have been established in different vocational areas by the Qualifications and VET Development Center, who coordinates their activities. CPD courses are offered by different providers, including universities, NGOs, adult education providers. However, their provision lacks relevance to the specific context of vulnerability faced in the VET schools (e.g., poverty of families, lack of resources for attending schools, employment in part-time unskilled jobs during the studies, etc.). There are reasonably more opportunities for CPD in the bigger cities, in schools with more and easier accessible CPD resources rather than in rural areas. In the latter, VET teachers face more problems with student vulnerability (especially socio-economic) and schools have less resources and opportunities to provide CPD (Daukilas et al., 2016). Also, VET schools in the bigger cities more often use external CPD services, whereas schools in the rural areas exploit different internal forms of CPD, such as methodical circles (groups) of VET teachers (Daukilas et al., 2016).

In Latvia, CPD is loosely coupled with education strategies and policy, stressing the importance of strengthening formal teacher qualification in VET in seeking to improve the quality and public esteem of the VET provision. The latter is gradually improving, due to strategic investments over the past two decades into the infrastructure and modern equipment, VET curriculum design, and training of teachers and trainers. One example of such a strategic approach is the national project PUMPURS for the capacity building of teaching staff in dealing with the challenges of school drop-out ([www.pumpurs.lv](http://www.pumpurs.lv)). This ambitious project, funded by the European Social Funds (ESF), follows a holistic approach to tackling the challenge of dropout, by seeking to establish the framework of institutional cooperation for dropout prevention, developing and implementing training programs and providing targeted financial support for vulnerable learners. Ten competence development programs, targeting broad sets of vulnerable student support competences, were developed for teaching staff. Like in the other Baltic countries, VET teachers are themselves responsible for their CPD. They are required to follow a 36-hour CPD program in every three years, planned together with their school management (Strode et al., 2022). VET teachers have a statutory right to CPD, and opportunities are provided to this end, through programs provided in all regions of Latvia, both on a general basis and targeted to teachers working with students at risk. However, the very high workload of VET teachers and trainers in Latvia is making themselves vulnerable to burn-out (Strode et al., 2022), especially those working with young persons at risk.

In Norway, education policymakers have had a strong and long-term focus on quality in education since the beginning of the third millennium (Pedersen et al., 2021). Teachers' competence is seen as the key factor in developing the quality of the education system (Mogstad Aspøy et al., 2017, p. 23). Large governmental investments aim at building a robust national system of continuing and further education (Ministry of Education and Research (MER), 2018). For VET teachers, a particular CET strategy, Vocational Teacher Promotion (VTP) (MER, 2015), was adopted in 2015 in the face of a shortage of skilled labor in a range of vocational areas, which worsened even more after the pandemic. The three strategic goals were: (i) to increase recruitment and improve qualifications of VET teachers, (ii) to secure high quality and relevance in VET, and (iii) to provide good opportunities for continuous competence development. Their competence needs were also addressed from VET students' perspectives. Three groups of students were distinguished as posing specific competence challenges to the VET teachers: students with weak subject-related prerequisites to complete secondary education, students in special education, and students with weak skills in the Norwegian language and who have lived in Norway only a short time (MER, 2015, p. 15). VET teachers are to develop necessary skills and knowledge through participation in CET, which is of high-quality, flexible, and practice-based, as well as adjusted to participants' life situations (MER, 2018, p. 32). The VPT strategy has led to development of new CPD programs.

There are plenty of general CPD opportunities, with financial support available (e.g., to cover temporary employment, scholarships) as incentives (Cedefop, 2019), still CPD is not compulsory for VET teachers. More than half (55%) of VET teachers have expressed competence development needs regarding vulnerable students (Mogstad Aspøy et al., 2017, p. 91). However, the available CPD offer does not always match their needs: VET teachers experience the provision of CPD opportunities in secondary schools as being on the premises of general/academic teachers, insufficiently addressing the topics of vocational practice and developments in working life (Hiim, 2020). VET teachers prefer CPD by private actors, enterprises and alike, through staff-exchange ("hospitering") and work-based learning (Mogstad Aspøy et al., 2017). Cornerstones in the most recent initiative to competence development in special education and inclusive practice (Kompetanseløftet for spesialpedagogikk og inkluderende praksis), (Utdanningsdirektoratet [The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training], 2022) are not necessarily more numerous or better targeted CPD courses, but strong local multi-agency, multi-professional partnerships between the different stakeholders, involving special education professionals from teacher education establishments, securing tight communication and collaboration to the best of the children and youth. This measure was adopted following the critical evaluation of the special education system by the expert group (Nordahl et al., 2018).

### *Support available to VET teachers*

The broadening of the scope of competence requirements and stronger focus on pedagogy, described earlier, is associated with increasingly diverse student populations and, accordingly, their diverse needs. There is a common understanding across the four countries that, in such a situation, there is a need for organizational capacities (e.g., support staff) to support individual level capacities to meet the diverse needs of VET students to learn and complete their education, and to assist them in transition to employment. An overview of the main characteristics of the organizational level capacities available in the four countries is presented in Table 4, also indicating the main challenges in them.

**Table 4**

*Main Characteristics of the Organizational Level Capacities Available and Challenges in the Four Countries*

<b>Country</b>	<b>Main support staff</b>	<b>Other support available</b>	<b>Challenges in organizational support</b>
Estonia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- special- and social pedagogues and psychologists, yet often no on-site specialists available</li> <li>- sometimes a specific support unit in schools (e.g. counseling center)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'support services' by other staff, yet these too typically provided by teachers and group leaders</li> <li>- dormitory educators, hobby leaders, school nurses, librarians, youth leaders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- insufficiency of support staff, teachers must also play the role of "social workers"</li> <li>- poor management of support services</li> <li>- lack of public information</li> </ul>
Latvia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- designated support specialists for students</li> <li>- psychologist, social pedagogue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- information and counseling support for teachers, addressing issues concerning young people at risk</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- coordination of support among all stakeholders (school, support specialists, municipality, social care institutions)</li> <li>- rural areas often lack reasonable support</li> </ul>
Lithuania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- tutors of practical training</li> <li>- special- and social pedagogues and psychologists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- often no other support, calling for teachers to stretch their capacity also for socio-psychological support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- low and decreasing number of assistant pedagogical staff vis-à-vis increasing student needs for support</li> </ul>
Norway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- assistants for students</li> <li>- pedagogical-psychological services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'other pedagogical staff', their rate increasing</li> <li>- multi-agency, cross-sectoral collaboration for student support (e.g. social workers, health sector, Follow-Up-Service, The Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration, and employers)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- effectiveness of the support system in reaching all vulnerable students and their needs</li> </ul>



In Estonia, VET teachers have reported an observed trend of deteriorating social well-being of learners due to the low support of families (see Sirk et al., 2019). There were only 35 employees attributed to special support staff in VET schools in 2020–2021. Overall, the rate for students per VET teacher was much stronger, 12,7, than the rate for students per professional support staff, 730. It is worth noting that the Estonian Education Information System (EHIS) registers data only on support professionals with formal qualifications (e.g. special- and social pedagogues and psychologists). Therefore, the real numbers of staff in support services in VET institutions are higher, since other staff members, mainly VET teachers, perform the supporting role. The introduction of the new curricula in VET addressed the increasing variety of target groups – SEN students, students without basic education, and adult learners. Consequently, VET teachers face an increasing demand to perform the role of a “social worker” (e.g., Sirk et al., 2019), a role which they find difficult to adopt as it contradicts their previous teacher identity. VET schools are often set up to provide support services by other support personnel or these services have been granted although no specialist is working at the school site (Haaristo & Kirss, 2018, 8).

The provision of support services often involves different positions in the school, yet group leaders and teachers play a central role. There are four main approaches to the support system and the organization of support (Haaristo & Kirss, 2018, p. 45–46): 1) no on-site support specialists in the VET institution, students are mostly supported by teachers when needed; 2) support is provided by persons appointed by the school, for example, dormitory educators, hobby leaders, school nurses, librarians, youth leaders, etc. in addition to teachers and group leaders; 3) a support specialist employed by the school, for example, a social pedagogue or a psychologist, in addition to teachers and group leaders - often, one employee can simultaneously play several of these roles, and; 4) support provided by a team of different support specialists with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, in a separate support unit (for example, a counseling center, support services department) – common in schools with a more comprehensive, well-thought-out support system. This suggests that in most cases, support services are not well managed, and several bottlenecks have been identified: lack of awareness among school staff about the support available and insufficient support for teachers; scattered and often contradictory information on support across different documents, and necessary information for the student or his/her family is rarely available on the school website, and; school staff are often unaware of the school’s strategy to reduce dropouts, even if it is in place (Haaristo & Kirss, 2018, p. 45–46).

In Latvia, support staff for vulnerable students make up 2.8% of the total number of VET teaching staff (Valsts izglītības informācijas sistēma [National Education Information System], 2022). At the same time, in some VET institutions, specially designated persons, as their only job task, have to deal with the vulnerable students in regard to any problem that may arise. The survey by the Baltic Institute of Social Sciences (2014)

showed that 38% of VET teachers experienced support measures from school support staff (psychologist, social pedagogue, etc.) in resolving conflicts between students and between students and teachers, and in preventing ELET of VET students. Still, it is necessary to improve cooperation and teamwork between all stakeholders – school, support specialists, municipality, social care institutions – and enhance student well-being, satisfaction, and motivation. However, in small rural schools, there is a lack of support staff, due to the lack of resources. Support to teachers is available in the form of information and consultancy. To provide basic information about the system for prevention of risk for ELET, introductory seminars are being arranged for VET centers and their employees. They address common issues faced by young people at risk and help to understand the ELET problem and various risk-profiles, as well as the importance of cooperation and documentation of the student support processes and inform about available support measures. Teachers are also entitled to individual advice and supervision, support to cope with the challenges of their professional activities.

In Lithuania, the role of individualized support by VET teachers is of crucial importance to empower at-risk students in the context of the significant weaknesses of the neoliberal welfare state policy mechanisms in supporting them and their families. The situation is fragile and causes a lot of concern in the face of the growing numbers of at-risk learners in VET. Official statistics, published on the Education Management Information System, report a very low and decreasing number of tutors of practical training, signalling both the undefined legal occupational status of tutors and underdevelopment of apprenticeships and WBL, due to the recency of their introduction in initial VET. These factors significantly limit the potential of the VET system to support the employability and employment of vulnerable youth in VET. Particularly worrisome is the low and decreasing number of assistant pedagogical staff, such as social pedagogues, special pedagogues, and psychologists. For example, psychologists are working only in 17 of the 70 VET schools, although the number of psychologists working in the VET schools has been increasing in the last few years (Platūkytė, 2021). The ratio of SEN students per special pedagogue is also increasing, 41 in 2010/2011 vs. 125 in 2020/2021 (Education Management Information System, 2022). This implies that VET teachers increasingly deal with the provision of special support to vulnerable students under the circumstances of shortage of assistance and specialized teaching staff. Furthermore, a rather significant share of VET teachers still rarely supports vulnerable youth in their training pathways. In 2021 about a half (46.9%) of VET teachers rarely provided individualized training and counseling to students, about a third (32.7%) rarely accompanied students with special needs in their learning process, and 36.7% rarely adapted the learning environment to the special needs students (Tacconi et al., 2021).

In Norway the pedagogical support staff rate was 12.4% of teachers (8.5% of all staff) in upper secondary schools in 2020. Supporting pedagogical staff comprises primarily assistants and pedagogical-psychological services (PPT), and other staff. The rate of other

(than teachers) pedagogical staff has been increasing. There is a comprehensive policy and system in place, which enables support to all students, including in VET, according to their needs. Inclusive education is statutory, thus, cannot be opted out by teachers and schools. The support is relatively well resourced, but how effectively it manages to reach all students in need, at all levels of education, has recently been under discussion. VET students face less SEN than at the lower education system levels, but a recent study showed that in primary and secondary schools alone 1.3 million hours in special education are not being used for different reasons, mainly organizational (NRK, 2023).

Support to vulnerable students to complete their education is “layered” around the student, referring to multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral collaboration. The measures include increasing multi-agency collaboration between the actors in and around the school, strengthening of existing resources at schools, or both (Utdanningsdirektoratet [The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training], 2019; 2022). Cross-sectoral collaboration can incorporate social workers, health sector, Follow-Up-Service (Oppfølgingstjenesten [The Follow-Up Service]), The Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration (NAV), and employers. Consequently, the support targeted at vulnerable students is commonly tailored to meet his/her individual needs, often multifaceted.

Thus, in practice, teachers and schools receive help, but the focus is on helping the student and on his/her specific support needs. Beyond this, teachers and other school staff are supported and protected by the Working Environment Act, including regulations concerning their health and safety (regarding work environment, working hours, etc.). Teachers as professional workers generally enjoy relatively high levels of autonomy, discretion, and decision-making influence (Lloyd & Payne, 2011, p. 30).

## Discussion and Conclusions

This study has examined the capacities of VET teachers and schools to support vulnerable students in meeting their needs related to learning, education completion, and smooth school-work transition. Comparing the findings across the countries, several observations can be made. First, regarding individual level capacities, there was a decreasing trend in 2015–2020 in all four countries in the availability of VET teachers and support staff to vulnerable students. The trend may reflect the facts that recruitment in teacher education in general is a challenge in all four countries, and that the complexity of VET teachers work is growing, due to an increasing share of vulnerable students, especially in the Baltic countries. Ageing and persistent gender disbalance also increase concerns about the potential of VET teaching staff to deal with the challenges posed by student vulnerability. Finally, HE studies by most VET teachers can be regarded as a significant empowering factor to deal with supporting vulnerable students.

Second, when it comes to institutional capacities, displayed in the policies and national curricula in teacher education and CPD, the main form for the former is similar, typically

HE, but with a large variation in the scope of studies in pedagogy across the countries. The requirement for teacher competence in the area of inclusion was common in all four countries but less in Lithuania, where the issues of inclusiveness and accessibility remain less important due to the strong neoliberal focus of VET policies (including VET teacher training) on the improvement of skills quality in the labor market and the attractiveness of the VET provision. Further, three common trends describe the LOs and PSs securing VET teachers' pedagogical competence: i) formalization of the VET teachers' qualifications in seeking to improve the status and quality of VET, ii) broadening scope of competence requirements and stronger focus on pedagogy, and iii) insufficient attention to VET teachers' pedagogical competence to provide adequate support to vulnerable students. Thus, efforts to "standardize" VET teachers' PC and developments, expanding the concept and adding the complexity to their roles, are parallel in these countries.

Third, we found a clear difference in the CPD of VET teachers in the areas of support to vulnerable students between the Baltics and Norway. In the case of the former, it ranged from the random and market-based provision of CPD, combined with a dominant role of VET providers and the cooperation of VET teachers in Lithuania, to the efforts of standardization of the content of the CPD in Estonia, and the implementation of the national, ESF supported, CPD project (PUMPURS) in Latvia. Contrastingly, in Norway, a systemic and strategic organization and provision of general CPD are in place, based on a long-term planning by the state, an active involvement of social partners, and the availability of public funding.

Fourth, there was a large variation across the countries in the organizational capacities of the support available to VET teachers, both regarding the availability and profiles of supporting staff. While comparable statistics do not exist, a common observation was that the available support falls far behind the need for it. Consequently, support to (also) vulnerable VET students in the Baltic countries rests strongly on teachers' work, since the availability of support staff is limited. A main line of demarcation between the Baltic countries and Norway appeared to be their approach to support: the former has a stronger focus on supporting VET teachers, while in Norway the focus is on supporting the vulnerable students ("layers" around the students). Furthermore, there was a significant difference in the support provided to VET teachers regarding vulnerable students: while in the Baltic countries this support is mostly fragmented, random, and strongly depends on the initiatives of the VET providers, in Norway it is well-functioning, systemic, and well institutionalized, enhanced by the balanced involvement of all stakeholders, including state and social partners.

From the perspective of the institutional models of skills formation (Busemeyer & Trampush, 2011; Gonon & Bürgi, 2020), the above-mentioned differences of the roles and capacities of VET teachers and schools to support and empower vulnerable students can be explained by the different strategic and political-economic orientations of the VET provision. The VET systems of the Baltic countries are rather strongly oriented to the

neoliberal agenda of economic development, not prioritizing support to vulnerable students, but considering it as a responsibility of a VET provider and a teacher, to be managed by their resources and capacities, with the focus of VET teacher training being on their vocational/technological competencies. This trend is partially attenuated and contrasted with the influence of EU policies and funded programs, when the authorities or VET providers use EU support for the capacity building and the development of support to vulnerable students (the case of PUMPURS in Latvia). Norway, as a typical Nordic welfare state, has a more balanced view on the role of VET teachers' in developing human capital and facilitating social integration of all students, especially vulnerable ones. As a result, systemic institutional mechanisms of pedagogical, psychological, and social support to vulnerable students are operating and well-funded by the state, and implemented by VET teaching staff, in partnership with a broad range of relevant stakeholders.

The Nordic welfare model, together with a collective skill formation approach, significantly fosters strategic and systemic approaches to the capacity development of VET teachers and schools to support vulnerable students. Neoliberal and market-oriented approaches (Rekkor et al., 2013; Tütlys et al., 2022) to VET reforms in the Baltics make support to vulnerable students of secondary importance, leading to a fragmented capacity building of VET teachers, by making VET teachers and schools solely responsible for dealing with them.

The potential of policy learning between the Baltic countries and Norway is obviously limited by the above-indicated differences in skill formation institutions and their settings. Nevertheless, several areas of such policy learning can be proposed. First, within institutional capacity building, VET policy makers and providers in the Baltic countries could adopt an understanding of the strategic importance of VET teachers' capacities in supporting vulnerable students, creating preconditions for systemic policies and actions in this field with balanced involvement of the state, VET providers, and social partners. Second, making the individual level capacities of VET teachers in Norway an integral part of the individualized and preventive educational and psychosocial support interventions could serve as a source of inspiration for the policy makers and VET providers in the Baltics, where the pedagogical support of VET teachers often is detached from the fragmented psychological and social support provided by support staff and the state.

Methodologically, the comparison of the individual level capacities of VET teachers and their ramifications across the four countries appeared to be a challenging endeavour. First, finding systematic, reliable, and cross-nationally comparable data on VET teachers' availability, competence, and competence development through initial teacher training and CPD, has been difficult (see also Cedefop, 2009; Hiim, 2020). The second challenge was the limited knowledge about vulnerable students in secondary education from VET teachers or schools perspective, as also concluded in a Norwegian study on inclusion (Nordahl et al., 2018, p. 144). Followingly, there is relatively little research about organizational capacities on how to help schools better adjust to vulnerable students in

VET. Rather, studies on school drop-out to a high extent concern students, who have been previously receiving special education (Nordahl et al., 2018). Future research should seek to fill these knowledge gaps.

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# Profesijos mokytojų ir profesinių mokyklų pajėgumai sprendžiant socialinę atskirtį patiriančių mokinių problemas Baltijos šalyse ir Norvegijoje

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## Santrauka

Šio straipsnio tikslas – įvertinti profesinio rengimo sistemos mokytojų ir mokyklų pajėgumus padėti socialinę atskirtį patiriantiems mokiniams Estijoje, Latvijoje, Lietuvoje ir Norvegijoje, atsižvelgiant į du skirtingus politinius ir ekonominius įgūdžių formavimo modelius. Reagavimas į pažeidžiamų mokinių mokymosi ir paramos jiems poreikius yra labai aktuali tema, kadangi įtraukusis profesinis rengimas yra vienas iš Europos politikos prioritetų.

Tyrime, analizuojant trijų Baltijos šalių ir Norvegijos dokumentus ir statistinius duomenis, nagrinėti institucinio, organizacinio ir individualaus lygmens pajėgumai, remiantis UNESCO parengtomis gebėjimų ugdymo švietime gairėmis (UNESCO, 2012). Analizė atskleidė ne tik Norvegijos ir Baltijos šalių ryškius skirtumus, bet ir skirtumus tarp Baltijos šalių. Norvegijoje profesijos mokytojų pajėgumus stiprina ir palaiko turimi žmogiškieji ištekliai, sisteminis dėmesys profesijos mokytojų kompetencijų tobulinimo poreikiams ir patikima institucinė, tarpžinybinė, bendradarbiavimu grįsta parama. Baltijos šalyse profesijos mokytojų rėmimo priemonės yra daug fragmentiškesnės ir priklauso nuo organizacinių ir individualių mokyklų bei pačių mokytojų iniciatyvų.

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**Esminiai žodžiai:** *profesinio mokymo mokytojai, pažeidžiamas jaunimas, profesinio mokymo mokinių įgalinimas, profesinė integracija, jaunimo integracija į darbo rinką.*

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