

The Role of Policy, Services and Stakeholders in Supporting VET Systems: Cross Country Comparative Report

Skills2Capabilities Report

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ABSTRACT

This report presents a cross-country comparative analysis of career guidance and counselling services embedded in VET systems. It examines how national contexts and skills formation systems shape the design, delivery and strategic integration of career guidance services, particularly in response to economic disruptions, technological change and demographic shifts. Drawing on desk-based reviews and country case studies from Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Norway, and England (UK), the report explores how career guidance services are organised, managed and delivered to support individuals considering, engaging in and transitioning from VET. The findings highlight varied governance structures, legal entitlements, and delivery models, as well as the growing role of digital platforms in enhancing access and personalisation. The report concludes with policy recommendations aimed at strengthening career guidance and counselling provision, contributing to coherent, inclusive, and adaptable VET systems.

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Skills2Capabilities, a Horizon Europe study, is about understanding how skills systems need to develop if they are to assist people to make labour market transitions – i.e. between jobs, employers or sectors – and thereby reduce the level of skill mismatch which might otherwise arise.

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Contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1. Overview of work package 7	2
1.2. Work package 7 objectives	3
1.3. Approach to study	3
1.3.1. Analytical framework and its application	3
1.3.2. Study phases	4
1.3.3. Limitations of the study	5
1.3.4. Future research directions	6
2. Key findings: The role of policy, services, and stakeholders in supporting VET systems.....	7
3. Cross-country comparisons in career guidance and counselling services in VET systems.....	8
3.1. Career guidance and counselling legislation and strategies in VET systems.....	12
3.1.1. Systemic integration of lifelong guidance in VET systems	13
3.1.2. Devolved integration of career guidance and counselling services in VET systems	14
3.1.3. Fragmented and differentiated career guidance and counselling in VET	15
3.2. Entitlements to career guidance and counselling services in VET systems	16
3.3. Career guidance and counselling delivery models in VET systems	17
3.3.1. Integrated, holistic, and multidisciplinary career guidance and counselling models	17
3.3.2. Outreach and community-based career guidance and counselling models	18
3.3.3. Programme-based career guidance and counselling models.....	19
3.3.4. Hybrid models of career guidance and counselling with local integration and peer engagement.....	19
3.4. Digitalisation of career guidance and counselling services in VET systems	20
3.4.1. Digital maturity of career guidance and counselling services	25
4. The impact of national contexts and skills formation systems on transitions in VET and strategies for addressing skills mismatch	28
5. The impact of economic and social changes on VET systems and skills mismatch responses	31
6. Recommendations.....	34
References.....	36

List of figures

Figure 3.1: Digital maturity of career guidance and counselling services	26
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List of tables

Table 3.1: Cross-country comparison of career guidance and counselling services in VET systems.....	9
Table 3.2: Digitalisation of careers guidance and counselling, digital tools and platforms.....	21

1. Introduction

This cross-country comparative report addresses the growing recognition that lifelong guidance¹ is a critical component of vocational education and training (VET) systems, particularly in the context of economic disruption, technological and demographic change. The study explores how national contexts and skills formation systems shape the design and delivery of career guidance and counselling services, and how these systems address skills mismatches at local, regional, and national levels. Drawing on evidence from desk-based reviews and country case studies of practice, the report compares how career guidance and counselling services are organised, managed, and delivered in VET systems across the seven countries studied, including Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Norway, and England (UK). These services support individuals considering, engaging in and transitioning from VET within increasingly complex and dynamic labour markets.

This report aims to enhance understanding of how career guidance and counselling services can be effectively embedded within VET systems to support inclusive, responsive, and future-oriented skills development at national levels. It begins by outlining the aims, scope, and methodological approach, including the analytical framework and case study design. This is followed by a presentation of key findings in Section 2.

Section 3 examines how career guidance and counselling are integrated into VET systems through national legislation and strategic frameworks. It then discusses entitlements to career guidance and counselling in VET, and delivery models adopted across the countries studied, identifying three key approaches. The final part of this section assesses the digitalisation of career guidance and counselling services, highlighting the role of digital tools and platforms in improving access and personalisation of career guidance and counselling services, while also addressing both innovative practices and systemic challenges.

The report then assesses the impact of national contexts and skills formation systems on VET transitions and strategies to address skills mismatches in section 4. Section 5 examines how recent economic and social changes have impacted the responsiveness of VET systems. The final section presents recommendations aimed at strengthening the provision of career guidance and counselling services for individuals considering, engaging in, and transitioning from VET. These recommendations aim to inform both national and EU-level policy development, contributing to the development of coherent, inclusive, and adaptable VET systems.

¹ Lifelong guidance refers to structured, accessible support systems that help individuals make informed decisions about education, training, and employment throughout their lives. It ensures that people of all ages can navigate transitions in learning and work, contributing to more resilient labour markets and inclusive societies.

1.1. Overview of work package 7

Work package 7 is one of two work packages involved in researching the policy dimension, which links individuals to VET and adult learning provision. Work package 7 is specifically focused on career guidance and counselling policy and practice in VET systems. Contemporary labour markets are dynamic and complex; they are influenced by shocks such as the pandemic, war, political and societal changes, technological advancements, and economic fluctuations. Career guidance and counselling span different policy areas with growing evidence of the benefits of guidance at the individual, economic and societal levels (see for example, Cedefop, ETF, European Commission, ILO, OECD & UNESCO, 2021; Mayston, 2002; Percy & Dodd, 2021; Whiston, Mitts, & Li, 2019). As a policy, career guidance or lifelong guidance is seen as one instrument which countries can use to enhance education outcomes variously, reduce school dropout rates, improve individual transitions from education to the labour market, address social inclusion and equity, and reduce unemployment levels (see for example Hooley, Sultana, & Thomsen, 2018; Herdman et al., 2024; McCarthy, & Borbély-Pecze, 2021; OECD, 2004; Watts & Sultana, 2004).

Across Europe and internationally, nations have been working towards more developed systems of lifelong guidance (Barnes et al., 2020; Herdman et al., 2024; Kadletz et al., 2021). At a European level, developments in lifelong guidance have been driven by the 2004 Council of the European Union resolution on lifelong guidance and its 2008 resolution on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning² strategies. The establishment of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) (2015) guidelines for policies and systems development for lifelong guidance provided a reference toolkit in which policymakers and developers can systematise national guidance services and programmes. Recent research has reported that career development experts aspire to a more systemic and holistic approach to lifelong guidance (Kettunen et al., 2025), with several countries demonstrating progress towards developing such a system (Barnes et al., 2020). Alongside aspirations for more comprehensive lifelong guidance systems, there is recognition that supporting individual engagement with learning and skills development throughout their life course meets the needs of a changing labour market (OECD, 2021). However, a range of mechanisms need to be in place to support individual skills development, including legislation, strategy, funding, labour market information and key stakeholders.

Work package 7 addresses recent advances in lifelong guidance, with a focus on effective systems that convert resources into capabilities. This work package is designed to explore, using qualitative scientific methods, the role of policy, different stakeholders (such as career guidance and counselling practitioners, educators, trainers, employers, etc.), and services in VET systems to understand the

² Lifelong learning is the continuous development of skills, knowledge, and competencies across the lifespan. It encompasses formal, non-formal, and informal learning and is essential for economic competitiveness, social cohesion, and personal empowerment in rapidly changing labour markets

relationships between policy and practice at the national and regional level in seven case study countries. This will enable an understanding of how national VET systems are supported or overlooked by those delivering support programmes and services. The work package also assesses how these services could develop and evolve now and, in the future, to resolve skills demands and mismatches. Lifelong guidance can be seen as a building block in VET systems, supporting the delivery of services and those undertaking a VET transition with guidance and labour market information, including industrial insights and data on skills demands. It is, therefore, important to understand how VET systems are established, evolve and develop in response to changing labour markets, skills supply and skills demand.

1.2. Work package 7 objectives

- To understand the role of policy, service and stakeholders in supporting VET systems to better understand how services and support programmes are operating in the current environment in order to build better VET transitions.
- To examine lifelong learning and lifelong guidance (or career guidance and counselling) legislation and strategies at the national and EU level with a particular focus on support for VET systems and transitions.
- To explore the impacts of different national contexts and skills formation systems on fostering positive transitions in the VET system and the extent to which different regulatory constraints in countries under study result in distinct strategies for addressing skills mismatch.
- To explore the impact of current structures and dynamics in the economic and social environmental impact on national VET systems and what the implications of recent changes in these environments (for example, the COVID pandemic, economic and fiscal crises, industry trends, socio-demographic trends) entail for addressing skills mismatches at the local, regional and national level.
- To explore what areas of policy and delivery would benefit from greater intervention at a national and/or EU level.

1.3. Approach to study

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine career guidance and counselling within VET systems across seven European countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Norway, and the United Kingdom. These countries were selected to reflect diverse geographic regions, economic models, and VET structures. Political, social, economic and cultural contexts of these countries differ, so by examining specific elements or characteristics of a skills system and the role of career guidance and counselling in each country, variations between national systems can be appreciated and their formation better understood.

1.3.1. Analytical framework and its application

The analytical framework underpinning this study was developed from prior research on lifelong guidance systems and VET structures (Barnes et al., 2020; Cedefop/Hogarth et al., 2020; Kettunen et al., 2025). This framework was chosen as it provided a way to understand how a system is organised, coordinated, delivered, and structured, as well as identify key VET and career guidance stakeholders.

Moreover, the framework enabled systematic collection and analysis of VET systems across three dimensions: organisation, resources and stakeholders. Key elements examined included legislation, strategy, funding mechanisms, data utilisation, and the provision of career guidance services.

During the desk-based review phase, the framework facilitated comparative mapping of national systems, identifying structural features and gaps in provision. In the case study phase, it informed the design of semi-structured interview protocols and documentary analysis, ensuring consistency across diverse national contexts. The framework also supported cross-case synthesis by enabling thematic coding and comparative interpretation of findings, particularly regarding governance models, delivery approaches, and digitalisation in career guidance and counselling services. This structured application ensured analytical rigour while allowing for contextual nuance in interpreting national practices.

1.3.2. Study phases

The initial phase of this study involved a desk-based review synthesising extant academic and grey literature, policy documents, and institutional reports (Barnes, Kettunen, & Pullinen, 2024). A shared proforma, grounded in an analytical framework was operationalised across all country case studies to guide data collection and analysis.

Building on this mapping, the second phase of the study was designed to address gaps in our understanding of the implementation of career guidance and counselling services in VET through seven in-depth case studies (Barnes, Roy, Kettunen, & Pullinen, 2025). Each case study examined innovative practices in one country that support individuals considering, participating in, or transitioning from VET pathways. These studies investigated innovative practices and stakeholder collaborations, focusing on themes including:

- Organisation and management of career guidance and counselling in VET;
- Resourcing of career guidance provision in VET;
- Delivery of career guidance and support for VET;
- The application of labour market information and data to support those delivering career guidance services;
- Cooperation and collaborations in practice between stakeholders and actors in VET;
- Digitalisation of the provision of career guidance and counselling in VET systems.

Data collection combined documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews with key actors (including policy makers, career guidance service providers, educational leaders, teachers and employers). Ethical approval was secured, and research instruments, based on the analytical framework from the initial phase of the study, were designed.

Through country case studies, a diverse but converging landscape of VET innovation was revealed:

- Estonia is extending compulsory education to the age of 18, introducing flexible learning pathways, digital platforms, and integrated career guidance.
- Bulgaria is scaling up dual education, closely aligning vocational schools with local businesses to deliver real-world work experience, supporting learners' knowledge of the world of work and potential career paths.

- Austria's "*Vienna Weeks*" initiative brings education and guidance directly into communities, lowering access barriers to career support.
- Germany continues to strengthen local *Youth Employment Agencies* and peer-led career awareness via *Vocational Training Ambassadors*.
- Finland's "*Ohjaamo*" centres offer one-stop, low-threshold support for young people, integrating education, health, and employment services.
- Norway and the UK are piloting multi-agency approaches to learning tailored to fast-changing labour market needs to support sustainable careers.

These case studies highlight real-world examples of how VET initiatives and services are implemented, the strategies that are proving successful, and the challenges faced in delivering VET-related services, particularly those linked to lifelong guidance and learner support. Despite national differences, a few common threads emerged: the importance of employer engagement, multi-agency collaboration, and personalised, accessible career guidance and counselling.

The final phase of the study was an international workshop, where tentative research findings were presented (Kettunen & Barnes, 2025). Discussions contextualised the findings, facilitated cross-country dialogue, and highlighted shared trends in the provision of career guidance and counselling services across VET systems.

1.3.3. Limitations of the study

While this cross-country comparative report provides valuable insights into the integration of career guidance and counselling within VET systems, several limitations should be acknowledged to ensure transparency and contextualise the findings. First, the selection of case study countries was purposive, designed to reflect diversity in geography, governance structures, and VET system configurations. While this approach enables comparative analysis across varied contexts, it inherently limits the generalisability of findings to other EU member states, many of which operate under different lifelong guidance frameworks, educational systems, legislative environments, and policy priorities. Second, the quality and availability of data varied across the case studies. Countries such as Finland, Estonia, and Norway provided access to well-documented practices and benefited from established stakeholder networks and integrated digital infrastructures. In contrast, countries like Austria, Bulgaria, and England (UK) presented more fragmented or emergent systems, where documentation was less comprehensive and stakeholder engagement more variable. These disparities may have influenced the depth and consistency of analysis across cases. Finally, the study captures a temporal snapshot of VET systems and career guidance and counselling services during a period of significant economic, political, and social transformation. Some reforms and initiatives examined are in early stages of implementation, and their long-term outcomes remain uncertain. Conversely, in countries with more established systems, such as Germany and Finland, political shifts or funding constraints may pose risks to the sustainability and continuity of career guidance provision. These limitations do not detract from the value of the comparative insights presented but underscore the need for ongoing research, monitoring,

and policy dialogue to support the development of inclusive and resilient lifelong guidance systems across Europe.

1.3.4. Future research directions

Building on the findings and identified limitations, several avenues for future research emerge that could further advance understanding and inform policy and practice.

First, there is a need for longitudinal research to assess the outcomes of recent reforms and innovations, particularly in countries such as Estonia and Bulgaria, where systemic changes are still in early stages of implementation. Evaluating the long-term effectiveness of these reforms, especially in relation to learner transitions using both soft and hard outcome measures, skills alignment, and social inclusion, would provide evidence to guide future policy development.

Second, this study highlights significant variation in the digitalisation of career guidance and counselling services, with some countries demonstrating advanced integration and others still in developmental phases. Future research should explore the impact of digital tools on service accessibility, personalisation, and equity, particularly for marginalised groups. Comparative studies examining the interoperability of digital platforms and their alignment with labour market data could support the development of more inclusive and responsive digital ecosystems.

Third, the findings underscore the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration in delivering effective career guidance. Further investigation into the governance structures, funding mechanisms, and institutional arrangements that facilitate or hinder collaboration, especially in decentralised systems such as Germany and England, would enhance understanding of how partnerships can be leveraged to improve service delivery and outcomes.

Finally, as labour markets continue to evolve, there is a pressing need to examine how career guidance supports adult learners and mid-career transitions. Research focusing on flexible, personalised guidance models, such as those found in Finland’s “Ohjaamo” Centres or England’s Skills Bootcamps, could demonstrate how lifelong guidance systems can better respond to the needs of adults navigating disrupted career trajectories.

This final report presents a synthesis of the results, discusses key findings, and provides a set of recommendations.

2. Key findings: The role of policy, services, and stakeholders in supporting VET systems

- Recent economic and social conditions have prompted policy and practice to improve and enhance career guidance and counselling services:** The COVID-19 pandemic, fiscal constraints, and technological change have prompted changes to VET systems and the provision of career guidance and counselling services, with an increased emphasis on labour market alignment, flexible pathways, and adult upskilling. For instance, Estonia's education reform and Finland's Youth Guarantee are examples of practical responses to these changes. Similarly, initiatives targeting marginalised, disadvantaged groups (such as NEETs, migrants, or low-qualified adults) or the economically inactive, such as Austria's *Vienna Weeks* and Finland's "Ohjaamo" Centres, highlight the importance of accessible, community-based career guidance and counselling services. They promote social inclusion and reduce barriers to participation in VET.
- Legal entitlements to career guidance and counselling services:** All seven countries studied have legislation guaranteeing entitlements and access to career guidance and counselling services within VET systems. While some countries (such as Estonia, Finland, Germany, and Norway) have adopted comprehensive career guidance and counselling services available to individuals across the life course embedded in legislation), the others rely on entitlements to services linked to specific educational stages or transition points
- Integration of career guidance and counselling services into VET:** National strategies were found to embed lifelong guidance and lifelong learning within education and employment frameworks. All seven countries studied have national career guidance and VET strategies which provide a framework for the coordination and implementation of career guidance and counselling services. Countries with coherent legislation and strategies were found to have clear entitlements to career guidance and counselling services.
- Varied career guidance and counselling delivery models:** A range of delivery models, from systemic integration to targeted outreach and programme-specific interventions, were found in the case study countries. Effective systems (those with coherent legislation and national strategies), such as those in Estonia, Finland and Norway, combine stakeholder collaboration and personalised support. Other delivery models, like those in England (UK), highlight the need for greater integration and continuity. These models reflect differing governance structures and policy priorities.
- Digitalisation of career guidance and counselling services:** Countries were noted to be embracing digital platforms to support the provision of career guidance and counselling, with Estonia and Finland leading in systemic integration. Other countries were in various stages of progress, with some integrating digital platforms and tools into career guidance and counselling service delivery, while others were notably in the development stage. VET systems are well placed to benefit from these digital platforms.

3. Cross-country comparisons in career guidance and counselling services in VET systems

From the case studies, it is evident that countries have adopted varied legislative frameworks and strategies to embed and deliver career guidance and counselling services within their VET systems. These approaches reflect each country's priorities (variously on labour market needs, green and digital skills, inclusion and labour market alignment), governance (i.e., neoliberal, collective, statist, transitional or development) and structures. The cross-country comparison highlights how national contexts shape the integration of career guidance and counselling into VET systems. Table 3.1 provides an overview of key legislation, strategies, entitlements to career guidance and counselling services, primary stakeholders responsible for career guidance and counselling services and the digitalisation of services in VET systems.

Table 3.1: Cross-country comparison of career guidance and counselling services in VET systems

Country	Legislative	National career guidance and VET strategies	Entitlement to career guidance and counselling services	Stakeholders with responsibility for career guidance in VET	Digitalisation of career guidance and counselling services
Austria	<i>School Organisation Act, Vocational Training Act, Labour Market Service Act</i>	<i>National Lifelong Guidance Strategy (2006 – present), Lifelong Learning Strategy (LLL:2020), Strategy to Prevent Early Dropout. Strategy for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning, Qualification Plan Vienna 2030</i>	Explicit entitlements to career guidance services in schools and VET	Ministries, schools, public employment services, NGOs and social partners	Developing digital platforms and tools to support career guidance delivery and improve access to labour market information
Bulgaria	<i>VET Act, Preschool and School Education Act, Employment Promotion Act</i>	<i>Strategy for Development of VET (2015–2020), Strategic Vision for Dual VET by 2030, National Lifelong Learning Strategy, Employment Strategy of Bulgaria (2021–2030)</i>	Explicit entitlements to career guidance services in schools and VET	Ministries, municipalities, schools, VET providers and employers	Developing digital platforms
Estonia	<i>Education Act, Basic and Upper Secondary Schools Act, Compulsory Education Act, Vocational Education Institutions Act</i>	<i>Education Strategy 2035</i>	Explicit entitlements to lifelong guidance	Municipalities, schools, national services, digital platforms, and employer collaborations	Operates a unified digital platform for admissions, tracking, learning records and career guidance

Country	Legislative	National career guidance and VET strategies	Entitlement to career guidance and counselling services	Stakeholders with responsibility for career guidance in VET	Digitalisation of career guidance and counselling services
Finland	<i>Youth Act (1285/2016), Act on Vocational Education and Training (531/2017), Employment Services Reform (2025)</i>	<i>Lifelong Guidance Strategy 2020, Youth Guarantee 2013</i>	Explicit entitlements to lifelong guidance	Education institutions, Ministries, employers and regional actors	Complete integration of digital tools into career guidance services with data-driven approaches to service delivery
Germany	<i>Vocational Training Act, Social Code Books (regulating public employment services, vocational training, youth welfare services and social assistance)</i>	<i>Federal Government's skilled labour strategy (2022), National Skills Strategy, Pact for Vocational Training The Pact for Vocational Schools, Alliance for Initial and Further Training (2023-2026)</i>	Explicit entitlements to career guidance services in schools and VET (decentralised service delivery model)	Chambers, ministries, municipal governments, educational institutions, vocational training centres and colleges, public employment services, employers, youth welfare agencies, NGOs	Integrating digital tools into career guidance to modernise VET and improve access to personalised guidance, labour market alignment, and cross-sectoral coordination

Country	Legislative	National career guidance and VET strategies	Entitlement to career guidance and counselling services	Stakeholders with responsibility for career guidance in VET	Digitalisation of career guidance and counselling services
Norway	The Education Act, the Introduction Act, and the Nav Act	<i>National Skills Strategy (2017-2021), Norway in Transition (NOU 2016:7), Digital Strategy for Career Guidance</i>	Explicit entitlements to lifelong guidance with a focus on individualised learning pathways (devolved service delivery model)	Regional partnerships, local cooperative agreements, county administrations, career centres, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, and educational institutions	Complete integration of digital tools into career guidance services with labour market data
England, UK	<i>The Education (Careers Guidance in Schools) Act 2022, Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022, The Technical and Further Education Act 2017, The Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009, The Enterprise Act 2016</i>	<i>Careers Strategy: Making the Most of Everyone's Skills and Talents (2017), Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth (2021), Youth Employment Strategy and NEET Reduction Initiatives</i>	Explicit entitlements to career guidance in schools and colleges (devolved service delivery model)	Local authorities, educational institutions, national careers services, employers, local partnerships and training providers	Differentiated integration of digital tools into career guidance services, with national, regional and local digital platforms

3.1. Career guidance and counselling legislation and strategies in VET systems



All the case study countries have established legislative frameworks that embed career guidance and counselling within VET systems. These laws define entitlements, responsibilities, and quality standards, ensuring that career guidance and counselling services are integrated into VET systems.

Across the seven countries studied, legislation and national strategies play a foundational role in shaping the integration of career guidance and counselling services within VET systems. Countries such as Finland, Estonia, and Bulgaria have embedded career guidance into national education laws, ensuring structured and

legally binding frameworks that promote continuity, accountability, and alignment with broader educational and labour market reforms. In Finland, Estonia and Bulgaria, legislation ensures the integration of career guidance and counselling services into VET systems, set out entitlements to services for those considering, engaging in and transitioning from VET. In these instances, career guidance and counselling services are a core component of the VET system. Similarly, in Germany, legislation and strategies provide an established framework for the integration of career guidance and counselling services. In Norway, the *Education Act* and the *Nav Act* support lifelong and individualised career guidance through regional partnerships. In England, UK, legislation, including the *Education (Careers Guidance in Schools) Act* and the *Technical and Further Education Act*, mandates career guidance and counselling. However, there is a fragmented and devolved delivery model.

National strategies reinforce legislation setting policy direction and operational priorities. For example, in Finland, the *Lifelong Guidance Strategy* and *Youth Guarantee*, in Estonia, the *Education Strategy 2035*, and in Bulgaria, the *Strategic Vision for Dual VET by 2030*, provide comprehensive approaches to integrating career guidance and counselling services within lifelong learning and workforce development agendas. In Germany, the *National Skills Strategy* and *Pact for Vocational Training*, in Norway, the *National Skills Strategy* and *NOU 2016:7*, and in England, UK, the *Careers Strategy and Skills for Jobs* plan similarly aim to enhance access to and the quality of career guidance and counselling to support VET pathways. These strategies promote cross-sectoral collaboration, employer engagement, and access, though in practice, the degree of integration and coherence across national and regional levels varies. Collectively, the legislative and strategic frameworks across these countries studied highlight the importance of embedding career guidance and counselling services within broader educational and employment systems to support informed transitions and lifelong career development, in which VET is one potential pathway.

The following provides country examples of how legislation informs how career guidance and counselling services have been variously integrated into VET systems, whether there is systemic integration, devolved integration or differentiated and fragmented provision.

3.1.1. Systemic integration of lifelong guidance in VET systems

Countries, such as Bulgaria, Estonia, and Finland, have embedded lifelong guidance within national education legislation. These structured and legally binding frameworks demonstrate strong policy coherence and institutional commitment, ensuring continuity, accountability, and alignment with broader educational and labour market reforms. These models can be viewed as effective in supporting the transitions of young people and vulnerable groups, and offer replicable frameworks for other countries seeking systemic reform.

Bulgaria has established a comprehensive legislative framework to support VET (with dual education as its specific form) and career guidance. The *Preschool and School Education Act* recognises work-based learning as a valid educational pathway and includes career guidance and counselling as part of development support in schools. At the same time, the *Vocational Education and Training Act* outlines the structure of dual education, including the roles of mentors, educators and the conditions for employer participation. It includes careers guidance as part of VET. *The Labour Code* regulates internship contracts and student remuneration, providing legal protection for learners. Efforts are being made through legislative changes and strategic documents to support career guidance and counselling. *The Strategic Vision for Developing Dual-track VET by 2030* reinforces the legislative framework and promotes business-led learning, flexible formats, and targeted support for vulnerable groups. These strategies promote coordinated stakeholder engagement, inclusive access, and alignment with labour market needs, as well as detailing conditions for employer participation and the maintenance of national databases.

In Bulgaria, VET employers play a key role in mentoring learners (especially in dual education) as well as feeding into curriculum design and student assessments. Learners within this education system receive career guidance and counselling, and transition support often tailored to local labour market needs. Career guidance and counselling are available to all, but are specifically aimed at those not in education, employment or training (NEETs), those from low-income families and ethnic minorities at risk of dropping out of school.

Estonia undertook significant legislative reform to strengthen its VET system and career guidance and counselling provision in 2024. Amendments to the *Education Act*, *Basic and Upper Secondary Schools Act*, and *Vocational Education Institutions Act* extended compulsory education to age 18, reinforcing the country's commitment to inclusive education. A key innovation is the *Preparatory Studies Programme*, which offers flexible pathways for students uncertain about their post-compulsory education choices, aligned with Estonia's emphasis on inclusive and personalised career guidance. Strategic direction is provided by the *Education Development Plan 2021-2035* and "OSKA" labour market forecasts, which inform curriculum development and career guidance and counselling services. The "OSKA" forecasts analyse the skills needed in the labour market by sector and inform career guidance, curriculum design, and strategic planning. This ensures that the VET system is relevant and responsive to the labour market.

Overall, the legislative framework and national strategies support inclusive education, define employer involvement and reinforce the integration of career guidance and counselling services in supporting

transitions and reducing dropouts. The education system aims to support early intervention, flexible pathways, and recognition of prior learning. Lifelong guidance is available to all through schools and public employment services.

Finland integrates lifelong guidance through legislation such as the *Youth Act (1285/2016)*, which directs municipalities to provide youth services, including career guidance and counselling services. *The Act on Vocational Education and Training (531/2017)* ensures that VET learners have the right to receive career guidance as part of their educational pathway. Local access and integration of employment services and career guidance is with municipalities, as set out in the *Employment Services Reform (2025)*. *The Youth Guarantee (2013)* ensures that individuals under 25 receive offers of employment, education, or rehabilitation within three months of unemployment. Finland's *Lifelong Guidance Strategy (2020)* promotes career planning across the life course. These strategies are aligned with broader lifelong learning and labour market policies of Finland.

Similar to Estonia and Bulgaria, Finnish career guidance and counselling services are designed to support NEET youth, early school leavers, and those with migrant backgrounds. Career guidance is personalised and inclusive, addressing both educational and social needs. Labour market data informs career guidance services and curriculum development, ensuring that VET is relevant to labour market needs. Services are delivered through “Ohjaamo” Centres, which are one-stop career guidance hubs embedded in municipal youth services and coordinated nationally through the “KEHA” Centre. Career guidance is a core component of the holistic support offered by these centres. *The Employment Services Reform (2025)* consolidated service delivery by transferring employment services to municipalities, enhancing structural integration and accessibility.

3.1.2. Devolved integration of career guidance and counselling services in VET systems

In Austria, Germany, and Norway, career guidance and counselling services within VET systems are characterised by devolved governance. Services are integrated into VET systems and delivered through regional partnerships, local initiatives, and cooperative agreements. These approaches emphasise flexibility and responsiveness, enabling services to adapt to regional labour market needs and demographic shifts. Stakeholder collaborations, among schools, employment services, municipalities, and employers, have a central role in ensuring that career guidance and counselling are inclusive, context-sensitive, and accessible, particularly for underserved populations. By embedding career guidance within regional networks and outreach programmes, these systems promote lifelong learning and vocational transitions, especially for adults and marginalised groups.

In **Austria**, career guidance and counselling services are embedded in national legislation, including the *School Organisation Act*, the *Vocational Training Act* and the *Labour Market Service Act*. Together, this legislative framework regulates vocational orientation and career guidance in schools and public employment services, outlines the role of the employer in apprenticeship training, and directs the Austrian Public Employment Service (AMS) to provide labour market information. National strategies support the integration of career guidance and counselling services in the VET system, including the *National Lifelong Guidance Strategy (2006 to present)* and *Lifelong Learning Strategy (LLL:2020)*. Strategies are aimed at reducing early school leaving and improving qualification levels among low-

skilled adults. The legislative framework promotes inclusive access, lifelong learning, and coordinated stakeholder involvement. Career guidance and counselling services are provided to multiple stakeholders, prioritising community-based approaches. For instance, outreach initiatives, such as the *Vienna Weeks* and *FutureFitFestival*, provide low-threshold access to career guidance and counselling via public events and district-level cooperation. Services are targeted at migrants, NEET and low-qualified adults. They are funded by federal and municipal resources, the European Social Fund (ESF), employer contributions and the third sector (for disadvantaged groups).

In **Norway**, there is also a devolved integration model, where career guidance and counselling services are embedded within a strong legislative and strategic framework. The *Education Act*, the *Introduction Act*, and the *Nav Act* provide the legal framework for career guidance and counselling services, with explicit entitlements to lifelong guidance supporting individualised learning pathways. The *National Skills Strategy (2017-2021)*, *Norway in Transition (NOU 2016:7)*, and *Digital Strategy for Career Guidance* are key to guiding the delivery of services at a regional level. The aim of career guidance and counselling services is to support lifelong learning, labour market inclusion, and social equity. Career guidance and counselling services bring together the *Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration* (Nav), career centres, and upper secondary schools. Services are delivered through regional partnerships and local cooperative agreements (such as the “Trøndelag” Model), which prioritise regional labour market inclusion and adult skills development, with Nav advisors and career centres operating within a shared framework to provide integrated support.

Germany is unique as it adopts a decentralised, cooperative model for career guidance and counselling services in their VET system. Legislation, such as the *Vocational Training Act (BBiG)* and various *Social Code Books (SGB II, III, VIII, IX)*, regulates vocational training, employment services, youth welfare, and social inclusion in Germany. The *National Skills Strategy*, the *Pact for Vocational Training*, and the *Alliance for Initial and Further Training (2023–2026)* promote cross-sectoral collaboration, employer engagement, and regional responsiveness. This framework establishes explicit entitlements to career guidance and counselling within schools and VET institutions. The decentralised nature of service delivery means that implementation varies across federal states and municipalities. It aims to ensure the quality of training, equal opportunities and the social protection of children and young people. *Youth Employment Agencies* (“Jugendberufsagenturen”) and *Vocational Training Ambassadors* (“Ausbildungsbotschafter”) are key mechanisms for delivering integrated and locally tailored career guidance and counselling services. *Vocational Training Ambassadors* (“Ausbildungsbotschafter”), supported by local Chambers of Commerce, promote vocational pathways through peer-led engagement. These initiatives are embedded within federal and state programmes that facilitate school-to-work transitions. This exemplifies a locally responsive and holistic career guidance.

3.1.3. Fragmented and differentiated career guidance and counselling in VET

In the United Kingdom, the legislative framework supporting career guidance and counselling in VET systems is fragmented and complex due to devolved governance structures. Each of the four nations (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) has its own regulatory and quality assurance bodies, resulting in a diverse and often fragmented system.

In England, UK, legislation underpins the provision of career guidance and counselling in VET. The *Education (Careers Guidance in Schools) Act 2022* extended the statutory duty for schools in England to provide independent careers guidance to learners from Year 8 through to Year 13. This builds on earlier legislation, the *Technical and Further Education Act 2017*, which introduced the *Baker Clause*. This clause requires schools to give training providers and colleges access to learners to inform them about technical education and apprenticeship opportunities. The *Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009* provided a foundation for a statutory framework for apprenticeships and established key bodies to oversee vocational qualifications. Plus, the *Enterprise Act 2016* introduced measures to support employer-led apprenticeships and created the Institute for Apprenticeships, reinforcing the link between vocational training and labour market needs.

Together, this legislation aims to ensure that learners are informed about vocational pathways and have access to career guidance and counselling at critical transition points in their educational and work pathways. However, the system remains somewhat fragmented, with variations in delivery and access across regions and institutions. This highlights the ongoing need for greater coherence and integration in the UK's approach to career guidance within VET.

In summary, Bulgaria, Estonia, and Finland exemplify how lifelong guidance and counselling can be integrated into VET systems through legislation and national strategies. These structured, legally embedded approaches ensure continuity, accountability, and inclusivity. The findings reveal a variety of approaches, from embedded school-based guidance to regional outreach and integrated service hubs, reflecting diverse policy priorities and socio-economic conditions. These country approaches highlight the importance of coherent policy and institutional commitment in supporting effective career transitions for those considering and engaging in VET. The UK exemplifies how a strong legislation framework supporting VET systems has been developed and responsibility devolved. However, career guidance and counselling services are fragmented, with greater integration needed. Austria, Germany, and Norway demonstrate how strategic partnerships and regional collaboration can effectively deliver career guidance and counselling services. Their models demonstrate flexibility, local innovation, and inclusivity, particularly for adult learners and underserved groups.

3.2. Entitlements to career guidance and counselling services in VET systems

In all of the countries studied, entitlements to career guidance and counselling services within VET systems are generally well-established. **Estonia** and **Finland** are unique compared to other as there is a strong commitment to lifelong guidance so there is continuous support across for all of course their life course.

In Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, and Germany, there are explicit entitlements to services embedded into national legislation, ensuring that learners in schools and VET programmes have access to structured career guidance and counselling services. In **Austria**, legal entitlements to career guidance and counselling ensure that services are embedded in the formal education system, particularly in the context of early career orientation and vocational decision-making. **Germany** guarantees access to career guidance and counselling in schools and VET, but its decentralised service delivery model means that implementation can vary across regions. In **Bulgaria**, the legislative

framework similarly ensures access to career guidance and counselling services within formal education settings, with services integrated into vocational education.

In Norway and England (UK), there are also explicit entitlements to career guidance and counselling, though both operate under devolved service delivery models. In **Norway**, the entitlement is framed around lifelong guidance with a focus on individualised learning pathways, delivered through regional partnerships and coordinated by career centres and the *Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration* (Nav). In **England**, UK, entitlements are defined through statutory duties placed on schools and colleges, particularly under the *Education (Careers Guidance in Schools) Act 2022* and related legislation. However, the fragmented nature of governance across the UK results in uneven access, with delivery varying by region. Despite these differences, both countries recognise the importance of career guidance and counselling services in supporting transitions into education, training, and employment.

Overall, the presence of legal entitlements across these countries reflect a shared understanding of career guidance and counselling as a public good which supports educational equity and labour market participation. While some countries have adopted comprehensive, lifelong guidance models embedded in national legislation, others rely on entitlements linked to specific educational stages, transition points or programmes. The effectiveness of entitlements depends on the legislation framework and on the coherence of career guidance and counselling service delivery, and the extent to which career guidance and counselling is integrated with broader social and employment support systems.

3.3. Career guidance and counselling delivery models in VET systems

The delivery models for career guidance and counselling in VET systems vary across the countries studied. These models reflect differing national legislative frameworks, policy infrastructures and strategies. Each model offers distinct strengths and challenges, reflecting the diversity of approaches to supporting individuals in navigating VET educational pathways.

3.3.1. Integrated, holistic, and multidisciplinary career guidance and counselling models



Finland, Estonia and Norway have developed integrated systems that deliver career guidance through multidisciplinary teams and cross-sectoral collaboration. The focus is on holistic support that addresses not only educational and employment needs but also social, psychological, and health-related factors. These models reflect a commitment to inclusive, person-centred guidance that supports individuals across multiple dimensions of life. By integrating services and fostering collaboration among stakeholders, these countries address the complex realities of youth transitions and adult re-skilling. Their approaches reach NEET populations and those facing multiple barriers to participation.

Estonia's strategic focus is on systemic reform to reduce dropouts and enhance the attractiveness of VET. Career guidance is delivered through unified digital platforms, including admissions and tracking

systems, and is supported by the recognition of non-formal learning. The Preparatory Studies Programme offers targeted support for undecided students, ensuring that career guidance is responsive to individual aspirations and capacities.

Finland provides integrated, low-threshold career guidance for youth aged under 30 years through “Ohjaamo” Centres. These multidisciplinary hubs offer holistic support, addressing education, employment, health, and social needs. The model is data-driven and participatory, with youth involvement in service design and evaluation. “Ohjaamo” centres exemplify a comprehensive approach to guidance, bridging institutional silos and fostering coherent transitions.

Norway emphasises lifelong guidance through regional partnerships. Regional initiatives, such as the “Trøndelag” Model, facilitate tailored VET pathways for adults, particularly those unemployed or seeking re-entry into education, with Nav advisors and career centres collaborating to create individualised learning trajectories. The model emphasises labour market alignment. Career guidance is integrated into employment services, with a focus on supporting job seekers through education and training. Challenges include maintaining employer engagement and navigating data protection regulations.

3.3.2. Outreach and community-based career guidance and counselling models



Austria and Bulgaria focus on outreach and community engagement to deliver career guidance, often targeting underserved or marginalised groups. Guidance is embedded in local networks and delivered through schools, public events, and employer partnerships. These models prioritise accessibility and relevance, using outreach strategies to engage populations that may not seek guidance through formal channels. By situating guidance within communities and leveraging local partnerships, Austria and Bulgaria create inclusive environments that support vocational decision-making and skill development.

Austria delivers lifelong guidance through public events and district-level cooperation. The *Vienna Weeks* and *FutureFitFestival* initiatives target migrants, NEETs, and low-qualified adults, offering accessible information and counselling in familiar community settings. Strong regional coordination and stakeholder engagement underpin the success of this outreach model, which prioritises inclusivity and empowerment.

Career guidance in **Bulgaria** is closely tied to the vocational education model, with schools partnering directly with employers to provide real-world training and work experience. Career guidance and counselling is embedded within school activities and supported by regional education departments. The involvement of employers in curriculum design and student mentoring positions provides career guidance and counselling as a tool for workforce development and youth employment. The emphasis is on preparing students for local labour market needs and facilitating transitions into employment.

3.3.3. Programme-based career guidance and counselling models



Career guidance and counselling in the UK, specifically in England, are fragmented and provided at key education and work transition points. Educational institutions or the national careers service often provide career guidance and counselling for those considering and undertaking VET. For those undertaking VET, England adopts a programme-based approach to career guidance. Career guidance and advice can be embedded within adult skills programmes delivered through local partnerships between educational institutions, career service providers and employers.

For outcome-based short training aligned with employer needs, wraparound support services are provided. While formal career guidance and counselling is limited in these programmes, the emphasis on job readiness and inclusivity, particularly for underrepresented groups, positions guidance as a functional component of adult upskilling. This model reflects a pragmatic, labour market-oriented strategy. Career guidance and counselling is treated as part of the training programmes rather than a standalone service. While efficient and responsive to employer demands, the model may lack the continuity of more integrated systems, particularly in supporting long-term career development and addressing broader social needs.

3.3.4. Hybrid models of career guidance and counselling with local integration and peer engagement



Germany's strategy and delivery model are best described as a hybrid that blends the decentralised, outreach-oriented strategies (similar to Austria and Bulgaria) with an integrated and more holistic approach with cross-sectoral collaboration (similar to Finland and Norway). The strength of this hybrid lies in the adaptability of local partnerships and the innovative use of peer-led career guidance. Germany's dual focus combines structural support through *Youth Employment Agencies* and personal engagement through *Vocational Training Ambassadors*. *Youth Employment Agencies* offer holistic,

locally tailored services for youth aged 15-25 years, addressing both educational and social needs. *Vocational Training Ambassadors* provide peer-to-peer vocational promotion, leveraging the relatability of young apprentices to inspire students. These initiatives highlight the importance of both institutional integration and personal storytelling in career guidance.

Within the countries studied, four models for delivering career guidance and counselling in VET systems were identified. Integrated models in Finland, Estonia, and Norway deliver holistic, person-centred support through cross-sectoral collaboration. Austria and Bulgaria focus on outreach and community engagement, targeting marginalised groups. England's programme-based model integrates career guidance and counselling services with VET programmes that align with the labour market. However, Germany's hybrid approach combines integrated and outreach models. It features structural

support with peer-led initiatives, which support both institutional coordination and personal engagement. Together, these models illustrate the importance of tailoring career guidance and counselling services, ensuring accessibility, relevance, and impact across diverse populations.

3.4. Digitalisation of career guidance and counselling services in VET systems

Across the seven countries studied, the digitalisation of career guidance and counselling services in VET systems reflects national legislation and strategies. Digitalisation is embedded in broader policy frameworks with the aim of enhancing career guidance and counselling service delivery, enabling access to services and providing data and information on learning pathways and labour market opportunities. As digital tools increasingly shape how individuals access information and support, digitalisation is emerging as both a driver and an enabler of lifelong guidance systems. It affects not only the efficiency of service delivery but also its inclusivity, accessibility, and capacity for personalisation. However, the implementation of digital tools and platforms tailored explicitly to VET career guidance and counselling is limited and uneven.

Evidence from the case studies suggests that few countries have developed coherent, integrated digital ecosystems for career guidance and counselling support. Existing digital tools tend to be fragmented, generic, and insufficiently aligned with the specific needs of individuals considering, engaging in, or transitioning from VET. For instance, Estonia's "OSKA" labour market forecasting system and Austria's *AMS JobBarometer* provide valuable labour market intelligence, but their integration into personalised career guidance and counselling services is underdeveloped. Similarly, in England, whilst the *Skills Bootcamps* provide wraparound support, there was limited evidence of digital career guidance and counselling tools or an infrastructure.

Table 3.2 provides an assessment of the digitalisation of career guidance and counselling services and a selected list of portal and digital tools currently offered.

Table 3.2: Digitalisation of careers guidance and counselling, digital tools and platforms

Country	Digitalisation of career guidance and counselling services	Selected examples of digital tools and platforms
Austria	Developing digital platforms and tools to support career guidance and counselling delivery and improve access to labour market information	• <i>AMS.at</i> – public employment service portal • “Mein Beruf – meine Zukunft” – AMS portal aimed at young people called ‘<i>My job – my future</i>’ offering access to information about education, apprenticeships, training programmes, job search, career path and job market trends • <i>AMS JobBarometer</i> – a portal that offers detailed forecasts on the job market and competence demands • <i>Euraxess.at</i> – Austrian career service centres portal providing access to career tools, resources, career orientation tool and career handbook for young people • <i>18plus.at</i> – career and study checker tool supporting those making educational and career choices • Portals providing access to career guidance and counselling information: ○ “Eltern in der Bildungs- und Berufswahl” (for parents on education and career choices) ○ “Arbeitswelt 4.0” (world of work) ○ “Bildungs- und Berufsorientierung für Jugendliche” (education and career guidance and counselling for young people) ○ “Bildungs- und Berufswahlkompetenzen” (education and career guidance) • Various counselling and support services and non-profit guidance centres aimed at specific target groups such as women (e.g., <i>abz austria</i>), migrants (e.g., <i>Counselling Centre for Migrants</i>) or people with disabilities (e.g., <i>biv integrativ</i>)

Country	Digitalisation of career guidance and counselling services	Selected examples of digital tools and platforms
Bulgaria	Developing digital platforms	• <i>az.government.bg</i> - public employment service providing information and support for jobseekers and employers and linking to digital services • The <i>National Portal for Career Guidance of School Students</i> (“Национален портал за кариерно ориентиране на учениците”) - provides information about secondary education and professional colleges, career guidance centres, career guidance and counselling programmes and resources • <i>Orientirane.mon.bg</i> – national portal for career guidance and counselling for students and parents, providing information and guidance on education and career pathways, interactive career tools and labour market information • <i>Information and Career Guidance Centres</i> (“Центрове за информация и професионално ориентиране”) - portal linking career centres that provide career guidance and counselling services for those over 16 years old, part of the <i>National Agency for Vocational Education and Training</i> (NAVET)
Estonia	Operates a unified digital platform for admissions, tracking, learning records and career guidance	• <i>Eesti Töötukassa</i> - a self-service portal managed by the Estonian public employment service, for jobseekers and employers, providing support with CVs and applications, job search, and access to guidance tools • <i>Teeviit</i> - an online tool to support young people in describing their knowledge, skills and experience • “OSKA” forecasting and Labour Demand Barometer – labour market monitoring and skills forecasting system
Finland	Complete integration of digital tools into career guidance and counselling services with data-driven approaches to service delivery	• “Työmarkkinatori” - public employment services, a national digital platform (linking to regional portals) providing guidance and local job information for jobseekers • <i>One-Stop Guidance Centres</i> (“Ohjaamot”) - provide easy access service points to young people under the age of 30, offer career guidance, social rehabilitation, health care services, and support with educational pathways

Country	Digitalisation of career guidance and counselling services	Selected examples of digital tools and platforms
Germany	Integrating digital tools into career guidance and counselling to modernise VET and improve access to personalised guidance, labour market alignment, and cross-sectoral coordination	• “Bundesagentur für Arbeit” – public employment service • “Berufenet” – online database of information on occupations, training paths and labour market trends • <i>Planet-Beruf.de</i> – youth-oriented portal providing career planning tools, self-assessments and career guidance and counselling resources • “Berufsinformationszentrum” (BiZ) - a portal providing labour market information and guidance on study options, career or job search, job openings, tests and information about possible jobs matching students’ interests. Information about occupations and local information about education, school and studies • “Kursnet” – database of CVET programmes • “Check-U” – online aptitude and interest test supporting personalised career guidance and counselling by matching users with suitable vocational paths • <i>Berufenavi.de</i> – a portal of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the Federal Institute for Vocational Education aimed at young people, providing guidance on vocational orientation, labour market information and job opportunities • “Berufsorientierung Plus” (BO+) - offers a collection of different links for self-assessment tests and questionnaires to support young people with education and work pathways • “Nationale Bildungsplattform” – unified digital infrastructure for lifelong learning, career guidance, learning records and educational resources
Norway	Complete integration of digital tools into career guidance and counselling services with labour market data	• <i>nav.no</i> – the <i>Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration</i> • <i>karriereveiledning.no</i> - public career counselling website offering guidance about education and work • <i>utdanning.no</i> - Norwegian government website for career, labour market and education information, providing those aged 14 and older with information on occupations, education programmes and apprenticeships to make informed education and work choices, plus self-assessment tools

Country	Digitalisation of career guidance and counselling services	Selected examples of digital tools and platforms
England (UK)	Differentiated integration of digital tools into career guidance and counselling services, with national, regional and local digital platforms	• <i>National Career Service</i> – portal enabling access to career guidance and counselling tools, labour market data, self-assessments, career guidance information, and tools to search for jobs, education and training opportunities, and course information • Digital tools used in service delivery • <i>BBC Bitesize Careers</i> – a portal enabling access to career guidance and counselling resources, career planning tools and labour market information • <i>Start</i> – a digital career planning platform used in schools and colleges • <i>Unifrog</i> – a platform used in schools for career exploration, information on university and apprenticeship opportunities • Apprenticeship – a service to search and apply for apprenticeships in England • Various regional platforms providing data on regional and local labour markets, as well as local opportunities such as <i>Buckingham Skills Hub</i>, <i>Black Country Intelligence Hub</i>, <i>Hampshire County Council</i> • Various sector/industry specific websites such as <i>Enguinity</i>, <i>Technicians Make it Happen</i>

Sources: Barnes, Roy, Kettunen, & Pullinen, 2025; Barnes, Kettunen, & Pullinen, 2024; Careersnet (<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/networks/careersnet>); National Policies Platform, European Commission (<https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/>)

In countries like Finland and Estonia, digitalisation is explicitly framed as a tool to integrate fragmented services, improve data-driven decision-making, and enhance user experience through personalised platforms. **Finland** and **Norway** have evidence of advanced digitalisation models, with complete integration of digital tools into career guidance and counselling services. These systems are characterised by data-driven approaches, coordination across sectors, and the use of labour market data, which is being used to personalise guidance and create individualised learning pathways. **Estonia** has a similar approach with a unified digital platform that brings together admissions data, learner tracking and records. The aim is to provide a streamlined and accessible infrastructure.

Germany and England present moderately integrated systems. For instance, **Germany** is actively modernising its VET system through digital tools that enhance personalisation and cross-sectoral coordination. At the same time, the approach in **England** is fragmented and differentiated, with digital platforms operating at national, regional, and local levels. Reflecting the devolved governance structure in the UK, each devolved nation has a digital platform for career guidance and counselling services. In England, UK, there are platforms and portals at national and local levels that provide career guidance and counselling services and access to labour market data and local opportunities.

In contrast, **Austria** and **Bulgaria** are in earlier stages of digitalisation, developing platforms to support career guidance and counselling services and improving access to labour market data. These efforts are indicative of broader strategic ambitions. More advanced models of digitalisation suggest systemic integration.

3.4.1. Digital maturity of career guidance and counselling services

To assess the extent of digital integration in career guidance and counselling services within VET systems, each country was evaluated across five analytically derived dimensions. These dimensions reflect critical components of digital maturity in service delivery and were selected based on their relevance to systemic coherence, user experience, and strategic alignment:

1. **Platform development** – evaluates the existence, scope, and accessibility of digital platforms specifically designed to support career guidance and counselling in VET contexts.
2. **Data integration** – assesses the extent to which platforms incorporate and utilise labour market intelligence, learner records, and educational data to inform guidance provision.
3. **Personalisation** – measures the capacity of digital tools to deliver tailored guidance experiences, including the use of self-assessment instruments, adaptive learning pathways, and user profiling.
4. **Interoperability** – examines the degree to which digital systems are capable of connecting across education, employment, and welfare sectors, enabling coordinated and seamless service delivery.
5. **Policy alignment** – considers whether digitalisation efforts are embedded within national lifelong guidance strategies, supported by legislation, and coordinated through governance structures.

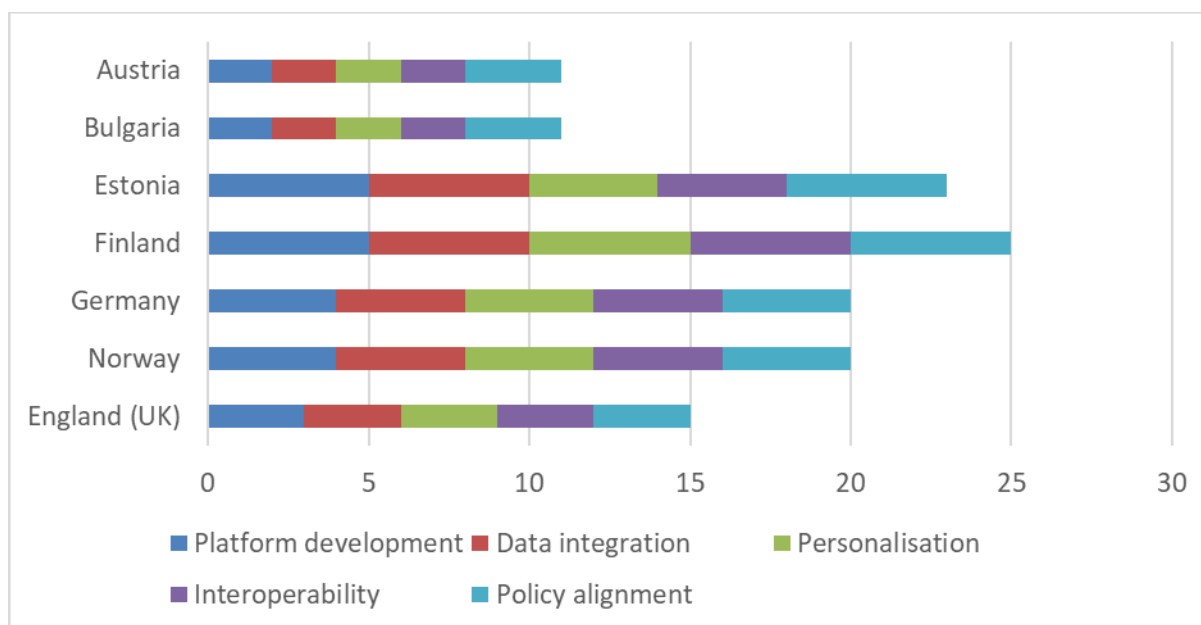
Each country was assigned a digitalisation maturity score ranging from 1 (early stage) to 5 (fully integrated). This scoring was based on a qualitative synthesis of desk-based reviews, case study

evidence, and stakeholder interviews, reflecting both the current state of digital infrastructure and its strategic integration within national VET systems:

- Score 1: Minimal infrastructure; fragmented tools not tailored to VET.
- Score 2: Early development; limited integration or reach.
- Score 3: Emerging systems; partial alignment and moderate functionality.
- Score 4: Advanced platforms; strong integration and cross-sector coordination.
- Score 5: Fully integrated ecosystems; personalised, policy-aligned, and interoperable.

The analysis presented in Figure 3.1 which provides a comparative overview.

Figure 3.1: Digital maturity of career guidance and counselling services



The comparative analysis of digitalisation maturity across seven European countries reveals distinct national approaches to embedding digital tools within career guidance and counselling services in VET systems. It offers an understanding of each country's progress toward digital transformation of career guidance and counselling services.

Austria and **Bulgaria** demonstrate relatively balanced efforts across all five dimensions, though their overall maturity levels remain moderate. **Austria** shows a slightly stronger emphasis on platform development, reflecting early-stage infrastructure aimed at improving access. **Bulgaria**, by contrast, places marginally greater focus on policy alignment, suggesting strategic intent to embed digitalisation within national frameworks, albeit with limited technical integration.

Estonia emerges as a leader in digital personalisation and strategic coherence. High scores in personalisation and policy alignment indicate a well-integrated digital ecosystem that supports tailored career guidance and counselling, which is firmly embedded in national education and labour market strategies. Estonia's unified digital platform and use of labour market forecasting tools exemplify systemic integration.

Finland presents a model of comprehensive digital maturity. Consistently high scores across all dimensions reflect a fully integrated infrastructure, underpinned by coordinated governance, data-driven service delivery, and inclusive access. Finland's approach illustrates how strategic investment and cross-sectoral collaboration can enable coherent and personalised lifelong guidance.

Germany prioritises personalisation and policy alignment, with strong institutional frameworks supporting guidance provision. However, its scores in interoperability and platform development are slightly lower than those of Finland and Estonia, suggesting room for improvement in cross-sectoral coordination and digital infrastructure.

Norway shows particular strength in interoperability and policy alignment, indicating effective integration of career guidance and counselling services across education, employment, and welfare sectors. Its regional delivery model and strategic governance structures support a coherent and inclusive approach to digitalisation.

England (UK) exhibits a more fragmented digital landscape. While there is notable investment in platform development and policy alignment, lower scores in interoperability and personalisation reflect regional variation and limited systemic integration. This suggests a need for greater coherence and strategic coordination to enhance the effectiveness of digital guidance services.

The maturity index highlights the diversity of digitalisation trajectories across the case study countries, with countries like Finland and Estonia exemplifying systemic integration, while others such as Austria, Bulgaria and England demonstrate emerging or uneven progress. This suggests that digital tools are fragmented or not yet fully embedded within broader education and employment systems. These insights underscore the importance of aligning digital infrastructure with strategic policy frameworks to ensure inclusive, personalised, and interoperable career guidance and counselling systems within VET.

Overall, digitalisation is arguably an important enabler of inclusive and individualised career guidance and counselling services in VET. However, the cross-country analysis highlights several systemic challenges. For instance, there was no evidence of national digital strategies focused on career guidance and counselling in VET, limited investment in platform development, and weak interoperability between education, employment, and welfare systems. There is limited evidence from the case study countries that specific digital tools or platforms exist for those considering, engaging in, or transitioning from VET. Interesting practices in the digitalisation of career guidance and counselling services are evident. For instance, Finland's "*Ohjaamo*" *One-Stop Guidance Centres* exemplify the integration of digital and face-to-face services, while Germany's *Youth Employment Agencies* are experimenting with cross-agency digital coordination. Also, education reform in Estonia includes the development of a unified digital admissions platform and the formal recognition of non-formal learning. This represents a forward-looking model of digital integration. Overall, the findings from the case studies suggest the need for coherent national strategies, sustained investment in inclusive and user-centred platforms, and more substantial alignment with national skills and education policies.

4. The impact of national contexts and skills formation systems on transitions in VET and strategies for addressing skills mismatch

The comparative analyses of VET systems in the case study countries evidence diversity in national approaches to skills formation and transition support. It is evident that structural differences shape how career guidance and counselling services are organised, delivered and integrated in VET systems to support VET learner transitions. For instance, Austria and Norway adopt hybrid models that blend collective and statist elements, while England, UK, functions within a liberal framework characterised by market-driven mechanisms and decentralised governance. The comparative analysis reveals diverse approaches to integrating career guidance and counselling services within VET systems. These differences have implications for how countries support those individuals considering, engaging in, and transitioning from VET.

Systemic integration and legislative coherence

Countries such as Finland, Estonia, and Bulgaria exemplify systemic integration of career guidance and counselling services within VET systems. In these contexts, national legislation provides a robust foundation for lifelong guidance, ensuring continuity and accountability across education and work transitions.

For instance, Finland has an established system that integrates lifelong guidance service delivery for all. This is supported by the statistical model, which features strong central coordination. The “Ohjaamo” *One-Stop Guidance Centres* operationalise this model and commitment to lifelong guidance, offering integrated, multidisciplinary services that address educational, employment, and social needs. This helps to mitigate skills mismatch by ensuring that all receive personalised guidance and transition support.

Estonia is undergoing education reforms and digitalisation of services with the aim of systemic integration. The systemic integration of services is founded on a new, coherent legislative framework. The 2024 education reform extended compulsory education to age 18 and introduced flexible pathways to support learners who are undecided, ensuring access to education for all. This reform is underpinned by the “OSKA” labour market forecasting system, which aligns curriculum development and career guidance and counselling services with sectoral skills needs.

These systemic integration models demonstrate how coherent legislation and strategy can foster inclusive, personalised guidance and reduce skills mismatches through early intervention and tailored support.

Regionally responsive models

Within skills formation systems, regionally responsive models are created through a combination of stakeholder coordination, national strategies and policy mechanisms that allow VET to adapt to local labour market needs. Countries such as Austria, Germany, and Norway have adopted these models where career guidance and counselling services are organised, managed and delivered through

regional partnerships and localised initiatives. These models emphasise flexibility and responsiveness to regional labour market dynamics, while also ensuring regional and local skills needs are addressed.

In Austria, national legislation outlines entitlements to career guidance and counselling, but services are embedded at the local level to ensure easy access for all. However, community-based initiatives, such as the *Vienna Weeks* and the *FutureFitFestival*, demonstrate how outreach services can effectively target disadvantaged and marginalised groups of young people and adults.

Similarly, in Norway the “Trøndelag” Model illustrates how regional collaboration between the *Labour and Welfare Administration* (Nav), career centres, and schools can support adult learners and job seekers through personalised VET pathways. This regional model promotes lifelong learning and labour market inclusion, but enables local stakeholders to tailor provisions to local labour markets and skills needs.

Responsive models focus services on addressing skills needs and reducing skills mismatches at the local and regional level. This is achieved through collaboration between key stakeholders in the delivery of services supported by legislation and national strategies.

Multi-stakeholder collaboration

Finally, it is evident that skills formation systems shape multi-stakeholder collaborations and how they interact in VET systems. Where legislation and national strategies are aligned, stakeholder collaborations are supported. For instance, national strategies can mandate collaborations (as seen in Austria and Bulgaria), funding mechanisms can incentivise joint initiatives between public and private stakeholders (as in Germany), and collaborations can be embedded in legislation (as in Estonia). Institutional coordination efforts, exemplified by Bulgaria’s “DOMINO” project, illustrate the potential of multi-stakeholder collaboration to modernise VET and align it more closely with labour market needs.

Where learners and employers collaborate within VET, evidence suggests that the relevance and interest in VET programmes increases. For instance, Germany’s *Vocational Training Ambassadors* programme utilises peer-to-peer learning, where current apprentices share their experiences with prospective learners, fostering informed decision-making.

In England, UK, employer-led initiatives, such as *Skills Bootcamps*, are designed and delivered in collaboration with employers. Similarly, Bulgaria’s dual education model embeds career guidance and counselling services within schools and employer-led training programmes. Employers play a role in mentoring and curriculum design, ensuring alignment with local labour market demands and skills needs. Therefore, VET is aligned with local and regional needs, as well as sector skills needs. This reinforces the importance of employer involvement in shaping responsive and inclusive VET systems.

Implications for addressing skills mismatch

The extent to which national systems address skills mismatch is based on alignment between education and labour market policies. Countries with systemic or devolved integration models, such as Finland,

Estonia, and Germany, demonstrate a stronger capacity to anticipate and respond to skills needs variously through coordinated service delivery, multi-stakeholder collaborations and labour market data that result in personalised career guidance and transition support. For instance, Estonia’s “OSKA” labour market forecasting system informs curriculum development and career guidance and counselling provision, ensuring responsiveness to sectoral skills needs.

Countries with weak and/or fragmented skills formation systems may, therefore, be unable to provide consistent, equitable access to career guidance and counselling services, reducing their ability to mitigate skills mismatches. In England, UK, face difficulties in delivering consistent and equitable career guidance and counselling services. Regional models in Austria and Norway offer locally tailored solutions, yet their impact is contingent on broader policy coherence and stakeholder collaboration. These skills development systems may be responsive to employer needs at the local or regional level, but they may lack systemic integration and legislative coherence, leading to unsustainable service delivery. This, overall, limits their ability to mitigate skills mismatches and support inclusive transitions systematically. Evidence all highlights the role of employer engagement in reducing mismatch, as seen in Bulgaria’s dual education model and Germany’s peer-led *Vocational Training Ambassadors*, which align training with real-world labour market demands.

In summary, it is evident that the national context and regulatory design significantly impact the effectiveness of VET systems and their ability to address skills mismatches. Both systemic and devolved models, reinforced by coherent legislation and strategic coordination, offer one way to embed inclusive, responsive, and future-oriented career guidance and counselling services within VET systems. These systems not only support individuals in navigating complex labour market transitions but also contribute to broader goals of social inclusion and economic resilience. As labour markets continue to change, the capacity of VET systems to support positive transitions will depend on their ability to enable access to career guidance and counselling services. Strengthening these systems requires sustained investment, policy coherence, and cross-sectoral collaboration at both national and regional levels.

5. The impact of economic and social changes on VET systems and skills mismatch responses

VET systems across the countries studied have been shaped by changing economic and social environments. The COVID-19 pandemic, fiscal pressures, technological disruption, and demographic changes have determined the need for adaptive, resilient, and inclusive VET systems. The comparative analysis of seven countries conducted in this study has indicated how national VET systems have responded to these challenges and the implications for addressing skills mismatches at local, regional, and national levels.

Responses to labour market volatility

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in labour markets and accelerated structural changes. In response, countries such as Finland and Estonia have prioritised education and labour market alignment in their VET systems. Estonia has relied on its occupational forecasting system to inform curriculum development and career guidance and counselling services. This has been done to ensure that VET provision reflects current and projected labour and skills needs. Finland's Lifelong Guidance Strategy and Youth Guarantee aim to mitigate unemployment and underemployment by providing holistic support targeted for both young people and adults navigating disrupted career paths. In both countries, the digitalisation of services has been central to their response.

Regionally responsive mechanisms, including engaging employers in VET, have been implemented in Germany's VET system to support individuals in navigating a volatile labour market. *Youth Employment Agencies* and *Vocational Training Ambassadors* help individuals understand vocational pathways and facilitate transitions, particularly in regions facing demographic decline or industrial restructuring. These initiatives reflect a broader strategy to maintain skilled labour supply and reduce mismatch.

Responses to regional economic development needs

Economic disparities between regions have driven the need for regionally responsive VET models that are responsive to local labour market conditions and industry demands. Regionally adaptive systems enable targeted interventions that support inclusive growth and workforce development. In England, the *Skills Bootcamps* initiative exemplifies this approach by offering short, employer-led training programmes tailored to regional skills gaps. Commissioned by local authorities and co-funded by employers, these bootcamps provide flexible, outcome-based learning opportunities that align with local economic priorities and sectoral needs. Similarly, Norway's "Trøndelag" model demonstrates how regional collaboration between career centres, schools, and the *Labour and Welfare Administration* (Nav) can support adult learners and job seekers through vocational pathways adapted to individual needs. By integrating education and employment services, the model facilitates VET transitions. This approach can be particularly useful in areas with high skill mismatches and structural unemployment resulting from technological advancements, industry shifts, or regional economic decline. Similarly, the introduction of the dual system as a VET form supports a closer connection to local economic needs. These examples exemplify how skills formation systems operating in decentralised governance

structures can develop multi-stakeholder collaborations to ensure VET provision is relevant and economically strategic.

Responses to socio-demographic shifts and the need for inclusive practices

Demographic changes, including ageing populations, migration, and youth disengagement, have implications for VET systems. Inclusive and person-centred lifelong guidance models, such as those in Finland, Estonia, and Norway, begin to address these challenges by targeting disadvantaged and marginalised groups (such as NEETs, migrants, and low-skilled adults). These models are delivered through local and regional collaborations, local initiatives and community-based projects. They highlight the importance of local and regional engagement, as well as flexible delivery, to promote equity and inclusion and reduce skills mismatches.

Responses to technological change in service delivery

Technological transformation is reshaping the delivery of career guidance and counselling services. Digital tools, such as AI-powered chatbots, virtual career fairs, and mobile platforms, are becoming an increasingly common part of service provision, with self-service access on the rise. However, ensuring equitable access to these digital platforms and tools remains a cross-cutting challenge, especially for disadvantaged groups and regions with limited infrastructure.

Countries such as Finland, Estonia, and Germany have led the way in terms of embedding digitalisation within their VET systems to enhance responsiveness and accessibility. Estonia's education reform includes the development of a unified digital admissions platform enabling more flexible and personalised educational pathways. Finland's "Ohjaamo" Centres integrate digital and face-to-face services, using data-driven approaches to coordinate support across sectors and improve service delivery. Germany is undergoing the digital modernisation of its VET system, with efforts focused on improving cross-agency coordination and personalising career guidance through digital platforms. These efforts reflect a broader trend to leverage digital technologies in career guidance and counselling service delivery. Nonetheless, challenges remain in achieving interoperability and ensuring inclusive and equitable implementation. What is equally important is the development of practitioners' digital competencies. Ensuring that practitioners are equipped to effectively utilise and interpret digital tools will be essential to sustaining quality service delivery and ensuring that technological innovation translates into better learner outcomes.

Implications for policy and practice

Overall, the analysis reveals that effective responses to economic and social changes require innovative approaches supported by a coherent policy framework and strategies, as well as resources and cross-sectoral collaboration. Countries with integrated or devolved models appear to be better equipped to anticipate and respond to local and regional skills needs through the coordinated use of data (such as unified platforms), stakeholder engagement, and collaborations, as well as personalised career guidance and counselling support. Fragmented systems highlight the risks of disjointed services, which are only available at points of transition between education and work, reflecting a functional approach

to addressing skills gaps rather than a more strategic approach. At the local and regional level, collaborative partnerships between education providers, employers, and public services can ensure that VET is aligned with labour market demands and skills needs. National strategies should be flexible enough to adapt to regional variations while maintaining consistency and equity in the delivery of career guidance and counselling services.

6. Recommendations

In this section, policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the provision of career guidance and counselling services within VET systems are presented. Drawing on comparative insights from the seven countries studied, the recommendations respond to recent economic, social, and technological shifts. They are intended to inform both national and EU-level policy development. They support the creation of coherent, inclusive, and adaptable VET systems that promote equitable access to VET and career guidance and counselling.

Expand inclusive, community-based career guidance services – Support the development of accessible, locally embedded career guidance and counselling services to engage disadvantaged groups (e.g. NEETs, migrants, low-qualified adults) and promote social inclusion in VET. Examples: Austria's *Vienna Weeks*; Finland's "Ohjaamo" Centres

Ensure legal entitlements are operationalised across the life course – Strengthen the implementation of legal entitlements to career guidance and counselling by embedding services across all stages of education and employment, ensuring continuity and access beyond transition points. Examples: Estonia, Finland, Norway

Integrate career guidance and counselling service into national VET and employment strategies – Embed lifelong guidance within coherent national strategies that link education, employment, and social inclusion policies, enabling coordinated delivery and clear entitlements across sectors. Examples: Estonia's educational reforms; Finland's *Lifelong Guidance Strategy*; Germany's national employment strategy; Norway's collaboration between regional career centres and the *Labour and Welfare Administration* (Nav)

Support flexible and personalised pathways for adult upskilling – Develop career guidance and counselling systems that facilitate flexible learning pathways and support adult learners navigating disrupted career trajectories. Examples: England's *Skills Bootcamps*; Estonia's education reform; Finland's Youth Guarantee

Invest in digital infrastructure for equitable service delivery – Promote the integration of digital platforms into career guidance and counselling services, ensuring interoperability and equitable access while maintaining face-to-face options for those with limited digital access. Platforms should integrate labour market information, educational pathways, and guidance tools, and be interoperable across sectors and regions. Examples: Estonia, Finland, Germany

Build professional capacity and ensure sustainable funding – Invest in training, continuous professional development, and adequate resourcing for career guidance practitioners, while securing stable long-term funding to reduce reliance on short-term projects. Examples: Finland's state-funded "Ohjaamo" centres and *Lifelong Guidance Strategy*; Norway's publicly funded *Regional Career Centres*; Germany's institutionalised *Youth Employment Agencies*; Estonia's national education reforms embedding guidance roles

Enhance practitioners' digital and data literacy: Support professional development to enable practitioners to confidently and ethically utilise digital platforms, data dashboards, and AI-supported tools. This will help ensure that digitalisation improves the quality of guidance, personalisation, and reach. Examples: Estonia, Finland, and Germany

Promote multi-stakeholder collaboration to strengthen regional partnerships – Foster partnerships between education providers, employers, public services, and community organisations to deliver coordinated, person-centred career guidance, tailored to local labour market needs. Examples: England's *Skills Bootcamps*; Germany's *Youth Employment Agencies*; Norway's "Trøndelag" model; the development of the dual education model in Bulgaria

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