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**SOLITY**  
VET SOCIAL UTILITY

SOLITY – VET SOCIAL UTILITY MONITOR  
590169-EPP-1-2017-1-IT-EPPKA3-PI-FORWARD

# SOLITY – RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS REPORT (D11)



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## Introduction

According to the economist Jean Gadrey, "Social utility is the activity of an organisation in the social economy which has as an observable result and, in general, as its explicit aim that of contributing to social cohesion (notably by reducing inequalities), solidarity (national, international or local: the social bond of proximity), sociability, and to the improvement of the collective conditions (which, among others, include education, health, the environment and democracy) necessary for a sustainable human development"<sup>1</sup>.

Though it is widely accepted that education, including vocational training, is "socially useful" per se, it is less clear how to translate this intrinsic theoretical concept into evidence that can be evaluated and actually used (e.g. to improve).

In times of significant and continuous changes and challenges (technology (r-)evolution, environmental change, aging of population, migration, economic crisis, pandemics) the social impact and relevance of Vocational Education and Training (VET) can be substantial but, nonetheless, not easily or immediately perceived by citizens, policy/decision makers and stakeholders.

However, what we have experienced in 2020, has pushed the world in a completely new setting defined by a huge economy crisis caused by an unprecedented global pandemic, which may hit all over again in the near future: these two big challenges will strongly impact on the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. COVID-19 has made everyone much more aware of the unpredictability of tomorrow. Though socially distant, we have never been so close: somehow this is a unique opportunity to boost cooperation, inclusion and social utility among European countries. Common efforts are needed to face exceptional challenges. Networking and collaborative approaches to the pursuit of shared solutions and opportunities are now more than ever key enabling factors that steer the hopes and success stories of many organisations.

In many European countries, VET centres train every year thousands of young people, adults, jobseekers of every age and nationality and NEETs, providing them with an extensive range of services, which help them effectively enter (or re-enter) the labour market or strengthen their career path. They often reach excellent results (some of this excellence has even been mapped by the European Commission<sup>2</sup>) and, nevertheless, Vocational Education and Training is still perceived as a "second" or even the "last" choice by many people.

It becomes, then, of paramount importance for VET centres to have tools to make their social usefulness and impact apparent, and that is why the SOLITY project has been developed. The aim of the SOLITY - VET SOCIAL UTILITY MONITOR project, funded by the Erasmus+ Programme<sup>3</sup>, is to

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Gadrey, « L'utilité sociale des organisations de l'économie sociale et solidaire », rapport de synthèse pour la DIISES et la MIRE, septembre 2003.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, « Mapping of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) », 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8250&furtherPubs=yes>

<sup>3</sup> Call EACEA-41-2016 – Key Action3 – Sub-programme: Support for Policy Reform - Action: Forward looking cooperation projects

develop a framework that allows VET providers to self-assess their social impact, identify – thanks to the benchmarking with other centres – where they can/should improve, gather tangible evidence on the results of their activities in order to strengthen their dialogue with policy makers on the one hand, and promote the quality of their services to the general public and relevant stakeholders (potential students and their families, teachers and trainers, enterprises, etc.).

Because of its goals, the main target of the project are VET providers, but the second are definitely policy/decision makers: it is up to policy makers to design policies that support Vocational Education and Training, helping it to get closer to the needs of the job market, quicker in adapting its content and methodologies according to the various challenges and changes that may occur, more equipped to ensure social inclusion and human development. Thus, a framework which allows to gather data on the social impact of VET providers becomes of great use for policy/decision makers: it may highlight the areas where more funding is needed, the necessity to foster new procedures or technologies or, on the contrary, it may suggest dismissing certain practices that may have become obsolete, or targeting new groups whose active participation in VET services needs to be strongly encouraged.

## Methodology

The project “VET Social Utility Monitor” aims to assess social utility of VET providers with ratios based on representative criteria. These indicators must allow to draw accurate and objective pictures of the scenario undergoing analysis.

They also must meet certain characteristics, as they are supposed to be:

- simple and understood in the same way by all data collectors;
- accessible - data must be collected without difficulty;
- accurate - conforming to the correct value (a part-time return to work rate on fixed-term contracts is different to a full-time return to work rate on permanent contracts);
- reliable - complying with databases of at least one of the following three levels of reliability:
  - LOW: internal data;
  - AVERAGE: the final data is based both on an internal and an external source;
  - HIGH: official external data or internal data based on official data transferred to regional/national bodies.

In order to develop indicators that respected such characteristics, the SOLITY partnership followed a multi-stage process.

### Stage 1 – Research

In the first stage of the project, a desktop research activity was carried out in order to map the state of the art and common approaches in relation to VET social utility at national (Italy, Germany, France, Belgium) and European level.

This research outlined that each partner countries implement and evaluate the concept of social utility differently so, first of all, it was important to agree on a precise meaning of social utility applied to vocational training.

In particular, social utility of VET was defined as a concept which consists of 5 dimensions, which were called "axes":

- Employment/Return to employment
- Lifelong personal development
- Social inclusion
- Territorial development
- Internal practices

Then each axis was associated with a number of indicators pertaining to its sphere.

From this analysis, a "social utility" actor or activity was unanimously defined as any organization or action that participates in the economic dynamics of a territory and contributes sustainably to the social integration and development of people, by developing their ability to act and interact with their environment. This takes into account vulnerable groups, contributes to social cohesion by combating exclusion and inequality and strengthens people's autonomy.

## **Stage 2 – Framework Development**

Based on the findings and outcomes of the previous research activities, the partnership then moved onto the further development of the methodological framework behind SOLITY's model.

This implied a rework of the indicators previously identified, following the collection of the opinions and insights provided by a panel of 23 external European experts in the field of vocational training, which came together during an in-person meeting held in Bruxelles on 11-12 December 2018.

This allowed to ensure that the proposed indicators could be applicable in whatever EU country. Experts confirmed by vote the relevance of the axes and indicators, and expressed comments that were studied and taken into consideration to define an updated table of axes and indicators.

At the same time, the project partners worked in order to define the weighted voting system applied to the SOLITY framework, i.e. the relative weights used to calculate the importance of each axis and indicators, determining the calculation of the global score of Social Utility of VET providers.

The final step of this stage foresaw the creation, by a tendered software developer, of SOLITY's online website – hosting both the general interface presenting the project, as well as the online tool available for VET providers to self-assess their social utility level in the axes and indicators from the SOLITY framework.

## **Stage 3 – Validation**

In order to validate SOLITY's framework in a comprehensive perspective, the following activities were carried out:

### 1. National workshops in Italy, Germany, France and Belgium

The main outcomes of the national workshops were suggestions on new indicators or changes to the existing ones, as well as propositions on a further development of the tool, and comments on

the online consultation. Three target groups were identified for the national workshops: (1) VET trainers, (2) entrepreneurs and (3) policy and decision makers, as well as other parties involved in vocational training (e.g. chambers of commerce etc.)

### 2. One international workshop

The international workshop was conceived as a means to summarise the results of the national workshops and discuss them with representatives of all four partner countries.

### 3. Online consultation

The online consultation was a tool to get as many stakeholders (VET centres, employment agencies, companies, learners and jobseekers, decision-makers) as possible involved in weighting the developed indicators and axes.

### 4. Testing of the framework/tool

The aim of the testing was to observe how easily the framework could be used by a VET centre and if there were any further adjustments necessary to the framework and the online tool.

Results of the validation phase:

A total of 14 workshops took place between June and December 2019: 3 in Italy, 3 in Germany, 5 in France and 3 in Belgium, with a total of 131 participants. The international workshop took place on September 26th, 2019 in Berlin. In the end, a total of 15 participants took part in this event.

As a whole, the validation process involved more than 140 VET trainers, entrepreneurs, decision-makers and stakeholders in national and international workshops, almost 800 VET stakeholders in the online survey, as well as 26 VET centres (18 from Italy, 3 from France, 3 from Belgium and 2 from Germany) that tested the framework and tool.

This allowed to collect a comprehensive feedback from various sources and, since many of the recommendations were adopted, also brought to a general improvement of the SOLITY framework to get to its final, current version.

## **Stage 4 – Dissemination**

During the second and last year of implementation of the project, an extensive communication campaign was implemented in order to disseminate and mainstream SOLITY's tool and results to reach as wide an audience as possible. The project partners, supported by a tendered communication agency, carried out the following activities:

- set up ad-hoc webpages on the partner organisations' websites
- creation of ad-hoc SOLITY accounts on the most relevant social media (LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)
- use of internal and external newsletters and e-mail communications to promote the activities/events organized and the results achieved by the SOLITY project
- exploitation of any networking event (one-to-one meetings, conferences, ad-hoc events, fairs on education and training, VET associations' annual assemblies) in order to share information on SOLITY with any interested party, and to distribute the physical support tools (posters, flyers, folders, roll-ups) that were developed
- organization of meetings with local and regional stakeholders/policy makers in order to present the tool and receive relevant feedback on it
- production and mainstream of a project-presentation video

- organisation of a national multiplier event for each of the involved partner countries, engaging regional/national and European policy makers and EU networks of stakeholders in order to have them use and test the SOLITY tool.

The main groups that were targeted with these dissemination and exploitation activities were primarily VET providers (public or private schools or VET centres, for young or adult users) and decision/policy makers (EU, national or regional public bodies, associations of VET providers, VET providers organizations with different VET centres, etc.)

Secondarily stakeholders like citizens, users of VET services and companies, labour market operators were also reached by said activities.

All in all, during this final stage of the project the SOLITY partners managed to involve the above-mentioned targets with the involvement rate specified below:

- SOLITY multiplier events, in-person group or bilateral meetings, ad-hoc conferences' workshops, in order to present the project and its tools → total of more than 750 persons reached
- participation in other projects' conferences, festivals, fairs, VET associations' annual gatherings, or events dealing with VET at national and European level in order to spread primary information on the SOLITY project → total of around 4,500 persons reached
- online communication/information by means of newsletters, posts on social media, ad-hoc mailing → total of nearly 20,000 persons reached.

## Results & Recommendations

Following the activities carried out during the project, especially those related to the testing of the SOLITY tool and the collection of feedback from the relevant target groups and stakeholders, the following policy recommendations have been formulated:

### 1) **Challenge: Misconceptions around Vocational Education and Training (VET)**

The project activities confirmed that VET is still underrated in many European countries. All relevant target groups underlined that, although VET is crucial in fostering employment, social inclusion and human development, its huge social impact is still not visible to the majority of society and this contributes to making VET the second, sometimes the last, option of a person's educational choices. In general, there is very poor knowledge about the many opportunities offered by VET: for example, VET is not only the educational sector where the worlds of education and enterprises dialogue the most, but also the place where students often find professional career counselling; furthermore, VET is about life-long learning for employed people; VET often offers educational opportunities to disadvantaged people of all ages, collaborating with social services, recruitment agencies, public employment services, NGOs, social partners, and so on (in addition to enterprises); VET is also a place where innovation, internationalisation and inclusion frequently go hand in hand; finally, VET often means quality (of education, of work-based learning, of guidance, of support to its students).

VET is certainly different from high-school or universities and it cannot compete with them in certain domains (e.g. research and development activities of universities), but it does offer services and opportunities that other educational institutions cannot deliver and that create a high impact on the social and economical development of society. Therefore, it is necessary for policy and decision makers to support the valorisation and recognition of the social impact of VET, in order to make VET a first choice.

→Policy Recommendation: ***Valorise the social impact of Vocational Education and Training (VET)***

The valorisation of the social impact of VET needs a comprehensive strategy: however, tools as the one developed by the SOLITY project, may be of great help and a good starting point to make people aware that VET is a crucial part of a larger ecosystem, devoted to economic, social and human development. The assessment and valorisation of the social impact of VET providers could be compared to the assessment and valorisation of social responsibility of enterprises, i.e. a way to: a) encourage VET providers to continuously improve their services and internal practices, b) raise interest and awareness of the general public on this topic (social impact of VET) and, consequently, on VET in general, c) foster policies that promote sustainability and inclusion, generating a virtuous cycle of socially responsible actions from all the actors of an entire ecosystem, VET providers included.

## 2) **Challenge: Differences among the European national VET systems**

VET systems are still managed at national, sometimes even regional, level. This implies that there are a lot of differences among European VET systems, which can make working on VET at European level quite challenging. These differences relate to many different aspects of VET: how work-based learning is organised (traineeship, apprenticeship, dual system, etc); management (public or private); targets (young people, adults, NEETs, jobseekers, migrants, etc); training methodologies; technologies and quality of labs; economic sectors; size; available funding; and so on. Beyond all that, working on the SOLITY project has outlined that differences are also about definitions and terms used in VET, so that a term that has a well-defined meaning in a particular national VET system may have no meaning at all in another one. Since VET is intrinsically and profoundly linked to the labour market and since, nowadays, the labour market is not national but European-wide, regional, national and European policy and decision makers should work together to establish a set of common terms, tools and methodologies for all European VET systems.

→Policy Recommendation: ***Favour the establishment of a common framework of terms, tools, methodologies and goals for VET***

This does not mean to standardize national VET systems in Europe, which may be not feasible nor desirable, but to establish at least a common ground, which would allow an easier transfer of knowledge, practices and tools among VET providers located in different EU Member States. It would also favour the mobility and human and professional development opportunities for VET students and trainers (and for workers, more in general: let us think about the recognition and certification of competences, for example). Many initiatives have already been carried out (e.g.



EQAVET) and institutions created (CEDEFOP) that go in this direction: however, a lot more still needs to be done.

The development of the SOLITY project has also underlined that in order to favour the benchmarking and social impact of VET at European level, which means favouring the understanding and use of a minimum set of indicators by every VET provider in Europe, a EU endorsement is necessary: not only for promotional purposes, but first and foremost to favour the establishment of a minimum set of common definitions, tools, methodologies and goals for all European VET providers. The contribution of regional and national policy and decision makers to reach this goal is also of paramount importance.

### 3) **Challenge: Assessing and monitoring social impact requires a lot of efforts**

Though there is a general agreement on the importance of highlighting the social impact of VET, there is also a common agreement that this should not become an additional administrative burden for VET providers. Collecting data to self-assess and regularly monitor one's own social impact requires a great effort in terms of resources (time, people, etc): if the data collection is left to VET providers alone, with no support or incentives from public bodies, the risk is that only a very little number of VET providers would be willing and able to do it. At the same time, if the amount of VET providers assessing their social impact is low, there is no real benefit for society, policy makers and the VET system as a whole (the amount of data collected and available for analysis and benchmarking would not be relevant enough to draw significant conclusions).

Therefore, it is not unexpected that in every activity carried out by the SOLITY project where target groups and stakeholders were involved, it always came out that VET providers should be encouraged to assess and monitor their social impact by, for example, providing them with technical support or incentives, which could take different forms.

#### →Policy Recommendation: **Engage VET providers in regularly monitoring their social impact.**

In order to engage VET providers in regularly monitoring their social impact, a series of different measures could be implemented as, for example:

- the development of specific support policies to assist VET providers in the data collection: for instance, giving financial resources to small operators, providing support from national/public statistical services, etc.;
- sharing the burden of carrying out some of the data collection: some of the data may be collected by existing public bodies (or their statistic offices/depts.);
- the establishment of an external body, which could standardize the tools to use, the indicators to measure (from a pool of indicators, only some could be defined as mandatory for all VET providers), the procedures to follow, and which could provide assistance to all VET providers engaged in the collection and management of data;
- the creation of a label or a certification to award all VET providers that agree to regularly monitor their social impact (the label could be a new one or could be included in already existing labels or certifications);
- the possibility to get more points in call for proposals or call for tenders if a VET provider proves to have measured its social impact.

#### 4) **Challenge: Support to VET providers that assess and monitor their social impact may generate a negative competition among VET providers**

While it is necessary to foresee opportunities or incentives for VET providers to regularly and openly monitor their social impact, it is also crucial to avoid creating a competitive system among VET centres (good performers vs bad ones), as the reasons for differences in performance may be manifold and not correlated with a VET provider's efforts to deliver good quality services: for instance, they may be related to the VET providers' size, the area where it is located, the sector(s) it addresses, the public policies for VET in that region/country, and so on. All stakeholders and policy and decision makers involved in the SOLITY project activities stressed that the logic behind the assessment of social impact of VET should be to raise awareness about the social value of VET activities, encourage VET providers to continuously improve the quality of their services, help policy makers to draft more effective policies to support VET (by better understanding externalities' effects and low performances' reasons). If the involvement of VET providers was possible thanks to a label, a certification or a specific policy, any risk or temptation to trigger a sort of competition among VET providers should be thoroughly avoided under any circumstances.

→Policy Recommendation: **Focus on the promotion of the social value and impact of VET and not on the creation of a competitive system among VET providers.**

Some suggestions to avoid the risk of generating a competition among VET providers are:

- give the possibility to differentiate VET providers by size, sector, ownership, target, etc., so that the results of the assessment of social impact are comparable only among VET providers that are very similar;
- favour the identification and transfer of good practices;
- do not favour cooperation only among good performers (the "excellent ones"), but also and especially among those which have higher results and those which have lower ones;
- balance the drive for excellence with the drive for social inclusion;
- support VET providers in the collection, analysis and management of data on their social impact, so that this activity becomes a way to empower them, allowing them to become proactive contributors to national/European social utility;
- focus on promoting the same goal (at national/European level): human development.

#### 5) **Challenge: Data used provided by VET providers may not always be reliable**

When collecting data, there is always a problem of reliability, which becomes even more relevant if the collected data are used to support the adoption of new strategies (from VET providers' management) or new policies (from policy makers) or to benchmark a VET provider against another one. Moreover, qualitative data and evidences (i.e. produced through qualitative research design and methods) have often been considered "children-of-a-lesser-god" in monitoring schemes. Today the situation is changing, though still at a slow pace, for qualitative approaches (and their outputs) are still barely recognized as credible and sound as quantitative ones. Nonetheless, VET relevant monitoring dimensions (especially in perspective) like internationalization, networking,

links with other EU Programmes, cooperation, responsiveness to industrial changes, governance, innovation diffusion and so on, are likely to be better overseen if qualitative approaches and methods are used in combination with quantitative ones.

In addition, if the final results of a measurement can lead to incentives or a certification/label, it is of paramount importance that the way data are collected and processed is also "certified." This means that an external body should monitor and certify the data presented by every VET provider that measures its social impact, especially if the goal is to involve a very large number of VET providers in a country or in all EU Member States.

→Policy Recommendation: **Establish a common data management system for social impact of VET**

In particular, the following suggestions have been provided during the exploitation and dissemination activities of the SOLITY project:

- establish an independent body to monitor, manage and certify the data collected (at European and/or national level); it may be a new body or an existing one that widens its functions and tasks to also include the supervision of the assessment of social impact carried out by VET provider;
- this body should not only monitor the process, manage the related label/certification, and ensure data transparency, but should also provide recommendations, support VET providers' efforts to increase their social impact, encourage the transfer of best practices, and so on;
- this body should also favour the dialogue among VET providers and policy/decision makers in order to use the collected data as evidence to direct public funding to improve policies for VET and in order to encourage a collaborative approach when reviewing/adjusting the indicators used to measure the social impact of VET (over time some indicators may become obsolete and it may be necessary to add new indicators, cancel some other ones or change the weight of the indicators);
- this body should also govern the process, so to have VET providers assess their social impact regularly (e.g. every year), for the major benefits of this data collection would be apparent only with the possibility to measure progress over the years.