



AHEADinVET



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# Mental health in vocational education and training

## POLICY PAPER

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## 1 Summary

There is growing evidence that mental health problems are becoming the new pandemic, and young people are the vulnerable group. Hence, it is even more important to help teachers and trainers develop knowledge and skills to deal with this issue. The apparent mental health crisis has double the effect on the teachers and trainers, as they have to deal with mental health issues of their learners and with their own personal issues, and all of that without being trained or supported. AHEAD in VET is an Erasmus+ project aimed at advancing European discourse on mental health in education, especially in vocational education (VET) and building competencies of teachers and trainers in dealing with mental health issues. We conducted pan-European research with online survey (n=400) and in-depth interviews with teachers and trainers from Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Greece, and Italy on the topic of Mental health in VET organisations.

The results of the research speak unquestionably in favour of the existing crisis of mental health in the VET system and the need for training for teachers and trainers in VET on the topic of mental health.

Stakeholders in the educational systems on a national and European level should consider there is an urgent need for a policy in education which will include integration of mental health in teacher's training which is continuous and long-term, steps to improve care and self-care among teachers, and establish and maintain accessible mental health service for both students and teachers.

## 2 Introduction

AHEAD in VET is an Erasmus+ project aimed at advancing European discourse on mental health in education, especially in vocational education (VET) and building competencies of teachers and trainers in dealing with mental health issues.

The motivation behind the AHEAD in VET project is to support those involved in VET with the rising issue of mental health. Our target group are VET teachers and trainers who have a significant role in the educational process, not only as those who teach and transfer knowledge, but also those who take care of wellbeing of their students and trainees. In supporting teachers and trainers' capacity for improving student mental health there is a dual benefit, for teachers and trainers on both a personal and professional level, and for students.

There is growing evidence that mental health problems are becoming the new pandemic, and young people are a vulnerable group, among many. Hence, it is even more important to help teachers and trainers develop knowledge and skills to deal with this issue. AHEAD in VET is dedicated to providing teachers and trainers in VET education with sufficient skills and competences so that they feel well equipped to deal with mental health issues of their learners. We intend to do so through creating learning opportunities for VET and educational staff but also through raising awareness on the topic.

With this policy paper, the AHEAD in VET project consortium aims to present its position on the mental health issues of students in VET education and the recommendations on providing support for teachers and trainers in dealing with the mental health problems of learners.

The paper will first look at some specific mental health areas of relevance for adolescents and young adults and then address the findings of pan-European survey on mental health in VET organizations. Finally, it will provide conclusions and recommendations for stakeholders in educational systems.

## 2.1 What is mental health?

The world is facing a mental health crisis, even before the recent pandemic. Mental health issues are not only a personal struggle, something others have and should deal with, but rather a significant disability, with influence on family, community, society in general on various levels. Therefore, the WHO has made action on mental health a priority and there have been many attempts and initiatives by other organizations as well. Yet, the results of these efforts are still missing, and we have not seen adequate implementation of programmes and policies. However, the rise in mental health challenges among adolescents and adults is increasingly recognised.

Unlike most physical health problems that come with age, mental health issues tend to develop earlier in life (Kessler et al., 2007). Children and adolescents constitute 44% of the world's population and about 10–20% of them experience mental health problems (Kieling et al., 2011). In the recent pandemic, the numbers only went up, and young adults were found to be at risk for developing mental health problems due to Covid-19 and the anti-pandemic measures (Ajdukovic et al., 2021.). Even without the pandemic, mental health issues are the leading cause of health-related burden in children, adolescents, and young adults (GBD, 2017). Early prevention and treatment of mental health problems are of utmost importance as about half of the mental health problems affecting people in their adulthood have their onset during or before adolescence. Although the primary task of treating mental health issues lies upon the (mental) health professionals, prevention is everyone's job. Children, adolescents, and young adults spend a large portion of their lives in schools and in educational systems which can be a protective or a risk factor for further development of students and their mental health.

WHO defines mental health as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. Mental health is a basic human right. And it is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development”.

Mental health issues vary in their intensity and form, as mental health lies on a continuum from good mental health to psychosocial disability. Without mental health prevention and early intervention mechanisms or adequate support services, mental health problems experienced will likely increase.

### 2.1.1 Risk factors associated with mental health issues

As stated earlier, the prevalence of mental health problems among children and adolescents is estimated to be between 10% and 20%. The rise of mental health issues in children and adolescents has been named as the so-called 'millennial morbidity' (dated to the period between 2000 and the present) as mental health problems have advanced to achieve significant importance within child and adolescent health (Wille et al., 2008). These mental health issues are then reflected in students' abilities to function in school, and in their relationships with family and friends.

Reasons behind the emergence of mental health issues are numerous and often interlinked. In current society the biomedical model of (mental) health is the dominant model, which has led to an overfocus on biological and hereditary factors, that has been linked to negative consequences such as over-medicalisation, stigmatisation, and coercion. Overtime, there has been an increased understanding that has linked psychosocial factors with poor mental health. Here, mental health protective factors contribute to mental health and allow a person to be able to cope in the face of challenges. Someone with a lot of protective factors such as relationships and healthy coping skills will be better equipped to overcome life's obstacles. In contrast, risk factors include things that adversely impact a person's mental health and are associated with a higher likelihood of negative outcomes. Both factors are influenced by all areas of life, such as social, environmental, cultural, and situational factors. Some well-known psychosocial risk factors are associated with early life traumatic or stressful events such as physical problems of the child or a parent, parental conflicts, family breakdown, parental psychosocial issues including addictions, socio-economic disadvantage, and experiences of violence or sexual molestation. Risk factors do not emerge in isolation but tend to cluster together and interact. The vulnerability to risk factors varies with age and gender, but in general unfavourable event(s), especially with cumulative effect overtime, can have a significant repercussion on the developing mind of a young person. "Millennial morbidity" is a concept yet to be fully investigated,

however, changes in today's way of living, such as presence of digital screens, social media, and the pressure or doing well can be disruptive.

It is important to keep in mind that mental health and well-being is affected by proximal factors (family influence) but also by distal factors such as characteristics of communities and society that shape opportunities and experiences (Wille et al., 2008).

## 2.2 Mental health and VET education

Education has become increasingly important in today's work life and is a significant factor when employers are hiring employees. This puts pressure both on learners and educators. Entering vocational education is a significant step in becoming adult, experiences in the period can be deterrent for the rest of your life. Although vocational training is available for adults as well, most vocational students are adolescents and young adults. By the time they reach vocational education, many of the risk factors have already been set in motion. Due to the changes brought up by the adolescent period, mental health issues can become more pronounced.

Addressing mental health needs in school is critically important because statistics show that 1 in 5 students has significant emotional, behavioural, or mental health issues which impact their wellbeing at home, in school, and in the community. Whether the mental health issues are pre-existing or emerge in the context of school through peer pressure, bullying, test anxiety, and so on, the mental health of students should be a priority. Absenteeism and dropping out of educational system can be caused by mental health issues and at the same time pose relevant problems for society and future workforce. VET organisations are at higher risk for having early leavers, a subgroup of students that the EU has recognised as vulnerable and has an EU-level target stipulating that the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 9 % by 2030.

In most European countries, upon compulsory schooling children choose between general academic education or vocational education which is perceived as less lucrative and/or prestigious (Juttler et al, 2021). Even though there is high need for vocational professionals, vocational education and VET organisation are often marginalised and underfunded which in turn creates further obstacles in caring for

mental health of students. Many schools including VET organisations do not have the resources to train their teachers in the field of mental health or to employ mental health professionals while the help from health care systems is often hard to get.

As stated by the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory (2021) in response to the negative impact of Covid-19 pandemic, supporting "the mental health of children and youth requires a whole-of-society effort to address longstanding challenges, strengthen the resilience of young people, support their families and communities, and mitigate the pandemic's mental health impacts". But the statement rings true beyond the recent pandemic. Young people must be provided access to holistic support (including mental health support) within their community and in places they frequent. Here schools and VET organisations have a major role to provide targeted mental health for the youth and at every stage of life. This needs to be done through better coordinate of different services through an integrated approach (mental health services, social services, health services, educational systems, workplaces, etc.) and the provision of community-based services. There is a need to invest in mental health literacy and include mental health in school curricula and the curricula of teachers and trainers and increase mental health support in school and VET settings.

### 2.2.1 What about teachers and trainers themselves?

Recent study on European teachers in low-secondary education shows significant level of work-related stress and burden (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021). As per data from TALIS 2018 international survey, almost 50 % of European lower secondary school teachers experience stress at work. 46% (answers "a lot" and "quite a bit") of teachers report that their job has a negative impact on their mental and physical health respectively, with numbers going up to 50% in Belgium (French Community) and Portugal. Mental health is also a concern for one out of three teachers in Belgium (Flemish Community), Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Latvia, and the United Kingdom (England). Moreover, the data reveals that three of the top four sources of stress are not directly linked with the core tasks of teaching but rather administrative work, responsibility for students' achievements, and requirements from authorities. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021).



Eurydice report further points out several systemic and contextual factors related to teachers' higher stress levels withdrawn from TALIS 2018 data. Working long hours, having more experience, and working with permanent contracts but also working in classrooms they consider disruptive, or when they feel less self-confident about managing student behaviour or in motivating students is related to self-assessed high level of stress. Protective factors for perceived work-related stress were collaborative school environment and sense of autonomy in their job (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021).

The apparent mental health crisis has double the effect on the teachers and trainers, as they deal with mental health issues of their learners and with their own personal issues, and all of that without being trained or supported. It is a fair question to ask whether the mental health problems of learners should fall on the teachers' shoulders? The answer is yes and no. Yes, teachers and trainers by the nature of their profession are on the front lines of assessing the mental health issues, creating a safe environment, providing protective factors and offer low-level psychosocial interventions; but no, they should not do so without sufficient systemic support and adequate training.

There is plenty of evidence that school-based mental health programmes are effective but face implementation obstacles and barriers on several levels (Baghian et al., 2023; Eiraldi et al., 2015; Girio-Herrera et al., 2019). To achieve long standing effect those must be implemented on a larger scale within a systemic change from educational stakeholders. Structural changes must be put in place to enhance protective factors and mitigate risk factors related to the broader socio-economic and environmental determinants of mental health. To facilitate better mental health outcomes for all, investment in implementing structural and systemic changes is needed. Wellbeing of students cannot rely solely on enthusiasm of individuals within a school.

In order to examine current issues, the AHEAD in VET project consortium carried out a pan-European survey on the topic of mental health in VET. The results and recommendations will be presented in the following chapter.

### 3 Pan-European survey on mental health in VET organisations

The cross-sectional study on mental health in VET education was carried out online by the project consortium. The survey was created and distributed through VET networks, social media, and mailing lists in five European countries (Austria, Croatia, Italy, Belgium and Greece). The survey was conducted in two waves; the first wave (March 2022, n = 230) was part of the pre study for the project's needs assessment, while the 2nd wave (January through March 2023) was an extension of the pre study. In total, 405 VET teachers and trainers participated in the study. In addition, each partner country carried out in-depth interviews with two VET teachers or trainers. In-depth interviews were semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Almost 60 percent of our participants were 35 or older. One third of participants was in the age group of 18 to 24. The age distribution shows that we had a good combination of experienced and young VET teacher and trainers.

#### 3.1 Survey questions

In the online survey, participants were asked to rate their experiences on 22 questions, organised in several themes:

1. Teachers and trainers' impressions on mental health problems of the participants in educations.
2. Teachers and trainer's assessment of their needs and personal experiences in dealing with mental health issues and existing skills and knowledge.
3. Importance of mental health topics in VET education
4. Views on mental health in society

In-depth interviews with VET teachers and trainers were carried out after the online survey and were based on following core questions:

1. The results of our online survey show that half of teachers perceive a significant rise in mental health issues among their trainees. What is your experience on the topic? (If you do not share the opinion, why do you think so many teachers and trainers believe there are more MH issues?)

2. To the best of your knowledge, what are the possible reasons behind the increase in mental health issues in education?
3. Would you say teachers and trainers in VET are sufficiently equipped in dealing with mental health problems of their students/trainees? Our results show that half of them do not feel equipped enough by their previous training.
4. In your own opinion, what has got to change when considering mental health issues in VET and adult education?
5. If you were to write a policy statement on the topic of mental health in VET, what would be your main recommendations or message?

### 3.2 Results of the study

The results of the online survey and in-depth interviews were attained from a rather large number of VET teachers and trainers across five European countries who were representative in terms of years of experience compared to data from Teachers in Europe Eurostat report for 2015. Participants did not differ in gender distribution, age, work experience or other responses based on their country of origin. Therefore, we assume to have gained relevant information on the current state of mental health issues in the European classrooms and the needs of teachers and trainers in dealing with such issues.

Approximately two thirds of teachers and trainers believe that the number of participants with mental health problems (68.4%) and the severity of issues (61.7%) have increased which has had a negative impact on the transfer of knowledge and skills and consequent placement in the labour market (71.5%).

Almost 80% of teachers and trainers believe that it will become very or rather important to distance themselves from mental health problems of students in the future and 40% of them have often or very often felt helplessness in the face of students' mental health issues. One in two teachers does not feel they have been adequately trained to deal with mental health problems of their students.

Majority of participants (90%) perceive there is a lack of awareness of mental health issues in VET and adult education. They are almost unanimous (90%) in their high interest in the topics of mental health as they believe it will become rather important soon and therefore should be included in the training of trainers.

Participants agree in high numbers that VET educational organisations have obligation to deal with mental health issues of their students and should cover topics of mental health in the curricula. The majority strongly agrees that VET institutions should provide teachers and trainers with basic knowledge and skills but also include in their organisations more trained experts on mental health.

Half of teachers and trainers who participated in the study believe that seeking help for mental health is still rather not accepted. Almost all believe (86%) it is difficult to access help from professional mental health experts.

Insights from in-depth interviews tell us that teachers perceive there is more openness about mental health issues (possible reason for the observed increase) but there is also high pressure for instant solutions. Mental health issues are related to the time periods, and current times are very unfavourable for the mental health issues. Social media, its possibility of sharing personal experience(s) with numerous people in an instant, have opened space for more positivity and acceptance, yet at the same time created pressure to be constantly reachable and open/vulnerable to negative feedback. The rhythm of experience became shorter and exerts further pressure. Several teachers have emphasised that there have always been mental health issues, but the issues and the environment have changed noticeably. Although mental health issues are not a novelty, the feeling of general demotivation and low spirit accompanied with concentration difficulties and short attention span is unprecedented.

Teachers recognized several societal factors influencing the increase in mental health issues among students, such as change in the family structure (parents working long hours with no time to be with children), wider environmental context such as

digitalization, globalization, pandemic but also factors related to educational system such academic/curriculum overload (overflow of learning materials, system focused on learning outcomes, no or little time for establishing teacher-student relationship).

Teachers from five European countries all agree that teachers in general do not gain enough knowledge and skills in dealing with mental health issues of students in their own training. Any further learning is usually not supported by the educational system and gaining knowledge and skills is left to the individual efforts and resources.

Participants stated that formal policy from educational institutions is needed to provide the resources, both financial and time related, to complete training on mental health in students. Should these be missing, no widescale adoption of mental health training by teachers will ever be possible.

*More details on the study methodology and results can be found in the Appendix section.*

## 4 Conclusions and recommendations

### *Mental health crisis in VET*

The results of the research and interviews speak unquestionably in favour of the existing crisis of mental health in the vocational educational system. The reasons behind this are multiple, with family crisis, environmental issues such as migration, wars, pandemic but also digitalisation and influence of social media. Mental health issues are not a novelty, but the global changes including the need for a knowledgeable working force, the pressure on everyone involved in the VET system is increasing alarmingly. The apparent mental health crisis has double the effect on the teachers and trainers, as they must deal with mental health issues of their learners and with their own personal issues, and all of that without being trained or supported. One of two VET teachers in Europe do not feel they have received relevant training in dealing with mental health issues.

There is a need to support educational institutions in tackling mental health issues, through:

- systematic training programs
- inclusive school policies, which must reduce, until it is eliminated, stigma and discrimination
- actions of awareness of various types of mental health issues

### *Early intervention is needed*

Intervention for mental health needs to begin early in education, therefore institutions must ensure that teachers and trainers have the appropriate knowledge and skills to tackle mental health as early as possible. At the moment, teachers and trainers in the VET feel they are not trained well enough in dealing with mental health issues in the classrooms.

Better education and understanding of mental health amongst teachers and trainers increase their capabilities on individual level but also create a better school environment as a rather important factor related to mental health of everyone involved in the educational process.

### *Workload balance*

Today it is also necessary not to overload teachers, who in addition to their work, precisely because they are not adequately supported, are experiencing an increase in the complexity of their work, which is no longer manageable. Relentless strain may force teachers/trainers to leave their profession or deter future professionals for considering this line work.

Stakeholders in the educational systems on a national and European level should consider there is an urgent need for a policy in education which will include:

- reduction in curricula in terms of transfer of quantitative knowledge and information to allow for more qualitative interaction which will promote relationships between teachers and students,
- integrate mental health in the teacher training,
- take steps to improve care and self-care among teachers,
- and establish and maintain accessible mental health service for both students and teachers.

Education has become increasingly important in today's work life. Well trained vocational workers are a necessity and a great value for the society. Teachers and trainers are the most critical resource in the educational process of young people and future workers. They have a role in creating learning opportunities, motivating learners, and fostering the potential of learners. Moreover, they care for the well-being of children and young adults.

Policy makers in education should support teachers and trainers in dealing with mental health issues of their students as educational systems can be a protective or a risk factor for further development of mental health problems. Policy makers should develop sustainable changes in cooperation with teachers and trainers, students, and mental health professionals. Mental health issues are not just personal struggle but a responsibility of the wider community including educational systems.

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