

Mental health in vocational education and training

POLICY PAPER

Appendix – Detailed Results of the pan-European survey on Mental Health in VET

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1 Appendix - Detailed Results of the pan-European survey on Mental Health in VET

1.1 Survey background

The motivation behind AHEAD in VET project is to support those involved in VET with rising issues 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. By supporting teachers and trainers there is a dual benefit, for teachers and trainers on personal and professional level, and for students.

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. 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.

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

One of our aims is to create further awareness in VET sector for mental health and to create a significant impact on organisation level.

To raise awareness on the topic we have conducted an online survey with the aim to assess the current state of mental health in VET educational institutions perceived by teachers and trainers. One of our goals is to create a policy paper on the mental health issues based on relevant, up to date experiences of teachers and trainers across Europe.

1.2 Method

The cross-sectional study on mental health in VET education was carried 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 that pre- study. In total, 405 VET teachers and trainers participated in the study. As both waves had the same survey questions, further on we will analyse results on the whole sample (n=405). 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. with average duration of 60 minutes. Each partner country provided a written report on the in-depth interviews.

The survey was completely anonymous. Participants were asked to give their consent to participation by clicking on “Yes, I want to participate in the study” but were also allowed to abandon the survey at any point. Participants who were interviewed were asked to sign informed consent.

1.2.1 Participants

A total of 405 participants from five European countries participated in the online survey, out of which 200 were from Austria and further 205 from Belgium (n=25), Italy (n=29), Greece (n=66) and Croatia (n=85).

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. Age distribution of the participants in the online survey is presented in Figure 1.

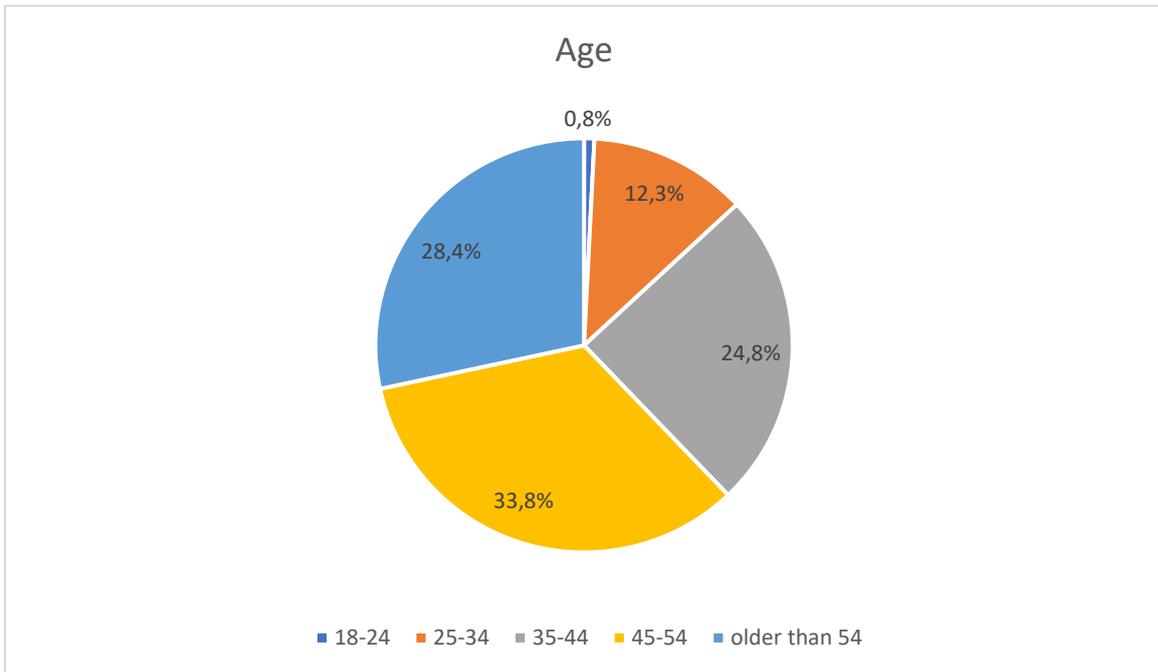


Figure 1. Age distribution of the participants

When it comes to the teaching experience, half of our participants had more than years of working experience as teachers and trainers. Distribution of teaching experience in VET or adult education is presented in Figure 2.

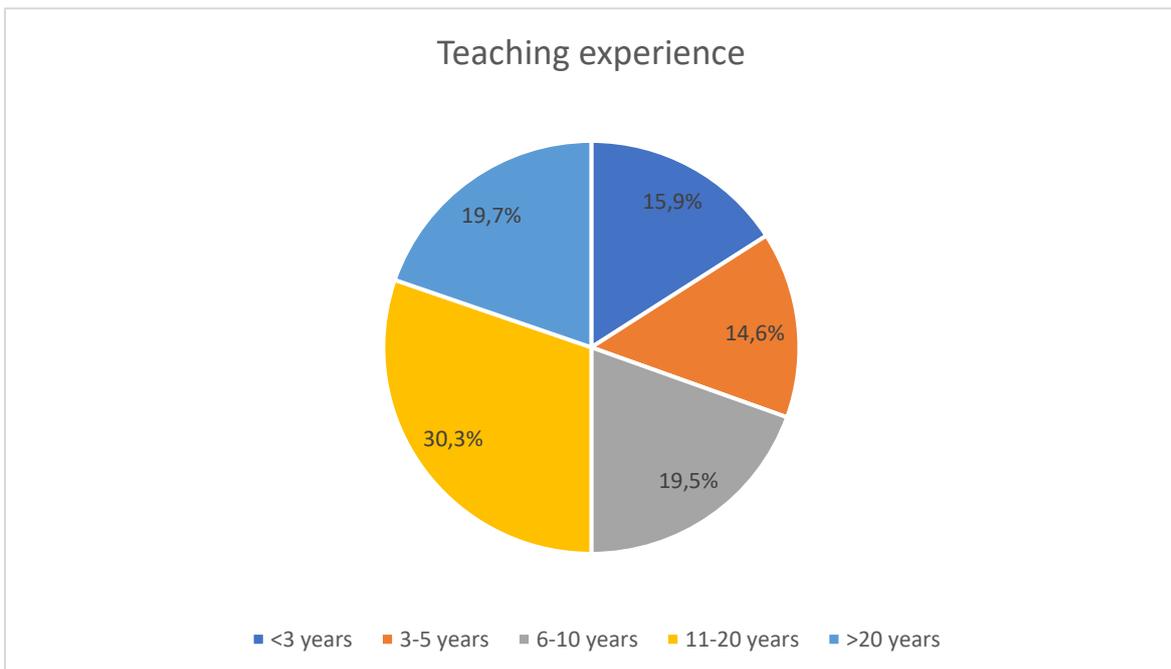


Figure 2. Distribution of teaching experience in VET or adult education

Majority of teachers and trainers who participated in the survey were female (70.5%) which reflects a higher number of female teacher/trainers in the educational systems in general.

1.2.2 Survey questions

In the online survey, participants were asked to answer 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 in our 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?

1.3 Results – online survey

As stated earlier, 405 vocational teachers and trainers from five European countries participated in the online survey. The results are presented in following subchapters.

1.3.1 Teachers and trainers' impressions on mental health problems of the participants in educations

In this section participants were asked to share their own impressions on mental health problems of their students and trainees.

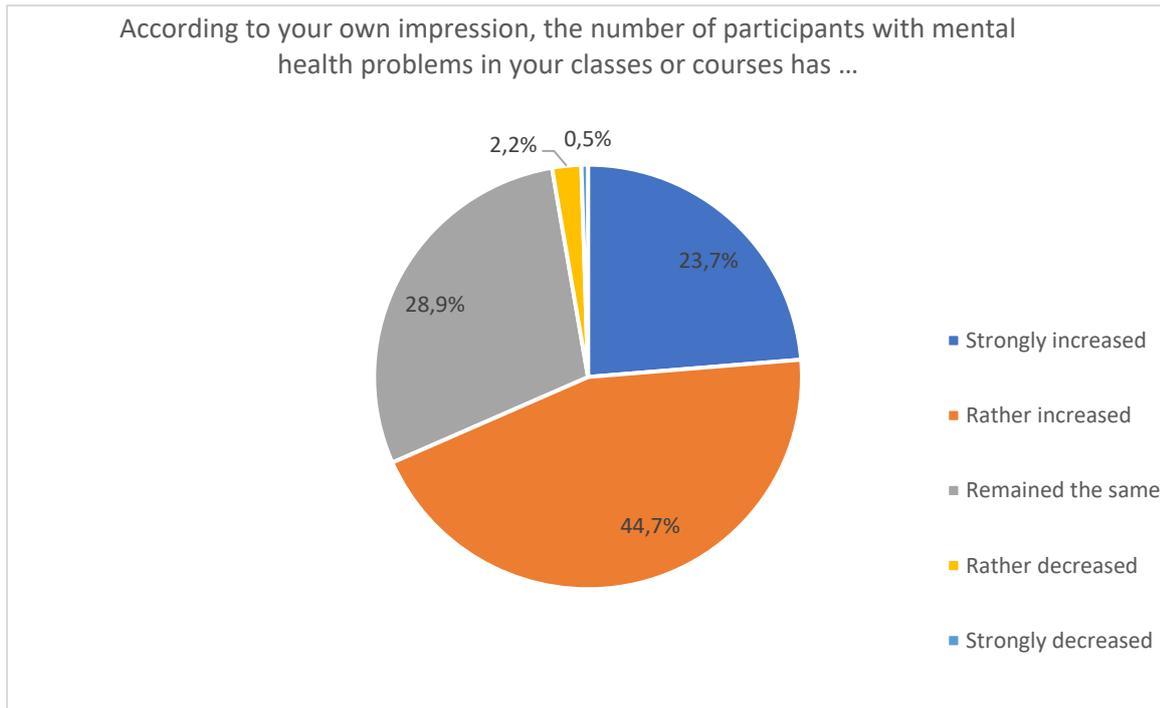


Figure 3. Assessment of mental health problems in classes and courses

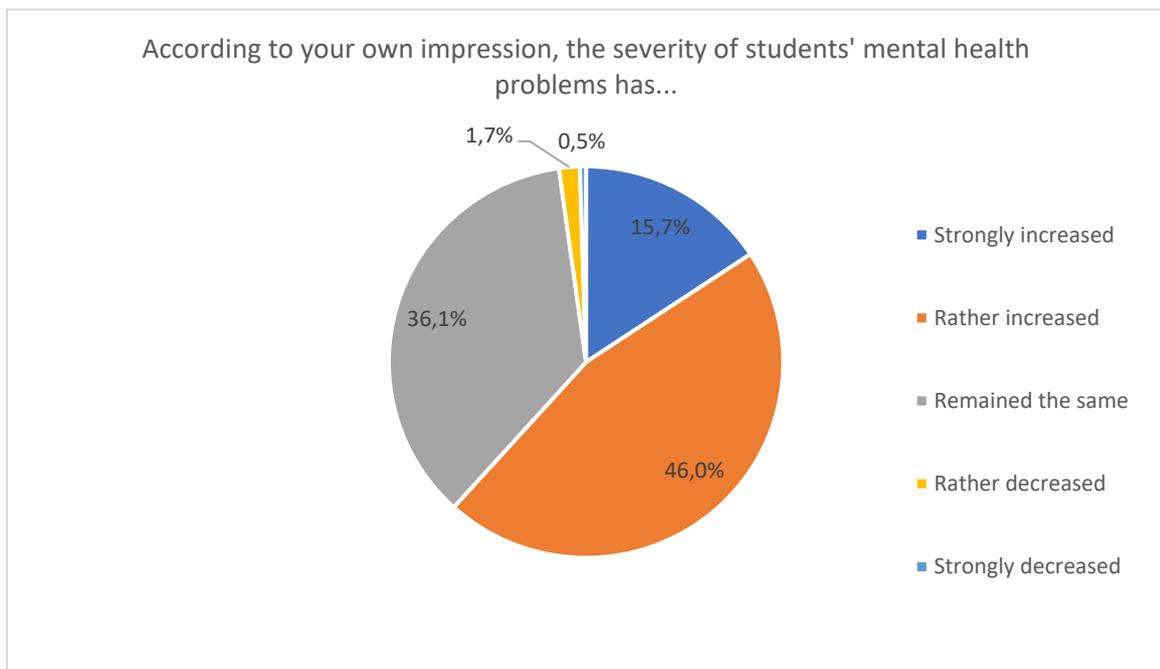


Figure 4. Assessment of severity of students' mental health problems in classes and courses

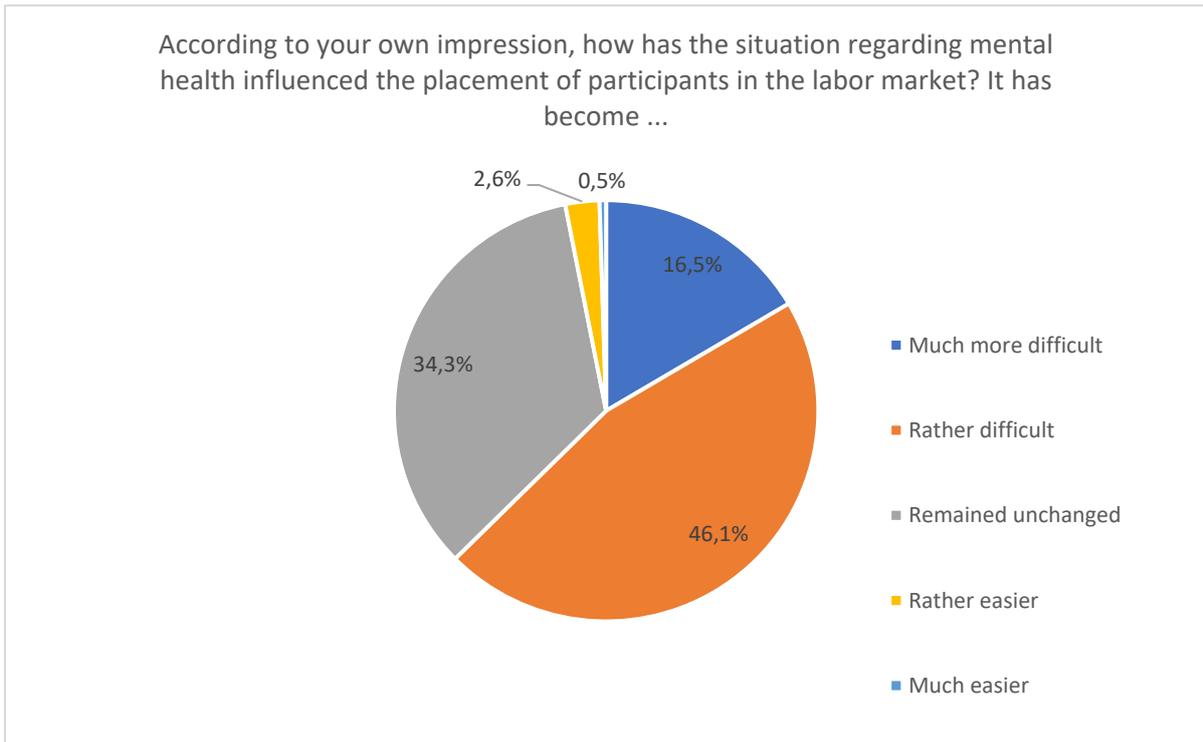


Figure 5. Assessment of influence of mental health issues on the labour market placement

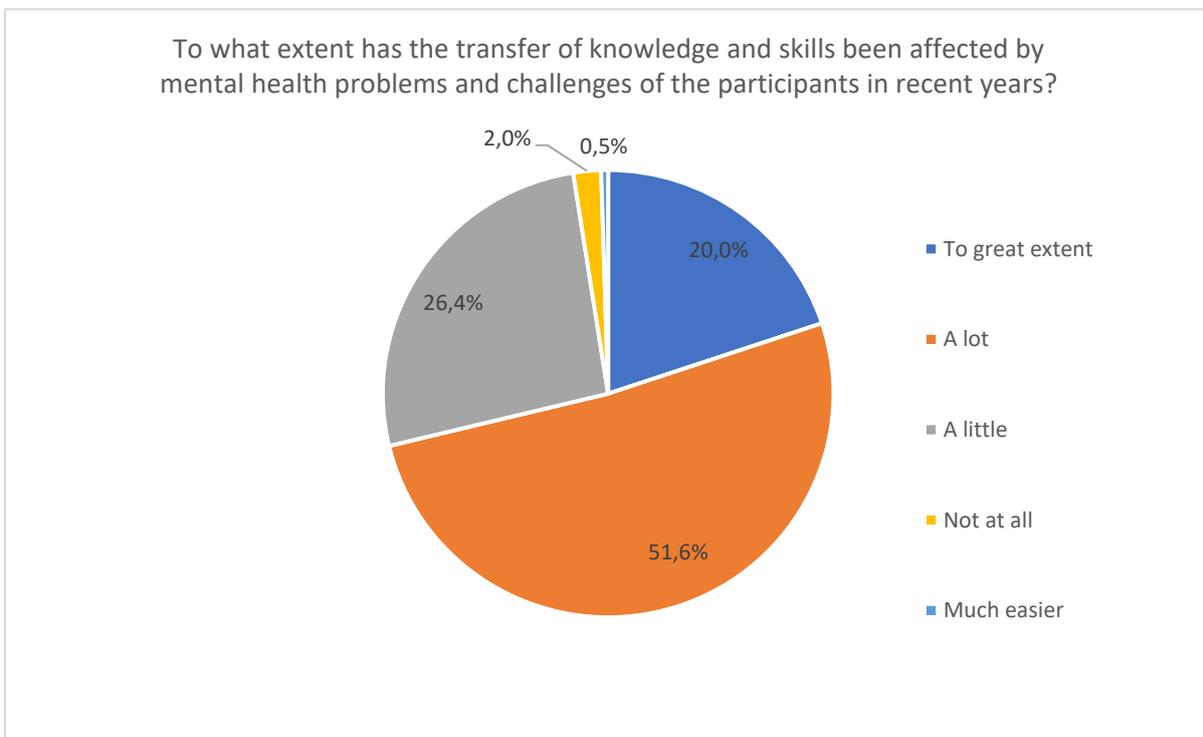


Figure 6. Assessment of influence of mental health problems on the transfer of knowledge in the classroom

In summary, 68.4% of teachers and trainers believe that number of participants with mental health problems has strongly or rather increased, and 61.7% believe that the severity of those issues has also strongly or rather increased. 62.6 % believe that mental health issues have negatively influenced the placement of those students in the labour market and 71.5% perceive that mental health issues have negatively affected the transfer of knowledge and skills in the classroom.

1.3.2 Teachers and trainer’s assessment of their needs and personal experiences in dealing with mental health issues and existing skills and previous knowledge

In this section, participants were asked to what extent were they able to distance themselves from possible mental health problems of students and if they had already built up the knowledge in the topic of mental health.

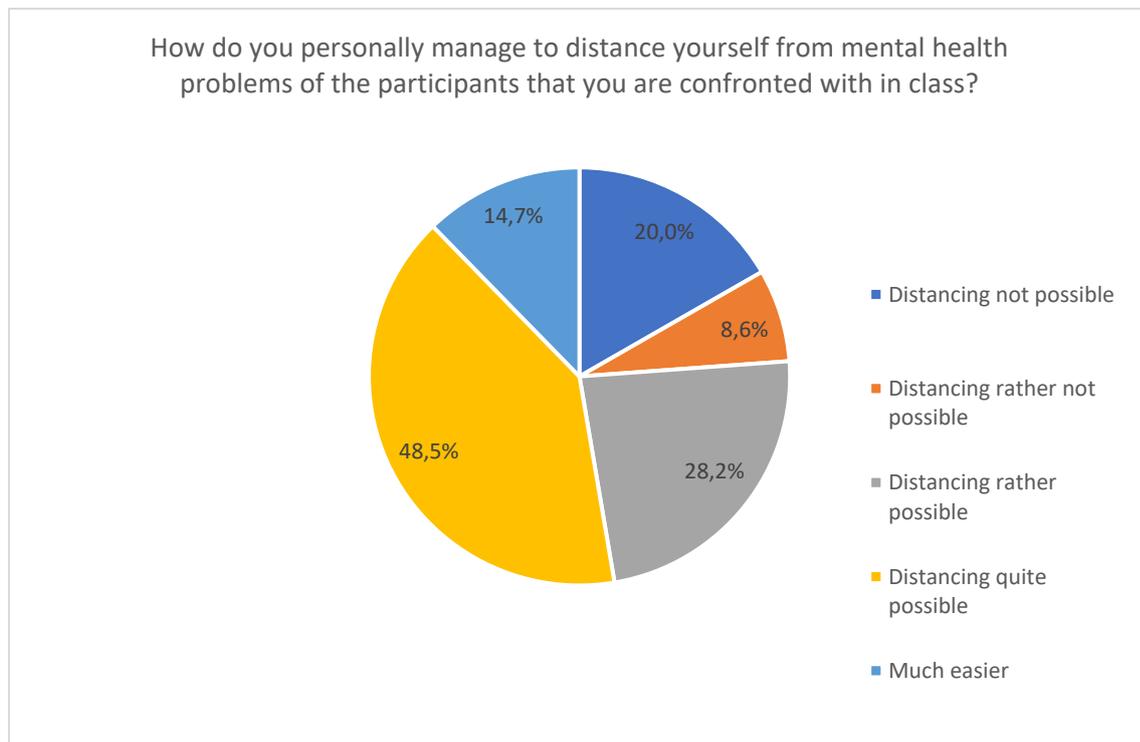


Figure 7. Assessment of managing distance form students’ mental health issues

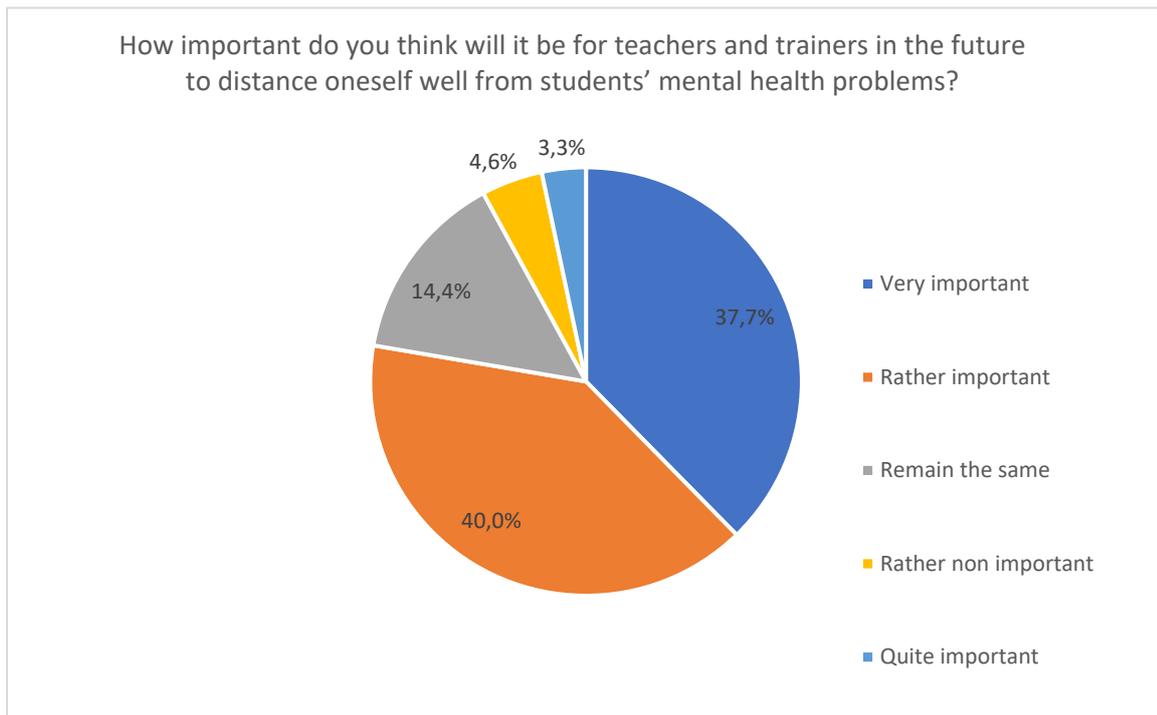


Figure 8. Assessment of importance of distancing from mental health problems of students

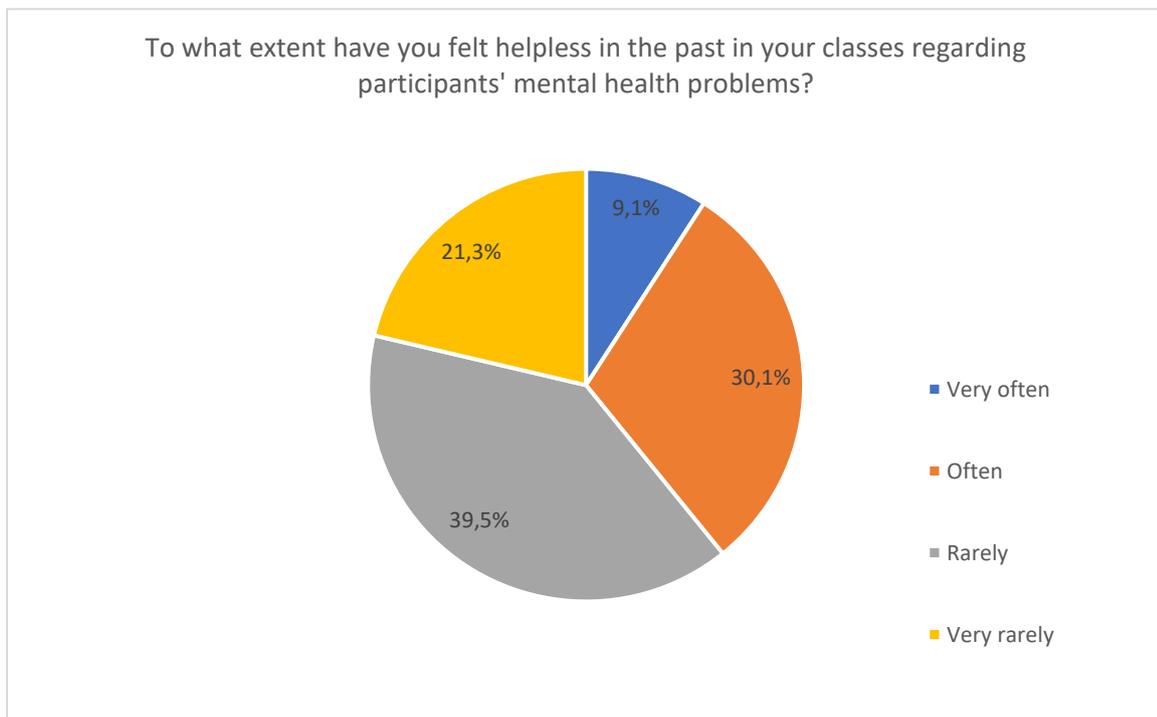


Figure 9. Assessment of helplessness in the face of students' mental health issues

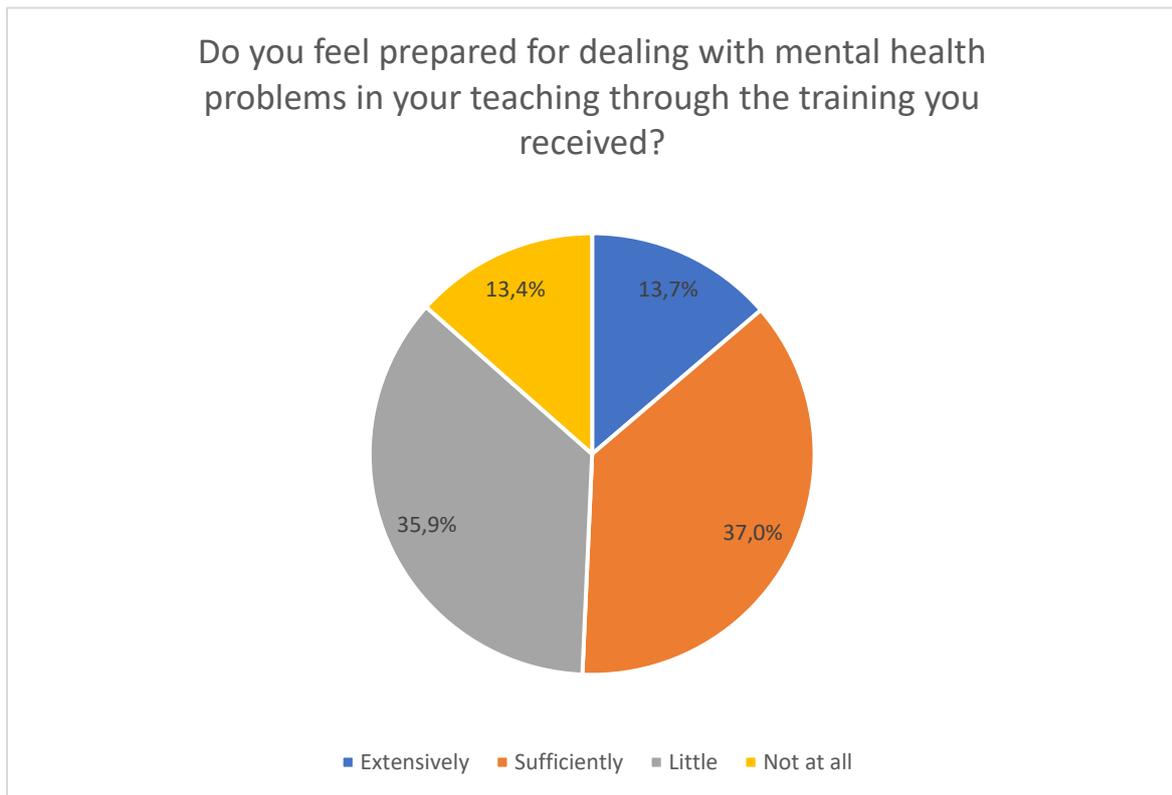


Figure 10. Assessment of preparedness from previous training in dealing with mental health issues

Almost 80% of teachers and trainers believe that it will become very or rather important to distance themselves from mental health problems of students. Currently, 37.7% have not been able or have struggled to distance themselves from the mental health issues of their students. Almost 40% of them have often or very often felt helplessness in the face of students' mental health issues. About half of the teachers believe they have been extensively or sufficiently prepared for the mental health issues in the classroom by their previous training. This means that one in two teachers does not feel they have been adequately trained to deal with mental health problems of their students.

1.3.3 Importance of mental health topics in VET education

This section is dedicated to teachers and trainers need of training possibilities concerning the topic of mental health.

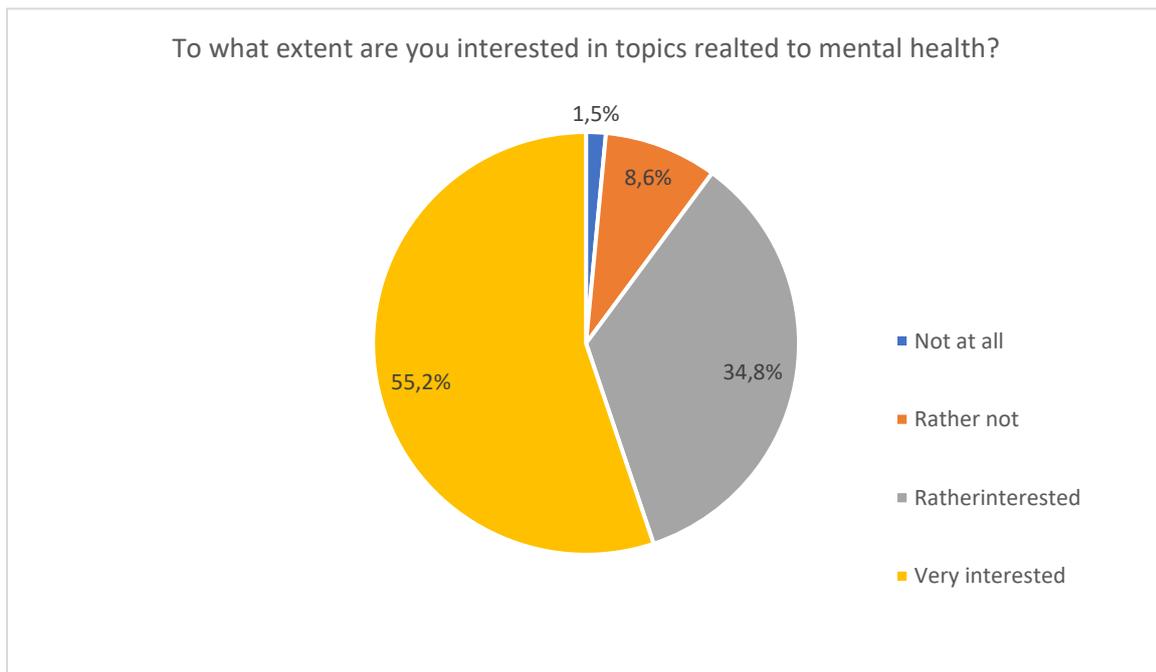


Figure 11. Assessment of interest in topics related to mental health

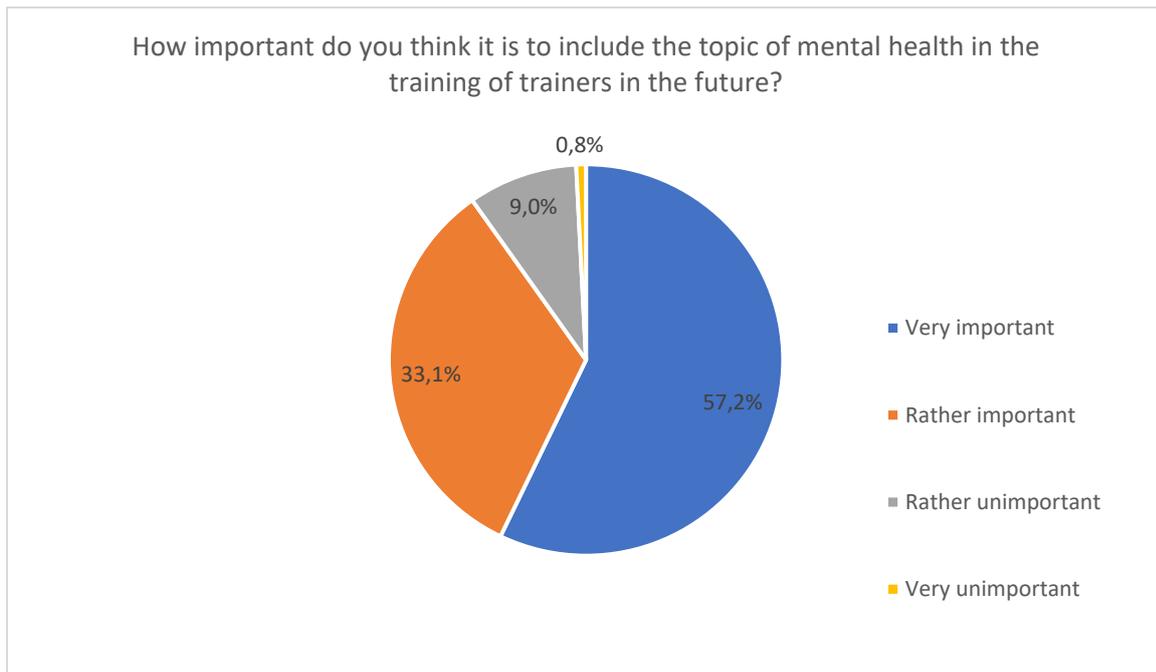


Figure 12. Assessment of importance of including topics of mental health in training of trainers

Participants had the opportunity to name topics they were particularly interested in the open ending question.

Responses were numerous and many included the need to know more about specific mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, stress, developmental disorders, and addiction. It is worth noting that many expressed the need to gain more insight and skill in how to deal with aggression, crisis, and difficult situations but also how to help traumatised students.

With recent increase in migration, there is pressure to integrate students who are migrants into new western culture, including education as soon as possible which can have a countereffect. Also, some expressed interest in topic of family violence.

Another issue worth pointing out is the problem of demotivation, emotional detachment of students and consequent dropping out of school.

Also, many expressed an interest in the topics of self-care and creating work-life balance.

In summary, almost all participants (90%) are interested in the topics of mental health and believe it is very or rather important to include them in the training of trainers in the future.

1.3.4 Mental health in VET and adult education

In this section we asked participants to rate the extent of inclusion of mental health topics in VET and adult education.

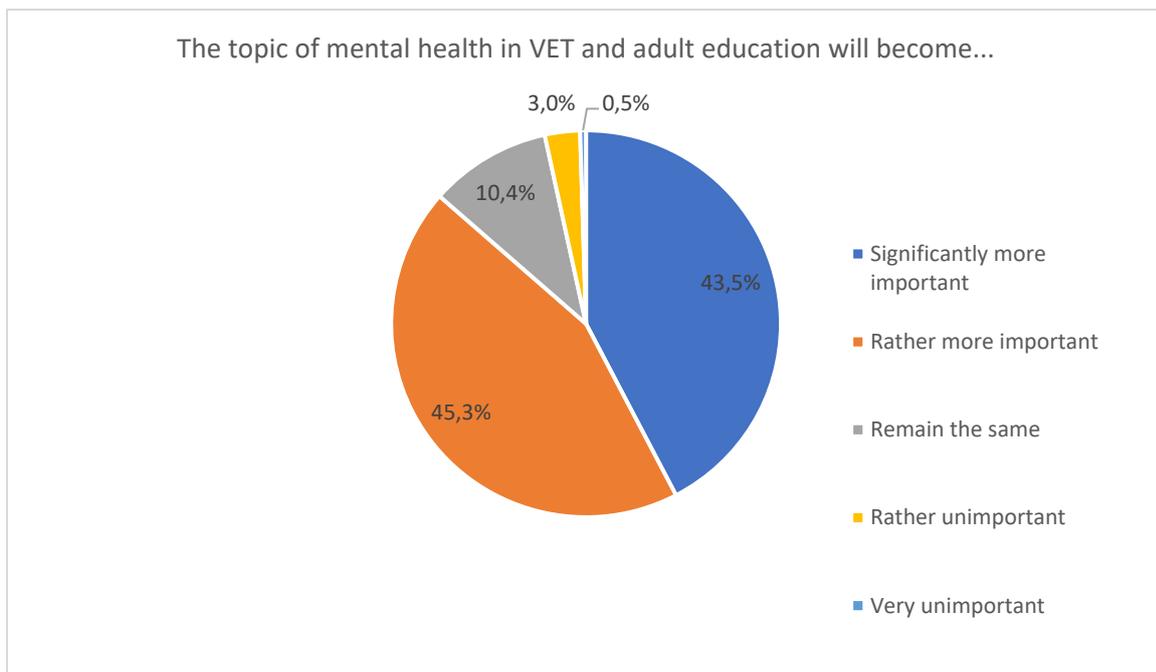


Figure 13. Assessment of relevance of mental health in VET in the future

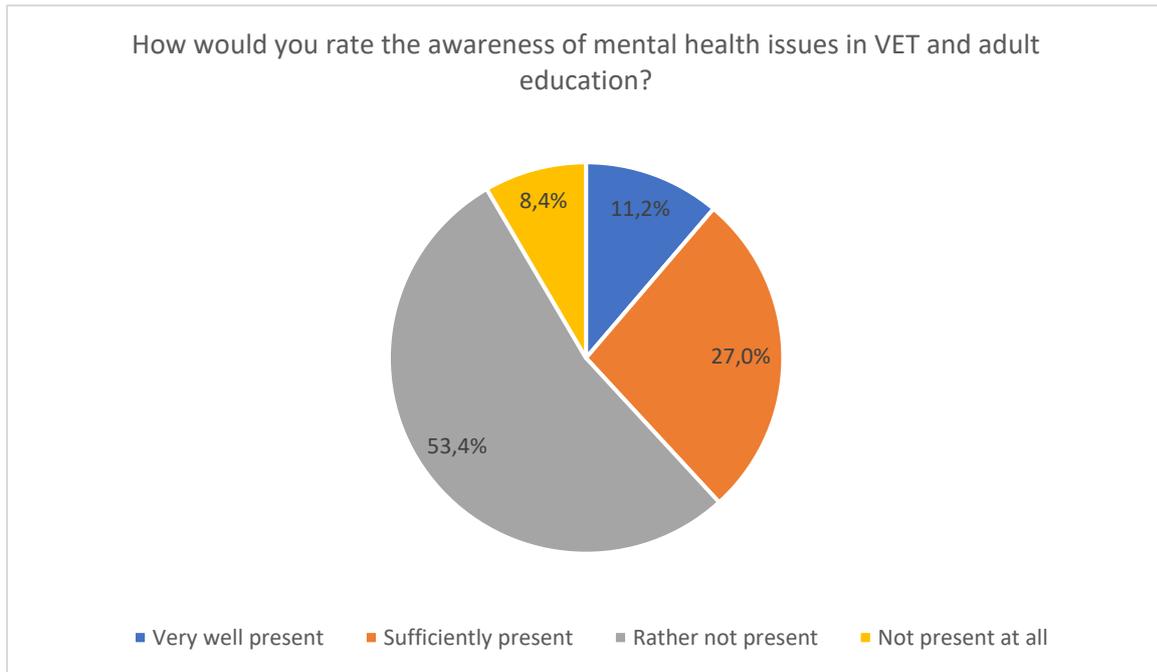


Figure 14. Assessment of awareness of mental health issues in VET

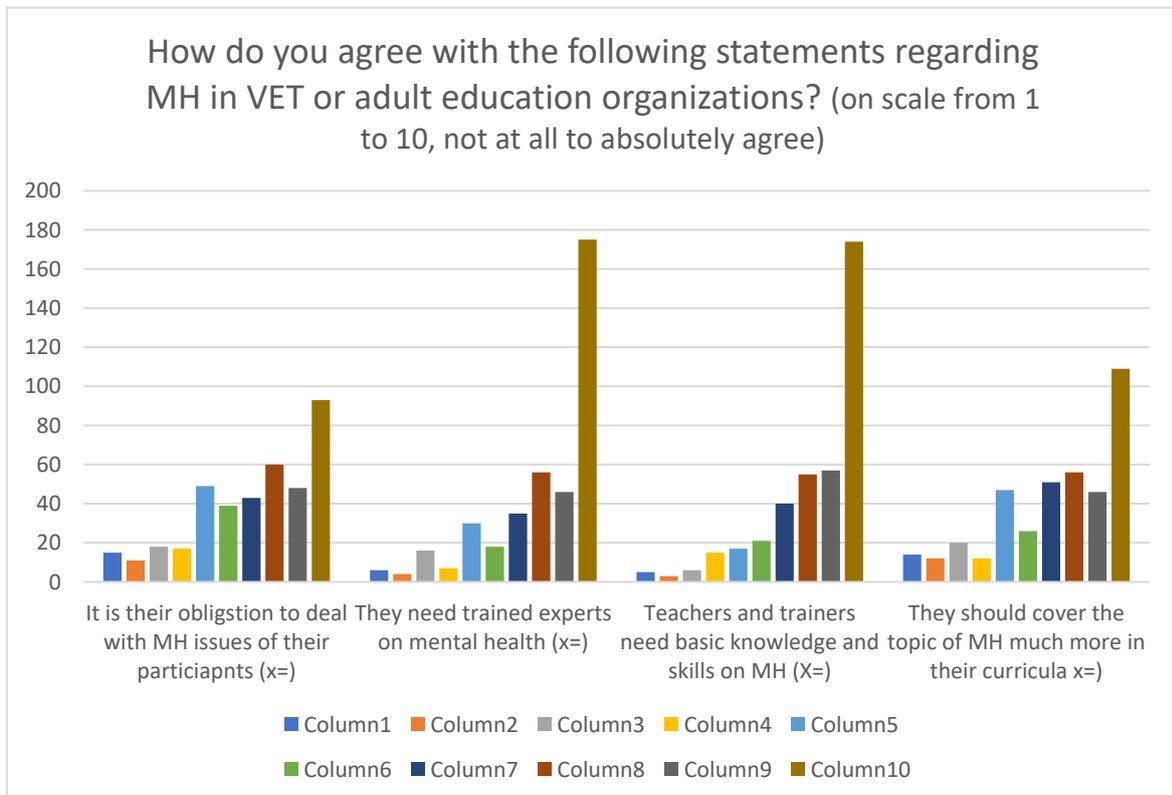


Figure 15. Assessment of MH in VET or adult education organizations

90 % of teachers and trainers stated there is not enough awareness on the topic of mental health in VET organisations. Participants agree in high numbers that VET educational organizations have obligation to deal with mental health issues of their students and should cover topics of mental health in the curricula. Majority strongly agree that VET institutions should provide teachers and trainers with basic knowledge and skill but also include in their organizations more trained experts on mental health.

1.3.5 Personal views on mental health in our society

Participants were asked to assess society's overall approach to the topic of mental health.

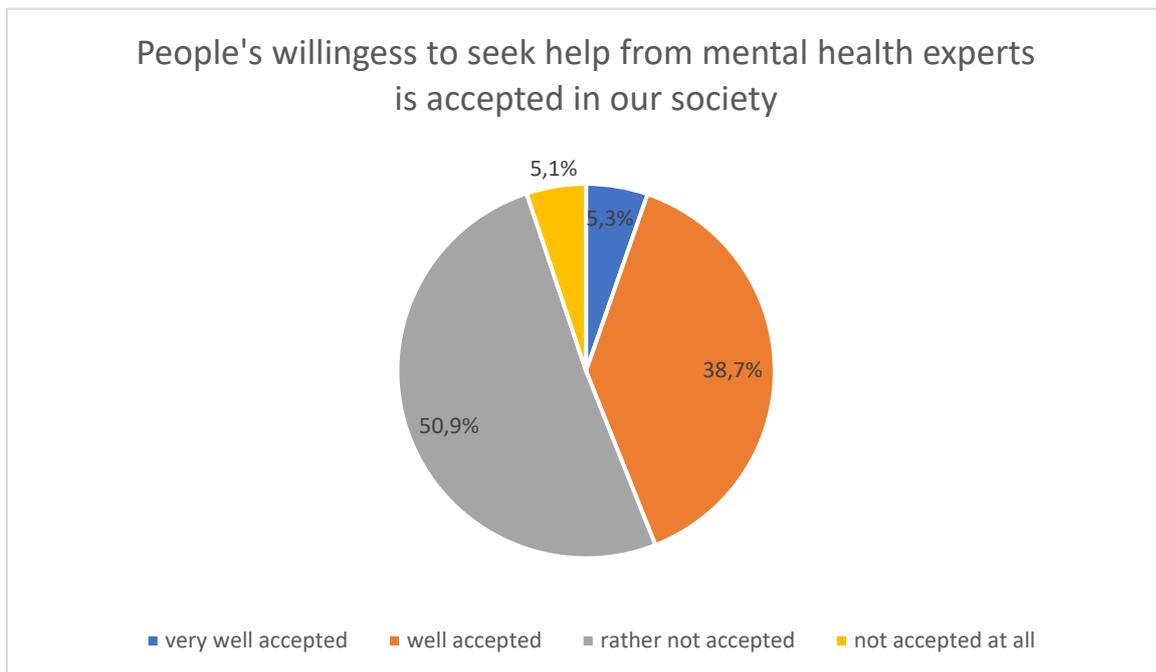


Figure 16. Assessment of people's willingness to seek help for mental health issues

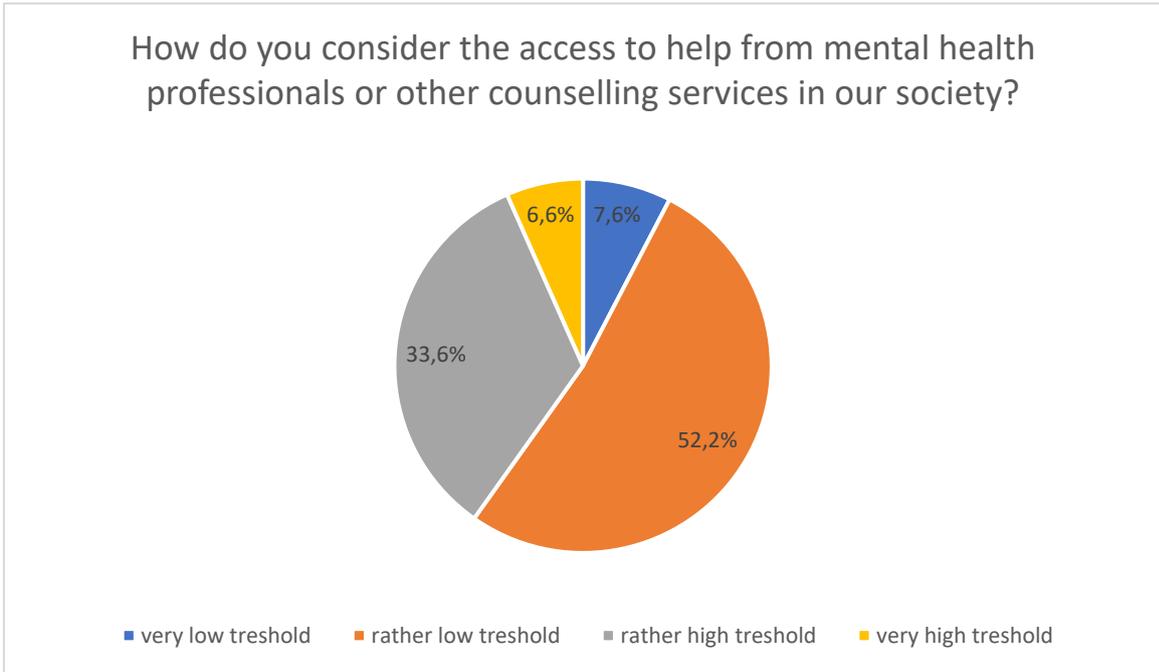


Figure 17. Assessment of accessibility of professional help in our society

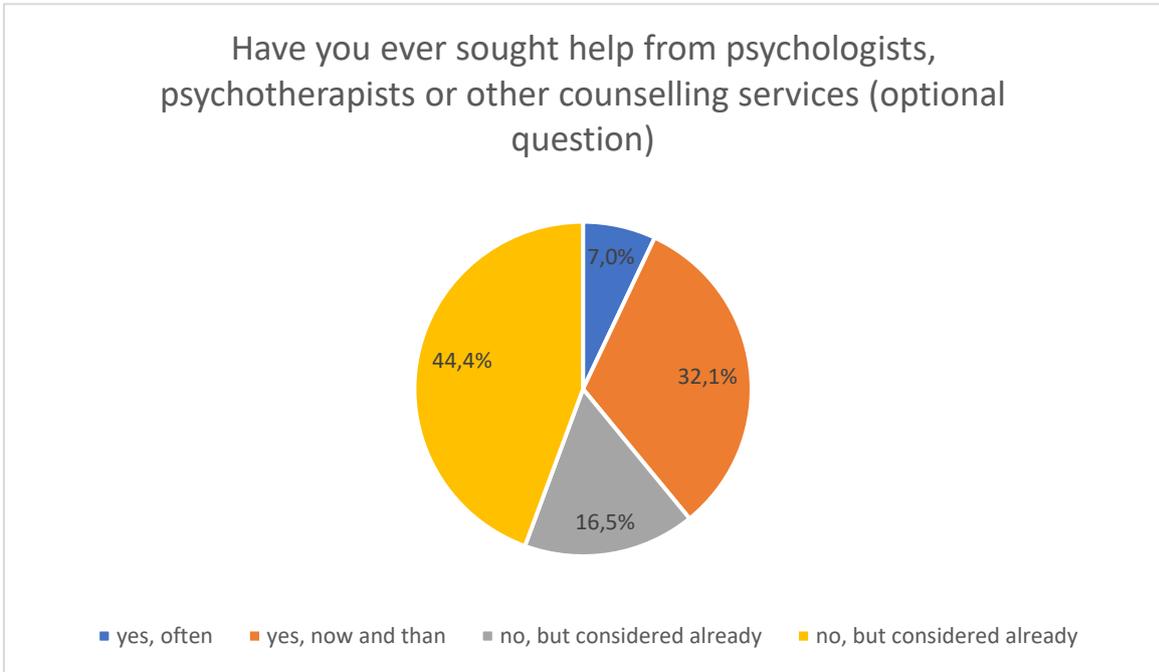


Figure 18. Assessment of previous help seeking

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

1.4 Results - In-depth interviews

1.4.1 Mental health issues among students/trainees

Most of the interviewed teachers across five European countries agree in that they perceive a significant increase of mental health issues in the classroom. Several teachers have emphasised that there have always been mental health issues, but the issues and the environment have changed noticeably. On one side there is more openness about mental health issues (possible reason for the observed increase) and on the other there is a pressure of instant solutions. Mental health issues are related to the time periods, and current times are very unfavourable for the mental health issues. Social media and sharing experiences have opened space for more positivity and acceptance, yet at the same time created pressure to be constantly reachable, open to negative feedback, the rhythm of experience became shorter and exerts further pressure. Participants singled out following mental health issues:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Suicidality
- Self-harm behaviour
- Aggressiveness and other conduct disorders
- Adjustment issues

However, almost all pointed out that there have always been students with inward mental health problems (anxiety, depressions) and outward problems (disruptive behaviours) but what worries is the feeling of general demotivation and low spirit accompanied with concentration difficulties and short attention span.

1.4.2 Reasons behind the increase in mental health issues in VET education

Through qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews there are several factors influencing the mental health status of today's VET students and trainees.

Societal factors:

- Change in the family – family structure has changed, parents themselves work long hours and do not have time to be with children and offer support
- Wider environmental context – Digitalization and globalization, pandemic
- Educational system - Learning materials – more and more to learn, system is focused on learning outcomes and there is no time for establishing teacher-student relationship.

1.4.3 Preparedness of teachers in dealing with mental health issues of their students

Interviewed teachers from five European countries all agree that teachers are not sufficiently trained for the mental health problems of their students. These topics are marginally or not at all dealt within their teaching training.

It is safe to say that on the European level teachers:

1. Do not gain enough knowledge and skills in dealing with MH issues of students in their own training.
2. They are not supported by the education system as teachers and trainers – gaining knowledge and skills is left to the personal motivation and is not institutionally supported.

1.4.4 Needed changes in the VET education to bridge the gap between education and mental health

1. Need for a policy on national level
2. Curricula should be reduced (the amount of factual knowledge)
3. Integrating mental health in the teacher training

4. Improving care and selfcare among teachers
5. Establish and maintain accessible mental health service for both students and teachers

Participants stated that formal policy from educational institutions is needed to provide the resources, 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.

A revision of the curricula to be more respectful of students' mental health would also be greatly beneficial. A system of mental health support needs to be built around education in general, where educators can receive feedback for what they did well and where they could improve, a place where they could go to receive support on what actions to take next or information on where to refer students with mental health issues that go beyond teacher's capacities to deal with. However, participant expresses doubt that access to such mental health support is viable, given that many VET organisations are simply too small to fund and logistically serve such capacity.

1.4.5 Policy on mental health in VET

The strong message to be conveyed to the institutions is characterised by fundamental points, such as the 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, through actions of awareness of various types of discomfort.

Today it is also necessary not to overload teachers, who in addition to their work, precisely because they are not adequately supported, are experiencing a complexification of their activity, which is no longer manageable.

Intervention for mental health needs to begin in early education, to ensure that everyone has the appropriate skills to tackle mental health as early as possible.

1.5 Conclusion

The results of online survey and in-depth interviews were attained by a large number of VET teachers and trainers across five European countries who were representative in terms of years of experience. Therefore, we assume to have gained relevant information on the current state of mental health issues in the European classrooms and on the needs of teachers and trainers in dealing with such issues.

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

The 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 in the near future and therefore should be included in the training of trainers.

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

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

The results of the research and interviews speak unquestionably in favour of the existing crisis of mental health in the educational system. The reasons behind 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 knowledgeable working force, the pressure on everyone involved in the VET system is alarmingly increasing.

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



in curriculum and learning outcomes to allow for more qualitative relationship 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.



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