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AHEADinVET: Scaling Strategy

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Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
Mental health as an educational priority.....	1
The AHEADinVET project: mental health well-being for teachers and trainers	3
1. Scaling Out: Expanding at the Geographical Stage.....	6
Why geographical scaling out matters.....	6
1.2 Objectives.....	7
1.3. Specific Programs and Activities.....	8
1.4 Challenges and Risks	9
2. Scaling Up: Influencing Laws and Policy	12
Policy Integration: A Prerequisite for Sustainability	13
2.1 Objectives.....	14
2.2 Specific Programs and Activities.....	14
2.3 Challenges and Risks	15
Changing the System.....	16
3. Scaling Deep: Shifting the Culture of Mental Health in Vocational Education	17
Transforming Culture from Within	17
3.1 Objectives.....	17
3.2 Specific Programs and Activities.....	19
3.3 Challenges and Risks	20
Stigma and Silence	21
4. Next steps.....	23
CONCLUSION.....	24

Scaling strategy: how to implement impact

INTRODUCTION

Mental health as an educational priority

For education systems to be truly effective, they must prioritize not only academic achievement but also the mental and emotional wellbeing of students and staff. A growing body of evidence¹ confirms that mental health is inseparable from learning: when students feel secure, supported, and emotionally well, they are better positioned to reach their full potential. Likewise, educators who are mentally and emotionally supported are more capable of fostering positive learning environments.

To advance the integration of education and mental health at scale, there must be a fundamental shift in how school mental health is conceptualized. This means aligning the goals of mental health services with educational outcomes, and vice versa, ensuring that effective schooling supports the healthy functioning of students, and that mental health frameworks contribute to learning success.

This integration means rethinking our priorities in education, treating mental health not as an extra service, but as a regular and essential part of everyday school life. One of the most effective ways to achieve this is by leveraging the natural resources already present within schools (such as classroom teachers, school leaders, counselors, peer support networks, and everyday routines) as part of a whole-school approach to mental health. Students can interact with them regularly, making them ideal touchpoints for early support, prevention, and positive reinforcement.

Schools should use approaches that combine emotional wellbeing with learning. This means creating classrooms where mental health is supported every day, through things like teaching

¹ [WHO, Supplement on Mental Health \(2015\)](#)

social skills, understanding students' experiences, and making sure all students feel included and supported. A key aspect of this integration is ensuring better outcomes for all students, including those with more serious emotional or behavioral challenges.

Parents and caregivers also play a critical role in supporting student wellbeing, and their involvement must be strengthened. Schools should create more opportunities for meaningful family engagement, recognizing that mental health support is most effective when it extends beyond the classroom and into the home.

Finally, we must recognize that educators themselves need to be supported. The wellbeing of school staff is foundational to student success. Teachers and school leaders cannot pour from an empty cup; when their mental health is protected and nurtured, they are better equipped to create the kind of nurturing, responsive environment in which students can truly thrive.

Mental health exists on a spectrum, including everyday emotional challenges as well as diagnosable conditions. Schools must address both ends of this spectrum, supporting general wellbeing while identifying and responding to more serious mental health needs. While some schools have started to focus on student wellbeing, systemic strategies are needed to ensure staff wellbeing is also prioritized, as it directly impacts student success.

The World Health Organization (WHO) affirms that mental health is a fundamental component of individual and societal wellbeing. It contributes to learning, productivity, resilience, and social engagement². However, despite its importance, mental health remains under-addressed in many public and educational systems. There is a clear and urgent case for investing in mental health promotion and primary prevention within schools, both to reduce the risk of mental disorders and to improve social, educational, and economic outcomes.

To make mental health a true educational priority, it's fundamental to coordinate actions: a solid research agenda, sustained investment, evidence-informed interventions, and a culture that values emotional wellbeing as much as academic excellence. By creating nurturing, inclusive, and responsive school environments, we can empower students and educators alike to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

² WHO, Mental Health https://www.who.int/health-topics/mental-health#tab=tab_3

The AHEADinVET project: mental health well-being for teachers and trainers

The AHEADinVET project is a two-year initiative implemented under the Erasmus+ programme. Its goal is to provide vocational education and training (VET) teachers and trainers with practical resources to enhance their understanding of mental health in educational settings.

The project offers a self-paced, free e-learning course as well as a MOOC that expands on the course through interactive lectures, case studies, exercises, and reflection questions designed to help participants apply what they learn in practice. In addition, a series of podcasts features insightful discussions with psychology experts, teachers, and students on some of the most pressing mental health issues affecting schools today.

The AHEADinVET project represents a forward-thinking initiative designed to address a pressing and often overlooked aspect of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector: the mental health and well-being of educators and trainers. As mental health concerns grow across educational environments, there is a critical need to equip those on the front lines of vocational instruction with awareness, tools, and support systems necessary to manage and promote psychological resilience, both for themselves and for their students. The AHEADinVET project responds to this need by creating practical, inclusive, and evidence-based resources tailored specifically for the unique realities of the VET context.

This scaling strategy serves as a blueprint for expanding and deepening the project's overall impact, ensuring that its benefits are both far-reaching and enduring. It is thoughtfully structured around three interrelated and complementary dimensions of scale, each designed to address a different aspect of systemic transformation:

- **Scaling out** involves extending the geographical footprint of the project by introducing AHEAD's tools, training programmes, and methodologies to a broader range of institutions and stakeholders across Europe. This dimension focuses on replicating and adapting successful practices in new contexts, allowing more vocational education and training (VET) providers to benefit from the project's innovations and contribute to a collective movement for improved mental well-being.
- **Scaling up** focuses on institutional and policy-level change. This means embedding the core principles and practices of AHEAD into national and regional education policies,

institutional strategies, and professional standards. By influencing how systems are structured, and decisions are made, this dimension ensures that the changes introduced by AHEAD are not just temporary interventions but become part of the lasting fabric of educational and vocational systems.

- **Scaling deep** addresses the often less visible but equally critical cultural and psychological dimensions of change. It seeks to transform the underlying values, beliefs, and mindsets that shape how mental well-being is understood and prioritized within VET environments. By fostering a shift in organizational culture and daily practice, this dimension aims to create educational spaces where mental health is normalized, openly discussed, and actively supported, leading to more inclusive, empathetic, and resilient learning and working environments.

This strategic framework acknowledges that real change is multi-layered. It is not enough to simply replicate materials or distribute toolkits. For the project AHEADinVET to achieve its transformative potential, the initiative must engage with diverse stakeholders, from policymakers to front-line educators, and adapt sensitively to the social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which it operates.

At the heart of the scaling strategy is a belief in collaboration and co-creation. Strong partnerships with VET providers, governmental bodies, mental health professionals, and education networks are essential. Moreover, ongoing adaptability, guided by feedback, evaluation, and emerging needs, will ensure the project remains relevant and impactful across varied contexts.

The general objectives of the AHEADinVET project remain central to the development and implementation of this scaling strategy: to enhance awareness, reduce stigma, and build practical, sustainable support structures for mental health within vocational education and training (VET) settings. These objectives guide every aspect of the project's activities and vision for the future. By providing targeted capacity-building opportunities, developing adaptable training resources, and fostering a vibrant, transnational community of practice, the project equips VET educators not only to recognize early warning signs of psychological distress among learners but also to respond with empathy and effectiveness. At the same time, it places equal emphasis on the mental health and well-being of educators themselves, acknowledging the complex and often demanding nature of their professional environments.

In aligning the scaling strategy with these core objectives, the project also draws from significant learning moments and stakeholder engagement activities, particularly the insights gained during the 2025 AHEADinVET Conference, held in Brussel during the third year of the project (April 2025). This landmark event served as a key milestone in the project's evolution and future trajectory. Bringing together educators, mental health professionals, researchers, and students in mental health from across Europe, the conference catalyzed meaningful dialogue around the integration of mental well-being in VET systems. It also provided an essential platform for resource-sharing, collaborative problem-solving, and strategic networking, laying the groundwork for expanding the project's influence. The outcomes of the event, including recorded keynote sessions, shared action commitments, and regionally focused breakout discussions, now form a cornerstone for the next phase of scale efforts, offering both inspiration and actionable guidance.

By advancing this multi-dimensional scaling strategy, AHEADinVET aspires to contribute to a broader cultural transformation within vocational education, one in which mental health is no longer treated as a secondary issue but rather recognized as a fundamental pillar of quality education and student success. The project set out to build a future where inclusive, psychologically safe learning environments are the norm, not the exception. Through deliberate, collaborative action and the sustained engagement of committed partners across sectors and borders, AHEADinVET aims to extend its reach, deepen its systemic influence, and support the development of a more inclusive, resilient, and compassionate VET landscape throughout Europe.

1. Scaling Out: Expanding at the Geographical Stage

Scaling out refers to the strategic process of broadening the reach of a project or initiative by replicating its successful elements, such as practices, methodologies, tools, and values, and across new geographical areas and to larger, more diverse populations. In the context of the AHEADinVET project, this means extending the project's benefits beyond its original scope to engage a wider network of vocational education professionals, including teachers, trainers, school leaders, and support staff across Europe.

Unlike simple expansion that focuses solely on numbers, scaling out within AHEADinVET is intentional and adaptive. It involves ensuring that the project's mental health resources are not only widely distributed but also meaningfully implemented in ways that align with local realities. This includes adapting content to different cultural, institutional, and linguistic contexts to maximize relevance and effectiveness.

Why geographical scaling out matters

The imperative to scale out AHEADinVET is grounded in the urgent and growing need for mental health support across the vocational education and training (VET) sector. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the education landscape has seen a notable rise in psychological stressors among educators. Vocational educators face unique challenges: managing hands-on training environments, engaging with at-risk learners, and balancing academic and emotional support roles. Despite these pressures, many lack sufficient tools or institutional frameworks to support their own mental health or that of their learners.

By scaling it out, the project addresses this gap by making its suite of mental health tools, awareness resources, training modules, and support strategies available to a broader community. This enables more educators to recognize early warning signs of mental health issues, apply preventative strategies, and cultivate environments that promote psychological well-being.

Geographical expansion is a cornerstone of the scaling out process. AHEADinVET aims to transcend its initial pilot regions and participating partner countries to reach educational professionals in diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts across Europe. This broad dissemination ensures that the project's tools and approaches are not confined to isolated use but instead become integrated into vocational education systems across regions.

This inclusive approach promotes equity in access to mental health resources, ensuring that professionals in under-resourced or remote areas are not left behind. It also strengthens systemic resilience, as more institutions are equipped to support the mental health of their staff and learners, contributing to a more sustainable and compassionate VET ecosystem.

Scaling out also opens the door for cross-national collaboration and mutual learning. By engaging a broad array of stakeholders, such as vocational schools, training centers, regional education authorities, and policy makers, the project encourages the exchange of best practices and innovative adaptations of materials. This feedback loop enriches the project's resources and allows continuous refinement to suit varied regional needs.

Cross-border collaboration enables the project to shape a cohesive European strategy for mental health in vocational education, while also adapting to the unique cultural and institutional needs of each region. This integration of shared objectives with localized approaches boosts the project's overall effectiveness, relevance, and long-term sustainability throughout Europe.

1.2 Objectives

The central goal of the AHEADinVET project is to extend its positive impact beyond the initial pilot regions and into a broader European context. Scaling out refers to the strategic expansion of the project's reach across new geographical areas, ensuring that its mental health tools, training programmes, and core values are made accessible to a wider audience of vocational educators, trainers, and health professionals. This phase of the strategy focuses on both dissemination and integration, sharing resources while also embedding them into local and regional structures in a way that ensures long-term sustainability. One key priority is to expand the availability of AHEAD's training programmes and mental health resources to professionals in new countries and regions. Expanding access to these tools empowers a broader group of educators and health professionals with the skills needed to support mental well-being in vocational education settings. This growth will be driven through targeted outreach initiatives such as workshops, webinars, and awareness campaigns, all designed to increase the visibility and importance of mental health within VET institutions.

Another critical step involves establishing partnerships with local and regional education authorities. By aligning the project approaches with existing professional development frameworks, the project can embed its principles more deeply into the ongoing training of VET teachers and trainers. These collaborations also strengthen institutional buy-in, encouraging

local ownership and long-term commitment to mental health support. To make the materials truly accessible and impactful, the AHEADinVET project also emphasizes the importance of translation and cultural adaptation. Recognizing the diversity of linguistic, cultural, and educational contexts across Europe, training content will be revised and adapted to ensure that it resonates meaningfully with its intended audiences. This not only improves engagement but also ensures that mental health promotion is responsive to local needs and realities.

In addition, the project seeks to promote peer learning networks that link educators and institutions across different regions. These networks offer valuable opportunities for mutual support, the sharing of best practices, and collaborative problem-solving. By fostering these horizontal connections, AHEADinVET aims to create a European-wide community of practice united by a common commitment to mental health in vocational education.

These efforts ensure that the success of the AHEADinVET project is not confined to a limited number of institutions or regions. Instead, its methods and impact will be multiplied across Europe, enabling more educators to confidently address mental health and create healthier, more inclusive, and more resilient learning environments for all.

1.3. Specific Programs and Activities

To ensure that the AHEADinVET project reaches its full potential in terms of scale and sustainability, it is essential not only to deliver structured programs but also to foster a vibrant culture of awareness, participation, and ongoing engagement. This involves leveraging a mix of communication channels, partnerships, and strategic outreach tactics that keep mental health on the agenda in vocational education settings across Europe.

One key strand of this strategy is a multi-channel awareness campaign that spans social media platforms, schools' official web pages, institutional newsletters, and dedicated communication outlets about the project. Regular posts (including articles, infographics, educator testimonials, and video interviews) will highlight key project tools, mental health strategies, and upcoming training opportunities. The project's website and YouTube channel will serve as central hubs for content distribution, hosting both promotional material and recorded webinars and conference sessions that educators can revisit and share within their own institutions.

Moreover, educators will be motivated and supported to use the material already developed through the AHEADinVET project. Through targeted emails, professional development sessions,

and social media campaigns, schools and training institutions will be encouraged to circulate toolkits and frameworks among their staff. The project will provide clear guides on how to integrate these materials into existing training modules, class curricula, and staff wellness initiatives.

Building long-term engagement is also a priority. After each major event, especially conferences and webinars, follow-up strategies will be implemented to maintain contact with participants. This might include newsletters, invitations to join peer learning networks, or facilitated sessions on how to integrate AHEAD resources into institutional policies and daily practice. Educators who attend these events will be encouraged to embed project materials into their courses and staff development programs, ensuring that the project's influence continues well beyond the original training.

In addition to working directly with educators, the AHEADinVET project will actively involve policymakers, school administrators, and regional education authorities. These stakeholders will be invited to attend key events, contribute to discussions, and review the materials being used in the training. Their participation is vital for embedding mental health frameworks into broader educational policies and systems.

Lastly, a central pillar of this strategy is to make AHEAD-developed mental health courses, i.e. the Mental Health Ambassador learning course and the MOOC, openly available to teachers, trainers, and school leaders. These will be offered through online learning platforms and may be recognized as part of continuing formal professional development programs in participating countries. With this strategy, self-paced learning options, the project will reach a broader audience and empower more educators to become advocates for mental well-being within their own institutions.

1.4 Challenges and Risks

As the AHEAD in VET project seeks to expand its impact across Europe, it must navigate a complex landscape of educational systems, cultural contexts, and institutional priorities. While the goals of scaling out are ambitious and necessary, the journey is not without its challenges. Understanding these risks and planning for them is key to ensuring the project's success in diverse settings.

One of the most pressing challenges lies in the cultural barriers surrounding mental health. In many communities, mental well-being is still a stigmatized topic, often viewed as a personal matter rather than an institutional responsibility. Teachers and trainers may be hesitant to participate in training or engage in discussions due to fear of judgment or misunderstanding. In some regions, mental health is even associated with weakness or failure, making it particularly difficult to introduce systemic approaches within educational institutions. To overcome this, the project must adopt a sensitive and inclusive communication strategy, one that respects local norms while gently challenging harmful taboos. Partnering with local advocates, using culturally resonant messaging, and embedding mental health within the broader theme of workplace well-being can help foster openness and trust.

Time constraints within vocational institutions present another significant barrier. Educators and school staff are often overburdened with responsibilities and tight schedules, leaving little room for additional training, no matter how valuable. Without careful planning, the project's activities may be perceived as “extra work” rather than integral to professional development. Timing will also be crucial, scheduling workshops during quieter periods or on dedicated professional development days can significantly increase uptake and engagement.

There is also the challenge of resistance to change, particularly in environments where institutional routines are deeply entrenched. Some educators may view mental health initiatives with skepticism, especially if they've previously encountered short-lived or top-down projects that failed to deliver meaningful change. Others may question the relevance of mental health training to their teaching roles. To counter this, the AHEADinVET project must prioritize clear communication of benefits, i.e highlighting how mental well-being directly supports teacher performance, student outcomes, and institutional resilience. Involving educators in the co-design and adaptation of materials can also foster a sense of ownership and relevance, building a stronger case for sustained engagement.

Given the project's ambition to scale across multiple European regions, managing diversity is another critical consideration. Educational systems vary widely from country to country, and even within countries, local needs and practices can differ dramatically. What works in one region may not be effective to another. This diversity, while enriching, can complicate implementation and evaluation. To succeed, the project must adopt a modular and adaptable approach, developing tools and resources that can be tailored to fit local contexts without losing their core purpose. Regional working groups and advisory committees can play a key role in this process, ensuring that local voices guide adaptation efforts.

Another potential risk is that the project's impact may not reach the policy level as intended. While AHEADinVET aspires to inform and influence policy development related to mental health in VET, achieving meaningful engagement at the institutional and governmental levels can be difficult. Policy landscapes are often slow-moving and shaped by competing priorities, which can limit the visibility and integration of mental health initiatives. To improve its influence, the project must align its work with existing EU and national policy frameworks, and produce accessible policy briefs, evidence summaries, and advocacy materials. Strong partnerships with education authorities from the outset will also be essential in embedding project outcomes into long-term strategic plans.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the project must ensure it effectively reaches people from all backgrounds, including those from underrepresented, disadvantaged, or marginalized communities. Cultural, religious, financial, and social differences can affect how mental health is perceived and addressed, and there is a real risk that certain groups may be excluded from the project's activities. To create equitable access, the project must invest in inclusive design and targeted outreach. This includes translating materials into multiple languages, incorporating diverse perspectives, and working closely with local NGOs, community organizations, and grassroots educators. Ensuring that all voices are heard and reflected in the project will improve reach as well as enhance the quality and relevance of the resources developed.

2. Scaling Up: Influencing Laws and Policy

Scaling up refers to the process of embedding the core principles, tools, and practices of a project into the formal structures that govern education, namely, national and regional policies, legislation, institutional strategies, and professional development systems. Unlike scaling out, which focuses on broadening geographic reach, scaling up aims to achieve systemic change: it transforms innovative ideas into recognized standards, reshaping how education is delivered, supported, and sustained over the long term.

In the context of the AHEADinVET project, scaling up involves positioning mental health as a foundational element of vocational education policy across Europe. This means moving beyond local or pilot-level initiatives to actively shape discourse at the policy-making level. Mental health must be reframed not merely as an individual or institutional responsibility, but as a systemic and strategic priority for educational authorities, ministries, and teacher training institutions alike.

To achieve this, the project focuses on influencing several key levers of change:

- Teacher training curricula: integrating mental health awareness and support strategies into the core content of initial teacher education.
- Professional development standards: embedding ongoing mental health competencies into national requirements for in-service training and career progression.
- Strategic planning frameworks: ensuring that national and regional education plans include measurable goals and resources for staff and student well-being.
- Policy dialogues and advocacy: engaging policymakers and stakeholders in structured conversations to drive legislative support and long-term funding commitments.

The project's vision is not to remain a temporary or isolated intervention. Instead, it seeks to become a catalyst for long-lasting reform, embedding mental health awareness, preventative measures, and support systems into the very architecture of vocational education. AHEAD in VET's resources such as training modules, strategic frameworks, communication materials, and policy briefs are designed to be institutionalized within national systems. This ensures that their benefits endure and evolve, long after the project itself concludes.

Policy Integration: A Prerequisite for Sustainability

Scaling up is essential not just for reach, but for sustainability and equity. Even the most innovative tools or comprehensive training programs can only have a limited impact if they are not supported by formal structures that guarantee their use, funding, and development over time. Policy integration provides a protective framework—shielding mental health initiatives from shifting political priorities, budget constraints, or changes in leadership. When laws, regulations, and institutional mandates require mental health provision, they create stable conditions for lasting impact.

By embedding mental health into teacher qualification frameworks, national development strategies, and educational quality standards, AHEAD in VET contributes to the creation of systemic conditions where mental health support is not optional or exceptional, but expected, resourced, and monitored.

Scaling up also plays a crucial role in legitimizing mental health as a central component of educational quality and teacher professionalism. When governments, training colleges, and educational authorities formally adopt and promote mental health strategies, it sends a clear and powerful message: that mental well-being is not a peripheral issue, but a core priority. This helps reduce stigma, normalize the conversation around mental health, and promote a culture of care and support within educational institutions. Such formal recognition also helps elevate the role of mental health professionals and peer supporters within the VET sector, giving their work the visibility, respect, and structural backing it deserves.

Eventually, the aim of scaling up within AHEAD in VET is not just to broaden adoption, but to reshape the very systems that define vocational education. This means influencing how teacher professionalism is conceptualized, how future educators are prepared, and how schools and training centers are structured to prioritize well-being alongside technical and academic achievement.

When mental health is embedded in both policy and daily classroom practice, the education sector becomes better equipped to support both personal and professional growth, for learners and educators alike. Through this systemic transformation, the AHEADinVET project lays the groundwork for a future in which mental well-being is recognized as a fundamental pillar of educational success across Europe.

2.1 Objectives

A critical first step in scaling up is building awareness and support among national and regional policymakers. In many European contexts, mental health is still not fully recognized as a core concern of vocational education policy. Often, initiatives targeting mental well-being exist in parallel to formal policy discussions, resulting in fragmented or short-lived implementation.

To bridge this gap, AHEADinVET will develop policy briefing papers that synthesize key project learnings, evidence of impact, and real-world success stories. These briefings will be short, visually engaging, and solution-oriented tailored to busy decision-makers who need compelling, data-driven arguments to support reform. They will be shared at strategic intervals, such as during national education planning cycles or mental health awareness months.

To maximize influence, AHEAD will also encourage cross-sector collaboration, linking mental health advocates, education reform actors, and teacher training institutions. By building coalitions and shared agendas, the project can amplify its voice and ensure that mental health remains visible within broader education reform conversations.

However, challenges in this area are inevitable. Bureaucratic processes can be slow-moving and complex, especially when dealing with ministries or multi-level governance systems. Furthermore, lack of political will or shifting policy priorities may lead to mental health being deprioritized or treated as an optional concern. AHEADinVET must therefore remain persistent, adaptive, and opportunistic, ready to act when windows of opportunity appear, while continuously building relationships with key institutional champions.

2.2 Specific Programs and Activities

The AHEADinVET project envisions a variety of partnership models with training institutions, tailored to different educational contexts. For instance:

- **Curriculum Integration:** Teacher training programmes can incorporate the *Mental Health Ambassador* course developed by AHEAD in VET as either an elective module or a mandatory component of pedagogical training.
- **Co-Development of Modules:** Faculty and project trainers can co-design and co-teach mental health modules that combine theoretical frameworks with practical application.

These could include role-playing scenarios, discussion of real-life case studies, or the implementation of school-based mental health initiatives as part of field placements.

- **Guest Lectures and Peer Learning:** Involving AHEADinVET alumni or trainers as guest speakers provides trainees with first-hand insights, models of good practice, and a stronger connection to the professional community of educators working in this space.

2.3 Challenges and Risks

While policy reform is essential for long-term, systemic change, it is the daily culture within schools, the subtle attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of educators, students, and staff that determines whether mental health initiatives succeed or stall. In many vocational education and training (VET) environments, stigma remains a powerful, yet often invisible barrier to mental well-being. Mental health challenges are still frequently misunderstood, dismissed, or equated with personal weakness. As a result, individuals experiencing distress often choose silence over support, reinforcing a harmful cycle of isolation and shame.

This culture of concealment not only undermines individual well-being but also erodes trust, openness, and mutual support within the broader school community. If students and staff cannot speak freely about their mental health, the learning environment becomes less inclusive, less compassionate, and ultimately, less effective.

To break this silence and actively challenge stigma, the AHEADin ET project is implementing a comprehensive advocacy strategy designed to shift perceptions, normalize conversations, and build environments where mental health is understood as a natural and integral part of life.

At the heart of this strategy is storytelling, a powerful tool to build empathy, bridge differences, and dismantle stereotypes. AHEADinVET will curate and share real stories from across the VET landscape, including:

- Educators navigating the emotional demands of teaching and caregiving roles.
- Learners overcoming invisible struggles such as anxiety, trauma, or burnout.
- Support staff and administrators working within systems that may not yet be fully responsive to mental health needs.

These stories, delivered through short videos, podcasts, testimonials, and written features, will be grounded in lived experience and informed by research. Sharing personal stories makes mental health feel real and relatable, opening the door to honest conversations and paving the way for more compassionate institutional responses.

Changing the System

Challenging stigma requires more than isolated campaigns: it demands systemic change. Scaling up the AHEAD in VET project is not simply about increasing reach; it's about embedding a mental health-inclusive ethos into the core structures of vocational education. This includes:

- Rethinking teacher education and professional development, to include emotional literacy and mental health awareness as core competencies.
- Influencing institutional policies around support services, leave policies, crisis response, and inclusive pedagogy.
- Ensuring that mental health is no longer a peripheral issue, but a core pillar of what defines a safe, inclusive, and high-quality learning environment.

While barriers such as bureaucratic inertia, limited funding, or cultural resistance may arise, AHEAD in VET is grounded in a strong foundation: collaboration, lived experience, evidence-based tools, and a growing network of committed stakeholders. By combining strategic advocacy with emotional truth, and policy engagement with grassroots storytelling, the project is uniquely positioned to disrupt stigma at every level of the education system.

The long-term vision is to create a vocational education system in which mental health is seen not as a side issue, but as an essential right, a non-negotiable component of what it means to educate and be educated. In this evolving ecosystem, schools become not just sites of learning, but communities of care, where every student and educator feels seen, supported, and empowered to thrive.

3. Scaling Deep: Shifting the Culture of Mental Health in Vocational Education

Transforming Culture from Within

While the transformative ideals of scaling deep offer a compelling framework for cultural change, their real power lies in how they are enacted day-to-day within vocational education and training (VET) institutions. Culture is not transformed overnight, nor through inspiration alone. It shifts through the cumulative effect of consistent practices, meaningful relationships, and institutional habits that reflect a genuine commitment to mental well-being.

3.1 Objectives

a) Empowering educators as agents of change

Educators occupy a central role in this cultural shift. As the individuals who interact most frequently with students, they are uniquely positioned to observe signs of distress, model emotional intelligence, and create inclusive learning environments that validate the mental health experiences of all students. However, this potential can only be realized if educators themselves feel supported, competent, and confident in addressing mental health. This means investing in professional development opportunities that go beyond compliance-based training and instead foster reflective, experiential learning. Through peer dialogue, mentoring, and structured reflection, educators can explore their own beliefs and biases around mental health, better understand student needs, and integrate mental health promotion into their pedagogical approach.

b) Creating psychologically safe learning environments

A psychologically safe environment is one in which students feel seen, heard, and respected, where they can speak openly about their struggles without fear of judgment or punishment. In VET settings, this is particularly vital given the diverse and often vulnerable student populations, which may include young people who have experienced academic failure, unemployment, migration, trauma, or systemic exclusion. Cultivating this kind of environment involves not only responsive teaching practices but also institutional policies that prioritize inclusion, respect, and

proactive care. Initiatives like student-led mental health campaigns, regular check-ins, well-being curricula, and trauma-informed practices can create a climate where mental health is not a taboo, but a shared concern.

c) Building stronger communities of practice

Cultural transformation does not happen in isolation. It requires collective engagement and shared ownership. The AHEAD in VET project promotes the establishment of communities of practice, ongoing networks of educators, leaders, students, and support staff who come together to share experiences, test new ideas, and co-create strategies for mental health integration. These communities help to distribute leadership, flatten hierarchies, and create feedback loops that keep the cultural change responsive and grounded in real needs. Importantly, these spaces also offer emotional support for educators themselves, acknowledging that staff mental health is integral to student well-being.

d) Engaging students as co-creators

A culture of well-being must be co-owned by students. They are not just recipients of mental health support but active participants in shaping how it is delivered and understood. Encouraging student voice through surveys, focus groups, peer support models, and participation in decision-making ensures that interventions are relevant, accessible, and empowering. Moreover, student engagement helps to disrupt stigma, normalize help-seeking behaviors, and foster a sense of agency and community.

e) Sustaining change through institutional commitment

For cultural transformation to be lasting, it must be backed by institutional commitment at every level—from governance to day-to-day operations. This includes aligning mental health with strategic planning, allocating sufficient resources, integrating well-being into quality assurance mechanisms, and ensuring that leaders model the values of empathy and care. Metrics of success should not be limited to academic performance or employment rates, but also include indicators of student satisfaction, emotional resilience, and sense of belonging.

As the AHEAD in VET project moves forward, it becomes clear that embedding mental health into vocational education is not an isolated initiative, but a long-term transformation. Scaling

deep is not about replication, it is about cultivating ecosystems that are resilient, adaptable, and rooted in human values. This approach recognizes the unique identity of each institution, while also fostering solidarity across borders, disciplines, and contexts.

By supporting educators, empowering students, and fostering shared ownership, the project aims to build a movement, one that redefines what it means to educate, support, and care for young people preparing to enter an increasingly complex world of work and life. The goal is a VET system where well-being is not a side conversation, but a core part of the educational DNA, where culture itself becomes the most powerful agent of change.

3.2 Specific Programs and Activities

One of the core priorities of the AHEAD in VET project is to support the mental well-being of educators, who are often at the front lines of emotionally demanding environments. Vocational teachers frequently work under pressure, managing large groups of students with limited resources and growing emotional responsibilities. Despite this, their own mental health needs are frequently overlooked or deprioritized.

To address this gap, the project proposes a combination of activities that merge both formations, through targeted training, and the regular sharing of information and experiences. These activities are rooted in the value of group dynamics and the strength of peer-to-peer engagement. When like-minded professionals come together in safe, reflective spaces, it opens opportunities for learning, support, and collective problem-solving that are essential to cultural transformation.

As a concrete step, the project recommends ensuring that each educator has access to at least one session per year with a qualified mental health professional. This simple, preventive measure acknowledges the emotional demands placed on teachers and affirms their right to psychological support. It is both a practical tool for mental health promotion and a symbolic commitment to prioritizing staff well-being.

In addition to this, schools are encouraged to host regular meetings focused on mental health awareness and self-care strategies. These sessions provide ongoing opportunities for educators to build knowledge, exchange insights, and normalize discussions about mental health within the workplace. When these conversations become routine, rather than reactive, schools begin

to cultivate a culture in which well-being is integrated into the fabric of professional life and institutional care.

Complementing this internal work with educators is the equally urgent goal of destigmatizing mental health across schools and their surrounding communities. Despite increasing awareness, stigma remains one of the most significant barriers to meaningful progress. In many contexts, mental health continues to be treated as a taboo subject and students, families, and staff alike are left without the tools or confidence to seek help.

To challenge this, AHEAD in VET promotes a broad, inclusive approach that extends beyond the school walls and actively engages the wider community. Schools can play a powerful role in reshaping public attitudes, particularly when they collaborate with parents, local leaders, and mental health professionals in open, constructive dialogue. Organizing community events centered on mental health awareness provides opportunities for education, trust-building, and collective reflection, creating safe spaces where stigma can be dismantled and empathy strengthened.

At the same time, embedding mental health into the school calendar, through awareness weeks, campaigns, or dedicated programming, signals that it is a priority, not an afterthought. Within schools, the development of internal support systems, such as peer mentoring or student-led well-being groups, offers students and staff accessible, everyday sources of support. This effort is reinforced by providing cultural sensitivity training to educators and administrators, ensuring that mental health initiatives are inclusive and responsive to the diverse backgrounds and needs of the school community.

In parallel, the creation of digital platforms to connect schools across regions allows for the exchange of successful practices, resources, and shared experiences. This kind of translocal network fosters a sense of solidarity and momentum, showing that while each context is different, the commitment to mental well-being is widely shared and deeply felt.

3.3 Challenges and Risks

While the goals outlined above are both essential and promising, the path to deep, systemic cultural change is rarely straightforward. Transforming how mental health is understood, prioritized, and addressed within vocational education requires more than policy tweaks or isolated programs, it demands a long-term shift in mindset, supported by structural

reinforcement and collective will. Such change is inherently complex, often incremental, and frequently met with resistance.

A key challenge faced by socially innovative initiatives like AHEADinVET is their reliance on a small group of passionate individuals operating within large, sometimes rigid, institutional systems. These change agents, be they educators, administrators, or mental health advocates, are often highly motivated but chronically overextended, with limited time, insufficient resources, and minimal institutional leverage to sustain long-term reform. When responsibility for transformation falls disproportionately on a few, burnout becomes a real risk, and momentum can be difficult to maintain.

Moreover, in systems where innovation is undervalued or met with bureaucratic inertia, even the most evidence-based and well-intentioned initiatives can struggle to gain traction. Without leadership buy-in, clear mandates, and meaningful incentives, cultural shifts remain fragile and easily reversed.

Stigma and Silence

At the heart of the challenge lies the persistent stigma surrounding mental health, one that transcends borders and educational contexts. In many vocational settings, mental health is still viewed through a lens of personal failure, weakness, or shame. This perception fosters a culture of silence, where both students and educators feel compelled to hide their struggles rather than seek support. If mental health remains a taboo topic, institutional change will be stifled at its roots.

Furthermore, this stigma often intersects gender norms, socioeconomic status, cultural expectations, and occupational identity, creating additional layers of complexity. For example, in trades or technical professions where toughness is valued, admitting to emotional distress may be seen as incompatible with professional identity.

Even when institutions are committed to change, practical barriers can limit their ability to fully engage communities. In rural or under-resourced regions, logistical challenges such as transportation, time constraints, and digital inequities make it difficult for families, students, and local leaders to participate in mental health dialogues or initiatives.

Language barriers, cultural differences, and varying levels of mental health literacy further restrict participation. As a result, some of the most vulnerable or marginalized groups may be

excluded from the very conversations and resources designed to support them, reinforcing cycles of inequity.

In response to these multi-layered challenges, the AHEADinVET project's strategy emphasizes the importance of creativity, adaptability, and collective leadership. Recognizing that no single actor or institution can drive transformation alone, the initiative encourages schools to build strategic alliances with NGOs, local authorities, health services, employers, professional bodies, and peer institutions. These partnerships not only expand capacity and expertise but also foster shared responsibility and broaden community ownership of change.

This approach acknowledges that system transformation requires both top-down support and bottom-up momentum. Empowering frontline educators, engaging learners and families, and amplifying community voices helps create a foundation that is both democratic and durable.

Perhaps most critically, AHEADinVET calls for a reframing of mental health, not as an individual burden or a crisis to be managed, but as a collective concern that sits at the intersection of educational equity, social justice, and community well-being.

Positioning mental health at the heart of vocational education aligns with broader goals of educational equity and systemic quality. This integrated approach is critical to advancing beyond superficial reforms and achieving enduring institutional change.

4. Next steps

Building on the achievements and lessons learned throughout the AHEADinVET project, the next phase focuses on ensuring continuity, deepening impact, and embedding mental health as a lasting component of vocational education across Europe. The following steps outline the key priorities for moving forward:

1. Institutionalization of resources and training

Partner institutions will continue to integrate AHEADinVET materials, such as the e-learning course, MOOC, and Mental Health Ambassador programme, into their teacher training curricula and professional development frameworks. This integration will guarantee that mental health literacy remains an established and sustainable part of educator preparation beyond the project's formal end.

2. Expansion of strategic partnerships

Building new alliances with ministries of education, VET associations, mental health organizations, and social partners will be central to extending AHEADinVET's reach. These partnerships will help secure institutional recognition, facilitate the inclusion of AHEADinVET principles in national frameworks, and support funding.

3. Creation of a European community of practice

To maintain momentum, AHEADinVET will foster a transnational network of educators, researchers, and mental health professionals committed to ongoing exchange, peer learning, and resource sharing. This community will serve as a living platform for innovation, evidence gathering, and continuous improvement in VET mental health education.

4. Monitoring, evaluation, and knowledge sharing

Continuous data collection and impact evaluation will guide the refinement of training tools and policy recommendations. Dissemination activities, such as webinars, conference presentations, and policy briefs, will ensure that findings inform wider education and well-being agendas at both national and European levels.

CONCLUSION

The AHEADinVET project represents far more than a temporary intervention: it is a movement toward reimagining vocational education as a system that places equal value on professional competence and psychological well-being. As this strategy document has outlined, scaling out, scaling up, and scaling deep are not separate tracks but interdependent pathways that together shape a comprehensive vision for lasting change. Each dimension, whether expanding geographically, influencing policy, or transforming culture, contributes to a more global understanding of what it means to support educators and learners in today's complex educational environments.

Looking across the three dimensions, one theme consistently emerges: the importance of collaboration. No single institution, organization, or individual can shoulder the responsibility of addressing mental health in vocational education alone. The process of scaling requires trust, dialogue, and collective ownership. The partnerships forged through the AHEADinVET project, between schools, policymakers, mental health professionals, and community stakeholders, are the bedrock on which its successes are built. These partnerships ensure that knowledge does not remain confined to reports or toolkits but is actively lived and adapted in classrooms, staff rooms, and policy discussions across Europe.

Equally important is the recognition that scaling is not simply about numbers or reach. To truly embed the values of AHEADinVET, it is essential to honor the lived realities of those who engage with the project. Teachers who struggle with burnout, students who face anxiety about their futures, and institutions navigating limited resources all bring their unique perspectives and needs. The strength of AHEADinVET lies in its flexibility, the ability to adapt resources to diverse contexts while holding firm to its core values of empathy, inclusiveness, and resilience. In this way, scaling becomes less about replication and more about co-creation, ensuring that the project resonates meaningfully wherever it takes root.

The challenges ahead are real: cultural stigma, institutional inertia, and competing policy priorities will continue to pose barriers. Yet, these challenges should not be seen as deterrents but as reminders of why the project matters. Every barrier is also an opportunity to refine communication strategies, to foster deeper engagement, and to push for systemic recognition of mental health as integral to quality education. With every step forward, AHEADinVET

contributes not only to healthier schools but also to stronger, more compassionate societies that value the dignity and potential of every individual.

As the project moves into its next phases, its vision expands beyond immediate implementation. The true measure of success will not only be in the number of schools reached or the policies influenced, but in the quieter transformations that take place: when a teacher feels empowered to seek support without fear of stigma, when a student learns coping strategies that carry them through both education and life, or when a school community embraces well-being as a shared responsibility. These are the lasting legacies of scaling deep, where culture shifts from silence to openness, from isolation to solidarity.

Finally, the scaling strategy of AHEADinVET is a call to action. It invites educators, institutions, and policymakers to recognize that mental health is not a peripheral concern but a foundational pillar of effective teaching and learning. It encourages a rethinking of vocational education, not merely as a route to employment, but as an environment that supports development, nurturing learners academically, professionally, and emotionally. In doing so, the AHEADinVET project lights the way toward a future where vocational education is not only about preparing skilled workers but also about nurturing resilient, empowered human beings.

The path forward will require persistence, courage, and innovation, but the groundwork has been laid. With its robust framework, its growing community of practice, and its unwavering commitment to well-being, AHEADinVET stands poised to make a lasting impact. The project aims to expand its impact with clarity of purpose and meaningful depth, supporting the evolution of vocational education across Europe into a model of inclusion, resilience, and hope for future generations.