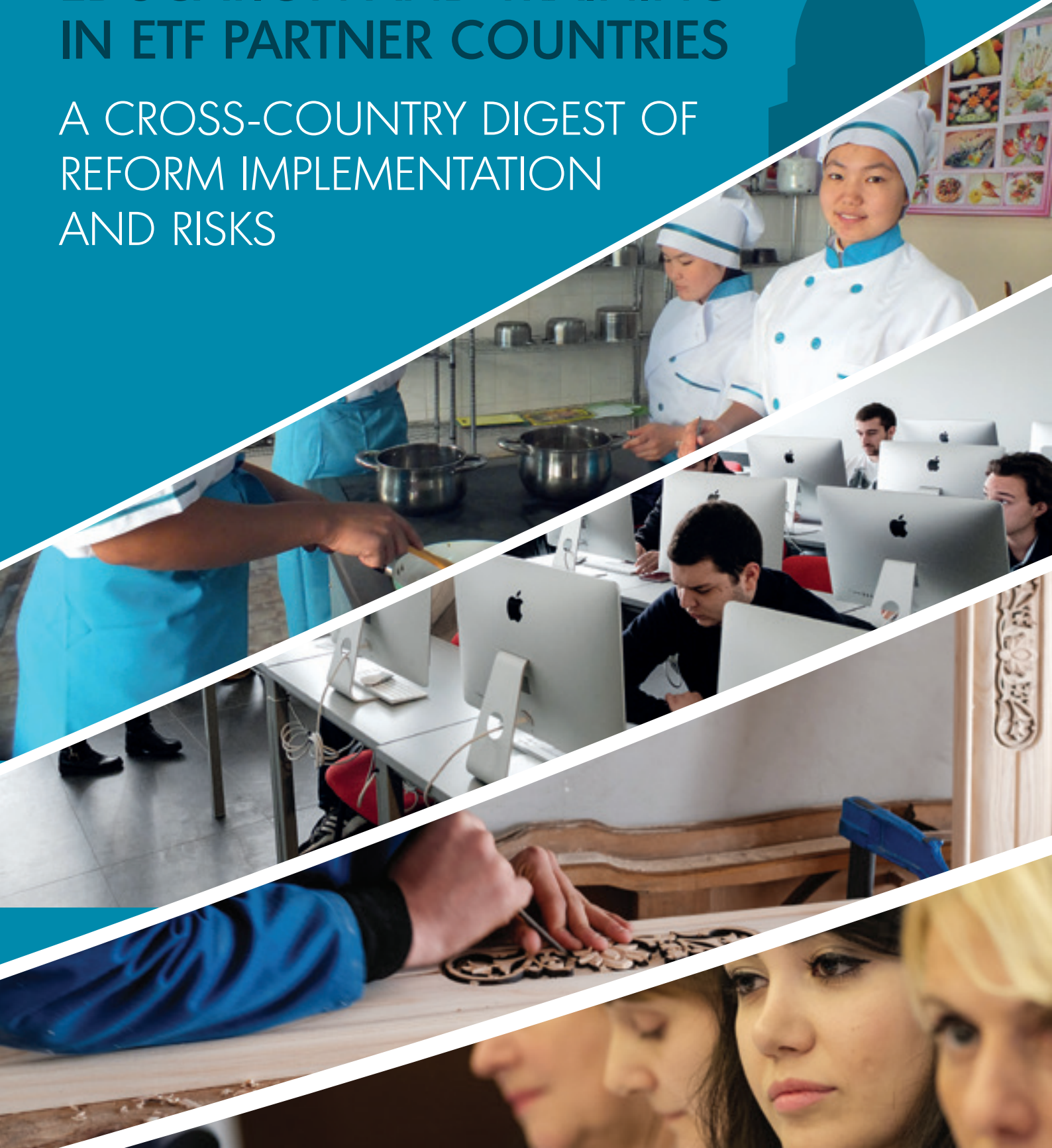


REFORMS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN ETF PARTNER COUNTRIES

A CROSS-COUNTRY DIGEST OF REFORM IMPLEMENTATION AND RISKS



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PDF ISBN 978-92-9157-702-6

doi:10.2816/82768

TA-04-18-697-EN-N

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ABSTRACT

This cross-country digest describes common approaches to the implementation of new policies for vocational education and training in the partner countries of the European Training Foundation in the regions of the Western Balkans and Turkey, the Eastern Partnership and Russia, the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, and Central Asia. Based on findings from the Torino Process – a biennial review of progress in vocational education and training – the paper evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to reform implementation in countries in these regions from the point of view of common risks to reform success. The paper points out commonalities between partner countries and discusses findings that could support a better, more effective transition from planning to policy action.

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INTRODUCTION

ETF Torino Process

The Torino Process is a biennial review of vocational education and training (VET) in the partner countries of the European Training Foundation (ETF). The focus of the review is on VET policies and impact, and on the socioeconomic context in which these policies are designed, implemented and evaluated.

The Torino Process is inspired by the Copenhagen and Bruges processes of the European Union (EU)¹. Participation in the Torino Process is voluntary, but it foresees adherence to certain requirements. The countries participating in the Torino Process must follow a review methodology that requires them to collect, describe and analyse quantitative and qualitative evidence on VET and to use the findings for the evaluation of policy and of progress with policy implementation. The review process is shaped by four principles: ownership, participation, a holistic approach to VET², and a commitment to evidence-based analysis (ETF, 2016). The added value of the process is the building of national and regional capacity for monitoring VET.

In each country, the Torino Process unfolds in consultation with stakeholders from the public and private sectors, and leads to the preparation of jointly owned national progress reports (one per country, per round). The reports summarise the issues, policy solutions and strategic planning along five dimensions: vision for VET, economic demand for VET, sociodemographic demand for VET, internal efficiency of VET systems, and governance.

The fourth round

Within the limits of some obligatory requirements, every round of the Torino Process has had a specific focus and priority. The first round in 2010 established a baseline for subsequent reporting and piloted the comprehensive analytical framework of the process.

¹ See www.eqavet.eu/gns/policy-context/european-policy/copenhagen-process.aspx and www.eqavet.eu/gns/policy-context/european-policy/bruges-communique.aspx

² 'Holistic' in this context means that the notion of VET is not confined to initial, formal VET, but may encompass skills delivery in other forms, such as continuing VET and training in non-formal settings.

It also introduced to partner countries the four principles of the Torino Process and their significance. The subsequent rounds in 2012 and 2014 refined the focus of reporting, deepened the capacity of countries to work with evidence, and facilitated a shift from the description of data and problems to analysis with a view to designing options for action.

The focus of the 2016 round was on evaluating progress in the implementation of countries' plans to address the problems and meet the strategic objectives of their national VET systems. The findings offer an insight into the connection between policy priorities and problems confronting VET systems, and the typical ways in which countries tackle those problems. The national reports are a rich repository of first-hand information in this respect, and this can be used to guide improvements in the planning and, in particular, the implementation of VET reform.

About this cross-country digest

It has become something of a tradition to conclude each Torino Process round with a macro-summary of the findings and trends reported by partner countries. In 2014, the cross-country overview presented the long-term vision for VET and evaluated this vision against realities 'on the ground': the state of national VET systems as described in the national reports, and the socioeconomic developments to which they are exposed. It concluded with the observation that authorities and stakeholders aspire to emancipate VET from its legacy as a subordinate segment of the education system, and that the fulfilment of such long-term aspirations will depend on how well countries manage to address short-term needs and current developments within VET and beyond.

The digest for 2016 describes common approaches to the implementation of new policies and evaluates their advantages and disadvantages in relation to common risks that affect reform success. The purpose is to point out that there are commonalities between partner countries and lessons to be learned that could support a better, more effective transition from planning to policy action.

The first part of this paper presents an overview of external risks to reform, understood as factors

in the context of VET that might create barriers to improvement, and how these influence the effectiveness of reform implementation. The second part discusses risks to reform success that emerge from shortcomings in the planning, justification and focus of reforms, as described by partner countries in 2016.

The preparation of this paper comprised multiple rounds of scanning national partner country reports. The purpose was to develop a matrix to guide the collection of information on common patterns of reform implementation, context of reform implementation and priorities of reform across countries. The matrix was then used in subsequent rounds of scanning to extract the evidence needed for the cross-country analysis.

Despite the diligence involved in preparing the digest, conclusions on this basis should be drawn with some caution. The evidence stems exclusively from the Torino Process national reports. These reports are highly representative and contextual because they emerged through extensive consultations with national stakeholders and have been validated by them. At the same time, the choice of information in these reports might display occasional bias, in favour of both themes of importance for countries and priorities that the Torino Process specifically enquired about in 2016. While this is not a shortcoming per se, it means the some of the reports might be selective in reproducing the reality of VET in ETF partner countries. Another consideration is that the notion of VET might vary between countries, so that reforms targeting one and the same policy priority could, in fact, be directed at different segments of education and training in different countries.

1. EXTERNAL RISKS TO REFORM IMPLEMENTATION



The cross-country report for the previous round of the Torino Process described how, in the relatively short time since 2010, the strategic thinking about VET in all partner regions had started to change and how partner countries had granted VET an emancipated vision for development (ETF, 2015). The goal was to maximise the value of VET, mainly by pushing and redefining traditional sector boundaries and placing VET at the centre of a new, multi-stakeholder environment and imperative for improvement. VET was to be established as a key player in the formation of work-related skills, while ensuring that it is accessible for all.

In 2016, these aspirations continued to dominate countries' long-term plans for VET. Although the national reports describe a wide variety of policies and actions, most³ appear to serve the same two overarching strategic policy priorities:

- to address labour market needs by making VET more relevant;
- to support social and economic development by widening access to VET.

These two priorities are reported under various headings. The widening of access is discussed by some countries under policies for vulnerable groups, by others under training for adults, or when describing plans to boost enrolment for girls and students from rural areas. Relevance to labour market needs could be covered in discussions about VET content, the introduction of a dual system or reforms promoting other forms of work-based learning, the establishment of skills councils, and so on.

In addition to their overarching goals, the actions of countries to improve VET share a comparable exposure to risk of failure. Defined as a 'potential for a loss' (Cline, 2003) or an 'uncertainty' (Cline, 2004) that is common to plans concerning the future, risk is an inherent feature of reforms. The national reports of ETF partner countries in 2016 suggest that there are similarities in the ways in which countries deal with some aspects of risk to reform while ignoring others, and the ways in which their actions might be impeding progress on reform implementation.

³ In the fourth round of Torino Process reporting, information on strategic planning was available for 25 of the 29 partner countries.

Reforms in education and training can certainly be a difficult undertaking. It can take a long time before the results of such reforms become visible, the cost involved can be quite high, and the changes they call for might be met with resistance, since they commonly threaten the long-standing position, benefits and arrangements of established providers and institutions (Wurzberg, 2010).

Partner countries are confronted with various difficulties in making reforms happen. Most report structural problems in key areas of VET policy that can fuel resistance to change. These include problems with staff working in VET, specifically the quality of teachers and trainers (e.g. Tajikistan, Ukraine, Serbia, Lebanon, Tunisia) and their retention (e.g. Azerbaijan, Moldova), the level of funding for VET, including wages (e.g. Georgia, Albania, Kosovo⁴, Lebanon), and the legislative framework and organisation of VET (e.g. Albania, Egypt, Palestine⁵, Georgia).

Such challenges are difficult to resolve. Staff policies are a sensitive and change-resistant policy area (OECD, 2005; Cerna, 2013), and reforming the set-up of education and training systems or the modalities of their funding are complex tasks that VET providers and professionals are commonly reluctant to engage in, out of concern that the result might be to their disadvantage.

Partner countries differ in the way they approach these problems and handle the risks posed to their reform agenda. Some prefer to hedge against these risks by working their way around them. Their national reports describe implementation solutions that in many ways resemble what development assistance research calls 'institutional bypasses' – new pathways around blocked or problematic public institutions (Prado, 2011), which allow projects and reforms to progress, despite the lack of institutional improvement. Of course, the hedging against risk comes at a price. It requires countries to limit the exposure of reforms to the regular VET system and to limit their own exposure as reform owners. To reduce the risk of

⁴ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence – hereinafter 'Kosovo'.

⁵ This designation shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual positions of the Member States on this issue – hereinafter 'Palestine'.

obstruction, partner countries usually pilot changes in just a few providers and/or regions. Another approach is to pass on responsibility for implementation (and possible political costs) to newly created external or subsidiary entities. Alternatively, some countries decide to postpone or refrain from substantive actions altogether, substituting them with commitments to investment in physical infrastructure instead.

A smaller group of countries report confronting their structural shortcomings head-on. The solutions to which they have committed aim at nothing less than a complete overhaul of the framework conditions under which VET planning and provision take place. These plans are reminiscent of models of radical reform (Murrell, 1992), which emphasise the obliteration of the old and the speedy transition to a new state of affairs that is profoundly different from the one before. Examples of such radical solutions include adoption of entirely new primary and secondary legislation for VET, the full decentralisation of VET governance and funding, and the restructuring of VET, often combined with a reduction (optimisation) of the VET provider network.

The hedge solutions comprise actions that help to deal with structural resistance to change in ways that try to pre-empt the negative implications of such resistance. They include the piloting of reform priorities, the establishment of external bodies, and infrastructure investment. Another group of solutions commits countries, instead, to an overhaul of the framework conditions in VET, by means of new legislation, decentralisation and/or restructuring of the VET system and provider network. [Figure 1.1](#) provides a summary of these 'overhaul' and 'hedge' solutions and their prevalence, by country and type of action. It shows that in most partner countries, the authorities hedge against reform risks by delegating responsibility for reform implementation to external, often newly established bodies. Piloting reforms instead of rolling them out is also widespread. A smaller group of countries give examples of infrastructure investment rather than describing qualitative improvement. In addition, [Figure 1.1](#) shows that many countries report intentions to fundamentally overhaul their VET system, mostly through legislative amendments, but some also through decentralisation and optimisation of the provider network. More than half the countries entertain such plans while they are busy implementing one or more hedge solutions. The

next sections of this chapter offer a brief overview of empirical evidence concerning the ways in which partner countries venture into reform implementation and discuss the strategic and pragmatic implications of each.

1.1 Hedging against adverse conditions – Uncertainty and resistance

Partner countries that hedge against risks and bypass immediate obstacles have good reasons to do so. They do it in favour of a greater reform goal. Bypassing can bring considerable political, logistic and financial benefits. A major advantage is that countries can commit to improvement without disrupting the established order of things. Disruptions in key policy areas, such as funding, can have far-reaching consequences and thus, countries are normally inclined to approach system-wide changes in such areas with some caution⁶. Although such stability comes at a price – the scope and coverage of reforms is more limited – for many countries such a compromise is still better than inaction.

Another feature that makes hedge solutions an attractive option is that they can be implemented quickly. Because of their limited scope, they can deliver tangible reform results within the timescale of a political mandate or even sooner, instead of making stakeholders wait throughout the lifetime of a student generation. This is a particularly useful feature for (novel) reform initiatives conceived and implemented on a project basis (e.g. some of the reform actions in Kyrgyzstan⁷, Belarus⁸ and Israel⁹). They often unfold

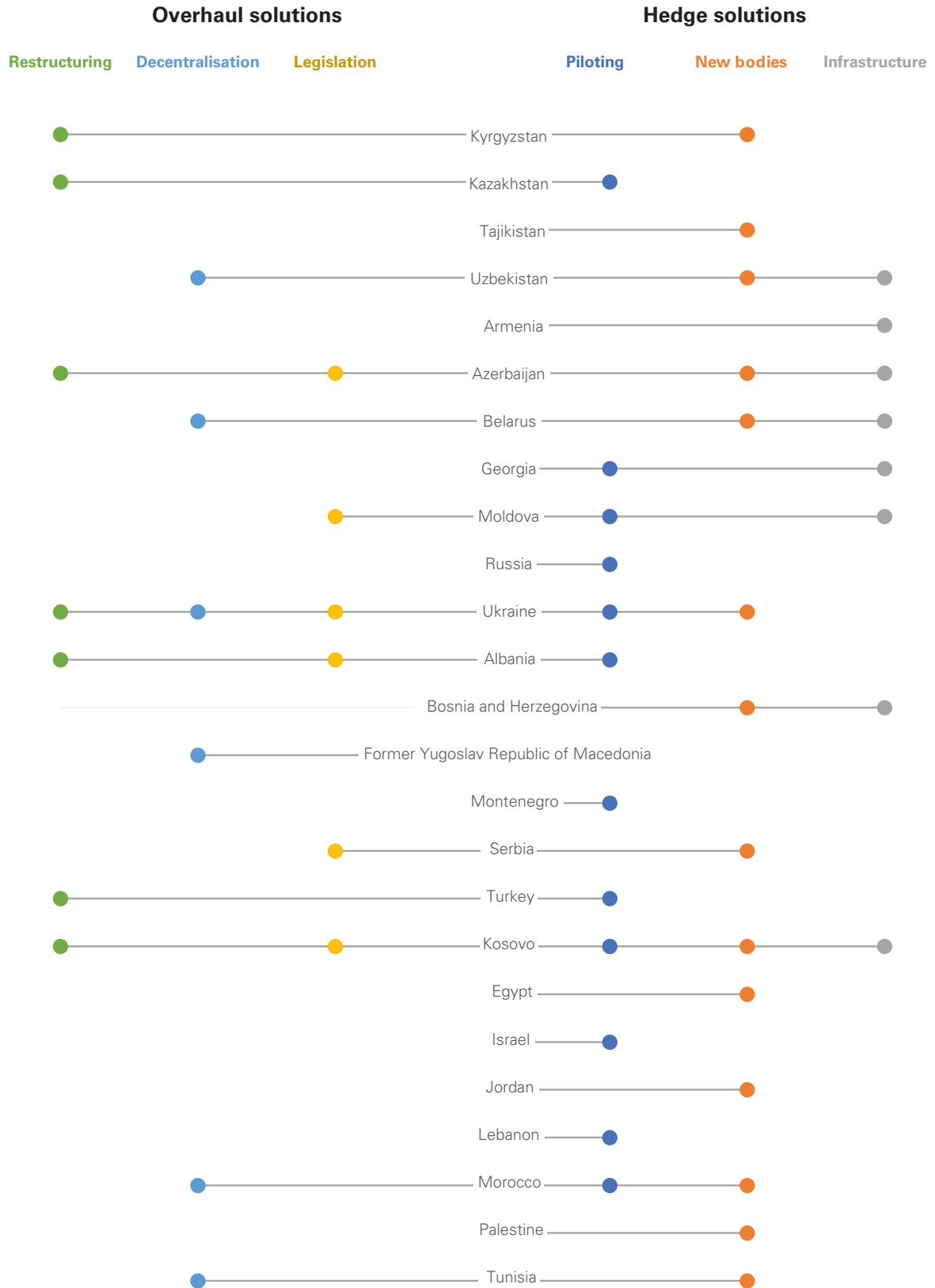
⁶ For example, a recent (2016) push for complete decentralisation of responsibility for VET funding in Ukraine left staff working in vocational institutions without a wage for some months and led to political turmoil.

⁷ In Kyrgyzstan, the Asian Development Bank is supporting the development of a national qualifications framework in the form of a project by the national VET agency. The scope is limited to qualifications of teaching staff.

⁸ Belarus has given priority to the modularisation of its VET curriculum, but the first step is a five-year pilot project for programmes in industrial design only.

⁹ Israel has invested heavily in technological innovation solutions and content for its VET providers and their programmes.

Figure 1.1 Reform implementation solutions, by country and type of solution



under the pressure of deadlines, commitments to external partners (donors) and funding limitations, and their continuation often depends on demonstrable results that can be delivered within a reasonable timescale.

Finally, reform actions that bypass most of the VET system to streamline implementation in only a few of its areas are likely to require less effort in terms of coordination, compromise and the forging of agreements. Although there are exceptions (for instance, Morocco¹⁰), the national reports suggest that such actions can be (and often are) put in place in a top-down way, without much discussion with stakeholders regarding the focus, scope, timing and sometimes even cost of reform implementation.

Despite these advantages, hedge solutions of this kind are hardly a sustainable alternative to system-wide improvement. Just as there is a difference between conflict avoidance and conflict solution (Schmitthoff, 1956), avoiding problems that might undermine reform is not the same as solving them. The bypassing of challenges might deliver results in the short run and under certain conditions. However, what matters most for the fate of reform and its progress is the 'reality check of ordinary life' (Allen, 2014) as it takes place in schools, training centres and departments in charge of education and VET. There, the unsolved (bypassed) problems are almost certain to pose difficulties at a later stage, for instance when pilot projects are scaled up nationwide, or when external bodies in charge of reforms attempt to fulfil their mandate.

The following sections provide evidence and analysis of the ways in which partner countries hedge against potential difficulties with reform implementation and also, to the extent the information is available, of the types of difficulty that they anticipate and hope to bypass. As already noted, the three most common ways are piloting of reforms, establishment of new bodies to implement reforms, and infrastructure investment.

Piloting

There are a variety of reasons why a country might wish to pilot a reform instead of rolling it out in its

entirety. When combined with proper monitoring, pilots can deliver insights into potential problems and help to calibrate reforms before a full-scale implementation. Pilots can also help to avoid costly mistakes with reforms that are time-consuming and expensive. Last (but not least), pilots can help to avoid exposure to problems when countries are not ready to accept the challenges and risks of full-scale reform implementation (Beschel and Ahern, 2012).

Of the 25 partner countries covered in this cross-country digest, 13 reported that they are piloting reforms, all of them in key areas of VET, namely staff, funding, provider network, innovation in VET, programme content and structure, and VET management and quality assurance (Table 1.1). Of these, the most common area for piloting (and, conversely, the one in which countries are least likely to roll out a full-scale reform) is VET programme content and structure. It is by far the most frequently referenced area with regard to piloting (Figure 1.2).

Against the backdrop of statements in most reports that VET must become more relevant and its content must be updated, the finding that countries are not implementing large-scale improvements in VET content might be somewhat surprising. However, it is, perhaps, understandable. Changes in learning content are difficult and cumbersome; they can be accompanied by resistance, controversy and conflict; and those in charge of implementing the changes may not be best prepared for their difficult role (Johnson, 2001). It seems that in all reported cases of piloting in this policy area, partner countries have decided that caution is a more promising course of action than full-scale reform.

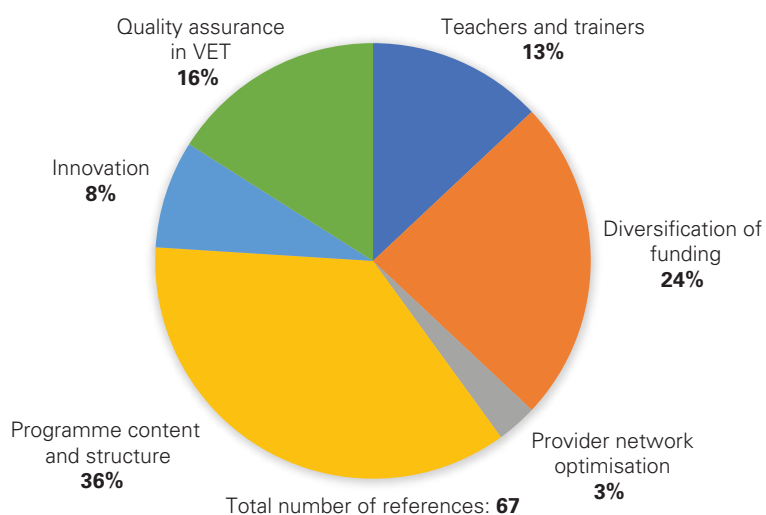
Albania, for instance, describes the revision of curricula as a central reform measure, but limits its remit to selected pilot vocational schools and multifunctional vocational centres. Supported by donors such as GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) and the Swiss and Austrian governments, as well as the EU, the authorities hope that the way to more relevant and higher-quality VET content is through smaller but successful achievements. Moldova has narrowed its pilot to one occupation only (tailor), but envisages that the trial will open the door for the proper introduction of a dual VET system. Georgia is piloting, on a small scale (20 students), the introduction of pre-

¹⁰ Morocco has established a committee for the piloting of reforms and the monitoring of the implementation of its strategy.

Table 1.1 Piloting of policy action, by country and policy area

	Teachers and trainers	Diversification of funding	Provider network optimisation	Programme content and structure	Innovation	Quality assurance in VET	Pilot reforms rolled out system-wide
Albania	#	#	#	#			Pilots ongoing
Egypt			#				Pilots ongoing
Georgia	#	#		#		#	Pilots ongoing
Israel				#	#		Pilots ongoing
Kazakhstan	#	#		#			Yes, selective
Kosovo	#	#		#		#	Pilots ongoing
Lebanon	#						Pilots ongoing
Moldova		#		#	#	#	Pilots ongoing
Morocco	#	#	#	#			Pilots ongoing
Russia		#		#	#		No
Tunisia			#				Pilots ongoing
Turkey	#					#	Pilots ongoing
Ukraine		#		#		#	Pilots ongoing

Figure 1.2 Prevalence of policy areas in pilot reforms



vocational skills in the mainstream curriculum, and Israel has introduced entrepreneurship in four pilot institutions. Similarly, Ukraine has launched a pilot for the modernisation of training in several occupations in which the economy is experiencing a shortage of skills; Russia has determined that a compact

network of inter-regional competence centres will be its testbed for newly developed standards, curricula and assessment tools; Morocco has undertaken a revision of selected curricula to base them on competences; and Kosovo is about to pilot a 'core curriculum' in 23 vocational schools.

Another important and frequently mentioned, but difficult, area of reform that partner countries prefer to approach slowly is the funding of VET. In line with developments in EU and OECD countries, where public VET systems increasingly rely on private financial support and involvement (OECD, 2017a), close to a third of partner countries report that they have undertaken steps to diversify the sources of funding for their VET system. The solutions implemented by this group of funding reformers are strikingly similar. They all work towards attracting financial and in-kind support for VET by testing ways to incentivise and involve employers, and to keep them involved. Specifically, they are piloting cost-sharing agreements for the provision of services such as work-based learning, and summarise their efforts under the heading of 'introduction of dual VET'. With some exceptions, as described below, there is no indication that the pilots are close to completion and even less indication that there are plans for a system-wide introduction of diversified funding arrangements.

Moldova, for example, has managed to attract several major businesses in some of its cities, convincing them to offer apprenticeships for selected VET providers in the textile and car industry, and the authorities are working on keeping them involved. Albania is piloting business internships within its 'Apprenticeship for Youth Employment' project, while Georgia has committed some of its private sector to test out work-based learning arrangements with the support of the World Bank. Meanwhile, in Kazakhstan some 3% of all colleges have benefited from on-the-job training, the provision of which was secured through a one-off involvement by employers. Russia also reports that dual VET pilots are being tested in over 100 schools and involve 1 000 companies, and the authorities in Ukraine have established partnerships between numerous (state) stakeholders for a project on training in several occupations using dual training principles. Kazakhstan is making progress with the roll-out of key aspects of dual VET, such as partnerships with employers for on-the-job training. By 2016, close to 45% of VET providers in the country had, in one way or another, embraced this model.

After programme content and funding, the third most common area of piloting is quality assurance in VET, and specifically the evaluation of VET providers

and programmes. Internationally, evaluation is increasingly recognised as an important channel of institutional change that can guide improvement and safeguard quality in settings dominated by increased institutional autonomy (OECD, 2013). Some countries, such as Egypt and Jordan, have already set up agencies for quality assurance in VET some time ago, but many others – almost a quarter of those covered in the 2016 Torino Process round – are still at the stage of piloting improvements in their arrangements for quality assurance, as well as in the ways they use the evaluation results. The solutions are therefore quite diverse.

Georgia, for instance, is testing out a move from institutional to programme evaluation with a view to making its accreditation procedures more flexible and fair and allowing providers to keep their licence even if one of their programmes fails to meet the minimum standards. In addition, formal judgements about VET quality will be made in a consultative manner by a council that involves civil society representatives. To enhance its quality assurance processes, Turkey has opted for the piloting of EQAVET (European Quality Assurance in VET) indicators, as have Montenegro, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia. Moldova is reinforcing its quality assurance by piloting ways to introduce the employability of VET graduates as a quality criterion and by testing out the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in several occupations. The authorities in Ukraine are piloting the incorporation of needs assessment in decisions pertaining to better quality VET provision and, like their peers in Turkey, they also draw on the entrepreneurship competence framework as a driver of changes in quality assurance requirements. Some countries, such as Russia, are also working on opening dedicated vocational centres as a source of improving quality standards in VET.

In comparison, the number of partner countries that are piloting solutions to improve the quality of teachers and trainers is smaller than might have been expected in this important area. Albania, Georgia, Lebanon, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro and Turkey provide information about improvement action in this policy area in 2016. In addition, some of these countries, which also include Israel, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Russia and Uzbekistan, describe system-wide efforts to improve

the quality of teaching, mostly through teacher-training arrangements (Table 1.2).

As far as piloting is concerned, Albania has developed a detailed national roadmap for the management of human resources in VET and is proceeding with a pilot of a basic didactic programme for VET teachers and trainers. Georgia is piloting guidelines for teaching oriented towards individual student needs, Kazakhstan has trained a number of teachers and trainers within the framework of its pilot project on introducing dual VET, and Kosovo has developed and piloted a teacher-performance assessment system. In Turkey, entrepreneurship training has been provided to part of the teaching workforce in VET, and a school-based vocational development guide in support of teachers' professional development has been piloted in six provinces of the country. Turkey has also been piloting distance and online training for VET teachers.

Overall, the relatively modest share of countries with proactive measures in this policy domain is somewhat surprising, considering that most national reports seem to acknowledge how essential good teachers and trainers are for the quality of learning and training outcomes. The reasons for the absence of broader reform action can only be speculated. One possible explanation is that policy interventions in this area are known to be costly, sensitive and consensus-resistant.

Creation of supplementary (new) bodies

In most countries (14 out of the 25 covered in this digest), the implementation of reforms seems to start with the creation of new supplementary institutions in charge of VET or a specific area of VET reform, or with the delegation of new responsibilities of this kind to existing bodies. While the national authorities (which in most countries assume ownership of reforms in VET) remain accountable for the outcomes of reform, the new bodies are expected to shape implementation, take decisions, ensure that the reforms gain traction, and manage the responses of VET providers, participants and stakeholders on the ground.

Countries describing such 'delegated' arrangements usually refer to two types of new (and/or subordinate) institution: VET agencies (or equivalent) and inter-institutional bodies. Close to a third of countries covered here report the establishment or re-establishment of VET agencies or the setting up of consultative bodies to deal with their plans for changes in VET, many of them after a period during which direct responsibility for VET was given to line ministries (Table 1.3). While their reasons for opting for supplementary bodies can differ, their overarching task converges around responsibilities for the management of change.

Table 1.2 Pilot and system-wide action to improve the quality of teaching

	Pilot action for teachers	System-wide action for teachers
Albania	#	#
Georgia	#	#
Israel		#
Kazakhstan	#	#
Kosovo	#	
Lebanon	#	
Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	#	#
Moldova	#	
Montenegro	#	
Russia		#
Turkey	#	
Uzbekistan		#

Table 1.3 Policy action through supplementary bodies, by country, policy area and type of body

Reform and policy area	Type of supplementary body	
	VET agency or equivalent body	Inter-institutional body
Generic	Azerbaijan, Kosovo, Uzbekistan	Palestine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Morocco
Qualifications	Ukraine	
Skills/human capital development	Kazakhstan	Kosovo, Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia
VET provision, methodology, and quality assurance	Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Russia, Kazakhstan	

For example, Palestine reports that difficulties in establishing a VET agency have forced the authorities to agree on setting up an inter-ministerial body (Higher Council for VET) to coordinate VET development. The council involves a broad selection of stakeholders and its operational arm – the Development Centre – is supported by the international donor community. In 2016, the VET Agency of Azerbaijan was still in the process of being established, but its *raison d’être* was the development and implementation of new VET policy. The same was true for Moldova. Kazakhstan has also established a number of supplementary bodies, some in charge of curriculum and competence development, others in charge of the monitoring and/or provision of VET and human capital development.

Kosovo, Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia, meanwhile, see change in VET as part of a broader task, namely to improve human capital development. These countries have delegated or shared the responsibility for implementation to inter-institutional bodies, such as an Inter-Ministerial Commission (Kosovo), a Skills Development Corporation (Jordan), a National Body for Human Resource Development (Tunisia) and a National Human Resources Development Council (Egypt). Overall, inter-institutional bodies seem to be more common in countries in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region, while VET agencies are the preferred form in all the other ETF partner regions. This might be because of the need in Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries to involve multiple stakeholders in what is traditionally a centralised culture of governance.

Countries commonly use the establishment of subsidiary bodies as an example of how they have moved ahead with reform implementation. Unfortunately, the national reports do not provide information on whether, and if so, how, these bodies have helped or are helping to advance VET improvement.

There is also the question of what these subordinate bodies are actually expected to do. Table 1.3 suggests that most countries have charged them with an all-inclusive responsibility for improvement. Some countries have delegated very specific responsibilities. Ukraine has established an agency in support of its plans to improve qualifications, and Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have set up subsidiary bodies to specifically address methodological improvement for VET providers. In general, improvement relating to skills and human capital as broader national priorities is usually delegated to inter-institutional bodies, whereas the more VET-specific targets are usually covered by VET agencies or similar.

Infrastructure investment

Infrastructure investment (capital expenditure) refers to spending on assets that last longer than one year. Typical examples include construction, renovation, and new or replacement equipment. In 2014, the last year for which there is comparable data, EU countries report spending an average of 8% of their education and VET budgets on such items (OECD, 2017b).

Partner countries also report such expenditure in 2016. They do not provide figures, but they all embed the information in country-specific narratives about the improvement of VET. In other words, their investment in infrastructure and other tangible assets is associated with aspirations for improvement in specific areas of reform, namely the professionalisation of teaching, modernisation of VET content, raising VET attractiveness, innovation and technology in VET, and accessibility and inclusiveness of VET (Table 1.4).

Uzbekistan reports on a programme for raising the professional level of staff working in VET, and its implementation through an improvement of infrastructure and training facilities, and the establishment of online systems for distance learning. Armenia reports similar efforts, though limited to the agricultural sector, while Belarus is investing in the setting up of the infrastructure needed for the provision of state assistance to a science, education and technology cluster.

The authorities in Moldova, meanwhile, hope that investing in better infrastructure for educational institutions will help the move towards a more innovative and attractive system of education and training. Kosovo refers to such an investment in the context of its aspiration for better quality VET, and Morocco describes its work on modernisation

through the production of computer-based educational materials by a national digital resource laboratory. In Georgia, the focus is on the procurement of learning equipment for institutions committed to inclusive education and access for students from vulnerable backgrounds. Russia describes a similar focus through an investment in the creation of accessible, barrier-free environments in VET. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the priority is to improve access for students with mobility challenges.

Poor and insufficient infrastructure is known to have a negative impact on the quality of provision and learning outcomes (Gershberg, 2014), so there is no doubt that improvement in the material and technical base matters beyond the material conditions for learning and training. It can facilitate the substantive improvements envisaged in VET reforms. However, infrastructure investment cannot be a substitute for these improvements. For instance, better classrooms and an upgrade of information and communications technology are not the same as better teaching and more relevant training content. Unfortunately, the national reports do not seem to make this distinction. Infrastructure investment is used interchangeably with reform implementation, and efforts to improve the material conditions of teaching and training are described instead of substantive improvement in VET.

Table 1.4 Infrastructure investment, by country and reform priority area in VET

	Professionalisation of teaching	Modernisation and quality of VET content	Attractiveness of VET	Innovation and technology	Accessibility and inclusiveness
Uzbekistan	#	#			
Armenia			#		
Azerbaijan		#			
Belarus				#	
Moldova		#	#	#	
Kosovo		#			
Kazakhstan					#
Kyrgyzstan					#
Georgia	#				#
Russia					#
Bosnia and Herzegovina		#			

1.2 Overhaul of framework conditions in vocational education and training

The previous sections described common ways in which countries hedge against risks associated with reform implementation. Most partner countries complement these efforts with more radical and ambitious approaches aimed at changing the very framework conditions of VET. The underlying rationale is that better framework conditions will be conducive to the implementation of specific reform actions. For instance, Ukraine reports on efforts to optimise its provider network and decentralise governance. The assumption is that a leaner, more efficient provider network and an improved mechanism for resource allocation are prerequisites for the smooth implementation of other specific reform priorities, such as getting the national qualifications framework off the ground, or revamping education and training to make it more relevant to labour market needs.

A major source of setbacks for overhaul solutions is their scope and radicality. For the most part, changes in the framework conditions imply profound alterations that might call for the replacement of long-standing arrangements, institutions, and patterns of cooperation and work in VET. The alterations might involve the closure of institutions and providers, cuts in funding and/or staff lay-offs, fundamental changes in legislation, etc. In 2016, the three major targets for partner countries in this respect (described below) were the adoption of new (primary) legislation, decentralisation of VET governance,

and rationalisation of the network of VET providers (Figure 1.1).

Important as they are, such changes rest on the assumption that it is possible to implement the system-wide replacement of old structures and conditions, and fully convert to new arrangements within a reasonable time, often following a top-down decision. Unfortunately, this does not always work as planned. If there is one common leitmotif throughout the years and rounds of Torino Process reporting it is that the process of overhaul usually turns out to be slower, costlier and more difficult than was hoped. Such a course of development is not surprising. It is a common theme in far-reaching and profound reforms in the public sector (Murrell, 1992) that could endanger other, smaller-scale and targeted improvements, especially when their implementation is made conditional on the success of the bigger changes.

The following sections describe the progress of partner countries with the three major overhaul solutions – legislation, decentralisation and restructuring – and assess whether these are set as preconditions for the implementation of other reform priorities.

Adoption of new legislation

Six of the 25 countries covered in this digest are working on the adoption of new primary legislation for VET. In all but one (Moldova), the new legislation is described as a means to an end – a reform priority or priorities to which countries committed in 2016 (Table 1.5).

Table 1.5 Adoption of new legislation in support of VET reforms, by country and reform area

	Dependent area of reforms				
	Teacher quality	Governance	Funding	Recognition	None indicated
Albania	#	#	#		
Azerbaijan				#	
Kosovo	#				
Moldova					#
Serbia		#	#		
Ukraine		#	#		

An example of a comprehensive agenda for legislative change comes from Ukraine. After the adoption of a Law on Higher Education in 2014, which prepared the ground for a reshuffle in the accreditation status of certain types of VET providers, legislators in Ukraine have recently adopted a Law on Education. At the time of preparation of this digest, the government was also preparing for the adoption of a new Law on VET. Together, these three primary laws are intended to set the stage for the imminent realisation of far-reaching changes in governance and funding arrangements. Their purpose is to make VET more autonomous, efficient and relevant.

The legislative agenda of Kosovo is more modest in comparison. One of the key priorities for improvement – the modernisation and upgrading of teaching in VET – depends on a new Law on VET, which the authorities need in order to incorporate provisions for the professional development of teachers. In Serbia, an expansion of the legislative framework is described as a prerequisite for the diversification of partnerships and funding for VET. The new legislation will provide employers with financial incentives to get involved and will change the legal status of VET providers so that they can enter into public–private partnerships on their own. Azerbaijan reports a commitment to prepare new legislation in order to set up mechanisms for the recognition of competences acquired through informal and non-formal learning, and the national report for Albania describes a new VET law that will provide a basis for transition to a dual VET system. Within this group

of countries, Moldova is the only one that does not describe a connection of conditionality between the overhaul of legislation and other reform priorities.

Decentralisation

Decentralisation is a process intended to transfer the functions and responsibilities of the state from higher to lower levels of government (European Commission, 2016). In 2016, decentralisation in some partner countries (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Tunisia, Uzbekistan) is about the devolution of administrative functions to sub-national authorities. In others (Belarus, Ukraine), the focus is on fiscal decentralisation by assigning revenue and expenditure responsibilities to local authorities. In some countries (Morocco), it is both (Table 1.6).

It is, perhaps, surprising to discover that only six partner countries refer to decentralisation processes in their national reports, considering the benefits, such as participation and better public services, that decentralisation can bring to local communities (European Commission, 2013). Like the legislative initiatives described in the preceding section, the reports of countries in this group (apart from Belarus and Morocco) refer to decentralisation in VET as an undertaking that sets the stage for action in other areas of VET reform.

The decentralisation of VET in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, for example, aims to create conditions of autonomy for VET providers in the hope that this will support them in finding and

Table 1.6 Decentralisation in support of VET reforms, by country and reform area

	Form of decentralisation		Self-reported stage of implementation	Dependent area of reforms			
	Administrative	Fiscal		Management of VET providers	Quality of VET programmes	Quality of staff	None indicated
Belarus		#	initial stage				#
Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	#		planning		#	#	
Morocco	#	#	advanced	#			
Tunisia	#		planning	#			
Ukraine		#	initial stage	#	#		
Uzbekistan	#		planning	#			

hiring more competent teachers and adjusting their programmes to become more local and relevant. In Tunisia, decentralisation is one of the key priorities in the National Economic Development Plan. In VET, its purpose is to kick-start and promote the involvement of local businesses in the work of regional vocational institutions, and the improvement of VET management in terms of serving regional labour market needs.

Interestingly, the national report for Belarus suggests that in that country there is no connection of conditionality between decentralisation and other VET reform priorities. The authorities are in the process of transferring authority to the local level of governance by putting the regional budgets in charge of funding for VET and by transferring the ownership of VET providers. In some cases, this has included mergers with other providers or higher education institutions.

Unfortunately, none of the countries has advanced particularly far with VET decentralisation. They are all either at the planning stage or still at the very beginning of the decentralisation process. The modest progress is perhaps understandable, as decentralisation is a complex and difficult task. Yet countries consider that some of their VET reforms depend on it, so it is also concerning because it is likely to hinder progress in other areas of improvement.

Of the countries included in Table 1.6, Ukraine, Belarus and Morocco report advances in terms of decentralisation that appear to be the most far-reaching in terms of implementation. In 2016, after adopting several legal acts on local self-government, territorial organisation, and amalgamation of local communities, Ukraine was moving towards actions on the ground, such as the amalgamation of territorial communities and the transfer of funding responsibility and ownership of VET providers to the local level. This is expected to help raise the quality of VET provision by strengthening the efficiency of financial resource allocation and use, supporting better quality VET providers while reducing the number of those that are redundant. Decentralisation in Belarus is about the devolution of administrative functions, but the VET reform priorities that it is supposed to enable are like the ones in Ukraine: better, more efficient management of vocational institutions. Finally, Morocco has been engaged in a

process of decentralisation through regionalisation for many years. In addition to a new regional division that has reduced the number of regions from 16 to 12, the status of the regions has been raised to 'privileged and appropriate territorial tiers' and regional commissions for VET have been introduced.

System restructuring and network optimisation

Countries have different reasons for and different ways of optimising their education and training provider networks, and of restructuring their formal systems of education. The goal is usually to find ways of using resources and space in the most efficient way possible, while ensuring the sustainability of educational and training provision, raising its quality and improving its management (Ares Abalde, 2014).

Some of the partner countries covered in this digest describe an overhaul of the set-up of their VET systems through the closure and merger of VET providers, the incorporation of some of them into VET resource centres of regional importance, the transfer of their subordination between line ministries, or a change in their legal status and type. In all but two cases (Azerbaijan and Turkey), the declared purpose of these changes is to increase the efficiency of resource use and to improve the management and governability of the VET system (Table 1.7).

Judging by the information provided in their national reports, partner countries are more advanced in the optimisation and restructuring of VET than they are with either of the other two solutions for an overhaul of their VET systems – legislation and decentralisation.

For example, Kazakhstan has already prepared for a change in the legal status of vocational institutions to allow them to become more autonomous and expand their services. In exchange, providers are supposed to introduce and use a transparent system of accounting and corporate management. Kosovo has completed the transfer of responsibility for VET to a single ministry, which has also funded vocational schools directly for the first time. According to Kosovo's national report, the stage is set for a unified management of VET as a continuum that includes both initial and continuing VET, although the connection between and unification of these

Table 1.7 Optimisation and restructuring in support of VET reforms, by country and by form and area of reform

	Form of restructuring and optimisation				Self-reported stage of implementation	Dependent area of reforms		
	Change of status	Merger/ closure	Resource centres	Change of subordination		Management of VET	Funding of VET	None indicated
Kazakhstan	#				planning	#		
Kosovo				#	completed	#		
Kyrgyzstan		#		#	ongoing, completed		#	
Azerbaijan		#	#		planning			#
Ukraine	#	#	#		planning		#	
Albania		#		#	ongoing, planning		#	
Turkey		#			completed			#

two is not yet formalised. Kyrgyzstan has achieved something similar by placing initial and secondary VET in the same line of authority and accountability under the agency for initial and secondary VET, while continuing to merge providers to save resources and use them more efficiently.

In its report, Azerbaijan does not include information on the reasons why it is investing efforts in optimising its network of VET providers and establishing VET resource centres, beyond the common reasons that are typical for this kind of intervention. However, these actions are described as being in line with the National Strategy for the Development of Education

and the Action Plan. Ukraine, meanwhile, is planning a range of measures, from a change in the legal status of providers, through mergers and closures of institutions, to the opening of centres of excellence, all driven by a need to use resources more efficiently by reducing staff numbers. The national report for Albania describes how the authorities are about to proceed with the closure of inefficient schools and programmes, while Turkey is managing the transition from the closure of several types of providers, which started in 2009, to the newly established faculties for technology, arts and other specialties.

2. INTRINSIC RISKS TO REFORM IMPLEMENTATION



The previous chapter discussed the external conditions in which countries implement their reform agenda for VET and described the most common strategies for dealing with risk emerging from these conditions. However, by no means all risks to reform implementation are external: some are intrinsic to the reform plans themselves. This could be due to the way in which these plans are conceived, formulated, justified, or communicated to stakeholders and beneficiaries, or to other reasons.

The national reports for 2016 suggest that the planning of reforms across countries and regions might be exposed to such a risk. Depending on the country, the risk could be due to one or more of the following problems: a disconnect between goals and the reform actions that are supposed to serve them; failure to provide evidence of the need for improvement; reform implementation plans that depend on too many independent factors (too many ‘moving parts’); and disregard for existing conditions and arrangements in the VET system, combined with limited buy-in for reforms.

The following sections describe each of these shortcomings separately and discuss how they manifest themselves, as reported by the partner countries.

2.1 Disconnect between strategic goals and actions

In 2016, all partner countries confirmed their commitment to a vision of transforming VET into a new and better segment of their national systems for skills development. A strategic vision is instrumental in designing policies of high strategic value because it indicates what strategic goals should be achieved, and by when, and provides the context for deciding on actions to that end.

The plans of countries in this respect vary greatly in terms of the extent to which they really are ‘strategic’ and manage to supply a proper strategic context for a change. Close to a third of the 25 countries covered in this digest describe only technical-level actions, such as optimisation of the network of VET providers (e.g. Ukraine), structured involvement of employers (e.g. Armenia), tweaking of qualification frameworks (e.g. Belarus), infrastructure investment

(e.g. Uzbekistan), curricular reform (e.g. Lebanon), and teacher (re)training (e.g. Jordan). It is not clear how the long-term goals articulated in these plans relate to the choice of actions, or, in other words, how these actions will improve VET in the specific national context. Rather, the legitimacy and strategic dimension of these plans is ‘borrowed’ from broader national strategies for education or, even further away, from national strategies for economic and/or social development, none of which refer specifically to VET.

The plans for VET laid out in most of the other national reports in 2016 feature elements of a strategic vision (Joyce, 2016). They set long-term goals; explain what current or anticipated needs and problems they address; and present solutions that are intended to involve and benefit all stakeholders. In seven of the countries, the vision is presented in a stand-alone VET strategy, while in others it is formulated through a clear reference to VET in broader planning documents. [Box 2.1](#) presents examples from two countries – Armenia and Moldova – with stand-alone VET strategies and associated plans for action on a technical level.

[Table 2.1](#) summarises the national visions for VET by country, type of vision (strategic and/or technical) and for countries with a strategic vision, whether this is described in a stand-alone strategy for VET or ‘borrowed’ from other strategic documents.

It is advisable to exercise caution when drawing conclusions based on this information. Its reliability depends on the quality and comprehensiveness of national reporting and, thus, it may vary between countries. With this limitation in mind, [Table 2.1](#) allows for some observations that might support the further analysis in this cross-country digest.

The first observation is that a number of partner countries seem to promote and invest in VET reform that is built only on technical plans describing short- to medium-term action. Without implying causality, it is fair to say that most countries in this group have a track record of dependency on official development assistance.

Second, countries that in recent years have put in place long-term plans for economic and social development with a heavy emphasis on human capital development and education, such as

Box 2.1 Examples of a 'strategic' type of vision for VET: Armenia and Moldova

The national Development Strategy 2014–2025 for Armenia has a strong focus on young people and their education as a path to sustainable development. The subsequently developed plan for VET describes why and how the VET system will contribute to that broader goal and includes subordinate priorities and actions, such as making VET more attractive to employers and young people, with a special focus on sectors of importance for rural development, such as agriculture.

In 2013, Moldova adopted a strategy for VET development up to 2020 that envisages the modernisation and streamlining of VET provision in ways that serve current and future market labour market needs. The overarching objective is to position VET as a contributor of the skills required to make the country competitive on a regional and European level. The overall objective is broken down into interconnected subordinate objectives, such as reforming the legislation, matching supply and demand for skills, optimising the VET provider network, updating the content of VET offer and promoting VET as a viable study choice.

Table 2.1 National vision for VET, by country, type of vision and source

Region	Country	Strategic vision	Stand-alone strategy	Technical vision
Central Asia	Kyrgyzstan			#
	Kazakhstan	#		#
	Tajikistan			#
	Uzbekistan			#
Eastern Partnership and Russia	Armenia	#	#	#
	Azerbaijan	#		#
	Belarus			#
	Georgia	#	#	
	Moldova	#	#	#
	Russia			#
	Ukraine			#
Western Balkans and Turkey	Albania	#		#
	Bosnia and Herzegovina	#		#
	Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	#	#	#
	Montenegro	#	#	#
	Serbia	#		#
	Turkey	#	#	#
	Kosovo	#		#
Southern and Eastern Mediterranean	Egypt	#		#
	Israel			#
	Jordan			#
	Lebanon			#
	Morocco	#	#	#
	Palestine			#
	Tunisia	#		#

Kazakhstan, Moldova, Morocco, Armenia and Tunisia, tend to have a comprehensive vision for VET, that is, a vision combining long-term goals with technical-level plans to achieve those goals. The ETF partner region with the biggest share of countries with a comprehensive vision for VET is the Western Balkan and Turkey region. This might be a positive consequence of decades-long donor presence and participation in international projects and policy processes, including those that adhere to EU requirements and conditions. These have introduced and established certain modes of planning and cooperation that are known to have a positive impact on the formulation and harmonisation of reform and development priorities and include sector-wide approaches and direct budget support, as well as international commitments in education, such as Education for All (European Commission, 2004).

Third, and perhaps most important, the summary in Table 2.1 shows that, despite deficiencies in the strategic aspects of their planning, all but one of the 25 countries covered did commit to specific actions to improve VET.

2.2 Most countries fail to provide evidence of a need for improvement

'Chasing' a goal usually implies believing that it addresses a certain need, and that it makes sense, solves a problem, or provides a benefit. This is also true for reform goals in the domain of public policy, which usually require the motivation, trust and joint effort of many people before they can be fulfilled. If an improvement effort does not have a clear justification explaining why the change is good and describing the need it serves, there is a good chance that the process of change will head in the wrong direction (Wilson and Dobson, 2008) or even grind to a halt.

To justify reform priorities and explain why the changes they imply are needed, the national reports refer to problems in VET and its socioeconomic context, and argue that these need to be resolved. Most of these problems are not new. They have been described over and over again since the inception of the Torino Process in 2010 and many were known

before that. The most prominent and frequently quoted examples include the mismatch between skills delivered by education and VET and required by the labour market (this includes the limited relevance of VET outcomes), shortfalls in access to VET, in particular for vulnerable populations and those with special needs, and problems with the quality of teachers and trainers.

Such problems are sufficiently fundamental to concern various groups of participants in VET and to justify action in more than one policy area. This makes them a preferred, all-inclusive justification for a host of difficult and complex reforms. For example, partner countries refer to problems with the mismatch and relevance of VET outcomes as reasons to initiate changes in VET programmes and curricula, promote the formal involvement of employers and the diversification of funding, and/or justify the reshuffling of the provider network. More than half of the reports also imply that there are problems with the composition, remuneration and quality of the teaching workforce and suggest that this is an area in need of urgent investment and change. Some national reports also argue that VET is persistently failing to include certain groups of potential VET beneficiaries, in particular girls and young people from vulnerable backgrounds, and that this merits a change in the provision, coverage and infrastructure of VET.

There is no reason to doubt the commendable intentions behind such measures or their potential to bring long-overdue improvement. They are known to have worked well elsewhere, solving many of the problems they were intended to address. However, this does not make them any less difficult or costly. Considering how far-reaching and possibly disruptive some of these reforms might be, having proper arguments in their favour could be decisive for stakeholder buy-in, for funding and, in general, for their success. Unfortunately, in a concerning number of instances described in the national reports, partner countries have difficulty making a convincing case for change. The major problem is the absence of evidence for the very problems that countries refer to when arguing in favour of reform. It is likely that other countries also lack such evidence but have not reported it, so the share of those without proper arguments for change in key areas of reform is probably much higher.

The problem of mismatch between the skills delivered and those required is one example. The national report for Kyrgyzstan notes the significance of the topic and assumes that there is a mismatch, but admits that there is no information on this. In the report for Kazakhstan, it is stated that there is no evidence that could help to determine the nature and extent of the mismatch, and the authors of the national report for Azerbaijan complain that data about the demand side of skills is lacking because of difficulties in developing proper methodologies and in reaching employers. In Georgia, there is no updated data on the issue of mismatch; in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the information is limited and the report notes that this hinders policy planning and implementation; and in Serbia, the authors of the national report admit that data on the issue is not being collected at all. According to the report for Kosovo, evidence on skills mismatch is unsystematic and collected only ad hoc, without coordination¹¹. Mismatch is also a key issue in countries of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region, where missing data is also reported.

Similarly, the issue of unsatisfactory quality of teachers and teaching in VET is commonly quoted as a problem that requires action, but partner countries also report that they lack evidence in this area. In turn, this undermines their arguments that the situation needs reform and improvement. The report for Egypt, for example, notes that data on teachers in technical and vocational education and training is difficult, or even impossible, to find. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the line ministries and pedagogical institutes do not possess official information about whether, and if so, how, their teachers are receiving in-service training, or what the impact of that training is. Albania reports the absence of a central repository of information about the same issue and about human resources in the teaching profession in general. The authors of the national report for Kazakhstan describe how

information about professional development is missing and also underline that there is no reliable, comparable information on the quality of teaching. In Kyrgyzstan, the authorities seem to lack even the most basic of data on the teaching workforce, such as gender and age composition.

A third example of a reform priority area for which countries do not present a strong enough case for change is access to VET. Data is usually lacking in a range of areas of significance for determining the presence of shortcomings with regard to access. Where data is available, it is not really being used to justify the need for reform. Instances of missing evidence include data on adult education and participation in VET (noted, for instance, by Kyrgyzstan and Belarus), the participation of students with disabilities and from vulnerable socioeconomic backgrounds (an evidence deficit reported by Lebanon and Kosovo), and in all partner regions but the Western Balkans and Turkey, information on problems of participation based on gender. Instances of unused evidence include, for example, statistics on youth unemployment and young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs). Although such indicators are included in most of the national reports, they are seldom (if ever) used to corroborate an argument in favour of expanding VET access and participation, and are rarely linked to a justification for specific actions.

All of this reflects a broader challenge with evidence and analysis concerning access to VET in general. Initial VET is somewhat better off in this respect, as countries usually possess information on the percentage of students following a vocational programme in upper secondary education. However, data on access and participation reported through the Torino Process in 2016 remains rather scarce. This makes it difficult to gain a differentiated picture of the nature and extent of the problems behind this policy priority. In addition, a number of partner countries struggle to establish a convincing link between their argument in favour of expanding VET and the evidence they have of broader socioeconomic challenges in their respective national contexts.

Difficulties with evidence are not necessarily an inherent feature of these and other policy areas in which countries argue for change. Armenia, for example, reports that it has evidence of mismatch

¹¹ In 2015–16, countries of the Western Balkan and Turkey region undertook efforts to address problems with the collection of data and intelligence on skills mismatches: in addition to employers' surveys, preparations were made for the setting up of a Skills Observatory in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and a tracer study system in Albania. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Montenegro carried out tracer studies during that period.

and gaps in key sectors of its economy, and information about the extent to which the training of workers with VET qualifications is relevant in the labour market. Israel also possesses such data, while the national report for Jordan indicates that the authorities have evidence of how participation in professional development for teachers is hampered by shortcomings. Georgia, meanwhile, provides data on problems with access for females both to VET and, subsequently, to the labour market.

For the other partner countries covered in this digest, the lack of objective proof that there are problems in need of addressing is likely to pose a risk to reform implementation. Certainly, evidence is not the only driver of reform. The choice of wording and the narrative in many national reports suggest that authorities and stakeholders are often motivated by aspirations for change inspired by global trends and ideas, and by initiatives in the EU to strengthen a trend towards improvement through, for example, work-based learning or qualification frameworks. In some cases, for instance in countries that are experimenting with the introduction of dual VET solutions, a strong driver of reform is the replication of solutions that are well established in countries known for their robust VET tradition, such as Germany and Switzerland.

However, although aspirations and replication can play an important role, it is doubtful that they are sufficient on their own to motivate sustainable, systemic and stakeholder-owned change.

2.3 Plans have (too) many 'moving parts'

The national reports describe how most partner countries have ventured into implementation of intentions by making their reforms depend on numerous parallel processes, which are fragile and thus could put the action at risk of obstruction. A good example of a risky conditionality is the pairing of the reform priorities relating to the involvement of employers and the modernisation of VET content. All partner countries without exception refer to these two as an interconnected reform priority in which the first goal is a key precondition for meeting the second goal. The problem with this is that most countries (except those with a tradition of governing

VET through national councils or other forms of multi-stakeholder advisory bodies, such as Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia, Israel and, most recently, Palestine) experience difficulties in establishing and running formal communication mechanisms with employers around VET. Thus, they are forced to pursue both goals simultaneously: the modernisation of VET content and the engagement of employers on what is needed and what should be next in terms of VET modernisation.

The parallel implementation of the two reform objectives in this example can become a source of risk because it makes the reform dependent on multiple variables that are beyond the control and sphere of influence of those in charge of reform implementation. What if VET content modernisation starts, but stakeholder involvement does not progress as planned, as some country reports suggest? What if employers are keen on supporting and informing change, but the authorities fail to incentivise VET providers and professionals to engage with the process? What if, in parallel, the authorities initiate new legislation for VET (as is the case in some countries), effectively making the other two processes depend on one more layer of parallel change?

In 2016, there was no evidence that any reform in a partner country had failed because of such discrepancies. However, complete failure is not the most likely effect of overly complex and interdependent reform processes: the risk is rather that such a reform will fail to progress as it cannot move faster and further than its weakest-performing goal.

2.4 Institutional and cultural 'inertia', and current needs

As previously mentioned, in order to justify and explain reform intentions, the national reports refer to the socioeconomic needs of countries and describe shortcomings that need to be addressed. Behind this line of argument is the assumption that change in VET can be justified solely through references to a greater good, such as economic progress and competitiveness, employability of future VET graduates, efficient use of scarce resources, and better teaching and training. This is only partially

true. Change in VET is also a personal decision on the part of those with a stake in VET, who participate in the system and have a stake in it 'here and now' and might not be willing or in the position to wait for future reform benefits: teachers and trainers, principals, students, etc. Their decisions are driven by personal motivation, but are also in response to the conditions that surround them. What if the greater good and the reforms it calls for go against the interest of VET providers, their employees and their attendees?

It is likely that the VET systems of partner countries exist and operate not only as a result of rational and optimal planning, but also, in part, on the basis of inertia and tradition. Schools might continue to exist because of their social and historical importance, or because of the ability of their principals to ensure the 'bureaucratic survival' of their institutions despite adverse circumstances, such as a reform that envisages their closure. In the same vein, bodies in charge of monitoring VET providers and shaping their priorities and profiles might have an interest in perpetuating the status quo or a lack of capacity to suggest viable alternatives. Although some partner countries, such as Israel and Russia, offer examples of the opposite scenario – VET providers who are early adopters or even drivers of change – the point is that progress with reforms depends not only on the quality of strategic planning and on rational decision making, but also on a complex interplay between institutional inertia, tradition, culture and vested interests, factors that tend to be ignored in the planning of reforms because of their specificity and complexity.

The inertia varies between countries, as do the obstacles that need to be overcome. Although the reform goals communicated in 2016 sound similar and comparable across partner countries and regions, and although the diagnosis of major problems might be the same (i.e. skills mismatch, low attractiveness and relevance, funding shortages, problems with teaching quality, etc.), the cultural and structural legacy of VET systems that needs to be overcome, or at least dealt with through a compromise, is quite different from place to place. It is also largely unexplored. This legacy comprises 'old habits' and ways of doing things and managing the system that can jeopardise reforms in subtle and undocumented, mostly informal, ways.

Unfortunately, institutional and cultural inertia does not seem to have been accounted for in the reform implementation plans as described in the national reports of 2016. Moreover, there is little information about the tentative (or actual) impact of reform implementation on the day-to-day functioning of the VET system, on the way reforms are internalised and 'bought into' by VET professionals (if at all), and on whether any of the problems they address coincide with the problems of people working and studying in the VET system at the moment of reporting. In fact, the reform priorities presented in national reports suggest that in all countries the drive to improve VET and the setting of the direction for this improvement come from outside the system. The reform appears to serve broader socioeconomic interests, but not the needs of the VET sector – of the people with a stake in it – at this moment in time. In turn, this can be another source of risk to progress with implementation.

CONCLUSION



This cross-country digest describes what countries typically do to hedge against the risk of failure of reforms, discusses their choices of and progress with reform implementation, and considers the impact this has on their agenda for change. The analysis allows for several conclusions.

First, notwithstanding the differences between countries, their reforms are exposed to similar risks that are being addressed in comparable ways. This suggests that there is potential for peer learning, specifically on issues pertaining to overcoming resistance to change from within the VET system. That includes strategies on how to transition from delegating responsibilities for implementation and piloting reforms to a system-wide roll-out of improvement. The analysis suggests that problems with this transition might be a major impediment to reform progress. There are also some success stories, which might hold lessons that are important across national borders.

Second, contrary to common assumptions, not all lack of progress with policy action can be blamed on lack of political will. Often the problems are of a technical nature and could be addressed through better planning and a recalibration of reform focus, so that VET participants have a chance to understand and endorse the reform plans and feel that these plans address their needs and concerns. This could include the creation of incentives for improvement, for instance in the form of formal recognition and support for teachers and providers who endorse change or might even be among its initiators and drivers. The lessons learned from the piloting of novel approaches (see the section on hedging against adverse conditions) could be used to demonstrate the advantages of specific reform undertakings, but these seem to still be a largely underdeveloped and unexplored source of inspiration, motivation and guidance in this respect.

Finally, and closely connected to the second conclusion, it might be time to look for a new set of justifications for change that rely less on difficult-to-collect evidence, and instead connect the readily available, albeit impersonal, arguments in favour of reform (such as those around economic and social development) to research and to the specific situation of participants in VET – VET providers, professional staff and primary beneficiaries (learners) – and their needs at this moment in time. This might give the drive for improvement a new impetus, and secure ownership and buy-in from the very individuals in VET who are supposed to benefit from the change, a task that in many countries seems long overdue.



ACRONYMS

ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
VET	Vocational education and training

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