

The Georgia Entrepreneurial Community demonstrates how a policy of inclusive education is getting off the ground in a district of Tbilisi. A local vocational education and training facility has created a positive learning environment where students with and without disabilities and from varying age groups and educational backgrounds not only learn together, but also participate in initial and continuing vocational education and training, work-based learning and apprenticeships together.

Georgia is eager to demonstrate progress in educational reforms and to **align policies and practices to the EU agenda centred on education for all and social inclusion**. The aim of the government is to **mainstream inclusive education so that it becomes an integral part of vocational education and training** across the country's vocational education providers. In the regional context, the approach to inclusive education in Georgia is breaking boundaries and shifting paradigms.

Through country peer learning with Norway, the Vocational College Mermisi is one of six vocational schools spearheading the transition towards inclusive initial vocational education and training. The effort is

part of an inclusive education programme, initiated by the Ministry of Education and Science in 2013, in line with the Strategic Plan for Vocational Education and Training 2013-2020. Today the Mermisi College delivers 34 programmes to its 700 students in the form of initial and continuing vocational education and training. Out of the 700 students, 52 are part of the inclusive education programme – a 350% increase from 2013 and the highest number among vocational education and training providers in Georgia. What is attracting students to the College is its high success rate of integration of graduates into the world of work. Tracer studies indicate that 18 months following graduation, 74% of the graduates have successfully integrated the labour force – with some specialisations reaching 95% integration. The key to Mermisi's success lies in its relationships with the local district, and with 250 local businesses, for **education-business cooperation**.

The Entrepreneurial Community has translated the national policy on inclusive education into action by **turning what some might perceive as barriers into opportunities**. The students, whose ages range from 15 to 68, all come from different backgrounds. Within its financial ability, the district provides modest support to the Mermisi College in terms of infrastruc-

Students from the Mermisi College that worked with us were all well prepared. I would encourage all employers to work with college students because our country is developing and we need to support our young people

PARTNERS:

VOCATIONAL COLLEGE MERMISI
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE
LOCAL DISTRICT
GOVERNMENT OF NORWAY
250 BUSINESSES BASED IN THE DISTRICT

ture. However, the **main collaborative advantage among the partners comes the district linking the College and its 72 teachers with local employers**, which then allows the College to link students to work-based learning and apprenticeship opportunities. Equipped with information about local businesses, the main obstacle that the Director of the Vocational College Mermisi has had to face is breaking through the stigma and convincing employers to hire students living with disabilities.

The Entrepreneurial Community in Tbilisi is fighting against the stereotypes of those living with a disability. Their role is essential, as stigmatisation represents the main barrier to employment for those living with a

disability. The Entrepreneurial Community **advocates and educates employers** to ensure work placements for students, including those living with a disability, which is essential for their integration into the world of work following graduation. **A person living with a disability must meet the minimum job qualifications set by the employer** and possess the relevant skills, experience, education, medical, safety, physical, and other requirements. **Employers too must make reasonable accommodations** to the students, while the Vocational College Mermisi ensures a teacher is always at hand during the integration period.

Despite the initial difficulties in obtaining the first partnership agreements with local businesses, today the results are there for everyone to see. Not only are the employers satisfied with the results of their experience, but they have also discovered the benefits of hiring employees with disabilities. In addition to relevant skills, employers report high levels of motivation and dedication as well as excellent social skills of employees with disabilities. Faced with a sizeable task of coordinating **over 250 partnership agreements with local businesses** that are mostly small to medium size businesses, the hard work of the Vocational College Mermisi is certainly paying off.



Compassion and competitiveness: Georgia's winning combination for social partnership

At Mermisi community college in Tbilisi, Georgia, principal Nona Gudushauri is quietly determined to embed a simple yet powerful idea. While including students with special needs increases their chances of finding a job, and that ultimately contributes to both economic growth and social cohesion, Gudushauri focuses on the positive impact that an inclusive approach can have on everyone in the college.

"The inclusion of students with special needs into the environment of our college helps to improve the general situation in the college," she declares. Through the increased awareness of educational, environmental, and social issues that inclusive education promotes, relationships flourish and communication skills are developed, bringing benefit to the college's employees, students, and partners.

The introduction of inclusive education into the Georgian VET system is relatively recent, and Mermisi is one of just six colleges selected to introduce a range of recruitment, infrastructure, and teaching and learning innovations intended to open vocational education to everyone who could benefit from it.

Seventy-two Mermisi college staff members were provided with special training by the National Centre for Teacher Professional Development, run by the Ministry of Education and Science and popularly known as the Teachers' House. The college also embarked on a 'universal design' project, based on the idea that the design of buildings and spaces should be equitable, flexible, and simple, thereby making them accessible to all. The college and the Ministry set up a multi-disciplinary group of specialists to provide on-going support for the staff and ensure alignment with the priorities of Georgia's national VET strategy.

Having made these efforts on the 'input' side, Gudushauri was keen to ensure that the benefits followed the college's graduates to the 'output' side; in other words, the world of work. In addition to the strong partnerships with the Ministry and with NGOs and international organisations, the college has established direct links with over 250 employers. At first it was difficult and time-consuming, as Gudushauri had to

visit each employer herself and ask them to consider giving her students a chance. Now, businesses are proactively contacting the college to invite students to join practical training programmes, and links with other employers are being strengthened through the involvement of the local municipality

A well-earned reputation

Under an MOU with the college, officials at Tbilisi's Gladi-Nadzaladevi municipality collect data on local labour market supply and demand issues and promote the courses at Mermisi to job seekers. They also recommend Mermisi graduates to specific employers, drawing on the remarkable 250 or more active connections managed by the college, particularly the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that are the main source of employment opportunities. Deputy Governor of the municipality Gocha Janelidze stresses the in-kind support that they are also able to offer; "We have provided certain equipment like benches outside as well as the concrete road," he notes, "so we are trying our best to help, and we hope that this cooperation continues in the future." He adds a comment that is revealing in terms of the reputation Mermisi enjoys: "Frankly speaking, I myself would like to go and do some retraining there!"

If he got the opportunity, Janelidze would be welcomed by a diverse and thriving student body. George Petriashvili arrived at the college having lost his sight in an accident at a railway training college. "When I first got here I was a bit scared," he remembers, "especially the first week. But after that I adapted to the situation. My class mates as well as my lecturers helped me." He discussed his needs with members of the inclusive education multi-disciplinary team, and as a result declares that "at least 90 per cent" of his expectations were met.

The support of classmates, staff, and inclusive education specialists is evident in all the students' stories. Trainee chefs Ketevan Chumberidze and Papuna Kurdadze have been able to express their love of cooking and pursue their personal and professional goals within an integrated environment. "I really like



to work in this mixed environment with deaf and hearing people,” says Chumburidze, “we have really good relations. We teach the hearing people how to use sign language.” Kurdadze also underlines the good attitudes and positive atmosphere of the college, describing how this has enabled him to build his passion for Georgian cuisine, “especially making khinkalis, the Georgian dumplings,” he says. “I’m now a real expert in khinkalis!”

Darina Gulaziani is one of the inclusive education specialists working at the college. She worked with George Petriashvili to identify the specific support that would enable him to access the curriculum on his chosen course, but she sees this as being no different to how a sighted student should be treated. “Today we consider our students at the same level whether they are with special needs or not,” she explains.

Darina’s colleague Lela Kvaraia teaches office management at the college, and brings workplace experience from a number of previous roles. Her focus is on helping all students relate to the demands of work, while helping employers realise the benefits of having employees with different abilities. “We have very close relations with the supervisors at a potential employer,” she points out, “this is a regular activity.”

Principal Gudushauri adds a valuable insight about the results of this activity, in terms of the college’s rela-

tions with employers. “At first they were a bit scared to hire our students,” she recalls, “But we showed them good case studies, examples of good practice, and we assured and convinced them that our students are well prepared and they can do the job. So now both sides, college and employers, find this a win-win situation.”

Policy beyond projects

It is easy to see how a win-win situation involving VET school graduates with disabilities and a large sample of local employers would attract the attention of policy makers. Deputy Minister of Education and Science Ketevan Natriashvili, a regular visitor to college Mermisi, describes the two directions that the current work on inclusive education takes. The first concerns the need to revise the legislative platform to enable people with disabilities who graduate from the VET system to find appropriate work. The second is the development of innovative pedagogical and andragogical approaches alongside the practical, work-based element that ties VET supply to labour market demand. In this process Natriashvili and her team work with colleagues from other government departments and through social dialogue. “It is important to involve all social partners in this process,” she insists, “to make the right decisions, to analyse the legislative platform properly, and to identify the gaps that exist.” However,

We are in dialogue with employer associations and the employers themselves - who are our first partners. We are preparing for them skilled persons with different abilities and disabilities. Our task is to find the right position, the right occupations

Marika Zakareishvili, Director of Inclusive Education Project, Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia

the operationalisation of Mermisi's education-business cooperation currently rests entirely on the shoulders of its Principal. This represents a potential stumbling block to the expansion of such constructive partnerships throughout the VET sector, and the government is being urged to find ways to ensure that the weight of responsibility does not sit disproportionately on VET providers.

The impetus behind the development of inclusive education can be found in the Georgian government's national VET strategy, and receives strong support from a strategic partnership with the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. "We're very lucky to have a supporter like this," Natriashvili is quick to acknowledge. And while their contribution to teacher training and infrastructure improvements in support of inclusive education is sometimes referred to as 'the Norwegian project', the deputy minister is clear that inclusive education is a core, cross-cutting approach, not a project with an end date. As Tamar Kitiashvili, head of the VET Development Department, puts it, "all activities that we are planning and all projects that we are planning should be inclusive. We are thinking inclusive."

In 2014 Kitiashvili's department took the major step of implementing revised legislation on the management of social partnerships, developing an agreed framework in consultation with partners. The result was important because it shifted the emphasis from dialogue to joint action. The framework encompasses new thematic areas, with active working groups putting forward ideas and proposals for further reform in the system. However, engaging private sector partners remains a challenge and there is a pressing need to share success stories with businesses of all sizes, from single entrepreneurs to multi-national companies with local facilities.

The new social partnership framework allows cooperation to flourish at all levels of the system, and the government is in the process of developing a private-public partnership approach to fostering new opportunities for young people and adults, at the interface between the VET system and the labour market. She is adamant that these opportunities will be open to people of all backgrounds and abilities; "we have to offer everyone the same opportunity to have high-quality, high-standards vocational education, including practical learning," she declares.

Again, the issue is passing on both the principles and the benefits of inclusive education to a private sector that is less amenable to policy direction than the VET system. “We have to work very hard with employers to involve them,” she admits, adding, “if we are working on vocational education and we have a partnership, inclusion is part of it and they have to consider this.”

Competitiveness, not charity

Gaining the participation of employers is benefit-led and not subsidy-led, as Marika Zakareishvili – who leads the government’s project on the implementation of inclusive education in the VET system – points out. “In Georgia the government doesn’t have any incentives for employers if they employ people with special educational needs, so our approach is to really show them that this person can do the job that the employer wants them to do.”

One of the new methods for getting this message across is via a group of ten specially trained coaches who work closely with employers to ‘sell’ the skills of people with special educational needs. The only direct financial support that employers can access is funding for infrastructure improvements or sign-language interpreters to help get new staff settled in. Beyond that, the government is keen to avoid paying employers to employ people with special needs. “We are preparing good, skilled people with different abilities and disabilities,” says Zakareishvili, “and we sell them because we believe that they can do the job.”

This comes as no surprise to employers who are making use of the skills that people with different abilities can bring and, like Nona Gudushauri at Mermisi college, experiencing the wider benefits. Take Ketevan Alavidze, who owns the Mirzaani restaurant. She has done well from hiring Mermisi graduates with special needs into full-time roles. “We never had any difficulties in terms of communication,” she says, “they’re so open, so diligent, so hard working.”

Natela Tsukhrukaidze, who runs a textiles and clothing manufacturing business in Tbilisi, took some students from Mermisi as apprentices and hired one on a permanent basis. “All the students who came from Mermisi were very well prepared, they had the relevant skills. I decided to hire Katia, she is a very nice person and as she has some special needs I thought it would be good for her to stay and work in our team.”

Three things related to Georgia from recent ETF work:

1. In November 2013 Tbilisi hosted an ETF conference on the link between skills development and migration, looking at areas including lifelong learning and equal access to education. Working groups discussed the effect of migrant support measures, in particular on preparing potential migrants, the validation of migrants’ skills, and support to returning migrants.
2. Representatives from Georgia took part in a 2014 ETF seminar on skills matching in the Eastern Partnership region. Among other things, they discussed increasing cooperation between ministries and social partners, creating a better environment for business development, and adopting a holistic approach to the use of labour market data in skills matching.
3. The ETF and the International Chambers of Commerce recently launched a call for good practices to be showcased at a conference in Turin. The Academy of the Chamber of Commerce of Georgia was selected to present its work on promoting entrepreneurship in secondary education, encouraging young people to consider an entrepreneurial career.

The impact has been positive throughout the operation, with Tsukhrukaidze readily acknowledging the value of diversity in the workplace. “I would like to recommend that all employers should hire young people in general and they should definitely hire people with special needs. They can work very well, especially in small facilities like this one, they study how to get along with other people and it’s very good for them and for our job as well.”

Katia agrees; “I really like to work here, and it is very important to me to be part of a team.” She is clear that her success is based on the inclusive approach at Mermisi, because in addition to learning the necessary skills as a seamstress, “I can communicate better with people, that’s what the college gave me.”

Perhaps one of the reasons for Mermisi college’s success is to be found in its compassionate ethos, which finds expression in principal Nona Gudushauri’s appeal to her staff to “treat these children, these students, as if they are your own kids – that is very important. Do everything for them. Just imagine that they are your own children.”



The ETF is an EU agency that helps transition and developing countries to harness the potential of their human capital through the reform of education, training and labour market systems in the context of the EU's external relations policy.

