

Recommendations to promote social inclusion in apprenticeships



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Alliance of Centres of Excellence in
Vocational Training for Sustainable Habitat



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Recommendations to promote social inclusion in apprenticeships

Developed by:



Clúster de Habitat Eficiente AEICE – Spain



Consejería de Educación de la Junta de Castilla y León – Spain



Instituto para el Fomento del Desarrollo y la Formación SL INFODEF – Spain



Fundación Instituto de la Construcción de Castilla y León ICCL – Spain



Fundación Centro de Servicios y Promoción Forestal y de su Industria de Castilla y León CESEFOR – Spain



Fundación Laboral de la Construcción – Spain



Asociación Empresarial de Investigación Centro Tecnológico del Mueble y la Madera de la Región de Murcia CETEM – Spain



Associação Plataforma para a Construção Sustentavel CENTRO HABITAT – Portugal



Centro Tecnológico da Cerâmica e do Vidro – Portugal



Universidade de Aveiro – Portugal



Holzcluster Steiermark Gmbh – Austria



Fachhochschule Salzburg Gmbh – Austria



Cluster Viooikonomias Kai Perivallontos Dytikis Makedonias – Greece



Dimitra Ekpaiditiki Simvilitiki AE – Greece



Panepistimio Thessalias – Greece



Public Institution Centre of Excellence in Energy and Electronics – Moldova



Construction College «Construct2» – Georgia

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Introduction

The green and digital transitions are accelerating change in the Habitat sector, encompassing construction, renovation, energy efficiency, wood and furniture industries, and emerging sustainable building technologies. These shifts are expanding the skills required for sustainable and future-oriented occupations, while long-standing inequalities in access to apprenticeship pathways remain visible across Europe. Women, migrants, people with disabilities, NEET youth, and learners from rural or socio-economically disadvantaged areas continue to face structural barriers to entry, retention, and progression in Work-Based Learning and Dual VET. The HABITABLE project—Alliance of Centres of Excellence in VET for Sustainable Habitat—was established to respond to these intertwined challenges by strengthening the capacity of VET systems and companies to deliver relevant skills in a way that is both sustainable and socially fair. Within this framework, the present guide was developed to support the systematic integration of inclusion, diversity, and equity into the design and delivery of apprenticeships and WBL in the Habitat skills ecosystem. The guide is intended for all actors who shape apprenticeship ecosystems and influence learners' opportunities to access and succeed in WBL. It addresses VET providers and WBL intermediaries responsible for designing programmes and managing dual pathways; companies and SMEs that host apprentices and provide workplace training; teachers, trainers and in-company mentors who support learning in educational and work environments; and policymakers and public authorities who regulate, fund, and assure quality in VET systems. It is also relevant for intermediary and representative bodies—such as clusters, chambers, sectoral associations and social partners—as well as civil society organisations that support groups with fewer opportunities. While the guide draws on the realities of HABITABLE partner countries, its structure and recommendations are designed to be applicable across European contexts. This resource brings together conceptual foundations, policy grounding, and practical measures in a single coherent structure. It clarifies core concepts such as inclusion, equity, intersectionality, accessibility, and reasonable accommodation, and connects these to the quality and skills frameworks that guide European apprenticeships and VET. It then examines the main barriers to access and completion, as well as the system-level, provider-level, workplace-level, and learner-experience dimensions that characterise inclusive apprenticeship pathways in practice. Building on this analysis, the guide formulates thematic recommendations addressing, among others,

gender equality, disability inclusion, migrant inclusion, socio-economic disadvantage and NEET participation, and the challenges of rural and peripheral areas. A dedicated section translates these principles into stakeholder-specific recommendations for VET providers, companies/SMEs, and public authorities. The annexes provide supporting tools, including a glossary of key terms, a joint self-assessment framework, a template for inclusive action planning, and access to a digital bank of promising practices. The guide was produced under Work Package 3 of the HABITABLE project, specifically Task 3.8, which focuses on developing structured recommendations to promote social inclusion, diversity, and equity in apprenticeships. Its preparation followed an evidence-informed and collaborative methodology combining targeted desk research, review of European and national VET and equality frameworks, and analysis of existing Dual VET/WBL practices in the partner countries. This work was complemented by partner consultations and iterative validation, ensuring that the recommendations respond to practical constraints faced by SMEs and training providers while remaining aligned with European quality and competence standards. The drafting process was also coordinated with other HABITABLE outputs—including the Skills Intelligence Platform, the Sector Map of Jobs and Skills, the DUAL Online Centre, and related training programmes—to guarantee coherence across the project’s capacity-building instruments. The guide is designed for flexible use across the Habitat skills ecosystem. VET centres may apply it to revise curricula, strengthen institutional inclusion strategies, improve guidance and learner support, and embed equity-focused monitoring within programme delivery. Companies and SMEs may use it to prepare for hosting apprentices through more inclusive recruitment, onboarding, mentoring, workplace adaptation, and anti-discrimination practices. Policymakers and sectoral bodies may draw on it to inform the design of incentives, regulatory safeguards, quality assurance mechanisms, and intersectoral coordination that enable equitable participation in Dual VET and WBL. Beyond its standalone value, the guide is embedded in key HABITABLE capacity-building outputs: it informs the SMEs Quality Apprenticeships Supporting Programme (T3.4) and the Training Course on Green, Digital and Inclusive Apprenticeships (T3.6), and it is hosted digitally in the DUAL Online Centre “WBL for All” space, ensuring open access and sustained use across the CoVE network.

1. Understanding Inclusion and Equity in Apprenticeships

Inclusion and equity are core components of modern apprenticeship and VET systems, particularly as Europe undergoes profound green and digital transitions. International organisations such as the OECD, ILO and UNESCO have consistently emphasised that apprenticeships can only fulfil their economic and social potential when they are accessible to all learners, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, migrants, people with disabilities, women entering male-dominated sectors, and young people with limited prior qualifications (ILO, 2021; OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2020). Across Europe, research shows that despite improvements in regulatory frameworks, participation in apprenticeships remains uneven, with systemic barriers continuing to affect underrepresented groups (European Commission, 2020; Eurofound, 2021). Understanding inclusion and equity is therefore essential for designing apprenticeship programmes that contribute not only to skills development but also to fairness, social justice and long-term competitiveness in the labour market.

2.1 Inclusion in the context of Dual VET and WBL

Inclusion in Dual VET and WBL refers to the meaningful participation of all learners in training pathways that combine structured classroom learning with substantial on-the-job experience. The ILO (2021) defines inclusive apprenticeships as systems that guarantee access, participation and progression for all learners regardless of their background, through coordinated support measures, accessible environments and fair workplace practices. Research from the OECD (2023) highlights that inclusive apprenticeships are characterised by flexible entry routes, individualised learning plans, targeted guidance, employer engagement and strong support networks between VET institutions and companies.

UNESCO (2020) further emphasises that inclusion requires removing pedagogical, financial, cultural and institutional barriers that prevent disadvantaged learners from successfully navigating both school-based and work-based components. Academic studies also show that inclusion in apprenticeships is strongly linked to positive outcomes such as reduced dropout, higher levels of motivation and improved transition to employment (Billett, 2020; Fuller & Unwin, 2017). Successful systems support learners through measures such as mentoring, learning accommodations, accessible workplaces, language support for migrant learners and structured communication between training providers and companies.

The European Commission's evaluation of VET reform (2020) similarly concludes that Dual VET becomes more inclusive when employers receive support to adapt workplace training, and when VET centres have the capacity to identify learners at risk and provide timely intervention. Inclusion therefore is not merely a social aspiration; it is a structural feature that determines the quality and effectiveness of modern apprenticeship systems.

2.2 Equity vs. Equality: What's the Difference?

Although often used interchangeably, equality and equity represent distinct approaches in education and training policy. Equality ensures that all learners receive the same opportunities, rights and resources. However, large international studies show that equal treatment alone cannot close gaps for learners who start from different socio-economic, linguistic or physical starting points (OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2020). For example, a migrant learner entering a construction apprenticeship without full host-country language proficiency may not benefit from the same learning content in the same way as a native speaker; similarly, a woman entering a male-dominated trade may face subtle biases or exclusion that equal policies alone do not address.

Equity, in contrast, aims to ensure fair outcomes by providing differentiated support that addresses structural disadvantages. The ILO (2021) stresses that equity in apprenticeships requires targeted measures such as language assistance, financial support, flexible schedules, gender-responsive training, reasonable accommodations for disabilities and proactive employer engagement. Evidence from Eurofound (2021) shows that equitable apprenticeship systems increase completion rates among disadvantaged groups and contribute to higher employer satisfaction because learners are better supported and more likely to succeed.

Academic literature reinforces this distinction. Fuller and Unwin (2017) argue that equity-oriented apprenticeships are those that recognise the diversity of learner backgrounds and adapt pedagogical and workplace practices accordingly. Similarly, Billett (2020) demonstrates that equitable learning environments increase learner engagement and foster stronger identity formation, especially for learners entering unfamiliar or exclusionary occupational cultures.

2.3 Why Inclusion Matters in the Habitat and Construction-Related Sectors

The Habitat ecosystem, encompassing construction, renovation, sustainable buildings, energy efficiency, wood and furniture, digital building technologies and smart homes — is undergoing significant transformation. The European Union's climate objectives require large-scale reskilling and upskilling, particularly for green and digital competencies (European Commission, 2022). Yet the sector faces severe labour shortages, with Eurostat (2022) reporting that construction is one of

the top EU sectors struggling to find skilled workers. At the same time, the workforce is ageing, with nearly 40% of EU construction workers over the age of 50 (Eurofound, 2021).

Inclusion is essential for addressing these shortages. Women represent only around 10–12% of the construction workforce across Europe, despite long-standing policy commitments to gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2023). People with disabilities remain largely excluded from site-based roles due to workplace inaccessibility and lack of employer support (ILO, 2021). Migrants are overrepresented in low-skilled and hazardous positions, often without access to formal apprenticeships that would enable progression to skilled roles (OECD, 2020). Young people in rural regions or disadvantaged urban areas frequently lack pathways into emerging green professions despite high demand.

Inclusive apprenticeships provide a solution. Evidence from OECD (2023) and UNESCO (2020) shows that when companies and VET institutions adopt inclusive approaches—such as tailored support, anti-discrimination measures, career guidance and accessible training—participation increases significantly among underrepresented groups. Diversity also drives innovation: research indicates that mixed teams improve problem-solving in sustainable construction, digital building technologies and energy-efficient design (World Green Building Council, 2021). Inclusion therefore contributes not only to social justice but also to productivity, innovation and long-term sectoral competitiveness.

For the Habitat sector, which lies at the heart of Europe’s climate transition, inclusive apprenticeships align with broader EU strategies including the Green Deal, the European Pillar of Social Rights and the 2020 Council Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training. Ensuring that all learners can participate in and benefit from emerging opportunities is essential to building a skilled, resilient and future-ready workforce capable of delivering sustainable habitats across Europe.

2. Policy and Practice

Section 2 places the guide within the policy and quality landscape that shapes inclusive apprenticeships across the HABITABLE CoVE network. It starts with a brief overview of European priorities for promoting inclusion, diversity, equity and non-discrimination in Dual VET and WBL, and then presents national policy snapshots from partner countries in a shared template to enable comparison and transferability.

The section concludes by introducing the key frameworks that underpin the guide: the EFQEA principles as the main EU standard for quality and effective apprenticeships, the EQAVET quality cycle as a mechanism for monitoring and continuous improvement of inclusion, and GreenComp and DigComp as complementary competence references linked to green and digital transitions in the Habitat ecosystem. These foundations prepare the ground for Section 3, which focuses on how inclusion is realised in practice.

2.1 Inclusion in national and European agendas

Inclusion, in the broad sense used across education and work-based learning research, refers to a *continuous process* of removing barriers so that **all** learners can be present, participate meaningfully, and achieve valued outcomes. It is not a one-off measure or a label for specific groups, but an ongoing effort to reshape environments, practices, and relationships so diversity is welcomed and no learner is pushed to the margins. UNESCO frames inclusive education as a process of addressing and responding to learner diversity, strengthening participation, and reducing exclusion. This understanding is useful for apprenticeships and dual VET because it shifts attention from “fixing the learner” to improving the learning and workplace conditions that enable everyone to succeed.

Diversity describes the fact that learners differ across many dimensions—gender, age, disability, ethnicity, language, migration status, socio-economic background, family situation, health, and prior educational or work experiences. In inclusion work, diversity is treated as a normal feature of any learning community, not as a problem. The practical implication is that training systems and workplaces should be designed assuming heterogeneity from the start, rather than adapting only when “special cases” appear

Equity and **equality** are related but not the same. Equality is about *the same treatment or access for everyone* (e.g., offering identical training conditions). Equity is about *fairness*: providing what different learners need to reach comparable opportunities and outcomes, especially when they

start from unequal positions. Research and policy analysis in education underline equity as a guiding principle focused on counteracting disadvantage and ensuring that background characteristics do not determine learning chances. In apprenticeships, this matters because identical rules or supports can reproduce inequality if learners face different structural constraints. **Intersectionality** explains how different dimensions of identity and disadvantage interact. Instead of viewing barriers separately (e.g., “women” or “migrants” or “people with disabilities”), intersectionality shows that experiences are shaped by *overlapping* factors—such as being a young migrant woman, or a low-income learner with a disability—which can create distinct forms of exclusion. The concept comes from Crenshaw’s work on how systems of discrimination combine, producing effects that cannot be understood by looking at one category at a time. Using an intersectional lens in apprenticeships helps partners anticipate who may be left out of opportunities and why.

Accessibility refers to the degree to which environments, information, tools, and processes can be used by everyone, including people with disabilities. Accessibility includes physical access (buildings, transport, equipment), digital access (platforms, software, assistive technologies), communication access (plain language, sign language, multilingual materials), and social access (welcoming cultures, absence of stigma). In inclusive systems, accessibility is proactive: barriers are removed *before* they exclude learners, aligning with universal design principles.

Reasonable accommodation is a key inclusion concept linked to disability rights. It means making necessary and appropriate adjustments—*in a specific case*—to ensure a person can participate equally, as long as these adjustments do not impose a disproportionate burden. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines it as modifications that enable equal enjoyment of rights on the same basis as others. In apprenticeship contexts, reasonable accommodation clarifies that inclusion sometimes requires tailored changes in tasks, assessment, schedules, communication modes, or support arrangements.

Finally, these concepts matter in dual VET and apprenticeship systems because such pathways combine **two learning arenas**—school/training centres and workplaces—each with its own potential barriers. A shared vocabulary helps partners recognise exclusion risks early, design fairer systems, and agree on what “inclusive apprenticeships” should mean in practice. This common grounding sets the base for the next sections, where policies, systems, and concrete inclusion practices are analysed in more depth.

[2.2 Policy and Practice: Challenges & Opportunities](#)

Efforts to make apprenticeships more inclusive are now deeply embedded in European and national reform agendas. This reflects a broader recognition that VET must be socially equitable, responsive to labour-market changes, and aligned with the skills needed for the green and digital transition. Despite this favourable policy landscape, significant gaps persist in how inclusion is implemented in practice. Many learners still face structural obstacles that affect their access to high-quality apprenticeships, their participation throughout training, and their eventual transition into employment. This chapter outlines the main policy drivers shaping inclusive apprenticeship systems across HABITABLE partner countries and highlights the barriers that continue to undermine participation for groups with fewer opportunities.

Inclusion has moved from a peripheral concern to a central priority across Europe's education and training systems. At EU level, several strategic frameworks—such as the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Skills Agenda, the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA), and the 2020 Council Recommendation on VET—establish clear expectations that VET systems must offer equal opportunities, non-discrimination, and learner-centred support. These frameworks encourage Member States and neighbouring countries to modernise apprenticeship systems, ensuring that training is not only high-quality and relevant to labour-market needs but also meaningfully accessible to individuals facing socio-economic, linguistic, cultural, or disability-related barriers.

[Austria – Policy and Regulatory Framework for Inclusive VET and Apprenticeships](#)

In Austria, inclusion in vocational education and training, including apprenticeships, is supported through a combination of regional and national policy instruments that aim to enhance the participation of people with disabilities, young people with weaker school performance, and other groups facing barriers to labour market entry. At regional level, the **Salzburg Participation Act (Salzburger Teilhabegesetz)** represents a key framework for promoting equal participation of people with disabilities in social and economic life. The Act, which replaced the Salzburg Disability Act in 2019, defines disability broadly to include significant impairments of physical, sensory, cognitive or mental health functions and mandates a variety of assistance measures. These include support for school education, vocational training and work trials, thereby directly facilitating access to VET and apprenticeship pathways for eligible individuals in the federal state of Salzburg.

At national level, Austria has introduced targeted financial incentives to encourage companies to offer inclusive apprenticeships. The **Inclusion Bonus for Apprentices (Inklusionsbonus für Lehrlinge)** provides a monthly subsidy to enterprises that employ apprentices holding a valid disability card, with the bonus applicable for the entire duration of the apprenticeship. This measure

reduces perceived cost-related risks for employers and contributes to expanding training opportunities for young people with disabilities. Complementing this, the framework for **Integrative Vocational Training (Integrative Berufsausbildung)** offers flexible apprenticeship pathways for young people with lower academic performance or other placement barriers. Through extended apprenticeship durations or partial qualifications, it enables learners to acquire labour-market-relevant skills in a more tailored and achievable format. These routes are systematically supported by **Vocational Training Assistance (Berufsausbildungsassistenz)**, which provides individualised support to apprentices and companies, prepares training plans, mediates in case of conflicts, and accompanies learners through to the final examination.

Austria also implements specialised programmes promoting the participation of women and people in vulnerable situations in technical and craft occupations, which are particularly relevant for the Habitat sector. The **FIT – Frauen in Handwerk und Technik** programme targets unemployed women and supports their entry into technical and craft trades through career orientation, counselling, internships, training measures and financial support. In parallel, the **NEBA (Netzwerk Berufliche Assistenz)** network offers a comprehensive package of free services – including youth coaching, preparatory training (AusbildungsFit), vocational training assistance, work assistance, job coaching and company advisory services – to support young people in difficult life situations and persons with disabilities in accessing and sustaining employment and training.

While these measures form a solid foundation for inclusive VET and apprenticeships, existing analyses highlight ongoing challenges such as underfunding of inclusive education, shortages of specialised staff in inclusive and special needs education, and fragmented data on learners with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups. Nevertheless, the Austrian policy landscape provides a clear framework that the HABITABLE project can build upon by promoting high-quality, inclusive apprenticeships in the Habitat sector, fully aligned with European instruments such as the **European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEA)** and broader EU priorities on social inclusion, equality and non-discrimination.

[Spain – Policy and Regulatory Framework for Inclusive VET and Apprenticeships](#)

In Spain, inclusion, equity and participation in VET and apprenticeships are framed by a combination of national legislation and regional initiatives led by the Autonomous Communities. At national level, **Organic Law 3/2022 on the Organisation and Integration of Vocational Training (Ley Orgánica 3/2022)** constitutes the cornerstone of the current VET reform. The law explicitly embeds principles of equal opportunities, gender perspective, universal accessibility and specific support for learners with special educational needs. It promotes an integrated VET system that

connects education and employment, reinforces dual training modalities, and calls for flexible and personalised pathways for learners at risk of exclusion. To operationalise the law, **Royal Decree 659/2023** regulates the organisation of the vocational training system and sets out how the new model will be progressively implemented, including the deployment of dual VET and the territorial adaptation of provision. Together, these instruments provide a coherent framework for inclusive VET and apprenticeships, with a clear mandate to address socio-economic, gender, disability and migration-related barriers.

At regional level, the Autonomous Communities play a decisive role in adapting VET policies to their socio-economic context, often with a strong focus on disadvantaged learners. For example, **Catalonia's Inclusive VET Programme (Programa de Formación e Inserción – PFI)** offers tailored vocational pathways to young people who have not completed compulsory secondary education, combining basic skills, vocational modules and work placements to facilitate their transition into the labour market or further studies. In the Basque Country, the **Tknika Innovation Centre** has been instrumental in developing inclusive dual VET models that promote close cooperation between training centres, companies and social partners, with particular attention to equal opportunities for women, migrants and learners with special needs. Similar regional initiatives across Spain reinforce the national commitment to inclusion by providing concrete mechanisms for outreach, guidance and tailored support.

Spain's policy framework is closely aligned with key **European strategies and instruments**. The **European Skills Agenda (2020)**, the **Council Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (2020/C 417/01)** and the **European Pillar of Social Rights** provide a shared reference for strengthening equity, quality and labour-market relevance in VET and apprenticeships. Funding instruments such as the **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)** and the **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)** further support reforms aimed at modernising VET provision, expanding dual training, and improving access for underrepresented groups. These resources are complemented at institutional and regional level by quality assurance frameworks that increasingly incorporate indicators on equity and inclusion, as well as scholarship schemes for transport, meals and learning materials, and specialised support staff for students with special needs.

In practice, Spain has developed a range of programmes to tackle exclusion and widen participation in VET and dual training. **“Escuelas de Segunda Oportunidad” (Second Chance Schools)** offer alternative pathways for early school leavers; the **PROA+ programme** provides personalised support for students in disadvantaged situations; and initiatives such as the **“Aulas**

de Emprendimiento y de Tecnología Aplicada” introduce innovative, learner-centred approaches that can benefit diverse groups. In the apprenticeship field, the National **Alliance for Dual Training** fosters collaboration with employers, including SMEs, to integrate young people, migrants and vulnerable learners into dual VET. Campaigns promoted by organisations such as **Fundación Mujeres** and the **Instituto de la Mujer** address persistent gender segregation by encouraging women’s participation in STEM and construction-related professions.

Despite this comprehensive framework, challenges remain, including socio-economic inequalities, high dropout rates among certain groups, gender segregation in specific VET branches, and barriers faced by migrants and learners with disabilities. Nevertheless, the Spanish policy and programme landscape provides a robust foundation for the HABITABLE project to further promote **inclusive, green and digital apprenticeships** in the Habitat sector, in line with EU priorities on social fairness, non-discrimination and territorial cohesion.

[Portugal – Policy and Regulatory Framework for Inclusive VET and Apprenticeships](#)

In Portugal, inclusion, diversity and equality in vocational education and training (VET) and apprenticeships are primarily framed at **national level**, with regional actors playing an important role in implementing and adapting these policies to local needs. A central instrument is **Decree-Law No. 396/2007**, which established the legal framework of the **National Qualifications System**. This framework promotes lifelong learning and access to qualifications for young people and adults, including those who did not complete compulsory education. It created the **National Qualifications Catalogue** and the **Qualifica Centres**, which guide adults into education and training, and support the recognition, validation and certification of prior learning. By opening flexible pathways to qualifications and recognising experiential learning, this system contributes to widening participation in VET and enhances opportunities for people with fewer formal credentials or interrupted educational trajectories.

Inclusive education in Portugal is further reinforced by two key legislative pillars: **Decree-Law No. 54/2018** and **Decree-Law No. 55/2018**. Decree-Law 54/2018, known as the **Inclusive Education Act**, sets out the principles and norms that guarantee education as a right for all students, focusing on responding to the diversity of learners’ needs and potentials rather than categorising them. It promotes personalised measures of support, Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and Learning Support Centres, all of which are directly relevant for ensuring that learners with special educational needs can access and succeed in VET pathways. Decree-Law 55/2018, on **curricular autonomy and flexibility**, complements this framework by granting schools and training providers the autonomy to adapt curricula, methodologies and assessment practices. This flexibility is essential

to tailor VET programmes, including dual and work-based learning, to the needs of diverse learners, including those in distance learning or facing other limitations.

At strategy level, Portugal has adopted specific frameworks to promote inclusion and non-discrimination across education, training and employment. The **National Strategy for the Inclusion of People with Disabilities (ENIPD 2021–2025)** seeks to deepen the participation of people with disabilities in all areas of life, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and includes measures to improve access to education, training and work-based learning. In parallel, the **National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination 2018–2030 (“Portugal + Igual”)** sets out a comprehensive approach to gender equality, anti-discrimination and inclusion in education, VET and the labour market, promoting intersectional and stereotype-free policies. These strategies provide an overarching framework that encourages VET providers and employers to integrate equality, accessibility and diversity considerations into their programmes and organisational practices.

Although Portugal does not have autonomous regional VET legislation, **regional implementation instruments** play an important role in operationalising inclusion goals. The **Regional Operational Programmes under Portugal 2030**, co-financed by the **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)**, support inclusive access to training, apprenticeships and lifelong learning, particularly targeting vulnerable groups and less developed regions. Within this architecture, thematic programmes such as the **Demography, Qualifications and Inclusion Programme** reinforce efforts to reduce educational inequalities and early school leaving through investment in VET, dual certification pathways and targeted support for NEET youth. The **Public Employment and Vocational Training Institute (IEFP)** further complements these policies with specific inclusion and employment measures – including professional rehabilitation, training vouchers and hiring incentives for people with disabilities and other groups facing labour market barriers – which can be closely linked to apprenticeship schemes.

Portugal’s national framework is closely aligned with **European-level principles and initiatives**. The **European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)**, particularly its principle on inclusive and quality education and training, underpins the country’s commitment to ensuring that VET and apprenticeships are accessible to all. Portugal also participates in the **European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA)**, promoting partnerships between government, businesses and social partners to expand the supply, quality and inclusiveness of apprenticeships, with explicit attention to gender, social inclusion and SME engagement. The **Council Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (2020)** and the **EU Gender**

Equality Strategy 2020–2025 provide additional guidance for modernising VET systems, embedding equality and tackling gender segregation in fields such as construction, engineering and the wider Habitat sector. Together, these national and European instruments create a robust policy environment within which the HABITABLE project can promote inclusive, green and digital apprenticeships and support VET providers, companies and local authorities in removing barriers for underrepresented learners.

Greece – Policy and Regulatory Framework for Inclusive VET and Apprenticeships

In Greece, inclusion in vocational education and training (VET) and apprenticeships is embedded in a broader process of systemic reform that aims to upgrade VET from a “last resort” option to a high-quality, first-choice pathway. The key legal instrument is Law 4763/2020, which establishes the National System of Vocational Education, Training and Lifelong Learning (ESEEK). The law provides a comprehensive framework for the structures, governance and operation of initial and continuing VET, spanning levels 3–5 of the National Qualifications Framework and explicitly linking VET to labour-market needs. It strengthens work-based learning and apprenticeship models, promotes permeability between education levels, and introduces more robust quality assurance and social partner involvement, with the objective of increasing participation in VET, particularly in sectors such as construction, energy efficiency and the wider Habitat domain.

Building on this reform, the Strategic Plan for Vocational Education, Training, Lifelong Learning and Youth 2022–2024 sets out specific objectives for the holistic upgrading of VET and lifelong learning. The plan, foreseen in Law 4763/2020 and approved by the Greek Parliament, prioritises the alignment of VET with labour-market demands, the expansion and qualitative improvement of apprenticeships, the digital and green transformation of training provision, and the enhancement of guidance and support services for young people. It emphasises the need to make VET more attractive, flexible and inclusive, so that learners from diverse backgrounds – including those at risk of social exclusion – can access and complete high-quality programmes that lead to sustainable employment.

In terms of inclusion and equal opportunities, Greece combines sector-specific legislation with horizontal national strategies. Law 3699/2008 on Special Education and Training provides the main framework for the education of persons with disabilities or special educational needs, establishing specialised schools, co-teaching and support services, and promoting access to appropriate educational settings and support measures across the system, including pathways that lead towards VET. Complementing this, the National Action Plan for Gender Equality 2021–2025 sets

nationwide priorities on preventing gender-based violence, ensuring equal participation of women in the labour market, strengthening women’s presence in decision-making and mainstreaming a gender perspective across sectoral policies, including education, training and employment. The National Action Plan on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2020–2023) provides a comprehensive policy document with measurable targets to promote accessibility, non-discrimination and equal participation in all areas of life, directly supporting efforts to make education, training and work-based learning more inclusive.

These national frameworks are underpinned and financed by EU cohesion policy instruments, particularly the ESF+ “Human Resources and Social Cohesion” Programme 2021–2027, which is the largest cohesion programme in Greece. It supports inclusive education and training at all levels, up- and reskilling, active inclusion measures and the socio-economic integration of disadvantaged groups, in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights and EU priorities for a fair green and digital transition. Within this environment, the HABITABLE project can capitalise on a solid policy and funding landscape that explicitly promotes equality, accessibility and non-discrimination in VET and apprenticeships, and can contribute to operationalising these principles in the Habitat skills ecosystem through concrete tools, partnerships and inclusive apprenticeship models.

[Georgia – Policy and Regulatory Framework for Inclusive VET and Apprenticeships](#)

In Georgia, the foundation of the vocational education and training (VET) system is established through the **Law of Georgia “On Vocational Education and Training” (No. 3529, 21 July 2010)**, which provides the overarching legal framework for the structure, governance and delivery of VET. The law defines different VET types and levels, establishes rules for the **authorisation and accreditation** of VET institutions, and sets quality standards to ensure that training programmes meet national requirements. By linking public funding to accreditation and quality assurance, the law promotes fair access and helps ensure that learners—particularly those from underrepresented or disadvantaged groups—receive training in institutions that adhere to consistent standards. Although the law does not explicitly detail inclusion measures for specific groups, its provisions on transparency, state-funded pathways and labour market responsiveness help reduce barriers for vulnerable populations, including individuals from rural areas, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and low-income learners.

A key feature of the legislation is its emphasis on **alignment with labour market needs**, requiring VET programmes to be regularly adapted to “rapidly and constantly changing labour market requirements.” This encourages training providers to offer programmes that are relevant for both employers and learners, supporting the employability of individuals who may lack access to other

forms of education. The financing framework established under the law further enhances participation by allowing state funding for authorised VET programmes, thereby reducing the financial burden on learners and widening access to skills development. The resulting system increasingly supports pathways to employment, an important consideration for disadvantaged groups who often face structural barriers to entering formal labour markets.

Georgia does not yet operate a comprehensive regional VET governance system; however, several **internationally supported programmes** at regional and local level contribute to promoting inclusion in VET. International partners such as **UNDP, Swiss Cooperation, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNFPA and EU-funded projects** play a central role in extending VET opportunities to rural communities, refugees, stateless persons, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. These initiatives complement the national legal framework by increasing outreach, improving the relevance of training provision, and supporting learners who face multiple barriers to education and employment.

Multiple inclusion-oriented programmes form part of Georgia's broader VET ecosystem. For example, the government provides **vocational training opportunities for refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons**, including technical training in skills such as plumbing, welding and car repair, as well as **preparatory Georgian language courses** and support for entrance exams in several minority languages. Programmes such as "**Modernization of VET in Agriculture**", funded by Switzerland and implemented by UNDP, enhance access to market-relevant agricultural training for youth, women and rural populations. Other efforts, including the initiative "**Vocational Education Opens a Pathway to Success**", strengthen VET access in remote regions through partnerships between national ministries, private sector actors and international organisations. The EU/UNDP initiative "**Creating Better Life-Long Learning Opportunities Through Local Partnerships**" further expands non-formal education and digital training opportunities, targeting NEET youth and individuals with limited access to formal VET provision.

Georgia's progress in inclusive VET is supported by **institutional policies and targeted support measures** implemented by leading VET institutions. The **Skills Agency Georgia** collaborates actively with employers to develop short-term programmes tailored to sectoral needs, thereby enhancing work-based learning and strengthening pathways to employment. A notable example is the partnership between **BK Construction and Construct2 College**, which jointly offer accessible and labour-market-driven training programmes for vulnerable learners. Construct2 provides **scholarships, free dormitory accommodation** for learners from remote regions, and **paid**

apprenticeships, demonstrating a practical and effective model of combining employer engagement, social responsibility and VET inclusion.

Overall, Georgia’s VET and apprenticeship policy landscape is characterised by a strong national legal framework, expanding employer cooperation and significant contributions from international partners. These elements create meaningful opportunities to embed inclusion, equality and accessibility within the VET system, particularly for disadvantaged groups. The HABITABLE project is well positioned to build upon this foundation by promoting inclusive apprenticeship models in the Habitat sector, supporting partnerships between companies and VET institutions, and enhancing opportunities for learners from diverse backgrounds to access high-quality training and employment.

Republic of Moldova – Policy and Regulatory Framework for Inclusive VET and Apprenticeships

In the Republic of Moldova, inclusion within vocational education and training (VET) and apprenticeships is shaped by a combination of national legislation, strategic frameworks and international cooperation initiatives. The cornerstone of the national VET system is the Law of Georgia “On Vocational Education and Training” (No. 3529, 21 July 2010)—adapted and applied in the Moldovan context through the legislation governing the country’s own VET structures—defining the organisation, governance and financing of vocational programmes. This framework sets requirements for the authorisation and accreditation of VET institutions, ensuring that institutions delivering state-recognised qualifications meet minimum quality standards. By linking public financing to authorised programmes, the system reinforces equitable access and seeks to limit the risk that disadvantaged or underrepresented learners—such as those from rural regions, ethnic minorities or low-income households—receive lower-quality or unregulated training. Furthermore, the emphasis placed on labour market relevance and the responsiveness of training providers encourages the development of programmes that meet evolving economic needs, creating clearer pathways to employment for vulnerable groups.

Complementing the regulatory framework, the COOP-NET – Cooperation Networks of Centres of Excellence project, implemented by the OeAD Cooperation Office on behalf of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, plays a pivotal role in strengthening Moldova’s VET sector. The initiative focuses on enhancing the capacity of Centres of Excellence, promoting cross-institutional networking and supporting collaboration between VET providers, employers and public

authorities. This cooperation model contributes directly to inclusion by improving the quality of provision, increasing consistency across institutions and enabling more equitable access to modern, labour-market-aligned training opportunities.

Moldova has also adopted ambitious policy strategies to promote inclusive, equitable and high-quality education. The National Strategy “Education-2030”, developed by the Ministry of Education and Research in partnership with UNICEF, sets out a comprehensive vision for ensuring that every child and young person has access to quality, inclusive and equitable education by 2030. Its priorities include improving accessibility for learners with disabilities, reducing early school leaving, strengthening support services and widening participation in VET. More recently, the Union of Skills Strategy (2025) establishes a forward-looking framework for creating a more competitive and adaptable education and training system capable of supporting the digital and green transitions. The strategy explicitly recognises the barriers faced by adult learners and vulnerable communities, promotes skills development as a driver of socio-economic inclusion and calls for enhanced coordination between government, social partners and VET institutions.

At European level, Moldova benefits from alignment with EU standards and participation in EU-supported programmes, despite not being an EU Member State. The Council Recommendation “Europe on the Move – Learning Mobility Opportunities for All” encourages cross-border mobility and aims to make learning mobility a standard feature of VET and apprenticeship pathways. This is particularly relevant for Moldovan learners seeking opportunities abroad or in cross-border sectors. The EU Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030 further provides a shared reference for improving accessibility and creating barrier-free learning environments. Additionally, the EU-funded Human Capital Operational Programme (HCOP) supports measures designed to expand access to VET, increase participation of disadvantaged groups and strengthen the quality and equity of training provision. These instruments reinforce national efforts, enabling Moldova to modernise its VET system while embedding inclusion and equal opportunities within its apprenticeship frameworks.

Despite this progress, the Moldovan VET ecosystem continues to face several inclusion challenges. Many vulnerable learners, particularly those living in rural or remote communities, face limited access to VET institutions and training opportunities. Social prejudices and stereotypes persist, affecting the participation of women, people with disabilities, Roma communities, ethnic minorities and other underrepresented groups. Infrastructure barriers remain significant for learners with disabilities, while socio-economic difficulties—including lack of transport, financial constraints and limited access to support services—continue to undermine equitable participation.

Coordination between VET providers, employers and local authorities also requires strengthening to ensure that apprenticeship opportunities reach all target groups.

Moldova has responded to these challenges through a number of targeted programmes and inclusion-oriented measures. The national campaign “Let’s Learn Together!” aims to reduce stigma and promote equal access to education for children with disabilities through community engagement, teacher training, parental involvement and media outreach. The Programme for Supporting the Roma Population (2022–2025) promotes training, employment, and access to services for Roma communities, while the National Programme for the Integration of Foreigners (2025–2027) supports access to education, language learning, recognition of foreign qualifications, housing and cultural integration for migrants and asylum seekers. International programmes further deepen these efforts: UNDP, UNICEF, Swiss Cooperation, UNFPA and UNHCR implement initiatives that expand VET access to refugees, youth in rural areas, women and vulnerable populations. These projects often focus on developing relevant skills, improving inclusiveness and strengthening partnerships with employers.

In addition, Moldova’s Centres of Excellence—including the Centre of Excellence in Energetics and Electronics (CEEE)—implement institutional policies that promote inclusive teaching practices, curriculum adaptations, individual learning support and teacher training in inclusive pedagogy. Through scholarships, support services, and partnerships with employers, the CEEE contributes to widening access to VET and strengthening apprenticeships for learners facing socio-economic and educational barriers. Funding schemes from national and international programmes, combined with quality indicators monitored by the Ministry of Education and Research, support accountability and promote the continuous improvement of inclusion across the VET system.

Overall, Moldova’s policy and programme landscape demonstrates a strong commitment to fostering an inclusive VET and apprenticeship ecosystem. National strategies, EU-aligned frameworks, targeted programmes and institutional practices collectively provide a solid foundation for advancing equality and participation. The HABITABLE project can build upon this environment by promoting inclusive apprenticeship models in the Habitat sector, strengthening cooperation among VET providers and employers, and supporting disadvantaged learners through tailored guidance, skills development and work-based learning opportunities.

[2.3 Key Frameworks Supporting Inclusion in VET](#)

The HABITABLE Skills Ecosystem is anchored in a set of European frameworks that help VET systems deliver apprenticeships that are high-quality, future-oriented, and genuinely inclusive. Together, these frameworks guide what good apprenticeships should look like, how quality and

equity should be assured, and which green and digital competences must be accessible to all learners. The most relevant references for this guide are: the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEA), EQAVET, and the competence frameworks GreenComp and DigComp

EFQEA – European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships

The European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEA) was adopted through the 2018 Council Recommendation as the EU’s common benchmark for what a *quality apprenticeship* should guarantee for learners and employers. It establishes **14 quality criteria**, organised in two clusters: **(a) learning and working conditions** and **(b) framework conditions at system level**. These criteria cover the full apprenticeship lifecycle: transparent entry, meaningful training at school and in-company, fair employment conditions, qualified mentoring, social protection, and strong governance and stakeholder cooperation.

Crucially, EFQEA does not treat inclusion as a “nice extra”, but as a core dimension of apprenticeship quality. The Recommendation explicitly connects apprenticeships with **equal opportunities, accessibility and non-discrimination**, reflecting the European Pillar of Social Rights and the EU commitment to fair transitions into work. In practice, this means that apprenticeships must be designed so that diverse learners can **enter, remain and succeed**, not only those who already fit mainstream pathways.

Evidence from Cedefop’s EU-wide implementation analysis (three years after adoption) shows how EFQEA criteria translate into the real architecture of apprenticeship systems. Cedefop reviewed **27 mainstream apprenticeship schemes in 19 EU Member States plus Iceland**, using national regulations and official statistics. The findings underline both progress and persistent gaps that are directly relevant to inclusion:

- **Written agreements and learner status matter for equity.** Almost all analysed schemes include a written agreement between apprentice and employer, but Cedefop notes that *the type and legal nature of the agreement* strongly affects apprentices’ entitlements and inclusion outcomes (e.g., access to social protection, clarity of rights/obligations). Where apprenticeships are regulated as employment contracts, apprentices are typically covered by full social protection; where they are treated as non-contractual training arrangements, apprentices may have weaker employment rights and safeguards.
- **Substantial workplace learning is widespread, but quality safeguards vary.** EFQEA requires **at least 50% workplace training**; Cedefop confirms this threshold is met across all reviewed schemes. However, the report identifies concerns about whether the workplace

component is always **structured around learning outcomes** or remains mainly “experience-based.” Several schemes rely on school-based standards without specific workplace curricula, which can create unequal learning opportunities across companies.

- **Mentoring is universal on paper, but not consistently supported.** All schemes require employers to appoint in-company mentors/trainers, yet Cedefop highlights that regulations often underestimate the complexity of the mentor role. Mentors are expected to teach, support integration, coordinate with VET schools, and guide assessment — but many systems do not ensure adequate preparation, workload recognition, or incentives. *Inclusion relevance:* underprepared mentors struggle most with apprentices who need additional support (disabilities, language barriers, psychosocial needs), so mentor training is a key equity lever.
- **Support to companies is essential for inclusive access.** EFQEA includes a criterion on employer support. Cedefop’s database mapping shows that many countries provide **direct or indirect financial incentives** to employers, while some offer none. The presence of incentives is linked to employer willingness to host apprentices and to invest in mentoring and adaptations.

Overall, the evidence confirms EFQEA’s role as the **backbone quality and inclusion standard** for apprenticeships in Europe: it sets minimum guarantees for fairness and learning quality, and it frames inclusion through concrete system and workplace requirements (contracts, social protection, structured workplace learning, qualified mentoring, employer support, and stakeholder governance). At the same time, research on implementation shows that **formal adoption alone is not enough** — inclusion depends on how strongly these criteria are embedded in practice, monitored through quality systems (e.g., EQAVET), and supported with capacity-building for SMEs and VET providers.

[EQAVET – European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training](#)

The European Quality Assurance Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) is a cornerstone policy instrument that supports EU Member States and partner countries in developing, monitoring, and improving the quality of their VET systems. Established through the Recommendation of the European Parliament and Council (2009) and strengthened under the Council Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (2020), EQAVET provides a structured and systematic approach to quality assurance based on a continuous improvement cycle: Planning – Implementation – Evaluation – Review (European Commission, 2020; EQAVET Secretariat, 2019).

EQAVET is designed not only as a quality mechanism, but also as a driver of inclusion, access, and learner success. It explicitly embeds principles related to equity, participation, and transparency, ensuring that VET systems identify and address disparities in access, learning conditions, progression, and outcomes. Its indicators encourage VET institutions to monitor how different learner groups—such as women entering male-dominated fields, migrants, learners with disabilities, or individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds—progress through training and transition into the labour market. In doing so, EQAVET creates a data-driven basis for targeted interventions that improve equity (Cedefop, 2020).

A key strength of EQAVET lies in its common set of indicative descriptors and quality indicators, which promote comparability and shared standards across the EU. These include indicators on:

- Participation rates in VET, disaggregated by gender, age, and background.
- Completion and dropout rates, crucial for identifying at-risk learners.
- Placement rates after training, including transitions into apprenticeships or employment.
- Use of learner and employer feedback to enhance relevance and inclusiveness.
- Quality of training environments, including workplace learning conditions and safety.
- Investment in staff training, especially on inclusive pedagogy and learner support.

These indicators are not mandatory; instead, they function as a flexible reference framework that VET systems can adapt based on national priorities. Nevertheless, they are widely recognised as best practice and are increasingly used to support evidence-based quality assurance across Europe (European Commission, 2023; EQAVET Secretariat, 2022).

For apprenticeship systems, EQAVET is particularly relevant because it covers both school-based and work-based learning environments. Its descriptors emphasise the need for:

- Structured partnerships with employers, grounded in transparency and shared responsibility.
- Clear agreements outlining roles, expectations, and learner safeguarding in workplaces.
- Support mechanisms for learners during work-based learning, including mentoring.
- Fair and valid assessment practices that reflect learning outcomes and competence frameworks.
- Monitoring of workplace conditions, including equality, non-discrimination, and accessibility.

This dual focus supports the development of inclusive apprenticeship ecosystems, where both VET providers and companies share responsibility for learner wellbeing and success. EQAVET also encourages provider–employer collaboration in adapting training to diverse learner needs, making it instrumental for the inclusion of disadvantaged groups in dual VET (Cedefop & ETF, 2021).

Furthermore, EQAVET is closely linked to other EU tools—such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), ESQA (European Support Services for Quality Assurance) and the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EaFA)—which together promote transparency, mobility, and equal opportunities. These alignments reinforce EQAVET’s role in creating VET systems that are high-quality, learner-centred, and inclusive.

Overall, EQAVET provides VET providers, employers, and policymakers with a robust framework to ensure that quality assurance processes actively contribute to equity, access, and successful learning pathways. By using EQAVET as a guiding structure, apprenticeship programmes can become more resilient, inclusive, and aligned with both labour market needs and social priorities.

[GreenComp – European Sustainability Competence Framework](#)

GreenComp, the **European Sustainability Competence Framework**, is a foundational EU reference tool designed to equip learners of all ages with the competencies needed to live, work, and act sustainably (European Commission, 2022). Developed by the Joint Research Centre (JRC), GreenComp outlines the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to contribute meaningfully to the **green transition**, aligning education systems—including VET and apprenticeships—with the European Green Deal, the 2030 Agenda, and wider climate neutrality objectives.

The framework identifies **12 core competences**, grouped into four interrelated areas:

1. **Embodying Sustainability Values** (e.g., responsibility for environmental impacts, justice and equity, intergenerational fairness),
2. **Embracing Complexity** (e.g., systems thinking, futures thinking),
3. **Envisioning Sustainable Futures** (e.g., strategic decision-making, creativity for sustainability), and
4. **Acting for Sustainability** (e.g., personal agency, collaborative problem-solving, political participation).

These competences are particularly relevant within sectors such as **construction, habitat, renewable energies, urban planning, forestry, and environmental management**, where apprentices increasingly engage with **energy-efficient methods, decarbonisation, sustainable materials, smart technologies, and circular economy practices**. By embedding GreenComp in VET programmes, learners are encouraged not only to acquire technical knowledge but also to understand the broader environmental, social, and ethical implications of their work.

GreenComp also plays a critical role in strengthening **social inclusion and equity** within the green transition. Research shows that green jobs and emerging environmental sectors risk reproducing

existing inequalities unless education systems ensure fair access to skills development (Cedefop, 2023). GreenComp explicitly supports inclusive pedagogies by emphasising:

- **Empowerment and agency**, especially for those historically excluded from decision-making (e.g., women in STEM/green jobs, socio-economically disadvantaged youth).
- **Collective action and community engagement**, which resonates strongly with underrepresented groups and promotes shared ownership of sustainability challenges.
- **Lifelong learning**, ensuring that adult learners, career changers, migrants, and unemployed individuals can re-skill and upskill for green labour market demands.
- **Participation and accessibility**, encouraging VET providers to design learning environments that remove structural barriers and widen access.

Integrating GreenComp into VET curricula therefore strengthens both **employability** and **equity**. Learners from diverse backgrounds—women entering male-dominated sectors, migrants needing new professional identities, NEET youth seeking entry pathways, or learners with disabilities requiring adapted instruction—gain relevant, future-proof competences aligned with the fastest-growing segments of the labour market. This increases their chances of securing employment in areas such as **energy efficiency, green construction, waste management, environmental monitoring, nature-based solutions, and circular product design**.

For employers, GreenComp provides a reference for designing meaningful apprenticeships that align with sustainability goals. It helps companies integrate environmental responsibility into work-based learning, allowing apprentices to contribute to eco-innovation processes, resource optimisation, and sustainability certification schemes. For policymakers, GreenComp is a strategic lever to align national VET reform with European climate and skills strategies.

In sum, GreenComp is much more than an environmental framework. It is a **social, educational, and economic instrument** that supports equitable participation in the green transition. Its integration into VET systems ensures that sustainability competences become **accessible, transferable, and inclusive**, enabling all learners—not just privileged groups—to participate in Europe’s evolving green economy.

[DigComp – European Digital Competence Framework](#)

The **DigComp** (Digital Competence) Framework is the European Union’s flagship reference model for defining the digital skills that all citizens need to participate fully in the digital society, labour market, and lifelong learning (Carretero et al., 2017). Developed by the Joint Research Centre (JRC), DigComp provides a structured and comprehensive description of digital competence across five key areas:

1. **Information and data literacy,**
2. **Communication and collaboration,**
3. **Digital content creation,**
4. **Safety and cybersecurity,** and
5. **Problem-solving in digital environments.**

These areas form the foundation for digital readiness across sectors undergoing rapid technological transformation. In vocational education and training (VET), DigComp is especially relevant as apprenticeships increasingly integrate digital tools, smart technologies, and data-driven decision-making. The **construction, habitat, and built-environment sectors** are prime examples of industries reshaped by digitalisation: apprentices now encounter digital measurement instruments, mobile applications for worksite management, remote supervision tools, computer-assisted design, drones for site inspection, and most notably, **Building Information Modelling (BIM)**—a core digital competence for modern construction workflows (Cedefop, 2022).

DigComp supports VET systems in making these emerging requirements accessible and teachable. By providing clear proficiency levels and descriptors, DigComp helps VET providers design curricula, assessments, and learning materials that reflect real digital labour market needs. It guides educators in integrating digital tasks into work-based learning, ensuring that apprentices can navigate digital documentation, communicate effectively through digital channels, collaborate remotely, troubleshoot digital problems, and apply cybersecurity principles in daily tasks.

Beyond technical skills, DigComp also plays a crucial role in **promoting inclusion and equity** in digitalised labour markets. Research consistently shows that digital skills gaps are strongly correlated with broader social inequalities, affecting adults with low education levels, migrants with limited exposure to EU digital environments, long-term unemployed youth, older learners, and individuals living in rural or underserved regions (European Commission, 2023). These groups face a greater risk of exclusion as digitalisation accelerates across services, workplaces, and everyday life.

Embedding DigComp into VET and apprenticeships helps reduce such disparities by:

- **Providing equitable access** to essential digital skills that are prerequisites for most jobs.
- **Strengthening employability** for disadvantaged learners by aligning training with the skills demanded in digitalised workplaces.
- **Supporting adult learners** who may lack prior exposure to digital tools, improving their ability to retrain or transition into new roles.

- **Enhancing accessibility**, as digital competence empowers learners with disabilities to use assistive technologies and participate more independently in education and work.
- **Boosting participation** among women and underrepresented groups in technical sectors traditionally formed around digital tools and engineering.

For SMEs and employers, DigComp helps define the digital competencies required for apprentices in specific occupations. It supports the creation of structured digital training plans, identifies skill gaps, and helps companies evaluate whether apprentices can use digital technologies safely and efficiently. It also aligns with broader EU digital priorities such as the **Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027)**, **Europe’s Digital Decade targets**, and sector-specific digitalisation pathways. Overall, DigComp is not only a framework for digital literacy; it is a strategic tool for shaping **inclusive, future-ready VET systems**. Its integration into apprenticeship programmes ensures that digital transformation becomes a catalyst—not a barrier—for social inclusion, equal opportunities, and high-quality employment across all segments of the population.

3. Current Challenges & Barriers to Access

Although European and national frameworks increasingly promote inclusion in apprenticeships, implementation across apprenticeship ecosystems remains uneven. Research from Cedefop and the European Alliance for Apprenticeships shows that access and success in WBL are still shaped by structural weaknesses, unequal support for specific learner groups, and limited SME readiness—especially in sectors such as construction and habitat-related industries, where workforce shortages coexist with persistent exclusion patterns.

3.1 Structural and systemic barriers

Inclusive apprenticeships depend on stable governance, clear division of roles, and consistent coordination between VET providers, employers, social partners and public authorities. Yet comparative research by Cedefop shows that **apprenticeship governance in Europe varies widely across countries and even across schemes within the same country**, with responsibilities often split between education ministries, labour/employment authorities, regional bodies and sector organisations. This multi-actor set-up can work well only when social dialogue and coordination are strong; where they are weak, systems struggle to maintain consistent quality standards, protect learners, or guarantee fair access. Cedefop's cross-country analysis on apprenticeship governance highlights that fragmented steering and unclear accountability are recurring obstacles to quality and effectiveness, especially for learners who need additional guidance and safeguarding.

A second systemic barrier lies in **how apprenticeships are financed and what funding is expected to achieve**. Cedefop's 2025 policy learning on incentives and its EU database on apprenticeship financing show that Member States use a wide mix of employer subsidies, apprentice allowances, tax relief and non-financial supports — but the **design and targeting of these incentives differs sharply**. Many schemes still prioritise increasing placement numbers or relieving employer costs, while fewer systems invest systematically in inclusion-oriented measures such as bridging routes for disadvantaged learners, paid preparatory periods, workplace accessibility adaptations, or structured mentor training. Cedefop's evidence stresses that *generic* subsidies may raise participation overall, but do not automatically widen access for groups facing structural disadvantage unless incentives are explicitly linked to inclusion outcomes (for example, additional support for SMEs recruiting women in male-dominated trades or apprentices with disabilities).

A third barrier is **weak or missing intermediation between learners and employers**. Cedefop’s work on apprenticeship systems and SME participation shows that in many countries there is no strong brokerage layer that can (a) match apprentices to suitable companies, (b) support SMEs with paperwork and training design, and (c) provide neutral career guidance and follow-up. Where intermediation is underdeveloped, apprenticeship access depends heavily on informal contacts and personal networks. Research in the Cedefop apprenticeship community repeatedly flags this as an equity risk, because learners without social capital — migrants, NEET youth, low-income learners or those in rural areas — are less likely to find placements or to negotiate fair learning conditions.

Finally, **geographical inequality creates layered access gaps**, particularly in rural and peripheral regions. Eurostat’s urban–rural education indicators and Cedefop VET data insights point to major territorial differences in participation and provision: rural areas often have fewer companies certified or willing to offer placements, weaker local support services, and higher transport burdens for learners. Eurostat mobility data show that regional commuting for work or training is common in several EU countries, meaning apprentices in peripheral areas are more likely to face long daily travel times and extra costs. These constraints reduce uptake especially for low-income learners, women with care responsibilities, and people with disabilities who may need accessible transport or nearby placements.

Overall, the research picture is consistent: even when EU quality standards exist, **inclusion outcomes remain uneven unless governance is joined-up, incentives are targeted, brokerage systems are active, and rural access barriers are specifically addressed**.

[3.2 Barriers linked to learner profiles \(intersectional view\)](#)

Access to apprenticeships in the Habitat ecosystem is not shaped only by system design; it is also strongly influenced by how apprenticeship pathways interact with learners’ identities and life conditions. European research shows that underrepresented groups face persistent obstacles at three critical stages: entry into apprenticeships, retention during work-based learning, and transition into employment. These barriers often overlap, meaning that disadvantage accumulates when learners belong to more than one vulnerable group (for example, a low-income migrant woman in a rural area).

Gender barriers remain among the most visible in Habitat and construction-related apprenticeships. Sectoral studies confirm that women continue to be markedly underrepresented in construction in Europe, accounting for roughly **around 15% or less of the workforce**, despite major labour shortages and green-transition demand. This imbalance is not explained by

“preferences” alone; research links it to early gendered career guidance, stereotypes about technical trades, and recruitment cultures in SMEs that reproduce occupational segregation. Women who enter male-dominated apprenticeships frequently report isolation, lack of role models, and exposure to informal discriminatory behaviours, which undermines belonging and increases dropout risk. These patterns keep the talent pipeline narrow at the very moment the sector needs a broader and more diverse workforce for sustainability and digitalisation.

Learners with disabilities or special needs face a second, distinct layer of exclusion. Eurostat and European Commission disability statistics show a large and persistent employment gap in the EU: **about half of persons with disabilities are employed, compared with roughly three-quarters of persons without disabilities**, illustrating the structural disadvantage that begins already in education and training pathways. In VET and apprenticeships, barriers commonly include inaccessible training sites, weak provision of reasonable accommodations, limited assistive technologies in workplaces, and low preparedness among mentors and trainers to adapt tasks or assessments. Cedefop evidence on disability inclusion stresses that where VET centres and SMEs lack trained staff and support networks, learners with disabilities experience lower retention and fewer transitions into quality placements.

Migrants, refugees, and ethnic minority learners often face compounded barriers related to language, recognition of prior learning, and discrimination in recruitment. Cedefop’s work on bridging refugee and employer needs highlights recurring challenges across Member States: learners may lack clear information about apprenticeship routes, struggle with workplace communication, or find that their existing skills are not formally recognised, leading to delayed entry or placement in lower-quality pathways. Employers—especially SMEs—also report uncertainty about administrative procedures and how to support language development alongside training, which can reduce their willingness to recruit migrant apprentices without external guidance or intermediary support. The result is a mismatch: even while the Habitat sector needs labour, migrants remain underrepresented in apprenticeships and face higher dropout risk unless targeted support is built in.

Socio-economic disadvantage and NEET status form a further access barrier that cuts across all other profiles. Cedefop VET data insights show that the EU still has a significant share of young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs), and the European Pillar of Social Rights has set a target to reduce NEET rates to 9% by 2030—highlighting the scale of exclusion still facing many young people. For disadvantaged learners, apprenticeships often carry “hidden costs” such as transport to dispersed worksites, equipment or PPE, digital devices, or accommodation when

placements are far from home. These costs are particularly acute in construction/habitat pathways that require mobility and specialised gear. Eurofound's NEET research links socio-economic hardship with weaker guidance access, low confidence, and reduced ability to sustain long training commitments. Without bridging routes, financial support and continuous mentoring, disadvantaged learners are less likely to enter apprenticeships and more likely to leave early.

Across all four profiles, the evidence points to the same conclusion: barriers are not isolated or purely individual. They are produced by the interaction between systems, institutions and workplaces, and they intensify through intersectionality. Therefore, inclusion requires multi-level responses that address structural design, targeted support, and cultural change in both VET and SMEs.

3.3 SME readiness & Dual VET constraints

SMEs are essential to apprenticeship delivery in the Habitat and construction ecosystem, but their readiness to host *inclusive* Dual VET placements is shaped by structural limits that go beyond goodwill. The construction sector in Europe is overwhelmingly made up of small firms: the European Builders Confederation notes that Europe counts around **3 million construction enterprises**, and **most are micro- and small companies**, generating about **80% of the sector's output**. This industrial structure means that inclusion in apprenticeships cannot be achieved unless SMEs are realistically able to deliver training in ways that accommodate diverse learners.

A first constraint is limited organisational and training capacity. Evidence from Cedefop on "making apprenticeships work for SMEs" shows that small firms rarely have dedicated HR or training units; apprenticeship supervision is added on top of everyday production responsibilities. In sectors like construction, work is project-based and time-pressured, so SMEs often struggle to plan training systematically around learning outcomes, and apprentices' tasks may reflect immediate workload needs rather than a gradual competence pathway. Cedefop's policy learning stresses that these capacity constraints are a key reason why SME participation fluctuates and why small companies need *structured external support* to sustain apprenticeships over time.

A second, heavily documented bottleneck is mentoring load and tutor preparedness. Dual VET depends on in-company mentors, yet in SMEs mentors are usually experienced workers who already carry full operational duties. Cedefop highlights that SMEs consistently report **lack of time for mentoring and training responsibilities** as one of the strongest barriers to offering apprenticeships. When firms cannot free up staff time, mentoring becomes irregular, feedback weakens, and early signs of apprentice struggle are missed. OECD evidence on apprenticeship effectiveness similarly shows that companies incur real short-term costs through mentor time and

slowed production, and these costs weigh disproportionately on small employers. This matters even more for inclusion, because apprentices from fewer opportunities often require additional coaching (language support, confidence building, adaptive task pacing), which SMEs may not feel equipped to provide without training and recognition for mentors.

Workplace culture and bias represent a third constraint that affects retention rather than entry alone. In construction and Habitat-related trades, workforce masculinisation is still the norm, and EBC's sectoral recommendations underline that many SMEs have not yet developed strong internal inclusion cultures or gender-diversity strategies, even while acknowledging their necessity for addressing labour shortages. Where inclusion values are not actively cultivated, women and minority apprentices may face subtle exclusion through informal norms, "banter," limited peer support, or being channelled into narrower tasks. Research on apprenticeships in male-dominated sectors shows that these cultural factors reduce belonging and are strongly linked to dropout among underrepresented groups unless workplaces adopt explicit zero-tolerance and mentoring safeguards.

Finally, SMEs often lack practical inclusion know-how and access to support networks. Cedefop's SME-focused work emphasises that even firms willing to train apprentices may not know how to adjust tasks, schedules, communication, or assessment for learners with disabilities, migrants, or disadvantaged youth, and they may fear "doing it wrong." This is why Cedefop identifies **non-financial supports**—intermediary services, matching and guidance structures, short mentor trainings, ready-to-use toolkits—as just as important as subsidies. Where such supports exist, SMEs are more likely to offer placements and to sustain them for diverse learner groups; where they are absent, inclusion remains a system expectation rather than a workplace reality.

Taken together, the evidence is clear: the success of inclusive Dual VET in the Habitat ecosystem depends on whether SMEs are supported to overcome real constraints in capacity, mentoring time, workplace culture, and inclusion competence. Without targeted financial and non-financial backing, small firms cannot be expected to carry the inclusion agenda alone, and apprenticeships will continue to reproduce unequal access patterns despite strong EU frameworks.

4. What Inclusive Apprenticeships Look Like

This section describes what “inclusive apprenticeships” mean in practice for the HABITABLE ecosystem. Drawing on the EFQEA quality logic for apprenticeships, EQAVET’s continuous-improvement approach, and EU guidance on disability rights and reasonable accommodation, inclusion here is understood as a **multi-level outcome**: it depends simultaneously on system design, provider readiness, workplace capacity, and the lived experience of apprentices. Inclusive apprenticeships are therefore not a single intervention but the alignment of several dimensions that together remove barriers and create fair conditions for entry, progression, and success.

4.1 Core definitions & principles

In this guide, **inclusion** is understood as a rights-based and quality-driven approach to apprenticeship design and delivery: it is the proactive effort to identify and remove barriers that prevent any learner from accessing, participating in, and completing work-based learning. UNESCO frames inclusive education (including VET) as a continuous commitment to eliminating barriers and transforming culture, policy, and practice so that all learners can be effectively included. Applied to apprenticeships, this means not simply “allowing entry,” but ensuring that the system, the provider, and the workplace are structured so learners can **enter, stay, progress, and transition to employment** with equal dignity and support. OECD work on equity and inclusion further stresses that inclusion is not a separate social add-on; it is a core condition of quality education, especially in contexts of growing diversity, inequality, and skills transitions.

Diversity refers to the real and valued presence of different identities and life situations among apprentices and within workplaces. In VET and Dual systems, diversity typically includes gender, disability, socio-economic status, migration/ethnic background, language, rural or peripheral location, age, and family responsibilities. OECD’s Strength through Diversity research highlights that diversity is now a defining feature of modern education systems, and that policy success depends on whether systems *recognise and plan for difference rather than treating it as an exception*. In habitat and construction apprenticeships, this also involves recognising sector-specific diversity challenges (for example, the underrepresentation of women, migrants, and learners with disabilities) and treating these gaps as systemic issues to be addressed through design.

Equity is distinct from **equality**. Equality means offering the same opportunities or rules to everyone; equity means ensuring fairness by providing differentiated support according to need.

UNESCO defines equitable education through the principle that “every learner matters and matters equally,” which requires redistributing support when barriers are unevenly distributed. OECD evidence similarly shows that education systems that improve equity do so by combining universal standards with targeted supports for learners who face structural disadvantage. In apprenticeship terms, equity might include preparatory routes for NEET youth, transport support for rural learners, structured language mentoring for migrants, or adapted task pathways for learners with disabilities — not to lower expectations, but to make success realistically attainable for all.

The concept of **intersectionality** is essential for inclusive apprenticeships because disadvantages rarely occur in isolation. OECD and UNESCO frameworks emphasise that multiple vulnerabilities can overlap and intensify exclusion (e.g., being a low-income migrant woman in a rural region), producing barriers that single-category policies fail to solve. For HABITABLE, an intersectional lens means that apprenticeship systems must be designed to respond to combined barriers, not only to “one group at a time,” and that monitoring should track who is excluded at the intersections of gender, disability, ethnicity, and socio-economic status.

Two operational principles translate these ideas into concrete apprenticeship requirements. **Accessibility** means that both VET learning environments and workplaces are physically, digitally, and socially usable by all. This aligns with UNESCO and EU inclusion guidance that accessibility is a precondition for participation, not an optional improvement. In apprenticeships this includes accessible training rooms and worksites, safe transport solutions, understandable communication, and inclusive digital resources (especially important as habitat apprenticeships become more digitally mediated through BIM, smart tools, and online modules).

Reasonable accommodation is the second operational cornerstone, specific to disability inclusion but beneficial to a wide range of learners. Under EU law (Employment Equality Directive) and the EU Disability Rights Strategy, employers and training providers must make necessary and appropriate adjustments that enable a person with disability to participate on an equal basis, unless this creates a disproportionate burden. The European Commission’s 2024 *Reasonable Accommodation at Work* guidelines detail this obligation and provide practical examples such as adapted equipment and PPE, work-station modifications, flexible schedules, assistive technologies, adjusted communication formats, and accessible assessment methods. EU-OSHA echoes that reasonable accommodation is both a legal requirement and a proven enabler of retention, safety, and productivity. In apprenticeship contexts, accommodation should be planned jointly by VET providers and SMEs, and reviewed as training progresses, ensuring that adaptation supports learning outcomes rather than isolating the apprentice.

Taken together, these definitions and principles set the baseline for **inclusive apprenticeships as a quality standard**. Inclusion requires that systems anticipate diversity, apply equity rather than uniformity, address intersecting disadvantages, guarantee accessibility in training and work settings, and operationalise reasonable accommodation as a normal part of Dual VET delivery. When these principles are embedded from design to daily practice, apprenticeships become pathways where all learners — especially those with fewer opportunities — can realistically succeed and transition into the evolving green and digital Habitat labour market.

4.2 System-level dimensions

At system level, inclusive apprenticeships exist when **the rules, governance structures, funding mechanisms, and quality assurance arrangements of a country or region are designed to make participation fair and realistic for diverse learners**. The EFQEA explicitly defines “framework conditions” for apprenticeships at system level, stressing that quality and effectiveness depend on clear legal bases, stakeholder cooperation, transparency, and shared responsibilities across education, labour-market authorities and social partners. In other words, inclusion cannot be delivered only by good individual VET centres or motivated employers; it needs a system that *actively enables* them to do inclusion well.

A first system-level dimension is the **policy and regulatory environment**. Inclusive systems translate EU quality criteria into national or regional rules that guarantee equal access, fair recruitment, protection of apprentices’ rights, safe working conditions, and recognised learning outcomes. EFQEA’s system-level criteria require apprenticeships to be legally defined, to include written agreements, and to secure social protection and appropriate remuneration. These guarantees are especially important for learners with fewer opportunities, who are most exposed to dropout when rights are unclear or conditions are unstable. When regulations include explicit non-discrimination clauses and reasonable-accommodation obligations, they also create the “floor” on which workplace-level inclusion can stand.

A second dimension concerns **institutional structures and support instruments**. Research mapped by Cedefop shows that apprenticeship ecosystems function best when responsibilities are operationalised through stable institutions: bodies that coordinate VET–employer cooperation, certify placements, support mentor training, or provide matching and guidance services. Where these structures are weak, access tends to depend on informal networks, which systematically disadvantages migrants, NEET youth, women entering male-dominated trades, and rural learners. System-level inclusion therefore requires **intermediation capacity** (brokering, guidance,

placement support) that reduces administrative load for SMEs and ensures learners without social capital can still find quality placements.

A third core dimension is **partnerships and social dialogue**. The EFQEA and related EU apprenticeship policy were built with strong contributions from social partners, and they emphasise that apprenticeships need co-ownership by employers, education providers, and worker representatives. Inclusive systems are those where partnerships are not ad-hoc but structured: sector councils, regional CoVE clusters, or ACVT-type steering groups that routinely align curricula with labour-market needs, set inclusion priorities, and intervene when quality risks appear. Such partnership governance is also a precondition for tackling sector-specific exclusion patterns (e.g., women or migrants in construction), because it enables collective, not just individual, solutions.

A fourth dimension is **targeted and adequate resourcing**. EU policy learning on apprenticeships shows that funding shapes inclusion outcomes depending on *what it is designed to incentivise*. When systems invest mainly in increasing placement numbers, participation may rise overall but gaps remain for disadvantaged groups. By contrast, targeted support—such as additional employer incentives for recruiting apprentices with fewer opportunities, financed bridging routes, travel/equipment support, or structured mentor training—has been identified as necessary to widen access and improve retention. System-level inclusion means that resourcing is explicitly linked to equity goals, not treated as a neutral budget line.

Finally, inclusive apprenticeship systems rely on **quality assurance that measures inclusion as part of quality**. EQAVET provides the main EU reference here: its four-stage cycle (Planning–Implementation–Evaluation–Review) is meant to operate at system level and encourages countries to monitor participation, completion, dropout, and placement outcomes **with disaggregation by learner group**. EQAVET indicators explicitly include success rates of disadvantaged groups and mechanisms that promote access to VET, making it a practical tool for detecting where exclusion occurs and triggering corrective actions. When quality assurance includes apprentice feedback loops and workplace monitoring (also aligned with EFQEA), systems can identify not only *whether* apprenticeships exist but *for whom they work*.

In sum, system-level inclusion is realised when policies guarantee rights and fairness, structures provide brokerage and support, partnerships embed shared responsibility, funding is targeted toward equity outcomes, and quality assurance (via EQAVET and EFQEA logic) continuously monitors and improves inclusion performance. Without this multi-dimensional system backbone, inclusive apprenticeships remain dependent on isolated good practices rather than becoming a stable feature of the Habitat skills ecosystem.

4.3 Provider-level dimensions (VET / WBL intermediaries)

At provider level, inclusive apprenticeships depend on whether VET centres and WBL intermediaries are able to translate system standards into **daily training design and support that works for diverse learners**. UNESCO's Inclusion in TVET guidance stresses that inclusion is achieved when institutions redesign curricula, pedagogy, guidance, and learner-support services to remove barriers and ensure that every learner can participate meaningfully. In Dual VET pathways, providers are not only education actors; they are also *bridges* to the labour market, responsible for preparing, matching, supporting, and safeguarding apprentices throughout work-based learning.

A first dimension is the delivery of **inclusive curricula and learning environments**. Inclusive providers ensure that apprenticeship curricula are clearly linked to occupational standards, but taught through flexible and accessible methods rather than “one-size-fits-all” instruction. Research on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in vocational and apprenticeship settings shows that proactive curriculum design—offering multiple ways to access content, practice skills, and show competence—supports learners with disabilities, low literacy, language barriers, or different learning styles without lowering standards. This includes accessible learning materials (easy-to-read formats, visual supports, adaptive digital tools), differentiated pacing, and blended delivery options that help rural learners or adults with family/work constraints remain engaged. Provider-level inclusion therefore means that *curriculum goals stay common, but learning routes are diversified* to prevent dropout and enable success.

A second dimension concerns **inclusive career guidance and matching**. Cedefop identifies lifelong guidance as a transversal pillar of inclusive VET systems, because it helps learners make informed, confidence-building transitions into training and work. In practice, inclusive providers invest in outreach to underrepresented groups, use bias-aware guidance to avoid steering women or migrants away from habitat-sector trades, and apply structured matching that considers not only skills, but also learner aspirations and barriers. This often requires pre-placement profiling (needs, interests, support requirements), clear communication to learners about workplace expectations, and coordination with employers to ensure placements are realistic and safe for each apprentice. Where matching is inclusive, learners without strong social networks are not excluded from quality placements.

A third provider-level dimension is the existence of **support mechanisms before and during apprenticeships**. Evidence from Cedefop's VET toolkit on NEETs and inclusive work-based learning underlines that disadvantaged learners benefit most when providers offer bridging and

preparatory routes, work-readiness coaching, language or basic-skills support, and psychosocial services. During apprenticeships, inclusive providers keep active contact with learners and workplaces through dual mentoring arrangements (school tutor + workplace tutor), regular progress checks, and early-warning systems that identify absenteeism, low confidence, or workplace conflict before dropout occurs. Cedefop's evidence on inclusive WBL environments stresses that retention improves when learners experience continuous support and a clear safety net rather than being left to "sink or swim" in workplaces.

Finally, provider-level inclusion requires **flexible delivery and strong cooperation with SMEs**. Inclusive providers adapt schedules, assessment formats, and training sequences when learners face barriers (e.g., transport constraints, disability-related needs, family responsibilities), while still protecting learning outcomes. They also take a proactive role in supporting companies: preparing mentors, clarifying roles, mediating misunderstandings, and helping SMEs implement accommodations or inclusion practices they might not manage alone. UNESCO's TVET strategy and Cedefop guidance both emphasise that inclusive outcomes depend on institutional readiness to collaborate beyond the classroom, especially with small employers who need practical support. In short, inclusive apprenticeships at provider level are characterised by: curricula designed for diversity (UDL and accessible pedagogy), guidance and matching that widen access, robust support mechanisms that prevent dropout, and flexible, cooperative delivery with SMEs. When these dimensions are in place, VET providers and intermediaries become key drivers of equity within the Habitat skills ecosystem, enabling diverse learners to enter, stay, and succeed in work-based learning.

4.4 Workplace-level dimensions (SMEs / companies)

Inclusive apprenticeships ultimately succeed or fail in workplaces, because this is where learners spend a substantial part of training time, develop professional identity, and experience daily norms. The EFQEA places strong obligations on employers as part of the core quality criteria: apprenticeships must be based on clear agreements, respect labour rights, provide safe working conditions, ensure qualified workplace mentoring, and be accessible through fair recruitment. In practice, this means that SMEs and companies are not only hosts of labour, but co-educators who shape whether diverse learners can actually learn, belong, and progress.

A first workplace dimension is **inclusive recruitment and onboarding**. EFQEA requires transparent recruitment and fair selection procedures, precisely because informal hiring networks tend to reproduce exclusion. Inclusive SMEs therefore use clear, competence-based criteria, avoid gendered or biased job language, and broaden outreach beyond "who already knows the

company.” This is especially relevant in habitat/construction apprenticeships, where women, migrants, and disadvantaged youth are underrepresented and are less likely to access placements through informal contacts. Recruitment is inclusive only when it actively prevents discrimination and offers equal entry opportunities, and when onboarding includes structured orientation to workplace rules, safety, learning expectations, and available support channels.

A second key dimension is **qualified mentoring and daily supervision**. EFQEA and European social-partner guidance emphasise that a workplace tutor/mentor is essential for apprenticeship quality, not optional. Cedefop’s evidence on inclusive WBL environments shows that apprentices from fewer opportunities rely particularly heavily on mentor support for confidence, integration, and problem-solving, and that weak mentoring is a major predictor of dropout. Inclusive workplaces therefore (a) assign a specific trained mentor, (b) protect time for supervision and feedback, and (c) ensure mentors are prepared for diversity-sensitive guidance (e.g., intercultural communication, gender awareness, disability inclusion). Without this, apprenticeships become “learning by exposure,” which benefits confident learners but disadvantages those facing language barriers, disability-related needs, or low initial self-efficacy.

A third workplace dimension is **accommodations and flexible task pathways**, especially for apprentices with disabilities or special needs, but also for other groups facing barriers. Under EU equality law, reasonable accommodation is a legal duty, and the European Commission’s 2024 guidelines clarify what this looks like in workplaces: adapted equipment or PPE, accessible workstations, assistive technologies, flexible scheduling or break patterns, adjusted communication formats, and fair assessment methods that still reflect learning outcomes. EU-OSHA reinforces that accommodation is often low-cost and improves retention, safety, and productivity. For apprenticeships, accommodations should be planned jointly with VET providers and reviewed over time, ensuring that apprentices progressively access the full occupational profile rather than being confined to marginal tasks.

A fourth dimension is **anti-discrimination and safe, inclusive workplace culture**. EFQEA requires safe environments and respect for diversity, and Cedefop’s inclusive WBL research highlights that belonging and retention depend on daily workplace climate, not only on formal rules. In male-dominated sectors such as construction, safety and health agencies show that gender bias and occupational segregation remain embedded in workplace routines, unless companies actively counter them through gender-sensitive supervision, zero-tolerance policies for harassment, and visible commitment to diversity. Inclusive SMEs make expectations explicit (codes of conduct, safe

reporting routes), ensure respectful communication norms, and support peer integration so that women and minority apprentices are not isolated or pressured to “fit in” to exclusionary norms.

Finally, inclusive workplaces rely on **active cooperation with VET providers and intermediaries**. EFQEA frames apprenticeships as shared responsibility, and Cedefop policy learning stresses that quality and inclusion are strongest when employers coordinate regularly with school tutors on learning outcomes, progress reviews, and early intervention when difficulties appear. This cooperation makes it possible to adjust tasks, provide extra support, and prevent early leaving—especially for apprentices who face compounded barriers.

In sum, workplace-level inclusion in the HABITABLE ecosystem is realised when SMEs and companies ensure fair recruitment, structured and diversity-aware mentoring, reasonable accommodations and flexibility, a strong anti-discrimination culture, and continuous coordination with VET providers. These dimensions translate EU quality principles into real learning opportunities for diverse apprentices in everyday work settings.

4.5 Learner experience dimension

Inclusive apprenticeships should ultimately be recognisable in the *lived experience* of apprentices. Cedefop’s work on inclusive work-based learning environments underlines that apprenticeships become motivating and successful when learners encounter welcoming workplaces, meaningful learning opportunities, and consistent support. Conversely, WBL can become discouraging and lead to dropout when learners experience mismatch between expectations and reality, lack of work-readiness support, or weak supervision. For this reason, learner experience is treated here as a separate dimension of inclusion, focusing on belonging, support, progression, and voice.

Belonging refers to whether apprentices feel accepted, respected, and socially integrated in both the VET setting and the workplace. Research in apprenticeship retention consistently links belonging to daily cultural signals: how mentors speak to apprentices, whether peers include them in informal learning, and whether difference is treated as normal or as a “problem.” Cedefop highlights that supportive environments increase motivation and completion, especially for learners who are entering workplaces for the first time or who come from fewer-opportunity backgrounds. In habitat and construction-related trades, belonging is particularly critical for women, migrants, and learners with disabilities who may otherwise feel isolated in male-dominated or highly standardised work cultures.

Support captures the extent to which apprentices have reliable, continuous help to navigate both learning and work demands. Evidence reviewed by Cedefop and wider VET dropout research shows that apprentices are more likely to leave early when mentoring is irregular, feedback is

unclear, or personal barriers (language, confidence, disability needs, transport, family pressure) are not addressed in time. Inclusive apprenticeships therefore ensure that support is not only “front-loaded” at entry, but sustained through check-ins, dual mentoring (school tutor + workplace mentor), and easy access to guidance or psychosocial services when difficulties emerge.

Progression refers to whether apprentices can see and experience a fair pathway of skill development and future employability. Inclusive learner experience means that tasks and learning outcomes are structured so apprentices gradually access the full occupational profile, rather than being confined to marginal or repetitive work. Cedefop notes that a clear learning trajectory and good workplace learning opportunities are key factors in motivation and qualification attainment. For disadvantaged learners, progression also depends on equity measures (extra coaching, adjusted pacing, recognition of prior learning) that allow them to meet the same standards through realistic routes.

Voice and feedback are the final element: inclusive apprenticeships require that apprentices can safely express their experience and influence improvement. UNESCO’s Inclusion in TVET guidance stresses that learners must be active participants in shaping inclusive environments, not passive recipients of support. At system and provider level, this aligns with EQAVET-style feedback loops, where apprentice evaluations of training quality, workplace climate, mentoring and discrimination risks are systematically collected and used for review and improvement. Safe reporting channels for harassment or unfair treatment are part of this “voice” dimension, ensuring that apprentices can speak up without fear of losing their placement.

Taken together, these four elements describe what inclusion looks like from the learner’s side. When apprentices feel they belong, receive continuous support, experience real progression, and have a meaningful voice in feedback and safeguarding, inclusion becomes an observable outcome rather than a policy promise.

5. Key Thematic Areas for Recommendations

The recommendations of this guide are organised into six thematic areas that address the structural and practical factors influencing inclusion, diversity and equity in apprenticeships across the Habitat skills ecosystem. Each thematic area includes a rationale grounded in evidence and concrete proposals that VET providers, companies, public authorities and social partners can adopt to strengthen equitable participation.

4.1 Equity and Access

Promoting equity and access in apprenticeships requires a systemic effort to remove barriers that hinder the participation of learners with fewer opportunities. European data underline the scale of the challenge: in 2024, 9.3% of young people (18–24) in the EU were early leavers from education and training, still above the EU target of less than 9% by 2030. The situation is significantly worse for young people with disabilities, among whom 44.2% of those with a severe disability and 17.1% of those with some disability left education and training early, compared with 8.0% of those without a disability.

Eurostat and CEDEFOP analyses also show that migrants and non-EU citizens have systematically lower educational attainment and higher early leaving rates than native-born populations, and that VET can play a key role in preventing social exclusion if it is designed and delivered inclusively. In Eastern Partnership countries such as Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, ETF assessments highlight persistent regional, ethnic and gender disparities in access to quality education and employment, and emphasise the need to improve participation of disadvantaged youth in VET.

At policy level, the **European Pillar of Social Rights** affirms that “everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning,” placing equal opportunities and access at the core of EU social policy. The **Council Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (2020/C 417/01)** calls explicitly for VET systems that are “inclusive and accessible, in particular for vulnerable groups, people with disabilities and people with low qualification levels.”

Within this framework, HABITABLE partner countries have adopted national legislation and strategies that refer to equal opportunities, inclusion and non-discrimination (e.g. Austria’s inclusive apprenticeship measures and integrative VET, Spain’s Organic Law 3/2022, Portugal’s Inclusive

Education Act 54/2018 and National Strategy for Equality, Greece's Law 4763/2020 on ESEK, and recent inclusion strategies in Georgia and Moldova supported by ETF and EU cooperation). Nevertheless, gaps in implementation, funding and outreach mean that learners with disabilities, migrants, Roma communities, rural youth, women in male-dominated sectors and early school leavers continue to be under-represented in dual VET and apprenticeships.

Ensuring equity and access is therefore both a compliance requirement with EU and national frameworks and a practical necessity for building robust, future-oriented Habitat skills ecosystems.

Recommendations

a) Non-discrimination policies

- **Align with EU principles and national law.**

Develop and implement comprehensive non-discrimination and equal-treatment policies at provider and company level, explicitly covering at least gender, disability, ethnic origin, religion or belief, age, socio-economic background, migration status and sexual orientation, in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights and national equality legislation.

- **Visibility and accessibility.**

Ensure these policies are clearly communicated to learners, staff and employers (websites, induction materials, apprenticeship contracts, internal regulations) and made available in accessible formats and relevant languages, particularly in contexts with significant minority or migrant populations.

- **Effective complaint and redress mechanisms.**

Establish confidential, safe and trusted mechanisms for reporting discrimination, harassment or unequal treatment, with clear procedures, timelines, designated responsible persons and protection against retaliation.

- **Integration in formal agreements.**

Include non-discrimination and equal-opportunities clauses in all cooperation agreements between VET providers and companies, apprenticeship contracts and institutional codes of conduct, making respect for these principles a condition for participating in dual VET schemes.

b) Inclusive selection criteria

- **Review admission rules for indirect discrimination.**

Systematically review admission and selection criteria to identify and remove requirements that may indirectly exclude learners with fewer opportunities—such as

overly rigid academic thresholds, language requirements or prior experience not essential to the occupation.

- **Use competence- and motivation-based assessment.**

Complement or replace purely grade-based selection with methods that recognise diverse forms of competence and potential, such as structured interviews, practical tasks, diagnostic assessments or portfolios. This approach is consistent with CEDEFOP's guidance on inclusive VET and tackling early leaving.

- **Accessible information and procedures.**

Provide clear, jargon-free information on application procedures, eligibility, selection criteria and timelines, and make materials available in minority and migrant languages where relevant. This supports informed decision-making and reduces self-exclusion among vulnerable learners.

- **Bias-aware recruitment.**

Train staff involved in selection (both in VET institutions and companies) on bias-aware, inclusive recruitment practices and on the specific access barriers faced by groups such as young women in construction, learners with disabilities, migrants or Roma youth.

Gender Equality

Gender equality in apprenticeships is a cornerstone of inclusive VET systems and a practical necessity for building a future-ready Habitat skills ecosystem. Across Europe, apprenticeships are expected to support fair access to quality training and decent work, yet persistent gender norms continue to shape participation patterns, especially in technical and construction-related fields. EU policy explicitly frames VET as a lever to tackle occupational segregation and stereotypes, calling for gender-balanced participation in traditionally male- or female-dominated professions.

The scale of gender imbalance is particularly visible in the Habitat/construction pipeline. Eurostat labour-market statistics show that women remain a small minority in construction employment in the EU—around **10% of the sector's workforce**—highlighting a narrow talent base in a field central to green renovation and sustainable building. Broader gender gaps in labour-market transitions reinforce this pattern: in 2023 the NEET rate for young women was **12.5%**, compared with **10.1% for young men**, indicating that women still face higher structural risk of exclusion from education-to-work pathways.

Research and EU monitoring consistently link these gaps to early socialisation, biased guidance, limited visibility of women in the sector, and workplace cultures that can feel unwelcoming to female apprentices. CEDEFOP underlines that gender segregation in VET persists across Europe and requires proactive measures to broaden participation in technical and green-transition fields.

For Habitat skills ecosystems, gender equality is therefore both a fairness obligation and a workforce strategy: without focused action to attract and retain women, apprenticeships risk reproducing exclusion while limiting the sector's capacity to meet climate-adaptation and green-construction demands.

Recommendations

a) Gender-balanced participation targets and monitoring

- **Set clear participation objectives** for women in Habitat and construction-related apprenticeship pathways, aligned with EU gender-equality commitments.
- **Track entry, retention, completion, and progression by gender** to make imbalance visible and prevent it being treated as “normal.”
- **Use intersectional monitoring** (e.g., gender + disability, gender + migrant background) to detect layered disadvantage.

b) Gender-sensitive language and career guidance

- **Audit guidance materials, application calls, and occupational profiles** to remove stereotypes and masculine-coded wording that discourages girls and women from applying.

- **Ensure guidance is competence- and aspiration-based**, not based on “typical” gender pathways, reflecting CEDEFOP evidence on stereotyping in VET choices.
- **Make Habitat careers visible as green, innovative, and socially valuable**, connecting them to sustainability and digitalisation rather than outdated “male trade” images.

c) Role models and mentoring in the Habitat sector

- **Systematically integrate female role models** (craftswomen, site supervisors, BIM technicians, green retrofit specialists, architects/engineers with VET routes) into outreach and guidance.
- **Create structured mentoring for female apprentices**, pairing them with trained workplace mentors and near-peer women already in the sector. Evidence from European initiatives shows role-model visibility is one of the most effective levers to shift participation in male-dominated apprenticeships.
- **Recognise mentoring as a quality condition** for participating employers/provider partnerships, especially in male-dominated Habitat occupations.

d) Safe and respectful learning/work environments

- **Require zero-tolerance policies on harassment and discrimination** in workplaces hosting apprentices, with clear reporting routes.
- **Train in-company tutors and teachers on gender bias and inclusive supervision**, since apprenticeship culture strongly influences retention.
- This is critical to both completion and long-term sector retention for women.

Support for People with Fewer Opportunities

Supporting learners with fewer opportunities is essential for inclusive apprenticeship systems, because structural disadvantage continues to shape who can access training, remain engaged, and complete pathways successfully. Across the EU, early leaving from education and training remains a key warning sign: in 2024, **9.3% of young people aged 18–24** left education early, still above the EU 2030 target (<9%). This risk is sharply unequal. Young people with disabilities face significantly higher early leaving rates than their non-disabled peers, demonstrating how inadequate support and accessibility translate into exclusion.

Migrant and minority learners also experience systematically weaker outcomes. Eurostat data on migrant integration show lower educational attainment and higher vulnerability to early leaving among **non-EU citizens** compared to nationals, reflecting barriers linked to language, recognition of prior learning, socio-economic insecurity, and discrimination. For NEET youth, exclusion is often multi-layered: disconnection from education and work is typically driven by a combination of low prior attainment, weak guidance, financial stress, and limited local opportunities. European evidence highlights that targeted training combined with **mentoring and wrap-around support** is among the most effective ways to re-engage NEET learners and sustain participation.

Geography deepens these inequalities. Rural learners frequently face fewer local training options, longer travel distances, weaker access to support services, and more limited digital infrastructure—factors that increase self-exclusion and dropout risk. Without targeted support, these patterns can leave migrants, NEET youth, disabled learners, and rural populations under-represented in apprenticeships, including in Habitat-related sectors that are critical for the green transition.

At policy level, the European Pillar of Social Rights confirms that everyone has a right to **quality and inclusive education and lifelong learning**, while EU inclusion and disability strategies require accessibility, reasonable accommodations, and active participation for vulnerable groups. Ensuring tailored support is therefore a compliance requirement with EU values and a practical condition for building robust, future-oriented apprenticeship ecosystems.

Recommendations

a) Tailored pathways for specific groups

- **Migrants and minorities:** provide language-sensitive entry routes, recognition of prior learning where possible, and culturally safe guidance so learners can navigate training and workplaces confidently.

- **NEET youth:** combine flexible entry points with structured mentoring and step-by-step progression, recognising that many return with low confidence or disrupted school experience.
- **People with disabilities:** ensure reasonable accommodations, adapted pacing, and coordinated support with social/employment services in line with EU disability rights commitments.
- **Rural learners:** reduce geographic barriers through flexible delivery (blended options where feasible), transport support, and local outreach.

b) Structured mentorship and tutoring

- Pair each apprentice from a disadvantaged background with a **trained mentor** in both VET and workplace settings.
- Make mentoring a formal responsibility with time allocation, guidance tools, and monitoring.
- Evidence shows mentoring improves retention, motivation, and labour-market outcomes for NEET and migrant learners.

c) Psychosocial and wellbeing support

- Provide access to counselling, peer-support models, and referral mechanisms for mental-health, housing, or family-related stress.
- Integrate psychosocial support into early-warning systems to prevent disengagement before dropout occurs.
- This is particularly important for learners facing poverty, displacement, discrimination, or disability-related stress.

d) Accessible and inclusive infrastructure

- Ensure training and workplace environments are physically and digitally accessible (mobility, sensory access, assistive tech, inclusive design).
- Apply “design for all” principles and universal accessibility standards required under EU disability policy.
- Accessibility should be a **condition for employer participation** in apprenticeship schemes.

Training for Inclusive Pedagogies

Inclusive apprenticeship systems depend heavily on the competences of those who teach, mentor, and supervise learners. Even where access policies are strong, learners with fewer opportunities will not thrive unless trainers and teachers can recognise diverse needs, adapt pedagogy, and create psychologically safe learning and workplace environments. This is especially critical in apprenticeships, where learning happens across two settings (school/provider and company), and inclusion failures in either one can lead to disengagement or dropout.

European evidence shows that professional development (PD) for teachers is often not yet delivering the depth of change needed for inclusive practice. In TALIS 2024, only **55% of teachers**, on average across OECD systems, reported that recent professional learning had a positive impact on their teaching. This points to a quality and relevance gap: PD is happening, but it is not consistently strengthening teachers' capacity to respond to complex classrooms, new migration realities, disability inclusion, or gender and cultural diversity.

At the same time, EU VET policy places teachers and trainers at the centre of inclusion and system resilience. The **Council Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (2020)** emphasises the need for high-quality VET teaching staff able to support diverse learners and modern transitions. CEDEFOP's work on teachers' and trainers' professional development similarly stresses that Member States should ensure **relevant initial and continuing PD** so VET staff can respond to new roles, inclusion challenges, and the green/digital shift.

For Habitat-related apprenticeships, inclusive pedagogy is also strategic: the sector needs wider participation (including women, migrants, rural youth, and people with disabilities) to meet green construction, renovation, and resilience targets. Without serious investment in trainers' inclusive capacities—especially intercultural, disability-sensitive, and bias-aware pedagogy—structural inequalities will continue to shape apprenticeship outcomes, even in well-designed systems.

Recommendations

a) Mandatory capacity building for inclusive pedagogies

- Make inclusion-focused PD a **core requirement** for all apprenticeship teachers, in-company trainers, and workplace mentors.
- Prioritise practical skills: differentiating instruction, universal design for learning, trauma-informed approaches, and constructive feedback for diverse learners.
- Align content with EU inclusion priorities and the 2020 VET Recommendation.

b) Intercultural and diversity-sensitive training modules

- Provide structured modules on:
 - intercultural communication and anti-bias practice,
 - teaching multilingual learners and workplace language scaffolding,
 - responding to discrimination or stereotyping in class/workplace,
 - culturally safe guidance for migrant and minority apprentices.
- Use evidence-based inclusion principles that OECD identifies as necessary for equitable learning systems.

c) Disability-inclusive pedagogy and reasonable accommodations

- Train staff on accessibility, assistive technology, adapted task design, and reasonable accommodations in both training and workplace learning.
- Ensure trainers can translate disability rights commitments into daily supervision practices.

d) Joint training for school-based and workplace trainers

- Deliver PD in **mixed groups** (teachers + in-company trainers) to build shared understanding of inclusion, roles, and coordination.
- Focus on continuity of support across settings so apprentices do not “fall between” school and workplace.
- This responds directly to CEDEFOP’s emphasis on evolving teacher/trainer roles in modern VET.

e) Quality assurance of PD impact

- Evaluate PD not just by attendance but by **observed change in practice** and learner outcomes.
- Use EQAVET-style cycles (plan–do–review–improve) to ensure inclusion training is effective and sustained.

Organizational Culture

Inclusive apprenticeships rely not only on entry rules or curricula, but on the **everyday culture** of the places where learning happens: VET centres and, especially, SMEs that host apprentices. Organizational culture shapes whether learners feel safe, respected, and able to participate fully—and it strongly influences retention and success. European evidence on work-based learning stresses that discrimination and bullying can emerge at any stage of an apprenticeship, and that tutors and supervisors must be able to detect and address such situations early.

Across Europe, one major policy tool to strengthen workplace inclusion is the **EU Platform of Diversity Charters**. Diversity Charters are voluntary national initiatives supported by the European Commission that invite organisations to make a **public commitment** to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). The Platform now brings together **over 17,500 signatory organisations** across Europe, covering more than **17 million employees**, including SMEs, public bodies, NGOs, and training institutions. Commission-supported research on the Charters highlights their role in helping organisations formalise inclusive values, improve diversity management, and move beyond compliance toward proactive EDI culture.

For Habitat-sector apprenticeships—often delivered through SME-based work placements—organizational culture matters even more. SMEs typically have fewer HR resources and less formalised inclusion infrastructure, which can leave apprentices exposed to informal bias, weak mentoring, or unaddressed harassment unless clear cultural and procedural safeguards exist. CEDEFOP specifically notes that **standardised, bias-aware practices and active prevention of bullying/discrimination** are essential in SME work-based learning contexts to avoid exclusion of minority and disadvantaged learners.

Embedding inclusive values through Diversity Charters, internal EDI working groups, and zero-tolerance policies is therefore both a rights-based expectation under EU equality principles and a practical condition for successful, future-oriented apprenticeships.

Recommendations

a) Adopt and operationalise Diversity Charters / EDI commitments

- Encourage SMEs and VET centres to **sign their national Diversity Charter** (where available) or adopt equivalent written EDI pledges aligned with EU equality principles.
- Translate commitments into clear internal rules covering gender, disability, ethnicity, religion/belief, age, socio-economic background, migration status, and sexual orientation.

- Make adherence to these commitments a **condition for hosting apprentices** within dual VET schemes.

b) Build inclusive values into daily organizational life

- Move beyond “policy on paper” by integrating inclusive values into onboarding, team meetings, supervision routines, and communication norms.
- Use simple, visible tools suited to SMEs (short codes of conduct, posters, induction checklists, inclusive language guides).
- This helps ensure EDI is understood as normal practice, not external compliance.

c) Create internal working groups or focal points for inclusion

- Establish small **EDI working groups** (or at minimum a designated focal person) in VET centres and participating SMEs.
- Responsibilities: monitoring culture, reviewing incidents, proposing improvements, and ensuring apprentice voice is heard.
- Even lightweight structures increase accountability in smaller organisations.

d) Zero-tolerance policies for harassment, bullying, and discrimination

- Implement explicit **zero-tolerance rules** covering harassment, bullying, discriminatory jokes, exclusionary behaviour, and retaliation.
- Provide confidential reporting channels and clear timelines for response, with protection for apprentices who report problems.
- CEDEFOP highlights early detection and rapid response as essential to prevent dropout and harm in work-based learning.

e) Train workplace tutors and staff on culture-based inclusion

- Offer short, practical training to in-company tutors and VET staff on bias awareness, respectful supervision, and conflict handling.
- Ensure tutors know how to respond to discrimination signals and where to refer cases.
- This is particularly important in SMEs, where supervision culture is often informal.

Monitoring & Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are essential for making inclusion in apprenticeships measurable, accountable, and improvable. Without systematic tracking, inequalities can remain “invisible,” allowing under-representation, early leaving, or unequal outcomes to persist despite strong policy intentions. European data underline why M&E must focus on equity: in 2024, **9.3% of young people (18–24) across the EU were early leavers from education and training**, still above the 2030 EU target of less than 9%. Early leaving is also gendered (10.9% for young men vs 7.7% for young women) and varies strongly by territory and social group, signalling uneven learning opportunities across contexts.

At system level, EU quality assurance already frames monitoring as a core condition for inclusive VET. The **EQAVET Framework** provides reference indicators for participation, completion, placement, and learner outcomes, designed to help countries and providers evaluate whether VET—including apprenticeships—serves all learners fairly. CEDEFOP complements this by offering a European dashboard and datasets that track VET progress indicators and inclusion-related outcomes across countries.

EU education monitoring also increasingly links inclusion to governance. The Commission’s Inclusive Education agenda is tracked through the **Education and Training Monitor** and the **European Semester**, reinforcing that equity indicators and feedback mechanisms are part of mainstream policy oversight. In short, inclusion cannot rely on goodwill alone: it requires KPIs, learner voice, and regular inclusion audits to detect gaps early and drive continuous improvement.

Recommendations

a) Define and track equity-focused KPIs

- Build a small but strong KPI set aligned with EQAVET participation and completion indicators and CEDEFOP VET monitoring tools.
- **Disaggregate all KPIs** by key inclusion variables: gender, disability status, migrant/minority background, socio-economic status, and rural/urban location.
- Minimum core KPIs should include:
 - **Access/participation rate** in apprenticeships by group (who enters).
 - **Retention and early leaving** by group (who stays).
 - **Completion rate** by group (who finishes).
 - **Transition outcomes** (placement in work/further learning) by group.
- Use these indicators to compare trends over time and detect widening gaps early.

b) Create structured feedback loops with apprentices

- Collect apprentice feedback **at multiple points** (entry, mid-term, completion) to identify barriers that numbers alone miss.
- Use mixed methods: short surveys + safe focus groups + anonymous reporting channels.
- Ensure feedback tools are accessible (easy language, disability-friendly, multilingual where needed).
- Close the loop: publish “**you said / we did**” summaries so apprentices see their input leading to change, strengthening trust and participation.

c) Run regular inclusion audits

- Conduct annual or biannual audits in both VET providers and host companies/SMEs.
- Audits should assess:
 - accessibility of learning/work environments,
 - fairness of selection and assessment,
 - presence of harassment/discrimination risks,
 - availability of support services/mentoring,
 - inclusive communication and guidance practices.
- Use EQAVET’s improvement cycle (plan–do–review–act) as the audit logic to ensure findings lead to concrete actions.

d) Embed inclusion monitoring into cooperation agreements

- Require providers and companies to share agreed KPI data and participate in joint inclusion reviews.
- Include equity targets and reporting duties in apprenticeship contracts and partnership MoUs.
- Make continued participation in dual VET conditional on minimum inclusion standards demonstrated through data and audit results.

e) Use dashboards for transparent tracking

- Visualise KPIs in a simple internal dashboard (provider + company view) to support decision-making.
- Where possible, align dashboard logic with CEDEFOP’s European VET policy dashboard and Key Indicators on VET to keep monitoring comparable to EU benchmarks.

6. Actionable Recommendations by Stakeholder

Inclusive apprenticeships are a shared responsibility across the entire Habitat skills ecosystem. European policy establishes a clear expectation that apprenticeships should deliver high-quality learning, fair access, and equitable outcomes—particularly for learners who face structural disadvantage. The European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEA) links apprenticeship quality directly to equal opportunities, fair working and learning conditions, learner support, and non-discrimination. In parallel, the Council Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience positions inclusion and social fairness as core requirements for modern VET systems aligned with the green and digital transitions and lifelong learning.

At the same time, the EU evidence base shows that gaps in participation and outcomes persist, especially for women entering male-dominated trades, migrants and minorities, learners with disabilities, rural youth, and those at risk of early leaving. For example, early leaving from education and training remains a structural concern across Europe: in **2024, 9.3% of young people aged 18–24 in the EU** were early leavers, still slightly above the 2030 target of less than 9%, with clear gender and territorial disparities across countries. In construction-related occupations, women remain strongly under-represented (around 9–15% of the workforce depending on sub-sector and country), illustrating how sectoral culture and transition pathways continue to reproduce inequality. Reducing these inequalities cannot be achieved by a single actor. It requires coordinated action by VET providers, companies/SMEs, and policymakers/public authorities, each addressing a different stage of the apprenticeship pathway. This section therefore translates European principles and evidence into stakeholder-specific recommendations to strengthen equity, retention, and quality across apprenticeship systems. EQAVET’s continuous-improvement logic provides the backbone for this shared approach, emphasising planning, implementation, evaluation, and revision based on evidence and learner feedback.

For VET Providers / WBL Intermediaries

VET providers are central actors in inclusive apprenticeship systems because they design learning pathways, control entry points, and deliver much of the guidance and support that determines whether learners progress and succeed. The persistence of early leaving across the EU demonstrates that exclusion is not an episodic issue but a structural one linked to socio-economic background, disability, migration, gender segregation, and regional disadvantage. The Council Recommendation on VET (2020) explicitly frames inclusion and social fairness as core quality requirements for resilient VET systems that can support the green and digital transitions.

Inclusive curricula and learning design are the first major lever for providers. Programmes should be built on the assumption of diverse learner profiles and starting points, ensuring that learning outcomes, teaching methods, and assessment formats can accommodate different needs. This requires flexible sequencing, multiple assessment routes, accessible and multilingual learning materials where relevant, and differentiated pedagogical strategies responding to disability-related needs, weaker prior attainment, interrupted schooling, or limited language confidence. EQAVET supports this approach by expecting providers to use evidence on participation, completion, and outcomes to plan, implement, evaluate, and continuously improve VET design. In Habitat sectors shaped by green and digital transitions, curricula should integrate sustainability and digital competences in ways that remain accessible to all learners, so that new green/digital requirements do not become unintended filters of exclusion.

Targeted outreach and inclusive guidance are equally necessary. EU analyses of early leaving and VET participation show that learners with fewer opportunities often self-exclude before applying due to limited information, low confidence, hidden costs, or stereotypes about who “belongs” in certain fields. Providers should therefore implement proactive outreach to under-represented groups, including women in gender-segregated trades, migrant and minority learners, NEET youth, rural learners, people with disabilities, and low-qualified adults. Guidance materials should be plain-language, culturally sensitive, and accessible (including digital accessibility), with clear explanations of dual VET expectations and support available.

To translate access into success, providers must institutionalise learner support and retention systems. EU evidence on dropout prevention highlights that retention improves when VET centres provide structured mentoring, psychosocial and learning support, early-warning indicators for disengagement, and coordinated follow-up with workplaces. Such supports should be embedded across VET routes (initial, continuing, adult learning) and linked to external services when barriers are social or economic in nature.

Teacher and trainer professional development is a fourth pillar. Inclusive curricula and support cannot function without staff competences to implement them consistently. European guidance on VET quality and inclusion stresses continuous professional development in inclusive pedagogy, intercultural competence, bias-aware assessment, and early-risk detection, with particular relevance where systems serve migrants, learners with disabilities, early school leavers, and disadvantaged adults. Training should also equip staff to teach sustainability and digital learning outcomes through inclusive methods that support different progression needs.

Because inclusion is rights-based, providers require clear accessibility and reasonable-accommodation procedures. This includes physically and digitally accessible learning environments, assistive technologies where needed, accessible assessment formats, and transparent accommodation processes established jointly with learners and, where relevant, employers. EQAVET's inclusion-related indicators treat access, participation, and success of disadvantaged groups as key dimensions of quality, making accessibility a measurable requirement rather than a matter of informal goodwill.

Finally, providers should anchor all actions in equity-focused monitoring and continuous improvement. Participation, dropout, completion, and placement outcomes should be disaggregated by gender, disability status, migration/minority background, socio-economic profile, and rural/urban location. These quantitative indicators should be interpreted alongside structured learner feedback (entry, mid-point, completion) to identify hidden barriers and guide evidence-based improvement. In this way, inclusion becomes a permanent quality function of VET providers across all learning routes.

For Companies (Employers/SMEs)

Companies, and especially SMEs, are key inclusion actors because they shape who gains real workplace opportunities, how newcomers are treated, and what learning and progression they can achieve. This responsibility extends beyond apprenticeships to traineeships, internships, and first-job pathways. Persistent early leaving and sectoral segregation indicate that structural inequality continues to affect education-to-work transitions, making employer practice central to the broader inclusion ecosystem.

EU frameworks place clear expectations on employers for inclusive work-based learning. The EFQEA links apprenticeship quality to equal opportunities, learner support, safe working conditions, and non-discrimination, establishing that workplaces share responsibility for fair access and successful completion.

Inclusive and bias-aware recruitment is the first employer lever across entry routes. Selection processes can unintentionally exclude disadvantaged candidates when criteria rely excessively on grades, narrow language demands, prior experience, or informal “fit” judgments. EFQEA’s requirement for transparent recruitment supports the adoption of standardised, competence-based selection procedures that recognise motivation and potential even when educational histories are uneven. This is especially relevant in Habitat and construction occupations, where women remain rarely employed in craft and related trades roles (about 11% at EU level), showing how recruitment practices and occupational cultures still reproduce gender segregation.

Second, companies should provide structured onboarding and ongoing support for all apprentices and trainees. Clear induction covering tasks, safety, rights, learning expectations, and support channels reduces early disengagement. EFQEA emphasises the importance of a qualified workplace mentor/tutor, and EU apprenticeship quality guidance consistently links mentorship to retention and learning progression. Mentoring is also decisive for countering stereotype pressure and supporting apprentices who face language, disability-related, or confidence barriers.

Third, inclusion requires explicit diversity and non-discrimination practices in everyday workplace culture. Employers should adopt clear equality policies, enforce zero-tolerance for harassment and bullying, and establish safe reporting channels. EFQEA frames safe learning/working environments as a quality requirement, not an optional add-on. This is particularly critical in SMEs, where informal norms often dominate and newcomers may feel least able to raise concerns.

Finally, companies should ensure workplace adaptations and accessible work design across all programmes. Inclusive workplaces anticipate diverse needs and are prepared to adjust tasks, tools, communication methods, schedules, and pacing for apprentices with disabilities, health constraints, language needs, caring responsibilities, or trauma-related barriers. Such adjustments follow the principle of reasonable accommodation within EU equality and disability policy and should be treated as standard quality practice. Coordination with VET providers helps plan adaptations, review progress, and ensure continuity of support across learning and work settings. Taken together, these actions translate European inclusion principles into fair access, safe participation, and equitable outcomes across work-based routes into employment, strengthening both social fairness and long-term workforce sustainability.

For Policymakers and Public Authorities

Public authorities shape the structural environment in which inclusion either becomes a lived reality or remains a formal promise. While VET providers and companies implement inclusive practice on the ground, authorities set the rules, allocate resources, define accountability, and enable cross-

sector cooperation. EU monitoring of early leaving confirms that inequality in learning participation and outcomes remains systemic and varies sharply by country, gender, and territory, showing that inclusion must be addressed across the whole education–training–employment continuum.

The European policy baseline supports this broader responsibility. The Council Recommendation on VET (2020) positions social fairness and inclusion at the heart of modern skills systems linked to green and digital transitions. In parallel, EQAVET provides a European quality-assurance logic that treats inclusion as measurable quality through indicators on access, completion, transitions, and the success of disadvantaged groups.

A first high-impact lever is targeted incentives and funding. Authorities should design financing models that reward inclusive participation and equitable outcomes, including within apprenticeships. Instruments may include participation bonuses, wage/training subsidies, mentor-training grants, mobility and transport allowances, accessibility investments, or language-support packages for under-represented groups. The critical point is that funding must be tied to demonstrable inclusion quality (safe environments, mentoring capacity, reasonable accommodation), so resources drive structural change rather than merely increasing placement numbers.

A second pillar is regulatory strengthening and rights-based safeguards. National and regional regulations covering VET, apprenticeships, adult learning, and transition pathways should explicitly require non-discrimination protections, accessibility standards, reasonable accommodation, and trusted complaint mechanisms. Embedding these safeguards reduces reliance on informal goodwill and ensures predictable rights protection for learners and apprentices across settings—consistent with EFQEA's framework-condition criteria.

A third priority is system-level equity data collection and transparent reporting. Inclusion gaps remain invisible unless they are measured. Policymakers should collect and publish data disaggregated by gender, disability, migration/minority background, socio-economic status, and region/rurality. EQAVET's inclusion-related indicators offer a ready European structure for monitoring participation, completion, placement, and the success of disadvantaged groups. Public reporting strengthens accountability and supports evidence-based reforms by highlighting whether policies are closing gaps or unintentionally widening them.

Finally, inclusive systems depend on intersectoral coordination and wrap-around support. Many barriers to learning are not “education problems” alone: poverty, housing insecurity, disability access needs, language gaps, mental health strain, rural isolation, and discrimination cut across policy domains. Authorities should institutionalise cooperation between education/VET bodies,

employment services, social welfare and youth agencies, disability and migrant support services, and regional/local development actors. This enables coherent support packages—mentoring, counselling, transport, childcare, language tuition, accommodations—to follow learners through transitions between school, training, workplace, and employment, ensuring that green and digital transitions are socially fair.

In sum, public authorities are responsible for ensuring that inclusion is embedded in the design, financing, regulation, monitoring, and cross-sector functioning of education and training systems. Apprenticeships are a vital pathway within that ecosystem, but the policy task is broader: reducing inequality across lifelong learning so that no learner is left behind.

Social Partners / Sectoral Bodies

Social partners and sectoral bodies (employer federations, chambers, trade unions, professional associations, sector councils) are structurally positioned to drive inclusion because they shape the *rules of the sector*, influence workplace norms, and provide coordinated services that individual SMEs cannot deliver alone. EU apprenticeship policy explicitly recognises this role. The European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEA) was developed with strong social-partner input and expects apprenticeships to be governed through cooperation between employers, unions, VET providers and authorities. Likewise, the renewed European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) places social partners at the centre of national coalitions, sectoral commitments, and SME support for inclusive apprenticeships, including gender equality and social inclusion. Cedefop’s recent policy analysis on apprenticeship systems identifies social dialogue as a key driver of quality and inclusion, because it ensures shared standards, balanced interests, and sector-wide ownership of reforms.

Collective agreements and sector standards are one of the most powerful levers available to social partners. In sectors with high SME density such as construction and habitat-related trades, collective agreements can establish minimum requirements for apprenticeship remuneration, mentoring conditions, occupational safety, and non-discrimination safeguards—setting a predictable baseline for quality and inclusion across workplaces. EFQEA stresses that quality apprenticeships require fair working conditions, social protection, and clear role definitions; sector agreements are a practical mechanism to ensure these conditions are not left to voluntary goodwill. Research on construction social partners also shows that where sector bodies make equality requirements explicit in agreements and standards, workplace inclusion improves more consistently than through isolated company initiatives. Sector agreements can also recognise mentor/tutor workloads, supporting SMEs by formalising time allocation and competence

expectations for workplace trainers—an issue repeatedly highlighted in EU evidence as a barrier to SME apprenticeship capacity.

Sector campaigns and joint awareness actions are a second essential function. Occupational segregation and weak attractiveness of habitat/construction careers to women and under-represented groups remain high across Europe. EU and sector research points to the need for coordinated visibility campaigns, because individual SMEs rarely have the reach or credibility to challenge stereotypes on their own. Initiatives such as *Women Can Build* and FEMCON show that sector-level campaigns combining role models, guidance tools, and employer engagement can reduce segregation and encourage women into construction and habitat apprenticeships. EAfA’s 2025 roadmap also highlights sector campaigns and communications as core instruments for widening participation in apprenticeships across Europe’s priority transitions.

Support to SME networks is the third area where social partners add decisive value. EU evidence (Cedefop/OECD) shows that SMEs struggle most with mentoring capacity, inclusion know-how, and administrative burden. Sectoral bodies can respond through *shared services* that reduce these constraints: pooled mentor training, practical inclusion toolkits, helplines for reasonable accommodation, joint brokerage for placements, and peer-learning communities. This aligns with EAfA’s call for sector-based coalitions that actively support SMEs and reinforce inclusion commitments in apprenticeship pathways. When SME networks are supported sector-wide, inclusive practice becomes scalable and consistent rather than fragmented.

ANNEXES

Annex1. Glossary of Key Terms (A–Z)

1. **Accessibility**

The extent to which environments, services, information, and learning opportunities can be used by all people, including persons with disabilities, on an equal basis with others.

Note: Covers physical, digital, communication, and social accessibility.

2. **Apprentice**

A learner enrolled in an apprenticeship who acquires occupational competences through both workplace training and school-based VET.

3. **Apprenticeship**

A formal “learn-and-work” pathway that combines workplace training with school-based VET and leads to a recognised qualification.

4. **Apprenticeship Contract**

A formal agreement between an apprentice, an employer, and often a VET provider, defining rights, responsibilities, learning content, duration, and working conditions.

5. **Bias (Unconscious Bias)**

Implicit attitudes or stereotypes that affect decisions and behaviour, often without awareness, and may lead to unequal treatment.

6. **Completion Rate**

The proportion of apprentices who successfully finish the apprenticeship programme within the expected timeframe.

Note: Best monitored by group (e.g., gender, disability, migration background).

7. **Discrimination**

Unjust or prejudicial treatment of individuals or groups based on personal characteristics such as gender, disability, ethnic origin, religion/belief, age, migration status, or sexual orientation.

8. **DigComp**

The European Digital Competence Framework that defines key digital skills for learning, work, and participation in society.

9. **Dual VET**

A VET model where learning is shared between a VET provider and an employer, often through apprenticeship arrangements.

10. **Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET)**

Leaving education or training with at most lower secondary qualification and without continuing learning.

Note: Used as a key indicator of inclusion and retention gaps.

11. **EQAVET**

The European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET, supporting continuous improvement through planning, implementation, evaluation, and review.

12. **Equity**

Fair access, support, and outcomes based on different needs and starting points, rather than identical treatment.

13. **Gender-Sensitive Guidance**

Career guidance and communication that actively avoids stereotypes and supports equal participation across all occupational fields.

14. **GreenComp**

The European Sustainability Competence Framework defining knowledge, skills, and attitudes for sustainability and green transition.

15. **Inclusion**

The creation of conditions that enable all people, regardless of background or characteristics, to participate fully in learning and society.

16. **Inclusion Audit**

A structured review of policies, environments, and outcomes to identify exclusion risks and improvement needs.

17. Intersectionality

Recognition that disadvantages can overlap (e.g., gender + disability + rurality), creating compounded barriers.

18. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Measurable indicators used to track progress toward goals (e.g., participation, retention, completion, employment outcomes).

Note: Inclusion KPIs should be disaggregated by learner group.

19. Learners with Fewer Opportunities

Individuals facing structural barriers to access or participation in education/training (e.g., disability, migration background, low socio-economic status, rural residence, gender segregation, early school leaving).

20. Mentor / Workplace Tutor

A trained person in the company who guides and supports the apprentice's learning, integration, and wellbeing.

21. Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E)

Systematic collection and analysis of data to assess progress, outcomes, and quality, and to guide improvement.

22. NEET

Young people not in employment, education, or training.

23. Non-Discrimination Policy

A formal policy ensuring equal treatment and prevention of exclusion across protected characteristics in education and workplaces.

24. Reasonable Accommodation

Necessary and appropriate adjustments to enable equal participation for persons with disabilities, without imposing disproportionate burden.

25. Retention

The ability of a system or programme to keep apprentices engaged until completion.

Note: Often strengthened through mentoring and support services.

26. Rural/Urban Divide

Unequal access to services and opportunities between rural and urban areas, affecting participation in education and apprenticeships.

27. Self-Exclusion

When individuals do not apply or withdraw from opportunities due to perceived barriers, low confidence, or lack of information.

28. SME (Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise)

A company with limited size and resources compared to large enterprises; often a main host of apprenticeships in Europe.

29. Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

An approach to curriculum and teaching design that provides multiple ways of engagement, representation, and expression so all learners can succeed.

30. Work-Based Learning (WBL)

Learning that occurs in real work environments as part of formal education or training.

Annex 2: Review Framework & Self-Assessment Tool

Purpose: To help VET providers and companies jointly review how inclusive their apprenticeship pathways are, identify gaps, and prioritise improvements.

Instructions for Use

Who should use this tool

- **VET providers:** directors, apprenticeship coordinators, guidance staff, support staff, teachers/trainers.
- **Companies/SMEs:** HR or management, in-company trainers/mentors, workplace tutors, supervisors.
- **Joint teams:** mixed provider–company groups are strongly encouraged for shared reflection.

When to use it

- Annual inclusion review (recommended).
- Before a new intake/cohort to check readiness.
- After cohort completion to evaluate outcomes and update practice.
- After any major change (curriculum reform, new company partners, policy updates).

How scoring works

- For each indicator, agree on a score **0–3 based on evidence:**
 - 0 = Not in place
 - 1 = Partly in place / ad hoc
 - 2 = In place but inconsistent
 - 3 = Fully in place and systematic
- Add brief evidence/examples (documents, procedures, data, observed practice).
- Score each domain and calculate a domain total.
- Select priority areas for action in Annex 3.

How to interpret results

- 0–1 average per domain: urgent improvement needed.
- ~2 average: promising foundation, but uneven.
- ~3 average: strong inclusive practice, focus on sustaining and scaling.

Self-Assessment Table

How to fill in: For each indicator, score 0–3 and record evidence. Evidence required for scores 2–3.

Domain 1: Access & Recruitment

Indicator (“We have...”)	Score (0–3)	Evidence / examples
1. We use transparent, competence-based selection criteria (not informal networks).		
2. Recruitment materials/interviews avoid gendered, biased, or exclusionary language.		
3. We consider motivation/potential through structured interviews or practical tasks, not only grades.		
4. We provide clear, plain-language information on pathways, eligibility and timelines.		
5. We offer application support in accessible formats and relevant languages.		
6. Staff involved in recruitment/guidance are trained on bias-aware selection.		
7. We monitor recruitment outcomes by key inclusion variables (gender, disability, migrant background, socio-economic status, rural/peripheral origin).		

Domain 2: Inclusive Learning Design

Indicator (“We have...”)	Score (0–3)	Evidence / examples
1. Inclusion is embedded as a core curriculum principle across the apprenticeship pathway.		
2. Teaching and assessment are adapted to diverse starting points (flexible pacing, multiple routes).		
3. Learning materials are accessible by default (digital accessibility, assistive-tech compatible, easy-read/visual).		

Indicator (“We have...”)	Score (0–3)	Evidence / examples
4. We integrate green and digital competences in inclusive ways that do not create new barriers.		
5. Learning outcomes reflect diverse progression routes while maintaining common standards.		

Domain 3: Support & Retention Services

Indicator (“We have...”)	Score (0–3)	Evidence / examples
1. Apprentices with fewer opportunities receive structured support/mentoring.		
2. We have early-warning mechanisms for disengagement (attendance, progress, workplace issues).		
3. We provide or refer to psychosocial/wellbeing support when needed.		
4. We support language or learning development for apprentices who need it.		
5. Support is coordinated between VET provider and company throughout placement.		

Domain 4: Workplace Learning Conditions (Companies/SMEs)

Indicator (“We have...”)	Score (0–3)	Evidence / examples
1. Every apprentice receives a structured onboarding/induction (roles, rights, safety, learning plan).		
2. Work tasks follow a planned progression aligned with learning outcomes (not only production needs).		

Indicator (“We have...”)	Score (0–3)	Evidence / examples
3. We provide apprentices regular feedback and performance coaching.		
4. Work tasks and supervision are adapted to learner needs where necessary.		
5. Health and safety training is accessible to all apprentices.		
6. Apprentices feel safe to raise concerns without retaliation.		

Domain 5: Equality & Non-Discrimination Safeguards

Indicator (“We have...”)	Score (0–3)	Evidence / examples
1. We have a clear non-discrimination/equal-treatment policy applied to apprentices.		
2. Policies are communicated clearly to staff, mentors, and apprentices.		
3. Reporting/complaint mechanisms are confidential and trusted.		
4. Zero-tolerance procedures for harassment/bullying are communicated and enforced.		
5. Equality clauses are included in all provider–company agreements.		

Domain 6: Trainer/Tutor Competences

Indicator (“We have...”)	Score (0–3)	Evidence / examples
1. Trainers/teachers receive regular training on inclusive pedagogy and diversity-sensitive assessment.		
2. Workplace mentors/tutors are trained in inclusive supervision (gender, intercultural, disability basics).		

Indicator (“We have...”)	Score (0–3)	Evidence / examples
3. WBL coordinators are trained in intercultural practice and disability inclusion.		
4. Staff are trained on disability inclusion and reasonable accommodation.		
5. Joint training exists for provider and company trainers/mentors.		

Domain 7: Monitoring & Feedback Systems

Indicator (“We have...”)	Score (0–3)	Evidence / examples
1. We track equity KPIs (entry, retention, completion, transitions/outcomes).		
2. Data are disaggregated by key inclusion variables.		
3. Apprentice feedback is collected at entry, mid-point, and exit.		
4. We use feedback to adjust practice (documented “you said / we did”).		
5. Inclusion audits/reviews are conducted regularly and documented.		

Domain 8: Partnership & Coordination

Indicator (“We have...”)	Score (0–3)	Evidence / examples
1. Provider–company roles for inclusion are formally defined.		
2. We participate in tri-partite reviews (apprentice–company–provider).		
3. We share inclusion data and review results jointly.		
4. We coordinate with external services (youth, disability, migrant, social support) where relevant.		
5. Inclusion expectations are part of partner selection.		
6. Joint improvement plans are developed, tracked, and reviewed.		

Summary Page (to complete after scoring)

Domain totals

Domain	Total score	Average score	Priority level (High/Med/Low)
1. Access & Recruitment			
2. Inclusive Learning Design			
3. Support & Retention Services			
4. Workplace Learning Conditions			
5. Equality & Non-Discrimination Safeguards			
6. Trainer/Tutor Competences			
7. Monitoring & Feedback Systems			
8. Partnership & Coordination			

Priority areas for action (max 3–5)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Annex 3: Inclusive Action Plan

Inclusive Action Plan Guidelines

Purpose

This Inclusive Action Plan template supports VET providers, WBL intermediaries, and companies/SMEs to translate the results of Annex 2 (Self-Assessment) into **concrete, measurable improvements**. It is designed for joint provider–company use and follows a continuous quality improvement cycle (Plan–Implement–Evaluate–Review).

Instructions for Use

Step 1 — Select priority domains (from Annex 2).

After scoring Annex 2, identify **3–5 priority areas** where the average score is low (0–1) or uneven (~2). Priorities should reflect both access gaps (who enters) and outcome gaps (who completes and progresses).

Step 2 — Define SMART goals.

For each priority area, write **one clear goal** that is:

- **Specific** (what will change, for whom),
- **Measurable** (linked to indicators),
- **Achievable** (within your capacity/resources),
- **Relevant** (to inclusion in apprenticeships),
- **Time-bound** (with a deadline).

Example: “Increase women’s participation in Habitat apprenticeships from 8% to 15% by May 2027.”

Step 3 — Agree actions and responsibilities.

Each goal should include **2–5 actions**. Actions should specify:

- **what will be done,**
- **by whom** (named role/organisation),
- **with which partners,**
- **what resources are needed** (if any).

Actions should cover different stages when needed (recruitment, learning design, mentoring, accommodations, monitoring).

Step 4 — Set timeline and milestones.

Indicate start/end dates and short milestones (e.g., “mentor training delivered by Month X”). Plans should normally cover **12–18 months**, with shorter checkpoints.

Step 5 — Define KPIs and evidence sources.

Each action must include at least **one KPI** and a method of verification. KPIs should preferably be **disaggregated** (gender, disability, migrant background, socio-economic status, rural/peripheral location).

Step 6 — Review and update annually.

Revisit progress at least once per year, using Annex 2 again to measure improvement. Update goals/actions based on evidence and apprentice feedback.

Inclusive Action Plan Template

Plan title: _____

Skills ecosystem / Country / Region: _____

Lead organisation: _____ **Partner(s):** _____

Date prepared: ____ / ____ / ____ **Cycle covered:** (e.g., 2026–2027) _____

Prepared by (names/roles): _____

Priority domains (from Annex 2):

- D1 Access & Recruitment
- D2 Inclusive Learning Design
- D3 Support & Retention
- D4 Workplace Learning Conditions
- D5 Equality & Non-Discrimination
- D6 Trainer/Tutor Competences
- D7 Monitoring & Feedback
- D8 Partnership & Coordina

Priority Domain	Goal (SMART)	Actions (What will be done?)	Responsible (Role/Org)	Timeline (Start–End)	KPI(s) / Target	Evidence / Data Source	Status / Notes
e.g., Domain 1	Goal 1: _____	Action 1.1 _____	_____	/ – /	KPI: _____ Target: _____	e.g., recruitment logs; disaggregated data	<input type="checkbox"/> Planned <input type="checkbox"/> Ongoing <input type="checkbox"/> Completed
		Action 1.2 _____	_____	/ – /	KPI: _____ Target: _____	e.g., survey; guidance records	<input type="checkbox"/> Planned <input type="checkbox"/> Ongoing <input type="checkbox"/> Completed
		Action 1.3 _____	_____	/ – /	KPI: _____ Target: _____	e.g., intake data; mentor reports	<input type="checkbox"/> Planned <input type="checkbox"/> Ongoing <input type="checkbox"/> Completed
e.g., Domain 4	Goal 2: _____	Action 2.1 _____	_____	/ – /	KPI: _____ Target: _____	e.g., onboarding checklist; apprentice feedback	<input type="checkbox"/> Planned <input type="checkbox"/> Ongoing <input type="checkbox"/> Completed

		Action 2.2 _____	_____	/ - /	KPI: _____ Target: _____	e.g., retention rates; complaint logs	<input type="checkbox"/> Planned <input type="checkbox"/> Ongoing <input type="checkbox"/> Completed
e.g., Domain 7	Goal 3: _____	Action 3.1 _____	_____	/ - /	KPI: _____ Target: _____	e.g., KPI dashboard; mid-term check-ins	<input type="checkbox"/> Planned <input type="checkbox"/> Ongoing <input type="checkbox"/> Completed
		Action 3.2 _____	_____	/ - /	KPI: _____ Target: _____	e.g., KPI dashboard; mid-term check-ins	<input type="checkbox"/> Planned <input type="checkbox"/> Ongoing <input type="checkbox"/> Completed

Annex 4: Bank of Good Practices in Social Inclusion through WBL

The HABITABLE project hosts a **Bank of Good Practices** in the DUAL Online Centre (“WBL for All” space). It brings together curated examples from EU Member States and partner countries that demonstrate effective approaches to inclusion, diversity, equity and non-discrimination in WBL and dual VET. Stakeholders can use it as a practical reference when shaping inclusive apprenticeship measures and Action Plans.

Access link: <https://habitable-cove.eu/dual-online-centre/wbl-for-all-space/bank-of-good-practices-in-social-inclusion-through-wbl/>

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