

# End-Term Review (ETR) of the VET Toolbox 1

Enabel PO: PO202220000028

RFT: BEL160611T-1015

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## Executive Summary

07 April 2023



## Executive summary

### Background

The VET Toolbox 1 Programme (2017-2022) was a EUR 15.85 million programme funded by the European Union and BMZ and co-implemented by Enabel, GIZ, LuxDev, and the British Council, working together to provide a coherent and comprehensive support package in 41 partner countries. The programme's objective was to improve vocational education and training (VET) systems in partner countries by providing know-how, tools, and advice, promoting a demand-driven approach to VET, encouraging private sector participation in VET, and fostering inclusion measures in VET. The interventions were split into three activity fields: Short-Term Actions (STA), Grants, and Knowledge Exchange Network Activities and Tools (KENT). With the launch of "Team Europe" in 2020, there are high expectations for learnings from the VET Toolbox experience to inform further Team Europe Initiatives.

### End-Term Review

With the conclusion of the VET Toolbox 1 in December 2022, Paeradigms was commissioned to conduct the end-term review (ETR) of the programme. The ETR's specific overarching objectives were to (1) assess the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of the interventions, providing insights into results achievement, ensuring accountability towards the European Commission, (2) extract insights from the evaluation findings regarding the factors and approaches that enabled and constrained the programme's success, and (3) provide lessons learned and recommendations to support ongoing VET Toolbox interventions and feed into the design, steering and implementation of future programmes.

### Methodology

The methodology of the ETR was based on three core elements:

- (1) An evaluation framework and matrix that clustered a set of 32 pre-defined evaluation questions (in the ToR: 27; later amended to 32) into themes and associates the clustered questions to the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria (Relevance, Coherence, Efficiency, Effectiveness, Sustainability, Impact).
- (2) A stratified sampling approach that selected from each of the three VET Toolbox activity fields a subset of cases that allowed for conclusions about the VET Toolbox as a whole while keeping the amount of data manageable. Accordingly, the Paeradigms team did an in-depth analysis of

10 (out of 70) STAs, 3 (out of 11) Grants and 14 (out of 52) KENT activities pre-selected according to agreed criteria that ensured the representativeness of cases.

- (3) A mixed-methods approach to data collection and analysis that uses the existing project documentation as secondary data while collecting and analysing different kinds of primary data both remotely and face-to-face in three field missions carried out in January and February 2023 by two senior evaluators in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Republic of the Congo, and Zimbabwe. The evaluation was guided by the DAC principles of impartiality, independence, and ethical conduct.

Overall, the ETR included the collection and analysis of 170 stakeholder interviews, close to 1,000 documents, online (perception) surveys (with limited yield), the identification of 10 final beneficiaries' most significant change (MSC) stories and observations from the two-day VET Toolbox 1 closing workshop in Brussels, in November 2022.

### Findings

#### Merits

On the whole, the VET Toolbox has achieved noteworthy success. First of all, it was a "pre-Team Europe" collaborative pilot programme that focused on cooperation between the EU and member states' development organisations on the one hand and collaboration among those development organisations on the other. This, in itself, was rather innovative and constitutes a significant achievement. It was visible not least in the VET Toolbox Consortium (GIZ, Enabel, LuxDev, the British Council, and AFD as a silent partner) that developed a "team mindset" with high levels of mutual trust and intrinsic motivation, achieving remarkable results with limited resources. Please note that this achievement cannot be taken for granted in a field often characterised by a lack of coordination (if not outright donor/implementor competition). It can be clearly seen in the work of the common "VET Toolbox Hub" (as a core coordination body) that also worked remarkably well (despite the original ambiguity of its mandate and, again, limited resources). Second, VET Toolbox allowed for various innovations in project design, instrumentation, and implementation in the broader field of TVET. Examples range from the improvement of quality assurance systems, delivery of online training, launching sector-skills councils and access to micro-financing to

training on disability strategies for teachers and testing the pertinence of "micro-credentials" without any requirements (not even literacy) while adapting these to the needs of students as much as possible. Some of these innovations were remarkably successful and can inform further work in the field – beyond the VET Toolbox. Third, VET Toolbox allowed for far-reaching learnings not only with regard to these innovations but also with regard to donor and implementor cooperation, project governance, project design and implementation. Finally, the evaluation team deems the overall performance score across all three VET Toolbox activities and across all OECD DAC criteria to be a straight "B" (on a scale from "A" to "D", where A is the highest). While not perfect, this is still a remarkable achievement given the complexity and breadth of the programme and its innovative character. It should be noted that on "relevance", all VET Toolbox activity fields achieved the maximum possible score. In other words, while the implementation, at times, had issues, the very idea of the programme as a whole and its theme and target were spot-on. On the other criteria (and across all activity fields), VET Toolbox as a whole scored high on coherence (an average of A-) and efficiency (B+). Average scores on effectiveness and impact are a bit lower (B-) and lowest on sustainability (C+), a field that will have to be more systematically addressed in the future. In a comparison across the three activity fields, the Grants stand out with an average score of A-. They achieved the highest score not only in relevance but also in coherence and efficiency (essentially because a lot was achieved with limited resources). Both the STAs and the KENT activities achieve only B-, with the STAs lagging behind in efficiency and sustainability and the KENT activities in effectiveness, impact, and sustainability.

### Cross-Cutting Challenges

The ETR identified a number of challenges that – if addressed – could enhance VET Toolbox's effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability. The evaluation team considers addressing these challenges as essential for the VET Toolbox to fully achieve its potential to promote labour market pertinency and inclusiveness in vocational education and training and contribute to achieving the corresponding goals of the Team Europe Initiatives. The challenges can be clustered into four main areas:

#### Governance, steering, and management

Most noticeable in this field is the structural under-estimation of transaction costs in coordinating and running the programme and its activities. Two considerations are of particular importance: (1) The

higher the number of actors to be coordinated, the (disproportionately!) higher the transaction costs. In a project with the broad collaborative nature and the enormous (topical and geographical) breadth of the VET Toolbox, transaction costs were thus necessarily very high and underestimated in terms of timing, time resources, and overall (staff) capacity. (2) The smaller the financial volume of an activity, the less favourable the ratio between financial volume and transaction costs. While STAs and KENT activities did involve lesser transaction costs than Grants, this was not proportional to their (much) smaller financial volume (visible in lower scores on effectiveness and efficiency). A second major issue concerns the persistence of national agendas in the VET Toolbox Consortium that, at times, came in conflict with the collaborative mission of the programme. Given the Consortium's prevailing "team spirit", this will remain an issue that can only be resolved politically on a Team Europe level. This pattern was exacerbated by the fact that while certain EU delegations were very active, others appeared much less involved, resulting in weak support that could neither offset the incoherencies resulting from diverging national agendas nor leverage the potential positive impact at the policy level.

#### Co-steering, coordination, and co-implementation

The Steering and Organisational Monitoring Committees of the VET Toolbox programme have reported positive achievements in co-programming, co-steering and coordination. However, opportunities for enhancement were identified with regard to co-implementation, which was abandoned by Consortium Members at the beginning due to unforeseen obstacles in programme design (e.g. lack of incentives, bureaucracy, diverging requirements, high transaction costs and high workloads). This reversal resulted in a high degree of isolated implementation. Furthermore, some processes lost agility which "turned the gazelle into a hippo" (D01) over time.

#### Knowledge Management, Learning and MEAL

VET Toolbox was designed as a pilot programme, with the anticipation that there would be insights gained regarding collaboration at the European level. The core issue here is that neither a programme knowledge management system nor, in particular, the MEAL system were designed to fully capture and advertise the potential of the VET Toolbox. In general, knowledge management was not sufficiently considered in the programme design, it was overall under-resourced, and it was not adequately tailored to strategic purposes such as, for instance, "internal marketing" (within the Consortium). In particular, information

about the VET Toolbox was not readily available and systematically communicated within the implementing agencies and beyond and conversely, information flow from Consortium Members into the VET Toolbox was equally limited. With regard to MEAL, the basis of it, namely, an overall Theory of Change (ToC), was missing, which created inconsistencies in the underlying assumptions, strategies, and intended outcomes. A logframe did exist, but it was focused on activity/process indicators at the output level with an overemphasis on quantitative data and accountability rather than qualitative indicators measuring progress in perceived change, impact, relevance, and innovation. This fact led to a strong focus on activities rather than outcomes and learnings – at odds with the overall strategic intentions behind VET Toolbox. STAs and KENT (despite being of approximately equal weight financially compared to Grants) were not considered proportionately in the logframe. As a result, there was a lack of systematic MEAL across actions and activity fields, resulting in incomplete documentation, elevated transaction costs and inefficiencies as data was highly fragmented (captured differently across all key actors) and not always of appropriate quality or easily interpretable. The unclear mandate (and the limited capacity) of the VET Toolbox Hub to analyse MEAL data and suggest adjustments based on learnings exacerbated the problem.

**Communication and Outreach** The issues here are closely linked to the problems sketched above. Overall, there was substantial underutilisation and misalignment of communication as a key function in support of the overall VET Toolbox objectives. There were different perspectives and uncertainties regarding target groups to engage with. The ambiguities with regard to the mandate of the VET Toolbox Hub also led to uncertainties in communication and outreach. The absence of a clear communication strategy and focal persons at Consortium Members resulted in the underutilisation and misalignment of communication as an enabler within and beyond the VET Toolbox. Overall, outreach could not use its full potential due to (1) limited time resources, (2) the absence of the planned Expert Advisory Committee, and (3) the absence of face-to-face conferences.

### **Short-Term Actions (STAs)**

While the overall share of STAs in the VET Toolbox budget is equal to the other two activity fields, the individual STAs were, by design, small interventions. They focused on labour-market analysis, private-public partnerships, and inclusion. STAs were planned as flexible and fast interventions and, given their small individual volume, they exhibited an enormous

geographical and topical spread. In some cases, STAs proved to be a good instrument to test new approaches and allow expertise from Consortium Members to feed into the local context. STAs could act as catalysts to stimulate new action within TVET systems, fill specific gaps, or react to unforeseen changes affecting running projects in order to support the achievement of planned outcomes. They also proved remarkably resilient against the challenge posed by Covid-19. However, as noted above, STAs had an unfavourable ratio of transaction costs to financial volume challenging the effectiveness of the actions and, therefore, driving down efficiency. The high geographical spread exacerbated the problem. Overall, the STAs scored "A" on relevance, "B" on coherence and effectiveness, and "C" on efficiency and sustainability. The evaluation team found such limited evidence on impact that it is difficult to pass judgement. The best available guess is between "B" and "C". In other words: Most of the STAs were highly relevant to national priorities, coherent with other local actions, and were mostly effective. However, very few STAs were able to fully demonstrate efficiency and sustainability, while to evaluate systemic impact STAs were generally too small, or the evaluation took place too early to render such effects visible. The effectiveness of the STAs appears mixed, with some objectives being fully met and others only partially met. The lack of documentation for some STAs made it challenging to assess this dimension. Regarding sustainability, the VET Toolbox Steering Committee expected that learnings from STAs would be captured, contribute to knowledge and be fed back into the programme. This expectation was not met. MEAL for the STAs suffered from divergent ideas about the purpose of the STA and gaps in the MEAL system itself. Post-implementation reports and surveys that were delivered were not analysed in a way that could capture insights and lessons learned and eventually lead to improving impact and informing future programming. There were only a few cases of upscaling and lateral diffusion. Even successful STAs did not have the resources that would allow them to carry on with planned activities for post-implementation, such as mainstreaming or upscaling models or sharing solutions. In conclusion, STAs proved to be the flexible tool they were designed to be. However, given their small volume, their short implementation period, and enormous geographical spread, expectations for systemic impact were too ambitious.



## Grants

The Grants aimed to promote the inclusion of marginalised youth in the formal and informal labour market using innovative approaches in vocational education and training (VET). They demonstrated coherence with multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and complemented other VET programmes. Overall, the Grants scored "A" on relevance, coherence, and efficiency; and "B" on effectiveness, impact, and sustainability. Grants successfully achieved their objectives, thanks to the excellent knowledge of the context, the ability to mobilise stakeholders, and a remarkable ability to adapt during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, challenges such as adjusting project ambitions to local realities and improving knowledge sharing were identified and require addressing to ensure the continued effectiveness of these interventions. Resources were used cost-effectively, with continuous improvement observed as they progressed. The Grants showed varying levels of impact at institutional, household, and individual levels, and in some cases, at the policy level, leading to increased employability, enhanced reputations of VET colleges, and mindset changes among teachers, employers, students, parents, and communities. However, sustainability remained a challenge due to the short project life cycle in some cases. In conclusion, Grants are a valuable instrument for testing new approaches, addressing specific needs, and promoting high ownership. Unfortunately, there were few links between the Grants, the STA, and the KENT. The planned peer reviews (monitoring missions) by Consortium Members were only partly operationalised, missing an opportunity for peer learning and tapping into the innovations developed by the implementing partners. In conclusion, Grants proved to be a good instrument for generating and testing new approaches and addressing specific needs.

## Knowledge Exchange Network Activities and Tools (KENT)

KENT activities constituted the third pillar of the VET Toolbox (with roughly equal weight in terms of funding volume). They were designed as activities to develop tools and share good practice examples to foster the spread of innovation. They took various forms, such as regional seminars, webinars, and toolkits. Overall, KENT activities scored "A" on relevance; "B" on coherence and efficiency; and "C" on effectiveness, impact, and sustainability. Accordingly, they were found highly relevant and aligned with partner countries' needs, international

declarations, and donor priorities. In particular, the South-South knowledge exchanges (e.g. twinning partnerships and regional seminars) were considered exceptional and of great value, and there was a desire for more such exchanges. They were also largely coherent, but they were mostly implemented in isolation from other VET Toolbox activities, with limited engagement from other Consortium Members. Most KENT activities achieved a low input-high output ratio and demonstrated adaptability to external factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic, which speaks for their efficiency. However, while most KENT activities were effective and innovative, there were significant weaknesses with regard to (a) making use of the Consortium, as there was limited co-implementation and exchange regarding the activities among Consortium Members, and (b) the MEAL system resulting in a lack of clarity around activities to be implemented and limited engagement in knowledge exchange. The impact of KENT activities was mainly at the individual and institutional levels, with limited impact at the policy level. Sustainability was a challenge, with toolkits being the most sustainable, but a lack of a mechanism to update and disseminate them beyond the programme term. Recommendations for enhancing sustainability include embedding the tools into other projects, making their use mandatory, developing capacity, and promoting partner ownership.

## Recommendations

The ETR findings suggest several key recommendations to be considered in future iterations of the VET Toolbox. Please note that some of these recommendations imply learning from the "merits" and not only from the "issues" identified over the course of the ETR.

- (1) **Further develop the "team mindset"**, the collaborative spirit, and the high level of trust in the governance structures of VET Toolbox – in particular, in the VET Toolbox Consortium and the VET Toolbox Hub. This is not only a highly valuable asset in programme implementation but also the necessary pre-condition for the outside perception of a true "Team Europe" approach. For these purposes: limit staff turnover, ensure continuity, invest in personal contacts, "spread the fame (not the blame)" of VET Toolbox to all members of the governance structure, invest in active "branding" and "internal marketing" of VET Toolbox.
- (2) **Keep the "spirit of innovation"** that has led to some of the best activities of VET Toolbox. Key components to maintain this are the use of

"good practice models" (to ensure the spread of innovation), the involvement of diverse stakeholders, high local ownership and flexibility in programme implementation.

- (3) **Consider transaction costs** in programme design (e.g. number of actors to be coordinated, the geographical and topical spread) understanding that these transactions represent knowledge exchange and are effective vehicles for learning. Allocate the time and resources needed through (1) differentiated time planning and (2) well-planned staffing at all levels to fulfil coordination functions. (Do not fall into the "operations trap", in which the focus on operations limits investment in coordinative over-head in such a way that operations suffer.)
- (4) **Consider the ratio of transaction costs to activity volume.** This can either be seen as suggesting reasonable capacity for coordinative overheads or, alternatively, it can be seen as suggesting larger individual actions rather than a multitude of smaller ones.
- (5) **Clarify and align the Hub's mandate,** resources, and formal power with the expectations towards it to ensure that it can fulfil its role effectively.
- (6) **Consider better integrating the different activity fields** (STAs, Grants, KENT) to allow for peer learning and spreading of innovation. Design the different activity fields in such a way that they at least can directly speak to one another. Reframe in particular KENT in such a way as to maximise its leverage for STAs and Grants (in particular for good practices or the spread of ideas)
- (7) **Significantly invest in the development of an overarching Theory of Change and a fundamental revision of the Logframe and the MEAL system** to better integrate all activity fields and, in particular, to leverage the full potential of the VET Toolbox via MEAL for actual learning. Without a proper ToC, it will be difficult to develop result-oriented strategies, design a comprehensive and useful MEAL system, and implement projects in such a manner that they can be flexibly adjusted to better contribute to intended results in an effective and efficient way.
- (8) **Include two-step approach to capacity development** to strengthen MEAL systems already in place. The first step is for the Consortium to learn from partners and co-develop monitoring processes that are integrated with the needs and resources available. The second step is to provide clear instructions on linking actions to monitoring, impact, and outcomes.
- (9) **Significantly reconsider the overall role of communications and outreach.** This includes "internal" (intra-Consortium, intra-EU, intra-member states) communication and the identification of "external" target audiences. It also includes two-way outreach formats with select audiences that allow for feedback into the programme.
- (10) **Maintain STAs** but limit the geographical scope and the "ambition" in terms of systemic impact. Refocus on innovative approaches, piloting, and testing, preferably at "critical junctures" in policy reform processes.
- (11) For STAs, carefully **consider a cost-benefit calculation** for the use of consultants versus in-house expertise. Implementers will continue to rely on consultants since they are flexible, cost-effective, time-saving, and knowledgeable resources. The decision is not "either-or" and can mix alternatives to ensure the link to in-house expertise, such as maintaining a stable pool to limit the loss of institutional memory.
- (12) **Maintain Grants** but consider (a) **better integrating them** with other activity fields, (b) **extending their runtime** beyond two years to increase chances for long-term policy impact, (c) **fully implementing peer reviews** to allow for peer learning and spread.
- (13) **Consider active "scouting" for Grant proposals** (based on past experience) to limit and focus proposals and thus avoid VET Toolbox morphing into a "grant factory". Look, in particular, for local constellations with as many invested political entrepreneurs as possible.
- (14) For KENT activities, **build on successful examples of South-South cooperation**, which were particularly well received.
- (15) To **enhance the sustainability of KENT** activities, consider embedding the tools into other projects and making their use mandatory. Additionally, consider capacity development in KENT as well as partner ownership.

## Imprint

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### **End-Term Review**

This End-Term Review (ETR) of the VET Toolbox 1 was commissioned by the VET Toolbox Hub in November 2022. The Final Report was submitted on 07 April 2023.

### **Paeradigms**

The ETR was carried out by Paeradigms, an NGO and social enterprise focused on transformational outcomes that lead to social change and economic impact. Paeradigms' work focuses on four thematic areas: (1) Education, (2) Renewable energy & climate change, (3) Gender, diversity & inclusion, (4) Communication & advocacy.

### ***Evaluation team***

Dr Nina Volles Bird (Team Lead & Evaluator)

Dr Kennedy Kibukho (Evaluator)

Carol Switzer (Research Analyst & Project Manager)

Chenai Tsorayi (Evaluator & Project Manager)

Dr Gregor Walter-Drop (Methodology)

Patricia Zamalloa-Hügel (VET Expert)

### ***Address***

Paeradigms Switzerland

via Furnet 8, CH-6978 Lugano-Gandria, Switzerland

Paeradigms Estonia

Pärnu mnt 139c, Kesklinna linnaosa Tallinn – 11317, Estonia

[info@paeradigms.org](mailto:info@paeradigms.org)

[www.paeradigms.org](http://www.paeradigms.org)

### **Cover photo**

Panashe is a Supervisor Electric Engineer at Blue Well in Zimbabwe and is shown here with her colleagues.

She participated in a VET Toolbox Grant and is featured as a Most Significant Story, pages 14-15.

Photo credit, Paeradigms (2023).

### **Cover Layout**

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communicative & visual design

Frankfurt – Germany

### **Disclaimer**

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### **Publication date**

07 April 2023